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The Wellcome Trust is very much a trans-humanist organisation and receives funding from the pharma industry and other private companies.

Therefore it's no surprise that they held a seminar on surrogacy with an academic who fully supports its commercialisation.



The point of the seminar was for Sigrid Vertommen to reflect on the materials Wellcome has in its library on surrogacy.

These were promotional material from The Fertility Show and children's books about surrogacy aimed at children born of surrogacy, so nothing hard hitting.

#### What you'll do

Hear Dr Sigrid Vertommen discuss her research on women's roles in "reproductive labour" in the global fertility industry as she explores the boundaries between gift-commodity, motherhood-work and altruism-profit in the fertility industry.

Over the past two decades, surrogate pregnancy has transformed from a small-scale activity into a booming 30-billion-dollar "baby business". Women, overwhelmingly from the global South and East, are recruited as egg-cell providers or surrogates to provide the "gift of life" to intended parents.

The talk will draw on archival material and ephemera from Wellcome Collection's library, such as promotional material from The Fertility Show. After the talk, you'll have the opportunity to look at some key documents from the archives and ask questions.

Sigrid Vertommen (hereafter SV) introduced herself and talked about her research which was pretty much a word salad assault.

#### About your speaker



**Dr Sigrid Vertommen**

Sigrid's researcher, King's College London

Dr Sigrid Vertommen is a research fellow at the Department of Conflict and Development Studies at Ghent University, and an affiliated scholar at the Sociology of Reproduction Research Group of the University of Cambridge. Her work explores the global politics of (assisted) reproduction, with a focus on transnational surrogacy between Israel/Palestine and Georgia. She is also a feminist and slow science organiser.

Put simply she decided to study why infertile Israeli couples and gay Israeli couples were choosing low cost surrogacy services outside of the country, with Georgia being the most popular destination.

#### Biography

Dr Sigrid Vertommen is Marie Curie Research Fellow at the Department of Global Health & Social Medicine.

In her PhD, obtained in 2017 at Ghent University in Belgium, Sigrid addressed the multiple ways in which reproductive technologies, including IVF, Pergonal, child removals, sperm smuggling, egg donation and transnational surrogacy, have been imagined, materialised and coproduced in Israel/Palestine, at the crossroads of settler colonialism, biocapitalism and bio/necropolitics.

Her work has been published in journals including BioSocieties and Science as Culture, and edited volumes such as 'Mattering: Feminism, Science and Materialism' edited by Victoria Pitts-Taylor, 'Assisted reproduction in a European and globalized perspective: notes on the overall framework' edited by Nina Lykke and Merete Lie, 'Critical Kinship studies: Kinship (trans)formed' edited by Charlotte Kroløkke e.a.

From 2010 until 2017, Sigrid was a doctoral researcher and assistant at the Department of Conflict and Development Studies at Ghent University in Belgium. She taught classes and courses on fieldwork in the Global South, Zionism, Palestine/Israel, gender and globalisation, reproductive labour, sexual politics, biopolitics, assisted reproductive technologies. Sigrid is part of the editorial board of Lava, a Belgian journal for societal critique. She is also active in the Slow Science Movement in Belgium.

SV wanted to understand the surrogacy industry from a 'labour perspective' and womens 'participation' in this (thereby implying that informed consent is given).

SV mentioned Palestinian sperm smuggling but I can't take that seriously as a human rights issue, sorry love.

#### Research

Under the supervision of Professor Barbara Prainsack, Sigrid is conducting qualitative research on the political economy of global fertility chains, with an empirical focus on the fertility chain between Israel/Palestine and Georgia.

She is particularly interested in understanding women's role and participation in the reproductive bio-economy as egg vendors and surrogates through the lens of reproductive labour. This research builds further on Sigrid's PhD research on the political economy of assisted reproduction in Israel/Palestine.

When SV named Sophie Lewis as informing her research, I was on full thicko alert, as Lewis is the batshit woman who likens pregnancy to \*cancer\* and has \*SIX\* 1-star reviews on Amazon of her book 'Full Surrogacy Now: Feminism Against Family', which has to be some sort of record.

