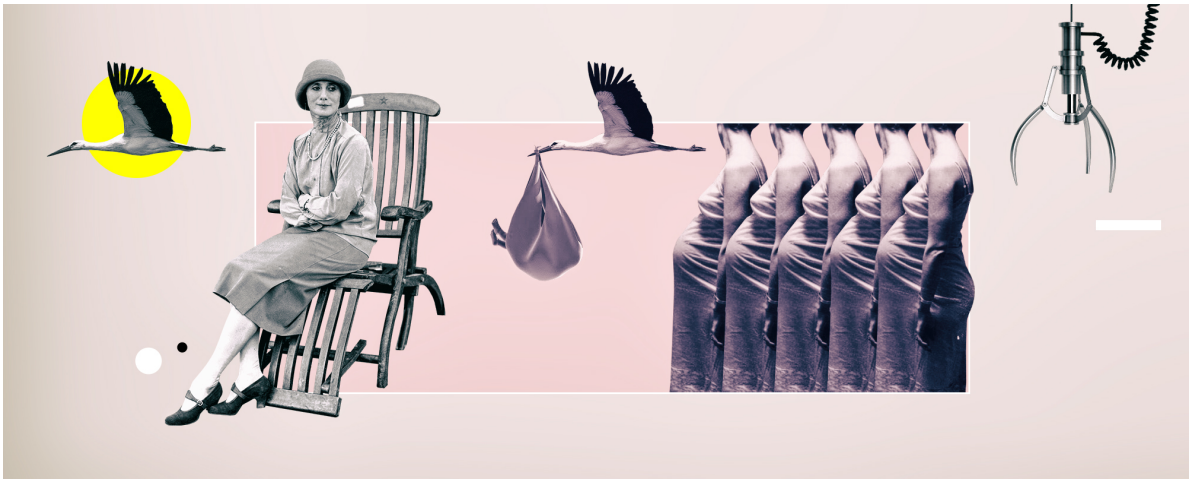
FEMINIST POETICS OF THE BODY AND DESIRE

Surrogacy and feminist movements

Anna Mª Morero Beltrán



Nadia Sanmartin

Since the first baby was born from in vitro fertilisation in 1978, we have seen the rapid evolution of a range of other assisted reproduction techniques, some of them simple variations of in vitro and others more complex. These advances in assisted reproduction techniques have come hand—in—hand with a social, ethical and legal debate that has developed in step with the breakthroughs in the field of fertility. In fact, assisted reproduction techniques play a central role in the construction of individual, family and group identities, while being of key importance to certain rights and desires related to parenthood that intertwine and intersect with other issues of relevance in the context of women's rights.

Assisted reproduction techniques have always been an area of great interest for feminists, but not only because such techniques are both gendered and (re)produce gender, but also because they have a bearing on other issues of key importance to both feminist movements and academic feminist movements. From the outset, finding an approach to these techniques and their implications has not been easy for feminist movements, which have taken heterogenous and often divergent positions when it comes to providing answers to the dilemmas that these techniques have been posing since the eighties and still pose today.

The early days of assisted reproduction techniques and the stance of feminist movements

When assisted reproduction techniques were in their early days, they provoked a certain ambivalence among feminist thought because, on the one hand, they were seen as a way to help women with fertility problems, while also helping women to overcome the biological limitations associated with reproduction. However, some corners firmly rejected these techniques as they considered that they worked to restrict women to their biological destinies through medical processes completely dominated by men. Moreover, the hopes of overcoming biological limitations rapidly gave way to significant criticism and reports on the possible effects of assisted reproduction on the empowerment and health of women. This paradoxical tension has subsisted to the present day, and the matter is still hotly debated.

> Human assisted reproduction techniques could represent a new way of exercising pressure on women to reproduce

Early theoretical feminist discussions were divided along the two main lines of thought. Firstly, there was certain mistrust of the social changes brought about through this scientific development, as it was feared that the costs of assisted reproduction techniques would be borne by women, both through medical and patriarchal control and in terms of the heteronormative expectations related to these techniques. Secondly, some corners voiced concern over the control and exploitation of women's sexual and reproductive capacities.

