

Reproductive technology has made it possible to have children with people whom one has never met-- indeed, who live thousands of miles away. Right now, there are women in India pregnant with fetuses conceived with the eggs of Eastern European women and the sperm of North American men, or vice versa. Upon giving birth, these women will hand over their babies to thrilled parents who have just flown halfway around the world and shelled out tens of thousands of dollars to receive them.

Each year, thousands of babies are born to Indian women working as surrogates for people who cannot have children any other way. Why would anyone take such a complicated route to parenthood?

The answer is also complicated, but the primary reason has to do with money. Having a child through assisted reproductive technology is extraordinarily expensive, beyond the reach of all but the wealthy. Outsourcing aspects of it is sometimes the only way to make it affordable. Needless to say, it also raises lots of ethical issues.

Surrogacy, the practice of bearing a child for another, is not a new invention. It shows up in the Bible, but it has taken on new dimensions in the current age. Having a baby can now be, and increasingly is, a truly global endeavour.

Should we be troubled by the globalization of surrogacy? It certainly has some things going for it. Most obviously, it enables people to have babies that they desperately want. Indeed, it enables more people to become parents because it is so much more affordable than commercial surrogacy in the United States.

On the other hand, we undoubtedly should be troubled by the potential for exploitation, particularly of the Indian women working as surrogates. Exploitation is not an easy concept to pin down, but broadly speaking, I exploit someone when I take advantage of her vulnerability in order to further my own ends or those of a third party.

There is little question that the surrogates are among the most vulnerable people in this particular global reproductive collaboration, and so we should ask whether the growing Indian surrogacy industry exploits the women who work as surrogates.

Defenders of Indian surrogacy point out that surrogacy offers vulnerable women a way out of poverty.

The fees that Indian women standardly receive for being surrogates-- at least at reputable clinics-- are much lower than they would receive in the United States.

But that fee may easily represent several years' worth of income. Surrogates may well receive better health care, food, and housing while they are surrogates than they would ever receive in their other lives. This is on top of the satisfaction of knowing that they have helped others become parents.

So long as the women aren't being coerced into participating in surrogacy, are being treated well and fairly while they are working as surrogates, and are paid a reasonable wage as agreed upon, it's hard to see how they could be worse off for having the option.

Now, it is very hard for Westerners contracting with Indian surrogacy clinics to know whether these conditions are being met. Moreover, the mere fact that a given woman is better off, in economic terms for having been a surrogate, doesn't mean that she hasn't been exploited.

If I hire a desperate person and pay him next to nothing for long hours of work, it's true that I am making him slightly less desperate. But it doesn't follow that what I'm doing is just fine, morally speaking.

In order for me to avoid exploiting him, I have to treat him with dignity and respect, taking seriously his wishes, needs, hopes, and circumstances. This goes beyond the actual dollar amount changing hands. Though, of course, that does matter a great deal.

Commercial gestational surrogacy contracts, whether domestic or international, allow people to become parents. But they also have the potential to cause great harm. The globalization of surrogacy has the potential to raise women out of poverty, but it can also serve to reinforce unjust social structures and patterns. Non-exploitative surrogacy arrangements, wherever they occur, require a deep commitment to the equal moral standing of all parties to the contract.