
Social Inequality. How societies cope with aspects of inequality, diversity, and integration is one of the WZB's key topics and is addressed in various research units. The focus of study includes the integration of immigrants, the reactions of native populations to immigration, and the impacts of immigration and diversity on social trust, cooperation, and solidarity in society at large. Analysis of social inequality offers insights into the world of education and democracy but also into inequality at a transnational level.

Renting Wombs Narratives of Surrogates from State of Kerala, India

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Popular as well as academic debates on commercial surrogacy take polemic positions on commercial surrogacy no matter which side one is, either for it or against it. What is interesting is that, ideologies apart, both streams of thought use the word 'work' and 'labour' without any distinction to argue their positions. One considers commercial surrogacy as work that is legitimate assertion of woman's autonomy and her way to extricate her family out of poverty. The other sees it as exploitation and demeaning work that needs to be regulated or banned.

My attempt is to explore the understanding on surrogacy of those who undergo that and it is an exercise which helps to superimpose social realities to the option to be a surrogate (with/out compulsions). The intention of this article is to explore the narratives of the surrogates, and bring out what are the self-interpretations of surrogates about surrogacy and how surrogates internalize the market-driven obstetric practice of surrogacy.

The narratives of the surrogates are from the field work I have conducted at three in vitro fertilization (IVF) clinics in the Indian state of Kerala during the period of September 2013 to November 2014.

Since Kerala is popular for its trade union culture and presence of left political prominence, unlike other parts of India, surrogates receive relatively more money (like any other daily wage/ contract wage worker if the case). Compare to the normal range of money receive in other parts of the country (2850 - 7130 Euros), surrogates from Kerala receive a relatively better amount (8560- 11400 Euros). The major parts of commissioning couple are Non- Resident Keralites-NRK (who live in UAE and US for their living and basically from Kerala) and people from NRK families. Kerala economy largely depends on remittance and highest receiver of overall remittance in India. Tourism plays another contributor to Kerala's economy along with agriculture, service sector and alcohol beverages. As part of medical/reproductive tourism also, Kerala get commissioning couple from different parts of the world too.

A paradigm shift in the basic principles of public health law-making is reflected in the draft Assisted Reproductive Technologies (Regulation) Bill, 2013. The Pre-

Summary: Altruism? An independently chosen line of work? Exploitation? There are many differing takes on commercial surrogacy. A field study in the Indian state of Kerala, in which open interviews were conducted with twelve surrogate mothers, examines the complex relationships and dependencies associated with the practice. The decision to bear another couple's child is always based on a range of reasons. Those wishing to restrict trade in fertility must provide social and economic security.

amble of this Bill states that the primary goal of the law is to regulate hitherto unregulated assisted reproductive technology clinics which have had an 'exponential growth' in last 20 or more years. There is no explanation for lack of regulation or the delays in regulating "mushrooming of such clinics around the country" over the past three decades.

The narratives of surrogates therefore provide evidence, that in contemporary India the sections from where surrogates come see surrogacy in different ways: some call it altruism; others work; and some as undesirable work under compulsions of their survival and therefore, that has to be the starting point and not the end.

I used semi- structured open- ended interview schedules and interviewed 12 surrogates (9 undergoing pregnancy and 3 just delivered within a month span of interviews). All of them are heterosexual, most of them married women (only one is divorced) and all of them practice Hindu religion and mostly upper caste (10) and from semi- urban locations. For the following quotations, I use pseudo names for the interviewed women.

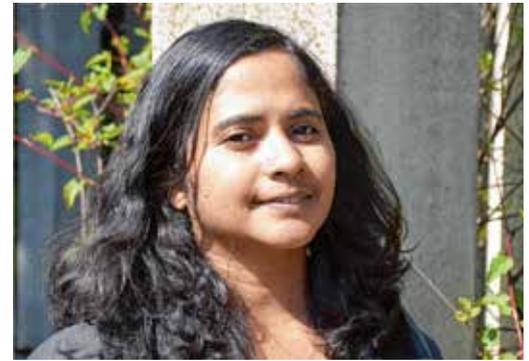
Surrogates are engaged in low paying, seasonal (probably 10/20 months of entire working life), risk involved, informalised labour. This usually translates into financial difficulties, uncertainties and possibilities of danger to health. The payment to surrogacy – the amount, nature of payment (lump sum), the time span over which the amount is received – emerges a central reason for becoming a surrogate. Almost all the surrogates revealed the reason to choose surrogacy on everyday financial hardships and difficulties in making ends meet.

Uma, 29 years old: "It is money that gets you to do everything. Compulsions at home give pressures on you. No one does it because they enjoy bearing someone else's child. God shows us this path. No women bear a child and give it away out of interest."

Or Gadha, 33 years old: "I have this dream, since I couldn't study, I wish to my children should get the best education. Now you know how expensive it is to get admissions in good schools and the fees too. Whatever I could not get, my children should. That's why I am here. I have no trouble over my everyday sustenance (food)." The nature of work the surrogates and their husbands usually have does not enable them to have the kind of money in a short duration that surrogacy promises. Even if the state of Kerala provides a better minimum wage, unorganized, contract/scheme workers are outside the ambit of minimum wage law and treated as "cheap labour" in the labour market.