In this regard, feminist movements feared that assisted reproduction techniques could be manipulated to limit women's autonomy, and that women's reproductive capacities would be used against them to further the interests of a social order dominated by men. Another fear was that human assisted reproduction techniques could represent a new way of exercising pressure on women to reproduce, given that the existence of these techniques, and the appearance some years later of surrogate gestation, seemed to point towards there being no reason not to reproduce.

As such, the crux of the matter was the conflict that existed between social control over reproduction and the right of women to control their own bodies—a constant question of feminist struggles. Assisted reproduction techniques thus became an area of profound ambivalence for feminist movements, generating a debate that has yet to be resolved.

Surrogacy and its place in feminist movements

With the evolution of assisted reproduction techniques came the emergence of surrogacy, lengthening the list of ambivalences. After the birth of Baby M in the United States in 1980

—the first child to be born through a surrogacy agreement— the debate within feminist movements took on a new, although still polarised dimension. Liberals feminists such as Shulamith Firestone (1976) asserted that sexual division was based on biological difference and believed that this difference was not impossible to eliminate. According to them, advances in assisted reproduction and biotechnology offered the possibility of a sexual revolution that would neutralise the sexual differences that generate inequality. The goal of this revolution was to be none other than to reach a state where the biological differences between people could be culturally neutral, considering that the main cause of exploitation of women was this biological—sexual divide. In general, liberal feminism adopted a positive stance, emphasising women's right to determine their own reproductive rights and therefore freely decide, for example, if they want to participate in surrogacy processes as surrogates or egg donors.

At the other extreme were the feminist movements that clearly positioned themselves against this practice, citing the commercialisation of women's bodies and their reproductive capacities. In particular, many feminists were against reproductive power being controlled, to a significant extent, by a group of experts working within the framework of the patriarchal system. This criticism formed part of a wider movement that spoke out against the over—medicalisation of pregnancy and birth within a health system once again dominated by men. For some feminists, surrogacy was above all just another form of patriarchal oppression that allowed men to intervene and exercise greater control over women's bodies.

> Liberal feminism adopted a positive stance on assisted reproduction techniques and surrogacy, emphasising women's right to determine their own reproductive rights, while other feminists stressed that surrogacy was just another form of patriarchal oppression that allowed men to exercise greater control over women's bodies and commercialise their reproductive capacities

This position found support in the *Feminist International Network of Resistance to Reproductive and Genetic Engineering* (FINRRANGE), an organisation of key importance for understanding the opposition of some feminists to surrogacy, and whose discourse has been continued recently through new Spanish platforms such as *No Somos Vasijas* (we're not vessels). The creation of FINRRANGE in 1984 made it possible to bring together a large number of feminists from countries in the Global North under the same umbrella organisation. They rejected the proposal of liberal feminism and opted to act as a kind of feminist resistance against assisted reproduction techniques and surrogacy with the aim of eradicating them. In fact, the organisation argued that assisted reproduction techniques in general, and surrogacy in particular, reflected the attempts of the patriarchy to take control of women's reproductive capacity and place it at the disposal of the market. They also claimed that this practice reinforced stereotypes around femininity and contributed

towards consolidating other stereotypes about women, for example that they have a natural capacity for reproduction and caregiving. So it was, in general terms, that feminist movements continued to align themselves with one of two opposing positions.

Surrogacy, globalisation and neoliberalism

We must bear in mind that, with the globalisation of surrogacy, the scenarios where it becomes possible have multiplied. This means that the United States is no longer the only available destination and, as such, no longer offers the only benchmark. All this makes a feminist approach—both theoretical and practical—much more complex. As the countries of the Global South have entered the scene, feminist movements have been forced to contemplate within their debates other aspects that had not previously been taken into consideration. Assisted reproduction techniques and surrogacy have also become something with the power to reproduce and even reinforce social inequalities in relation to gender, social class, sexual orientation, origin, nationality and sexual identity. These inequalities are not actually created or reinforced by assisted reproduction techniques and surrogacy, but they are tightly bound up in the existing social structures in which they are developed and implemented. As such, they end up propagating and even worsening the existing inequalities.

