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Wombs in Labor: Transnational Commercial Surrogacy in India by Amrita Pande

Laura I. Woods
Western Carolina University

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Pande, Amrita. *Wombs in Labor: Transnational Commercial Surrogacy in India*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2014. xi + 252 pages. Paperback, \$28.00.

Wombs in Labor, written by sociologist Amrita Pande, is a comprehensive discourse of commercial surrogacy in India, its impact on bioethics and human rights, and the degree to which this commodification of women's bodies empowers and/or exploits women.

Commercial surrogacy is morally and ethically ambiguous, with both the capacity for oppression as well as the opportunity for economic and psychological empowerment. India's Assisted Reproductive Technology (ART) Regulatory Bill seeks to legislate the unprecedented "biomedicalization of the birth process" (p. 119) at both the micro and macro levels by promoting, among other concepts, medical and financial transparency. Regrettably, the rights of the surrogate are secondary to the larger economic framework. The requirements for a surrogate are a healthy womb and a virtuous ("inert and submissive") disposition (p. 75). Intended parents have invasive rights to the body of the surrogate, and the ART Bill, which keeps the negotiating power of the surrogates in check, may become more strictly enforced to minimize legal complications. In addition, while the women expressed emotions ranging from enthusiasm to bitterness regarding their decisions to become surrogates, there was a unanimous intention to improve the economic standard of living for their families. Unfortunately, although the women intended to improve their families' standard of living, especially through education and dowries, most of the money earned went to medical expenses, one-time constructions, and their husbands' businesses. In reality, few were able to escape the cycle of poverty. In summary, the main exploitative elements included: under-information or over-simplification of the surrogacy process; minimizing or trivializing the value of the surrogate when, in fact, her services were in high demand; lack of financial transparency during contract negotiations; and family pressures based largely on financial need.

While commercial surrogacy is a business (consumer driven, for profit), it is also a service. *The goal is to produce a healthy baby*. Economic gain and altruism are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Although cultural stigmatization can draw a fine line between altruism and "reproductive prostitution," the general view tended to be that surrogacy is "a relationship of mutual understanding and generosity between the surrogate and the infertile couple" (p. 173). Surrogates removed - albeit temporarily - from a largely undereducated and impoverished setting have repeatedly demonstrated that the hypermedicalization and supervision; unprecedented rest and nutrition; education (such as language and computer classes); increased earning power; and - to a lesser extent - their ability to negotiate their own contracts (compensation, delivery method and postpartum care), can serve as modi of empowerment and provide a shift from an external to an internal locus of control. Some of the surrogates countered the stigma of being disposable and increased their self-esteem.

Commercial surrogacy in India has implications on the international community - and global capitalism - with opportunities for comprehensive discourse on the following: 1) Human rights awareness to ensure thoroughly informed consent and not a hierarchy of reproductive rights; 2) Long-term effects of the mandatory pharmaceuticals and whether these comply with *universal* international industry standards; 3) No single country should set an international industry standard of reproductive regulation or hold an *uncontested* monopoly on prenatal, maternal and postpartum care; 4) Socio-economic dynamics of a shift in earning power as the surrogates become the breadwinners in their households; and 5) India's growing role in medical tourism laws, international surrogacy and custody laws.

Wombs in Labor is an impressive, comprehensive discourse of the sociological, political and economic factors and challenges involved in the relatively new practice of commercial surrogacy in India. The short-term benefits to the mothers did not translate to permanent improvements in their financial situations. Efforts to regulate this commerce must protect the surrogates from moral, medical and financial exploitation and the community from destabilization as family dynamics shift. An international task force could be established to ensure that ethical international standards are upheld and that a culture of aggressive, neo-eugenics and denaturalized reproductivity does not become a global norm. Similarly, the indirect influences and agendas of other participating countries should not be disregarded. Commercial surrogacy must proceed slowly, as neither the long-term effect of the pharmaceuticals, nor the sociological outcomes, has been evaluated. The medical, pharmaceutical, and financial sectors must be held to a high level of accountability and transparency as the international community proceeds with caution into this unfamiliar territory.

Laura I. Woods, MPA
Western Carolina University
Cullowhee, North Carolina