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The miracle of human birth, outsourced

By Ellen Goodman

By now we all have a story about a job outsourced¹ beyond our reach in the global economy². My own favorite is about the California publisher who hired two reporters in India to cover the Pasadena city government. Really.

There are times as well when the offshoring³ of jobs takes on a quite literal meaning. When the labor we are talking about is, well, labor⁴.

In the last few months we've had a full nursery⁵ of international stories about surrogate mothers⁶. Hundreds of couples are crossing borders in search of lower-cost ways to fill the family business. In turn, there's a new coterie⁷ of international workers who are gestating⁸ for a living.

¹ outsourced: verb: contract work out or abroad

² global economy: noun: the wealth and resources of the entire world available anywhere on the planet (Pizza Huts in Hong Kong are characteristics of a global economy.)

³ offshore: verb: to relocate to a foreign country to take advantage of lower costs

⁴ labor: noun: work, esp. hard physical work; the process of childbirth, esp. the period from the start of uterine contractions to delivery

⁵ nursery: noun: a room in a house for the special use of young children

⁶ surrogate mother: noun: a woman who bears a child on behalf of another woman, either from her own egg fertilized by the other woman's partner, or from the implantation in her uterus of a fertilized egg from the other woman

⁷ coterie: noun: a small group of people with shared interests or tastes, esp. one that is exclusive of other people

⁸ gestating: verb: carry (a fetus) in the womb from conception to birth

Many of the stories about the globalization of baby production begin in India, where the government seems to regard this as, literally, a growth industry. In the little town of Anand, dubbed "The Cradle of the World," 45 women were recently on the books of a local clinic. For the production and delivery of a child, they will earn \$5,000 to \$7,000, a decade's worth of women's wages in rural India.

But even in America, some women, including Army wives, are supplementing their income by contracting out their wombs⁹. They have become surrogate mothers for wealthy couples from European countries that ban the practice.

This globalization¹⁰ of baby-making comes at the peculiar intersection of a high reproductive technology and a low-tech¹¹ work force. The biotech¹² business was created in the same petri dish¹³ as Baby Louise, the first IVF¹⁴ baby. But since then, we've seen conception¹⁵ outsourced to egg donors and sperm donors. We've had motherhood divided into its parts from genetic mother to gestational mother to birth mother and now contract mother.

⁹ womb: noun: the uterus; a place of origination and development

¹⁰ globalization: noun: develop so as to make possible international influence or operation

¹¹ low-tech: adjective: involved in, employing, or requiring only low technology

¹² biotech: short for biotechnology: noun: the exploitation of biological processes for industrial production

¹³ petri dish: noun: a shallow, circular, transparent dish with a flat lid, used for the growing microorganisms

¹⁴ IVF: noun: fertilization that takes place in a test tube

¹⁵ conception: noun: the action of conceiving a child

We've also seen the growth of an international economy. Frozen sperm is flown from one continent to another. And patients have become medical tourists, searching for cheaper health care whether it's a new hip in Thailand or an IVF treatment in South Africa that comes with a photo safari thrown in for the same price. Why not then rent a foreign womb?

I don't make light of infertility. The primal¹⁶ desire to have a child underlies this multinational Creation, Inc. On one side, couples who choose surrogacy want a baby with at least half their own genes. On the other side, surrogate mothers, who are rarely implanted with their own eggs any longer, can believe that the child they bear and deliver is not really theirs.

As one woman put it, "We give them a baby and they give us much-needed money. It's good for them and for us." A surrogate in Anand used the money to buy a heart operation for her son. Another raised a dowry for her daughter. And before we talk about the "exploitation" of the pregnant woman, consider her alternative in Anand: a job crushing glass in a factory for \$25 a month.

Nevertheless, there is — and there should be — something uncomfortable about a free market approach to baby-making. It's easier to accept surrogacy when it's a gift from one woman to another. But we rarely see a rich woman become a surrogate for a poor family. Indeed, in Third World countries, some women sign these contracts with a fingerprint because they are illiterate.

For that matter, we have not yet had stories about the contract workers for whom pregnancy was a dangerous occupation, but we will. What obligation¹⁷ does a family that simply contracted for a child have to its birth mother? What control do — should — contractors have over their "employees" lives while incubating¹⁸ "their" children? What will we tell the

¹⁶ primal: adjective: essential

¹⁷ obligation: noun: a duty or commitment; an act to which a person is morally or legally bound

¹⁸ incubate: verb: keep an egg or an embryo at a suitable temperature so that they develop

offspring of this international trade?

"National boundaries are coming down," says bioethicist Lori Andrews, "but we can't stop human emotions. We are expanding families and don't even have terms to deal with it."

It's the commercialism that is troubling. Some things we cannot sell no matter how good "the deal." We cannot, for example, sell ourselves into slavery. We cannot sell our children. But surrogacy business comes perilously close to both of these deals. And international surrogacy tips the scales.

So, these borders we are crossing are not just geographic ones. They are ethical¹⁹ ones. Today the global economy sends everyone in search of the cheaper deal as if that were the single common good. But in the biological search, humanity is sacrificed to the economy and the person becomes the product. And, step by step, we come to a stunning place in our ancient creation story. It's called the market place.

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¹⁹ ethical: adjective: of or relating to moral principles; morally correct