For some feminist activists and scholars in the Global South that have carried out a broad analysis of surrogacy in Asia, such as Amrita Pande (2014) and Alison Bailey (2011), surrogacy is not an unresolved moral dilemma, but rather a structural reality that needs to be correctly understood and approached. For Pande and Bailey, surrogacy agreements are neither moral nor immoral—they are simply the way things work for many women in certain parts of the world. According to these authors, a feminist movement that fails to contemplate the market and structural inequalities as essential factors in surrogacy processes, as well as the imbalance between the actors involved, is of no use. They consider that, without a contextual understanding of different situations and the dissolution of Western discourses regarding the exploitation of women, it will be impossible to make headway in creating an effective approach to surrogacy.

Eurocentric representations of surrogacy are unable to include the situation of countries where commercial surrogacy has become a temporary occupation and survival strategy for many women. In this context, we cannot look at surrogacy from an exclusively ethical or moral standpoint, as it is a structural reality with real stakeholders and consequences. According to Pande (2014), only by understanding how women that act as surrogates experience and define surrogacy will it be possible to build up knowledge regarding the experiences of women in this area.

As such, with the globalisation of surrogacy and the complexity this adds to the related approaches and theories, other standpoints have emerged within feminist thought with a more global, intersectional perspective on the matter. These feminist movements add an essential element to the debate: the socioeconomic context in which surrogacy takes place, highlighting the role played by the market and by neoliberalism in these processes.

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Therefore, the global dimension of surrogacy, together with the inequalities that are associated with it, mean that feminist movements must ask what the global socioeconomic framework is within which these practices take place. Neoliberalism is constantly expanding, while advances in the field of assisted reproduction continue to strengthen everything related to human reproduction that is liable to commodification.

In fact, authors such as Saskia Sassen (2003) have studied how, in general terms, a relationship can be established between welfare cuts, a more competitive labour market and women finding themselves forced to invent new productive niches in the informal economy. This means that women often support themselves and their children by reconverting their feminine capacities for maternity and sexuality into negotiable assets that can be exchanged for money through caregiving or sex work, as well as egg donation and surrogacy.

According to this logic, given the reproductive capacity of women's bodies, their bodies also become merchandise with added value—a biovalue, in the words of Catherine Waldby (2014), which is potentially available, transferrable and open to commercialisation on a very lucrative market. Both the provision of eggs and surrogacy, including for altruistic reasons, place women in what some authors have termed 'reproductive bioeconomies' based on reproductive work and tissues. This phenomenon is related to both the transfer of gametes and reproductive services between countries, as well as the movement of people with fertility problems searching for certain services or gametes, in other words people traveling to places where such services or genetic material are more accessible either in legal or financial terms.

As such, faced with this scenario, it seems that the only alternative for feminist movements is to think about the conditions in which we want surrogacy to take place in the world in general, as it is not viable to think exclusively about how it should be in our own countries—the global, decentralised nature of the phenomenon does not allow it, but forces us to think in global terms. In the same way, under this premise, thinking about global prohibitions is not a viable model. Perhaps the solution will be to contemplate surrogacy in all its complexity and to come up with a model that guarantees the rights of everyone involved in the process.

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Anna Mª Morero Beltrán

Anna Mª Morero Beltrán is an associate professor in the Department of Sociology at the University of Barcelona. She holds a Master's degree in Women's, Gender and Citizenship Studies (2011) and a PhD in Sociology (2017) from the University of Barcelona. Her fields of research and specialisation are mainly linked to gender-based violence, the study of the social construction of reproductive technologies and sexual & reproductive rights. She has been part of several research projects and research agreements with the Public Administration. She is a member of the consolidated research group Copolis –Welfare, Community and Social Control– and the consolidated teaching innovation group CEFOCID-Copolis, both attached to the University of Barcelona. Her most recent publications include the articles "Intimate partner violence in female-headed one-parent households: generating data on prevalence, consequences and support" (2019), "Fiestas, public space and rape culture. A study of the Wolf Pack case" (2020) and "The response of the feminist movement to sexual violence in the public space. Gang rape at the San Fermín festivities in 2016 as a turning point" (2020). Currently, she works at the General Directorate for the Eradication of Sexist Violence in the Ministry of Equality and Feminisms at the Government of Catalonia.