

GIVING SURROGATES A VOICE

CARRYING SOMEONE ELSE'S CHILD CAN BE FULFILLING, YET FRAUGHT WITH
MISUNDERSTANDING AND FAMILY TENSION. A RESEARCHER OFFERS
A RARE INSIDER'S VIEW OF WHAT'S AT STAKE

Surrogacy is an extraordinary act of giving, love and resilience, offering hope to people who dream of having a child. It is a unique journey, with each surrogate having their own experiences when they make the fateful decision to try carrying someone else's child. While some surrogates find meaning and joy in their role, they may also face strained relationships with spouses and parents or struggle to have their voices heard regarding medical interventions. Some surrogates devote years to building relationships with intended parents, completing hormonal treatments and submitting to intense medical monitoring, all for pregnancies that do not result in live births. Can they even call themselves surrogates?

Such a varied and increasingly nuanced experience of surrogacy is hardly reflected in social science literature. Research often focuses on commodification — the idea that women's bodies are being commercialized — and altruism — in which surrogates receive no financial compensation beyond medical reimbursement.

Orit Chorowicz Bar-Am offers a new pathway to understanding. She is a PhD candidate and Azrieli Graduate Studies Fellow in the department of sociology and anthropology at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev. Her focus is on harnessing Israeli surrogates' own voices to probe issues that do not fit neatly into the boxes labelled “commodification” or “altruism.” Issues such as the experiences of women in the highly medicalized surrogacy process or the challenges of coping with unsuccessful or no pregnancies.

Instead of the structured interviews favoured by researchers in the field, which feature a predetermined set of questions, she uses a narrative approach. “I listen to the surrogates. I listen to their subjective experiences and analyze that,” says Chorowicz Bar-Am. “I don't use a theory in advance to say if they're altruistic or being commodified or exploited. That's not my language.”

In her latest paper, Chorowicz Bar-Am focuses on women who had an incomplete surrogacy experience, meaning they went through the approval process, connected with intended parents and completed the medical procedures necessary to get pregnant, yet were unable to conceive or carry a baby. Using their voices and narratives, her paper redefines what a surrogate is.





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“The most simple and popular definition of a surrogate,” she says, “is a woman who carries and delivers a baby for others, but not all women carry and deliver.” She argues that a surrogate should instead be defined as a woman who tries to carry and deliver a baby for others. “I want people to start using my definition of women trying to help others, women trying to carry and deliver — and not evaluating a woman by the outcome of her uterus or her reproductive abilities.”

The researcher is inspired by her own experiences as a surrogate. Approximately six years ago, Chorowicz Bar-Am gave birth to a married couple’s second child. The experience was positive yet challenging. She had previously experienced one unsuccessful embryo transfer, and one that ended with a spontaneous abortion in the eighth week. The third try was a success, and as the pregnancy progressed, she began to notice how little people understood about the topic. She found herself answering questions such as, “How much are you getting paid?” and “Do your children think you will give them away?” To help people understand surrogacy, she wrote a weekly blog for a popular newspaper detailing her experiences.

She also realized that the lived experience of surrogacy was an understudied subject in the academic world. “A lot of the research is coming from theories and interpretations that are not completely connected to what women are experiencing,” she says.

Chorowicz Bar-Am had always been determined to earn a PhD. After she gave birth, she connected with Elly Teman, one of the first

researchers to study surrogacy in Israel. Teman, an associate professor of anthropology at Ruppin Academic Center in Israel, encouraged her to pursue a PhD on the topic, and has since acted as her mentor, together with Yael Hashiloni-Dolev, Presidential Advisor for Gender Equity at Ben-Gurion University.

Teman says that Chorowicz Bar-Am’s personal experience as a surrogate allows her to form connections with the women she interviews. As a result, surrogates can feel more comfortable sharing their experiences, which greatly benefits the research.

“She heard stories of women who did not have a perfect journey, and I think it’s the first time ever that we’re hearing these stories,” Teman says. “As someone who was a surrogate and was part of the surrogacy world, she’s able to gain a unique level of rapport and trust from interviewees. I don’t think that would have happened with any other researcher.”

Chorowicz Bar-Am’s research comes at a time in Israel where surrogacy laws have rapidly changed, shifting the demographics of those who choose to become surrogates. Until 2011, only single women who met specific medical criteria could be surrogates under Israeli law, which made it difficult for intended parents to find surrogates. Chorowicz Bar-Am adds that these women, many of whom were single mothers, often became surrogates for economic reasons.

The laws changed in 2014, allowing married women to become surrogates. It gave intended parents more options and welcomed women with other motivations and economic backgrounds into

the surrogacy world. “I call it, the ‘first generation’ and the ‘next generation,’” says Chorowicz Bar-Am. “The next generation is more varied. The regulatory changes brought into surrogacy married, highly educated women from middle socio-economic backgrounds with different motivations than before.”

Intended parents have also changed under Israeli law. Previously, surrogates could only carry children for heterosexual couples; in 2018, the law was extended to single mothers. In January 2022, the law was amended to allow anyone to become an intended parent, including single men and same-sex couples.

As laws evolved for both surrogates and intended parents, Chorowicz Bar-Am says surrogates’ experiences became more complex and diverse. Some married women, for example, experienced strained relationships with their spouses when they made the decision. Other women who were medical workers themselves, such as midwives or doctors, wanted more say in their medical care. The topic of surrogacy also became more widely discussed, including on social media, where surrogates in different stages of the process shared knowledge and sometimes struggled emotionally when they saw others having success.

Chorowicz Bar-Am notes that public attitudes toward surrogacy have not completely evolved alongside Israeli laws, and that there is a gap in peoples’ assumptions versus surrogates’ realities. These assumptions, she has found, stem from societal expectations about what kinship, motherhood and parenthood should look like.

“As women in a patriarchal society, we’re supposed to give birth to our husbands’ babies and reproduce,” says Chorowicz Bar-Am. “And then there are these women who go to their husbands and say, ‘I want to reproduce but not for ourselves. For other people.’ It’s very hard for people to grasp.”

She hopes that boosting surrogates’ voices in her research will also correct misconceptions about surrogacy — and about who these women are. She points to Teman’s previous research that found it was easier for people to believe only weak, unstable or “crazy” women would want to be become a surrogate.

“In reality, women can do what they wish with their bodies and their reproductive abilities,” Chorowicz Bar-Am says. “Surrogacy questions the boundaries and stretches the limits we all have regarding reproduction, family, motherhood, kinship and solidarity. It’s crucial for policymakers, healthcare professionals and ethicists to acknowledge the multifaceted implications of surrogacy practices on surrogate’s lives.” ▲●■

Ground-breaking research by Chorowicz Bar-Am (above) harnesses the voices of Israeli surrogates to probe issues that don’t fit into existing theories. Her work is inspired by her own experience as a surrogate for a hopeful woman (shown in the background, above left) and her husband.