

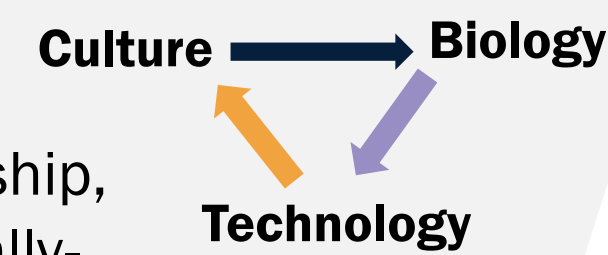
'WOMB FOR RENT': SOCIO-CULTURAL IMPLICATIONS OF REPRODUCTIVE TOURISM IN INDIA

Eki Okungbowa, LAPS/ANTH 3160

York University, Toronto, ON

ABSTRACT

- + Reproductive tourism can be defined as the process whereby affluent people predominately from Global North countries (i.e., Canada) seek assisted reproduction in the Global South (i.e., India), to accomplish fertility and kinship formation goals.
- + **Research Questions:** 1) Does reproductive tourism have social and cultural implications for kinship? 2) Does culture influence biological, reproductive, and technological processes?
- + **Thesis:** Reproductive tourism is a multifaceted social issue with significant socio-cultural implications for kinship, by being rooted in a gendered division of labour, culturally-specific belief systems, technological advancement, race and class stratification, capitalist economic structures, and globalization.



METHOD & ANALYTIC APPROACH

- + Analyzed an assisted reproduction technology (ART) within a cultural context.
- + Determined the role of ART in kinship and its portrayal in the media. ART: in vitro fertilization (IVF). Cultural context: India.
- + Critically analyzed diverse media sources that offered insights on reproductive tourism in India within the domains outlined in my thesis statement.
- + Used scholarly articles in anthropology as ethnographic evidence to support, challenge, or extend claims reported by the media. I compared and contrasted the presented narratives and constructed evidence-based arguments about the topic.
- + **Media Sources:** mainstream media outlets via the web, newspapers, citizen journalist articles, social activist articles, organizations, corporate sources, blogs, videos, documentaries, images.
- + **Academic Sources:** books, open access materials, scholarly articles, peer-reviewed articles, grey literature, websites, legal documents, course notes from lectures.

Word cloud containing key terms analyzed and used in research.



RESULTS: A SNAPSHOT OF REPRODUCTIVE TOURISM



Image 1: Indian woman living in poverty contemplates entering the surrogacy business to support her family financially. Common economic pressures include saving to buy a house and husband's unemployment. Source: <https://bit.ly/2G0kl2Z>



Image 2: She visits a local clinic known for the business. She is recruited alongside other women who have the same reasons for becoming a surrogate. Source: <https://bit.ly/2SYZ7LQ>



Image 3: Medical tourist(s) arranges for IVF and surrogacy with a reproductive tourism agency. The agency organizes hotel stays, tours, and leisure activities for the client while the client waits for the surrogate to give birth. Source: <https://bit.ly/2GAy43m>



Image 4: Immediately after giving birth, the child is given to the medical tourist(s). Payment is directly made to the institutions involved (agency and clinic) and a relatively small portion of that money trickles down to the surrogate. Source: <https://bit.ly/2SKn8qp>



Image 5: The medical tourist(s) returns to their country and creates kin bonds with their new baby. Cycle repeats. Source: <https://bit.ly/2Xbim40>

Note: Snapshot shows the "big picture". It is more complex than it appears.

DISCUSSION

- 1 Globalization, technological advancements, and the changing definition of family propels commodified reproductive labour.
- 2 Motherhood, Western family models, and assumptions about women's reproductive health are gendered cultural beliefs that contribute to commercial surrogacy.
- 3 Racial stratification is evident in commercial surrogacy and kinship formation. The Indian caste system and racial preferences imposed by foreigners seeking surrogacy are examples.
- 4 Despite their vulnerability and low position on the class hierarchy, Indian surrogates can exercise agency with their earnings. They earn between \$5300-\$8600 CAD per pregnancy, which is enough to buy a house and offset other financial struggles.
- 5 IVF and other scientific advancements related to reproduction are culturally perceived as "hope" and not possibly exploitative, allowing those who benefit from commercial surrogacy to morally justify or remain oblivious to the inevitable social issues.

CONCLUSION

Main Takeaway: Paid surrogacy commodifies reproductive labour – labour that is typically left unpaid. Old and new cultural meanings of kinship permit the commodification of reproductive labour.

Update: As of December 2018, commercial surrogacy is illegal in India. The Surrogacy (Regulation) Act, 2018 is an attempt by the Indian government to control the industry and associated issues such as exploitation.

Call to Action: Laws restricting surrogacy in many Global North countries drive infertile individuals to Global South countries where it is legal and significantly cheaper. All countries involved in this global issue must be willing to devise holistic regulations that prohibit the exploitation of vulnerable women who become surrogates while balancing the desire of infertile individuals to utilize surrogacy as a means of kinship formation.