

ALTRUISTIC SURROGACY – ETHICAL ISSUES AND DEMOGRAPHIC DIFFERENCES IN PUBLIC OPINION

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Abstract. *This is the first study of the attitude of Bulgarian people towards the allowing of altruistic surrogacy which is prohibited in Bulgaria. This study used an online survey which was active during one year (July 2010-June 2011) and which was answered by 951 respondents between 18-65 years of age. The majority of them (87%) are young people between 18-43 years. The respondents are men and women with secondary, university and medical university education from the capital and the countryside. They have different marital status. The data were treated with statistical package SPSS 16. The link between the demographic characteristics (gender, age, education, marital status and place of residence) and the answers of the respondents was identified. The majority of the respondents (73%) think that the altruistic surrogacy must be allowed in Bulgaria and the main supporters are the women and the residents in the countryside – married or living with partner. Only 38% of the respondents mostly divorced middle aged persons accept the access of same sex couples to surrogacy. The majority of the respondents (53%) fear that the surrogacy may transform poor women into incubators for babies. This opinion is shared by the men, by the youngest and the oldest respondents and by the unmarried persons.*

Key words: Assisted reproduction, surrogacy, surrogate mother, same-sex couples

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INTRODUCTION

The aim of this paper is the first study of the public opinion in Bulgaria about surrogacy. Surrogacy is a method of medically assisted reproduction in which a woman called surrogate or substitute mother becomes pregnant, carries and relinquish a child to infertile person(s) or intended parents.

There are interests of several persons in the ethical debate about surrogacy. In the first place there is the happiness of the most vulnerable persons in the process – the children. There are two groups – the baby born by surrogacy and the already born infants of the surrogate mother. There are data showing that the communication between mother and fetus dur-

ing pregnancy has a serious positive impact on the further physical, psychic and emotional development of the child [8]. According to Golombok [9] there are studies on the psychic development of children born by surrogacy which established no difference between them and those conceived naturally. Sharma [15] suggest that there is a danger for the psychic development of the existing children of the surrogate mother. They are afraid of being relinquished to other people and can hardly understand why the surrogate child is not their brother or sister.

Another important participant in the surrogate motherhood is the surrogate mother. The motivation of these women, the personal characteristics and the relations in their own families have been studied [6].

The opponents of surrogacy consider that it is against the principle of human dignity. According to them the surrogacy is treating the woman's body as an object which can be hired for a definite period of time. The womb of the woman is used as a tool for production of a child [1]. Some researchers [12] argue that prostitution is more moral than surrogacy because the prostitute sells only her body while the surrogate woman sells also her reproductive functions.

The attachment and the mother's feelings which arise during pregnancy in the surrogate are other difficulties to overcome in the process. The surrogate mother may develop psychological stress upon the relinquishment of the child [17].

The surrogacy is prohibited by law in many member states of the European Union. Only in the United Kingdom and Greece surrogacy is authorized by statute law. In the remaining countries the surrogacy is practiced by guidelines or without any regulations. Only altruistic surrogacy is practiced in seven member states [3].

Bulgaria is one of the countries in which this practice is forbidden. There is a demographic crisis in the country due to the important degree of emigration and the low number of newborn. The couples with fertile problems in Bulgaria are about 250,000. Considering these negative tendencies a group of members of the Parliament propose in 2010 amendments in several laws in order to legalize surrogacy. These amendments were voted on first reading. Our survey about the public opinion in Bulgaria on surrogacy was carried out in relationship with these amendments. The results of the survey are presented and discussed in the present paper.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

Participants

The on-line survey was carried out in cooperation with the company "Kupisait", a provider of on-line survey software and corresponding resources. The survey was installed on a specially created for this purpose web-site www.bioetika.org on which a lot of additional information about ART was presented together with a forum for discussion. The web-site was accessible in the Bulgarian language from July 2010 until June 2011. Cookies were set in order to prevent multiple responses from one person. Our study is directed towards Bulgarian people of working age – from 18 to 65 years. We removed the people under 18 and above 65 and those who have not answered all the questions. Considering the specificity of the questions, www.bioetika.org had been advertised on

university web-sites visited by students and on sites visited by people with fertility problems. The majority of the respondents (87%) are young people between 18-43 years of age. The respondents are men and women with secondary, university and medical university education from the capital and the countryside. They have different marital status.

