Global fertility industry reaffirms pre-existing inequalities

The global fertility trade can include anything that goes into the making of a baby. The industry now occurs in many countries and involves multiple kinds of reproductive actors or labourers, including egg providers, surrogates, brokers, doctors and prospective parents.

Human reproduction no longer relies solely on natural conception. The scientific advances that make this possible combined with ad hoc national legislation and the desires of couples struggling to conceive has created an international trade in fertility.

University of Cape Town (UCT) sociologist and feminist ethnographer Associate Professor Amrita Pande looks at the many interwoven processes that make up flows of fertility around the world. “You might think that new fertility technologies would remove the burden of reproductive labour from women, or at the very least, challenge societal norms. But in fact, my recent research shows that the global fertility industry reaffirms pre-existing inequalities.”

To illustrate how these processes might occur, Pande describes a common scenario. “These days, when you want to make a baby using assistive fertility technologies you can – if you are a very rich, heterosexual couple – do this in a place like California, where commercial surrogacy is legal. But, if you are a single father, a gay or lesbian couple, or if you want a ‘designer baby’ of a specific race, it gets complicated.

“In these cases, you can travel to an egg bank in New Delhi to be matched with an egg donor who comes from Ukraine, South Africa or another country. Your sperm will be used to fertilise this egg.

“The embryo will be flown to Laos where it will be inserted into a woman from Mexico, Cambodia or Thailand. The woman will live in a dormitory next to the fertility clinic for the duration of the pregnancy. When she gives birth, you will take the child and return to your home country.”
Pande is careful to describe these women as active participants in this process but admits that they are also vulnerable to exploitation. On a national scale, she likens the industry to other factory industries that move from one country to another as the legislation to regulate the industry is passed in each successive place.

There is also the question of how race and reproduction intersect.

“"In my second book, I look at the reaffirmation of the desirability of whiteness and the reasons that people seek out egg providers of a specific race,” says Pande. In many cases this happens when a woman who is part of a couple feels insecure that she is not providing her own genetic material and therefore wants as close a match as possible physically. The other instance in which prospective parents request an egg provider of a specific race is when they are intent on ‘racial improvement’.

“"This is a phenomenon seen often among Chinese and Israeli clients. The prospective parents are looking for white mixed-race babies, for a variety of reasons, and the clinics are ready to provide them this strategic choice,” explains Pande.

This research is part of a large initiative funded by the South African National Research Foundation, titled ‘Global fertility flows’, based in the UCT Department of Sociology.
The decentralised industry of global fertility

Over time, the global fertility industry has moved from one country to another as the legislation to regulate it has passed in each successive place.

1. India
Up until 2012, India was the foremost hub for commercial surrogacy. Then the country banned commercial gestational surrogacy, forcing the industry to move to Thailand.

2. Thailand
Thai authorities banned the practice in 2013 after an international scandal in which clients refused to accept a baby born with Down syndrome.

3. Nepal
Commercial surrogacy moved to Nepal. But after the 2015 earthquake, it was banned there too when it came to light that military planes had been used on behalf of clients to rescue babies born by surrogacy while leaving the surrogates themselves – who were Indian nationals – stranded.

4. Cambodia
Once again, the industry moved, this time to Cambodia. There the women stayed mostly in dormitories near fertility clinics for the duration of their pregnancies. The government caught on and criminalised surrogacy in 2017. This forced many women who were pregnant at the time to make a choice: keep the child as their own or go to prison.

5. Laos and African countries
The industry is now legal in some states in the United States but is rumoured to be active underground in Laos and several African nations, including Kenya and Nigeria.

Is South Africa involved? There is a high demand for white eggs and South Africa is the cheapest source of them. In South Africa, according to Pande, the majority of egg providers are Afrikaans-speaking women who come from smaller cities in the Western Cape. They are paid between USD2 000 and USD3 000 to travel to egg banks across the world for about 15 days during which time their eggs are harvested.

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