The unexpected events in life like disease or death of earning member in the family, pushed them to opt surrogacy. Story of Nisha, 28, as an example: "My father spent lots of money for my marriage as dowry and to conduct the marriage too. After months, I got to know that my husband has another wife and kid. He left me, but did not return the dowry money. My father was not interested to go the court to get the money back. Then I decided to work as a nurse in the nearby private hospital. Meanwhile my father got diagnosed intestinal cancer. As you know the treatment is too expensive and my father has already huge debt due to my marriage. I have the responsibility to repay the debt he incurred from my marriage and I have to find money for my father's treatment too. What else I could do? I cannot go abroad and work, since my father needs my attention and care".

Some women interviewed place their choice to be surrogate in the altruistic notions of surrogacy, helping a couple in need by renting one's own womb: "Of course all others came to do this job due to poverty and desperation... people become surrogates, egg donors and even sex workers due to compulsions. They sacrifice their life for their kids and family. I too did the same. Also I have sympathy for the plight of those childless couple. They used to call me from abroad again and again and said their problems of not having a child" [Bindu, 29 years]. Maya even more clearly placed the emphasis on the altruistic element of her relationship to the commissioning couples: "All I lack is money and this is noth-



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(Photo: Martina Sander)

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ing compared to the pain of those here, who are issueless for the last ten or fifteen years. I rent my womb to help to end the trauma of a couple" [Maya, 26 years]

The informal sector is the largest employment provider for women in India and featured by long hours of tedious work, meagre pay and no social security. The exploitative conditions in the sector have been further exacerbated by the structural adjustment policies adopted by the government, (which made the collapse of primary agricultural sector too) in the beginning of 1990. This is the context in which surrogacy started appearing as one of the options of mostly informalised work for women.

As Bindu articulates it, "this is definitely a work. I do understand this as work but not as the hard work I do normally for my earning. Of course here my body is involved 24 hours of the day. And I know that it has its own physical risks too."

However many others view it from a conventional understanding of gendered labour such as a traditional duty/ responsibility assigned to a woman, like any other domestic work, care work or reproductive labour, is invisibilised and devalued.

One of them tempted to compare surrogacy with other works. "When you are in need, its fine to do things which are not so normal and usual. Need can make a person do anything, but this is fine. Compared to other kinds of work, this work is okay. Like some women have to do domestic work, women go out and work in houses. This is better than that. Why? People in houses can treat you like shit and even can accuse you for stealing stuffs. It's a suffocating job. I have never done that." [Priya, 31 years]

Couple of surrogates used the typical language of formal sector employment to describe the money transactions involved in surrogacy. "Every time when we visited the hospital before and even after the delivery, the commissioning couple gave me a travel allowance. After the delivery they gave me an extra *batta* for my medical care. I have made a friend here, another surrogate, she had delivered a baby a month ago and she told me that she got *batta* and suggested me to demand it from my commissioning couple" [Maya, 26 years] Travel allowances are usually paid to a government employee who attends an official function, and *batta* means an extra pay or allowance based on special grounds.

When I did an examination of surro- pregnancy contracts signed by the surrogates I interviewed, it clearly showed many possibilities of exploitation of surrogates. The emergence of gestational surrogacy reduced the legal battle and gave more choices to consumers of the IVF industry. The courtrooms and law-making bodies remained silent in most countries on the equally critical role of gestation and ensuing emotional stresses the surrogates go through. In fact by banning the use of surrogate's ova and giving recognition to genetic identity of the baby, they undermining her contribution. In today's context transnational surrogacy practice gets legal sanction through the agreement, which is fundamentally a contract based on the notions of formal equality and does not care about the obvious hierarchies based on class, caste, race, religion and region/nation. The practice of commercial surrogacy however denotes that the "willingness" of being a surrogate comes mostly from those parts of the world where social and cultural options are skewed due to economic disparity as is the case with east Europe or India which have become cradles for relatively cheap surrogate babies.

When I went to the field after my PhD submission,(where I did a theoretical review of labour aspect of surrogacy and argued that it is "reproductive slavery") with a bias and moral judgement that surrogates are totally exploited without any voices or agency. My interactions with surrogates in the field gave me more nuanced and complex understanding with less judgmental about their decision to be surrogate. Until now in academia surrogates' voices are interpreted in a manner to argue the researcher's point of view vehemently. I feel, if I do, that is not ethical and morally a right thing to do. The researcher should take a

responsibility to make the unheard voices heard rather than interpreted, and to bring light to the complexities and nuances involved and varied dimensions of exploitations.

The dilemma of a woman, who opts for surrogacy to take care of her family, when she has no options but the extra bit of money it brings, is therefore the foremost. Those engaged in the debate need to first address her altruism directed towards the family. Since we work within a system that is forcing her into this 'work', whatever be its nature, the first task is to force the state to recognise her right to safety and security. Along with that, provide information enlarging women's world view on procreation, rights of the child, family relations and social struggles against all kinds of exploitation by making her a part of the larger struggle for democratisation and a better life. In this process, women learn to demand work that is adequate and regular and helps them retain their dignity, integrity and rights as workers, and also learn of equality in different domains.

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