Materials

Three questions were proposed to the respondents.

1. Should the law allow altruistic surrogacy?
2. Should the law allow surrogacy for same-sex couples?
3. Do you consider that surrogacy may lead to exploitation of poor women, transforming them into incubators for babies?

Statistics

The answers to the questions were encoded and were converted into CSV files for further statistical analysis. The data were treated with statistical package SPSS 16. The determination of the link between the demographic characteristics and the answers of the respondents was made using the χ^2 – method of Pearson Chi-Square in cross tables 2 x 2, the Linear by Linear Association in cross tables 2 x K, cross-tabulation, graphical analysis – diagrams of Bar-Chart and the one factor dispersion analysis of Kruskal-Wallis. The critical level of significance was 0.05. The zero hypothesis is rejected when $p < 0.05$.

RESULTS

Nine hundred ninety four respondents answered the survey. Finally, after the removals described in section 2.1 remained 951 respondents.

1. Attitude towards legalization of altruistic surrogacy in Bulgaria

Seventy-three percent of the respondents believe that the law must allow the altruistic surrogacy in Bulgaria (Table 1). The influence of five demographic characteristics – gender, age, education, marital status and place of residence – on the respondents' answers was studied (Table 2).

Table 1. Distribution of the answers in percent

	First question	Second question	Third question
YES %	73.1	39.8	52.9
NO %	16.6	45.8	35.8
I CANNOT ANSWER %	10.2	14.4	11.3

The gender modifies the answers – the women are stronger supporters of surrogacy ($p < 0.05$ – Table 3). The age has no statistical significance and the positive answers are between 75 and 80%. The education also does not modify the answers of the respondents with secondary, university and medical university education – all are about 70%. People with different marital status show diverse attitude towards surrogacy ($p < 0.05$ – Table 3). Stronger proponents are the married and those living with partner. The place of residence of the respondents has also statistical significance ($p < 0.05$ – Table 3). The people living in the country are more positive about altruistic surrogacy by comparison with those living in the capital.

2. Access of same-sex couples to altruistic surrogacy

Only 38% of the respondents agree surrogacy to be allowed for same-sex couples (Table 1). The influence of the same demographic characteristics was studied (Table 2). The gender has no influence on the answers ($p > 0.05$ – Table 3). The people with different education who support the access of same-sex couples to surrogacy varies between 35-40% and has no statistical significance ($p > 0.05$ – Table 3). The situation with the respondents from different place of residence is the same – $p > 0.05$. A differentiation in the opinion in regard to the access of same-sex couples to surrogacy depends on the age ($p < 0.05$). Most approving (above 50%) towards this access are the respondents between 44-51 years of age (Table 2). The marital status has also statistical significance on the answers of the respondents ($p < 0.05$). The divorced people are most positive – above 50% (Table 2).

Table 2. Significance of the demographic characteristics on the answers of the respondents

