

Parents selling their children's organs: another side to organ trafficking



* A Sudanese man testified that he sold his kidney to organ traffickers in 2017.

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Report by Carmen Ayman

In his early twenties, Jordanian Ghaith Salim (a pseudonym to protect his privacy) never imagined that his body would become a means of escaping poverty. He worked hard at a car wash to support his troubled family. Like many of his generation, he dreamed of independence and a job that would lift him out of poverty. But the path he had mapped out in his mind was completely overturned when his father pressured him to agree to travel abroad and sell his kidney for 13,000 dinars, with the help of his two brothers, who helped expedite the process of issuing his passport.

In Turkey, where the operation was to take place, his father's partners were waiting for him, having coordinated all the details with him in advance. They began preparing Ghaith for the operation and even coached him on what to say to the medical committee to convince them that the donation was voluntary. However, he was shocked when he heard an audio recording his father had sent to the brokers, requesting that his kidneys and any other usable organs be removed in exchange for money. Ghaith then decided to change his testimony before the committee, prompting them to refuse to perform the operation.

However, Ghaith did not escape his father's greed, as the latter, with the help of his partners, insisted on going ahead with the deal in India, where the procedures are less complicated, in exchange for 25,000 dinars this time. While Ghaith was accompanying the young Omani beneficiary of the operation on his way back to Jordan in preparation for his trip to India, they were stopped by the anti-human trafficking unit at the airport. During lengthy investigations in which Ghaith tried to hide the truth, he finally decided to disclose what had happened and filed a complaint against his father and those involved with him, according to case file No. 75/2023.

This story is just one example of many unfolding in Jordan, where human organ trafficking is on the rise, driven by economic crises on the one hand and cross-border broker networks on the other.

What drives Jordanians to sell their children's organs?

Statistics released by the Human Trafficking Crime Unit/ Criminal Investigation Department at the Public Security Directorate, published in a study by Tamkeen for Legal Aid and Human Rights, indicate that organ removal cases rose significantly during 2022–2023 compared to previous years, ranking second among human trafficking cases with a total of 36 cases.

In 2023, 18 cases were recorded involving 20 victims (17 males and 3 females), with 47 male perpetrators. In 2022, 10 cases were recorded involving 12 male victims, with 29 male perpetrators involved. In 2021, there were 7 cases involving 6 male victims and one female victim, compared to 11 male perpetrators and one female perpetrator. In 2020, there was only one case involving one victim and 4 male perpetrators.

These figures cannot be separated from the broader social and economic context. The "Under the Microscope 2" study shows that high rates of poverty and unemployment, coupled with a lack of legal awareness of the dangers of this crime against health and human rights, contribute to fueling this type of exploitation. According to the latest data from the Department of Statistics for 2024, the poverty rate in Jordan was around 15% of the population, while the unemployment rate reached 21.4%, with a noticeable disparity between genders and educational levels, with unemployment among males at 18.2% compared to 34.7% among females, Unemployment among university graduates was 25.8%, rising to 37.9% among those who did not complete secondary school.

Social researcher and founder of the Edmaa Center for Post-Prison Care Abdullah Al-Nasser cites the 2024 Criminal Statistics Report issued by the Criminal Information

Department of the Jordanian Public Security Directorate, which shows that the total number of crimes recorded during the year reached 23,982, an increase of 5.26% compared to the previous year. The crimes were concentrated in the capital Amman, followed by Irbid and then Zarqa, with theft crimes accounting for the highest percentage at about 30% of the total crimes, followed by fraud and breach of trust. Al-Nasser points out that the 18–30 age group is the most involved in these cases, most of whom are unemployed, reflecting the direct relationship between economic hardship and rising criminal behavior.

However, according to Al-Nasser, the most serious revelation from these indicators is that some families are sliding into new forms of crime that go beyond money to the body itself, such as the sale of human organs, which has begun to seep into society under the pressure of need and despair. He believes that increasing living pressures have pushed some young people to seek any source of income, regardless of the means or legality, but the tragedy reaches its peak when a young man sells one of his organs at the behest of his father, in a reversal of the traditional role of the father as a source of support and protection. Al-Nasser describes this shift as "a worrying sign of the erosion of the value system under the weight of poverty and despair."

