

## Article

# Sister wives, surrogates and sex workers: outlaws by choice [Book Review]

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## **Sister Wives, Surrogates and Sex Workers: Outlaws by Choice?**

Angela Campbell

2013

Ashgate

Surrey

240 pages

£70.00 (hardback)

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Angela Campbell's 'Sister Wives, Surrogates and Sex Workers: Outlaws by choice?' offers a critical look at how law and policy respond to and conceptualise choice made by women who engage in polygamy, surrogacy and sex work. The book makes very interesting and illuminating arguments about how women's choices in specific settings, is often undermined, ignored, questioned, disbelieved or misunderstood, because these women go against expected norms and values within certain societies. Women, who make 'bad' choices, are often seen as either victims of abuse, coercion and exploitation, and/or offenders and deviants who require intervention to encourage them to make better future choices or reprimand them for their deviancy.

Drawing on Canada, the United Kingdom and Australia, the book usefully demonstrates the similar approaches and responses to women who make contentious choices in morally sensitive areas. The book also draws on empirical research from each of the respective fields to demonstrate how choice and agency has been shown to be exercised by women, thus questioning assumptions of abuse, coercion or force of women making these choices. Yet, it is a little unclear at the start of the book that the empirical research drawn upon was that of others, and not the authors own empirical

research. Although the author recognised the pitfalls of drawing on empirical research more generally, drawing on the empirical research of others is equally troublesome. Not least because the author is relying on the validity and quality of the empirical research presented. It might therefore have been more useful to consider the merits and limitations of selective literature reviews in the introductory chapter, to signpost to the reader that the book synthesizes existing research, which as a method of research must also be put under scrutiny. An avenue for further research may be to utilise the analytical framework presented in chapter one, to analyse the narratives of women in each of these contexts.

For those who are already familiar with each respective field of study, the book may be a reminder of *some* of the important debates in the discipline, as what is presented is a taste of the research in each of the fields. This is not to undermine the contribution of this book, as it is a useful starting point for students who are seeking to gain an understanding of the debates around notions of choice in controversial areas. Furthermore, the conceptual arguments made about choice continue to be important. In particular Chapter one 'Complicating choices' examines feminists debates around choice, and rightly suggests a need to more fully consider the social, economic, political and cultural contexts in which women's choices are made. The author recognizes that although constraints are placed on certain women's choices, that it would be patronizing and ignorant of others to suggest that these women did not make an authentic choice to engage in polygamy, surrogacy or sex work, when evidence supports this. Similarly, it would be mistaken to assume that choices are made without constraint or influence.

In the following three chapters Campbell explores polygamy, surrogacy and sex work as case studies to further consider notions of choice in each setting. In each chapter, Campbell defines each

practice, provides background information and considers previous research which demonstrates women's agency and choice. This review of literature identifies some of the rationale women have provided for their engagement in each specific practice, as well as the structural constraints to their participation. Each chapter then moves on to consider Canadian, Australian and United Kingdom's state law's responses to the activity and provides a useless short summary of the legal standpoint in each state. The third part of each chapter then provides an evaluation of these responses in which the author considers how state law may itself hinder, constrain and undermine women's choices. By unpicking and challenging inferred assumptions evident in state responses, the chapters show how the reactions of nation states to women's agency are often based on often narrow-minded perspective of some women's decision-making. Empirical research in each field, as suggested, casts doubt on the monolithic understandings evident in state law and practice.

Despite its limited depth in some areas, the book will be a useful introductory text for students, academics and practitioners alike. It furthermore, raises crucial questions about how women's choices are conceptualised, perceived and responded to, which continue to have relevance for women's engagement in morally contentious areas.