Demographic characteristics		First question %			Second question %			Third question %		
		Yes	No	I cannot answer	Yes	No	I cannot answer	Yes	No	I cannot answer
Gender	Men	61.3	22.6	16.1	31.7	60.6	7.7	67.9	25.0	7.1
	Women	76.4	14.7	8.9	39.8	41.6	18.6	49.5	38.2	12.3
Age Years	18-35	76.7	18.5	4.8	36.9	45.4	17.7	58.4	29.6	12.0
	36-43	75.7	13.7	10.6	38.3	44.6	17.1	41.1	47.4	11.5
	44-51	80.6	14.3	5.1	50.2	43.7	6.2	46.1	47.6	6.3
	52-65	78.6	11.9	9.5	30.3	54.5	15.2	57.6	33.3	9.1
Education	Secondary	69.7	18.8	11.5	39.3	45.8	14.9	61.9	28.2	9.9
	University	71.3	17.4	11.3	35.6	45.8	18.6	61.7	24.5	13.8
	Medical	69.1	18.0	12.9	40.7	43.8	15.5	67.8	25.2	7.0
	University									
Marital status	Unmarried	61.8	25.1	13.1	38.8	49.4	11.8	71.9	21.3	6.8
	Married	79.9	12.6	7.5	33.6	48.1	18.3	41.4	45.2	13.4
	Divorced	73.7	18.9	7.4	57.1	35.7	7.2	50.0	42.9	7.1
	Widow	72.7	9.1	18.2	25.0	41.7	33.3	41.7	39.7	18.6
	Living with partner	80.7	7.9	11.4	44.4	33.5	22.1	52.9	35.8	11.3
Place of residence	Capital	62.2	20.4	17.4	39.1	43.4	17.5	57.3	31.8	10.9
	Country	76.5	15.1	8.4	36.6	47.8	15.6	49.1	39.2	11.7

3. The surrogate mother as an instrument for reproduction

There are scientific discussions on social and economic problems in which was pointed out some anxiety about the exploitation of poor women as surrogate mothers. The majority of our respondents (53%) also consider that surrogacy although altruistic may

transform a certain group of women into incubators for babies (Table 1). The study of the influence of the demographic characteristics upon the answers of this question showed statistical significance ($p < 0.05$) in regard to gender, age and marital status. The women are much less worried in comparison to men that the surrogacy arrangement may transform into

instrument the surrogate mother. Positive answers (above 50%) are given by the respondents aged 18-35 and by those from 52 to 65 years of age (Table 2). The people with different marital status have not the same fear about the above-mentioned possibility for the surrogate. Most worried are the unmarried (72%) followed by the living with partner (53%) and the divorced (50%). People with different education and place of residence answered in the same way to this question.

Table 3. The statistical significance of the demographic characteristics on the answers of the respondents (P-Value)

Demographic characteristics	First question p-value	Second question p-value	Third question p-value
Gender	0,0001	0,961	0,0001
Age	0,149	0,018	0,007
Education	0,587	0,902	0,651
Marital status	0,0001	0,031	0,0001
Place of residence	0,009	0,896	0,074

DISCUSSION

The first question of our survey concerns the most discussed topic – should the law allow altruistic surrogacy in Bulgaria. The majority of the respondents (73.1%) support the initiative for the legalization of the surrogacy in Bulgaria (Table 1). The presented data during the parliamentary discussions show that this practice exists in Bulgaria independently of the ban postulated in the Regulations of in-vitro fertilization. Poor women are hired as surrogate mothers, who are largely compensated to carry out the pregnancy. The birth takes place usually under the care of the gynecologist who has done the procedure. There are cases in which the surrogate mother gives birth to the baby with the identity card of the future mother. In this case the child is directly subscribed on the name of the potential mother and her husband. All this happens with the active participation of medics, mainly in the private reproductive centers. There are many risks for all participants in these cases. The potential parents might be blackmailed by the surrogate mother. Nobody can give a guarantee that the surrogate mother leads a healthy life during the pregnancy. If the potential parents separate or the baby is born with disabilities (malformations) and they do not want it any more, the child is usually abandoned by the surrogate mother as well. Another risk is that the surrogate mother may not receive the declared

compensation. All these factors explain the high percentage of support of the legalization of the already existing procedure. The women, the married, the living with partner and the people from the country are the principal proponents of this legalization.

