The vulnerability of Thai surrogate mothers in a global market

October 11 2022

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A new dissertation on surrogacy highlights Thai women's experiences of having acted as surrogate mothers. The dissertation shows the women's
vulnerability in a global surrogacy industry, but also provides a more nuanced picture of what makes women seek surrogacy and how they relate to the process.

Commercial surrogacy has been illegal in Thailand since 2015, but the industry lives on, albeit on different premises. But what happens when the surrogacy industry establishes itself on the black market and how does it affect the women who act as surrogate mothers?

"Bans will not make the surrogate industry disappear. However, the women who act as surrogate mothers are required to be more flexible than before. They travel from Thailand to countries such as China, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam, both for embryo implantation and to give birth to the children," explains Elina Nilsson, Ph.D. in gender studies at Uppsala University.

In order to continue existing in this rapidly changing legal landscape, the surrogate market depends on the women's mobility—being able to travel to and from health checks and move across national borders—but also immobility, periods in which they have limited opportunities to move freely, for example when waiting to give birth. This places the women in a precarious and vulnerable position.

As part of the dissertation, Nilsson conducted in-depth interviews with 12 Thai women who acted as surrogate mothers for international clients. Both stigmatization and the illegal status of surrogate mothers limited the opportunity to obtain more informants. The women describe how their female networks play a major role in learning more about the process and creating some sense of security, despite its illegal status. However, the main motivation for going through a surrogacy process is money.

"Commercial surrogacy is a way to earn a large amount of money in a relatively short amount of time. That said, many also remain in
surrogacy, either by repeating it, wanting to repeat it, or by recruiting other women to it, the reason being that it wasn't actually as economically transformative as they had hoped, so many simply remain in debt."

Although all the women interviewed were clear that they did this primarily for the money, they also highlighted how it was seen as a way to make merit, tam bun, which would generate positive karma in accordance with Buddhist morality. And since the women contributed financially to the family, it also became a way to live up to Thai gender ideals of being a woman, and specifically a mother and daughter, expected to take financial responsibility for both their children and their parents. By framing surrogacy in this local moral and religious context, it became comprehensible to both the women themselves and the people around them.

"The surrogate mother's position is vulnerable and ambivalent. She is expected to adapt to the conditions and needs of the surrogacy industry, while at the same time having her own needs and a family of her own to take care of. My research shows how the global surrogacy market and local contexts interact with each other and how this shapes the experiences of Thai surrogate mothers."

**More information:** Elina Nilsson, Thai Surrogate Mothers' Experiences of Transnational Commercial Surrogacy: Navigating Local Morality and Global Markets. [uu.diva-portal.org/smash/get/d…](uu.diva-portal.org/smash/get/d...63096/FULLTEXT01.pdf)

Provided by Swedish Research Council

Citation: The vulnerability of Thai surrogate mothers in a global market (2022, October 11)