He points out that the causes of crime are not solely related to economic factors, as poverty and unemployment are only one of the factors that lead to it, when combined with other causes such as bad company or family breakdown. He emphasized that these cases vary depending on the individual and their circumstances, but those living under suffocating economic and social pressure are more prone to deviance, especially in light of what he described as "the poor general conditions in which Jordanian society lives today."

Organ sales

The path to organ sales often does not begin in hospitals or clinics, but behind screens. According to Asma Amira, a lawyer specializing in labor issues and human trafficking crimes who works at the Tamkeen Association for Legal Aid and Human Rights, as well as case files reviewed by the author of this report on the Qasas website, social media, primarily Facebook, the most common gateway for deals with brokers looking for people willing to sell their organs for agreed sums of money to patients who need them. The operations are carried out in countries such as Turkey, which leads the field, as its law allows organ donation without the requirement of kinship, This has made it a major hub for this practice, rather than Jordan, where organ transplants are carried out under conditions specified by the 1977 Law on the Use of Human Organs, which prohibits human trafficking and the sale

of organs in any extralegal removal procedure, exposing the recipient, who requires follow-up care before and after the operation, to health risks and complications.

According to the report's author, advertisements are widespread that use enticing phrases targeting the poor and those seeking any financial outlet, such as "organs for sale for money." Then the brokers appear, speaking in a friendly tone, promising quick riches and convincing the victim that it is simple and safe. They even reassure them that they will cover all travel and medical expenses, but these promises quickly turn into a trap, and the victim does not always get what they are owed. Many discover, after being exhausted by the surgeon's scalpel and scarred by the operation, that the money they were promised was an illusion, thus doubling the exploitation: an exhausted body that has lost a limb and an empty wallet with no return.

These stories are repeated in the Kingdom and in various countries, where kidneys are considered the most traded organ in this illegal market. The Global Report on Trafficking in Persons issued by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) for 2020 and 2022 confirms that Egypt was one of the most prominent hotspots for this type of trade, especially the kidney trade, alongside India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, where illegal "medical tourism" is flourishing. while the Philippines was also recorded as fertile ground for the recurrence of these practices.

The warnings did not stop there. The European Parliament's 2022 report and the US State Department's 2023 report on human trafficking, in addition to data from the World Health Organization and the United Nations, indicated that Turkey was not immune to accusations, as it documented cases of exploitation of refugees in the organ trade. China, meanwhile, has repeatedly faced international accusations of committing serious violations related to the forced removal of organs from prisoners, making the global map of this crime even more complex and intertwined.

What is the penalty for human trafficking?

In this context, lawyer Amira pointed out that the trade of children's organs by their families is considered an aggravating circumstance under Article 9 of the Human Trafficking Prevention Act and its amendments, which stipulates a minimum sentence of seven years of hard labor and a fine of no less than 5,000 dinars and up to 20,000 dinars, especially if the perpetrator of the crime is a relative or guardian, i.e., a first-degree relative or guardian.

She explained that victims are first dealt with by taking their statements and referring them to the public prosecutor to verify that they are victims classified under this crime, after which they are sent to Dar Al-Karama, which specializes in receiving this type of victim, which was established under the Ministry of Social Development's system for the protection of victims and those affected by human trafficking.

She added that the center provides all necessary services, including food, clothing, and psychological and social services, through specialists who provide support in various fields. They also cooperate with a civil society organization to provide legal assistance and representation in court until a final decision is issued, as well as financial support. In addition to raising awareness of the psychological, health, and financial consequences of organ removal and highlighting the negative aspects of the crime.

Amira emphasized that the phenomenon has worsened significantly over the years, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic, as a result of difficult economic conditions. She described the current situation as "very bad," noting that although a large number of cases have been detected, there may be others that have not yet been discovered.

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