The answers of the students from 12 universities in UK are similar – 72.2% [2]. The application of surrogacy in cases of woman infertility is supported by 79% of the students in Australia [5] and 89.5% of mid-wife students in Iran [14]. A representative survey in Japan in 2003 [13] showed very serious acceptance of gestational surrogacy by men (71.1%) and women (71.3%) respectively.

Surrogacy is not accepted positively in all countries. The degree of religious concepts in a given country is very important because all religions more or less reject surrogacy as a possibility. The surrogacy is allowed in Greece and nevertheless in a survey in 2002 the majority of the greek women (69.5%) reject the usage of surrogacy in case of infertility and even more (73%) refuse to become surrogate mothers [4].

The answers of question 2 show that 39.8% from the respondents consider that surrogacy must be allowed for homosexual couples as well. The number of the proponents of reservation of surrogacy only for heterosexual couples is a slightly higher (45.8%) (Table 1). The little difference is maybe a sign for a change in the Bulgarian public opinion towards a higher tolerance in regard to people with different sexual orientation. Highest level of acceptance of surrogacy for same-sex couples is observed in the groups of middle age persons (44-51 years) – 57% and the divorced – 50% respectively.

In the survey of medical site Doctissimo in 2011 59.62% of the French respondents consider that surrogacy must be available to homosexual couples while the opponents are 34.81% [7].

The data from a survey with medical students and housewives in Finland are similar to our results and 40% of the medical students are proponents of surrogacy for homosexual couples. This support of the housewives is only 20% [10].

The law from 2008 in United Kingdom allows surrogacy for homosexual female and male couples but not for single women and men. The practice of surrogacy for homosexual couples and single women is tolerated in Belgium and Netherlands. Surrogacy is practiced for all in California (USA) and many famous men from the show business as Ricky Martin, Elton John and others have children from surrogate mothers.

The legislator in Bulgaria proposes surrogacy to be reserved only for married heterosexual couples. We consider that this is discrimination because more than 25% of the newborn children in Bulgaria are from heterosexual couples living without marriage. Such kind of marital status – living with partner – is declared by 14% of our respondents. Unfortunately there is no statistics for the number of same-sex couples in Bulgaria.

The third question of our survey concerns the ethical aspect of surrogacy – does it lead to exploitation of poor women transforming them into “incubators for babies”?

The existence of such a danger is accepted by 52.9% of our respondents (Table 1). One third of them think that this cannot happen. The gender and the marital status influence significantly the answers ($p < 0.05$) (Table 3). The possibility that surrogacy may lead to the exploitation of poor women is accepted by 68% of the men while only 49% of the women have the same opinion. The most disturbed are the unmarried respondents and 72% of them think that this may happen while only 41% of the married ones accept this possibility.

The survey of the sociological agency IPSOS in 2009 shows that in France 52% of the people consider that surrogacy leads to commercialization and the exploitation of the human body [11]. This is the opinion of the majority of women while our results show that the men are more disturbed about the fact that women are used as a tool.

Surrogacy is strictly forbidden in some big European countries – France, Germany, Spain, Italy. The professionals there underline the commercialization of the human body. The surrogacy may lead to the exploitation of the women of the poor countries with the development of the so-called “reproductive” tourism [16]. In Ukraine and Russia the good payment is pointed out in the announcements searching surrogate mothers. Many intermediate agencies have database of surrogate mothers.

CONCLUSIONS

1. More than 2/3 of the respondents consider that the altruistic surrogacy must be allowed by the law. The women, the married, the living with partner and the people from the country are the principal proponents of this legalization.

2. More than 1/3 of the respondents think that surrogacy must be available for same-sex couples. Highest level of acceptance of surrogacy for same-sex couples is observed in the groups of middle age persons (57%) and the divorced (50%).

3. About half of the respondents accept that surrogacy may lead to exploitation of poor women. The possibility that surrogacy may lead to the exploitation

of poor women is accepted by 68% of the men. The most disturbed are the unmarried respondents.

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