It turns out SV is very much of the Lewis school of thought on ideas around the family and surrogacy.

SV excitedly explained The Fertility Show is a 'fertility fair' that 'intended parents' (i.e. baby buyers) go to find out their way around 'the fertility maze' and helps them

'shop' for the best solution.

The Wellcome Library has more than 30 children's books on 'third party reproduction' which explain to young kids different kinds of 'kinship models'.

The books are apparently 'fun to read'.

Unlike research, said SV, which is very nuanced and complex (I bet hers isn't), the books for kids focus on telling a core message in narrative form in an accessible way.



SV felt that the promotional material and the books represented the two extremes of the debate. The former being commercial and capitalist, the children's books, on the other hand, represented:

'the beauty, power and subversive character of surrogacy

as a family making practice in its purest and most innocent form, as a horizon of what reproduction could look like in an ideal world, free from colonialism, racism, capitalism and patriarchal power relations'.



I think it's probably safe to say that SV is not exactly impartial on the subject. Also, the statement makes no sense.

Indeed the third party model of surrogacy that SV described throughout is that used by gay couples, yet she did not make clear this is was the growth market.

SV said that the materials she looked at provided by Wellcome did three things:

1. Normalised it as a family model.
2. Showed it as a collaborative process.
3. Showed racialised and gendered division of labour.

SV said it is likely to be a 40 billion dollar industry by 2026.

States in the US and Canada where commercial surrogacy had been legalised and the industry was flourishing, incl. secondary industries like legal services, shipping of genetic material, tourism, etc.

Cost of surrogacy (USD) in Canada is currently approx. 90-150K, 70K in Israel, whereas Georgia it is only 30-40K.

Thailand, Cambodia, and Nepal had recently banned surrogacy but these previously were the most popular destinations. SV did not state why it had been outlawed.

SV said that critics of surrogacy condemn it as 'immoral, exploitative and dangerous' and yet admitted that hormone stimulation to extract eggs from women takes months and can result in serious complications/death. Gestational mothers are exposed to repeated invasive

tests, and C-sections so that 'intended parents' can fit the birth into their 'busy schedules'.

SV went on to say contracts also take away a mother's bodily autonomy, multiple embryos are implanted without permission, and many experience psychological stress post-delivery.

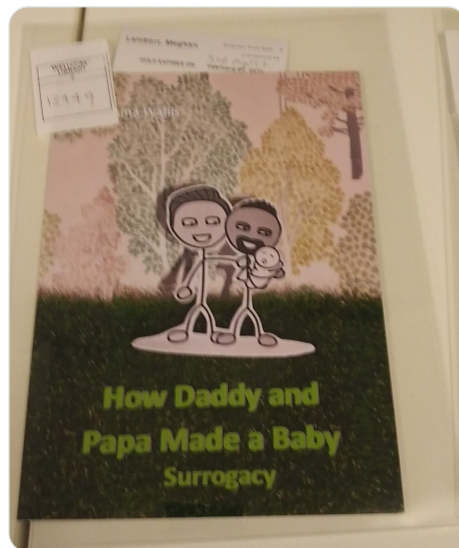
All of which sounds 'immoral, exploitative and dangerous' to me, so what exactly is

Vertommen's problem with that analysis?

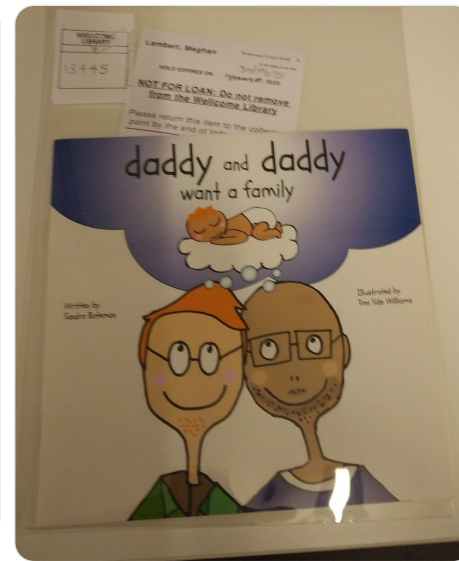
SV noted that most of the children's books were narrated by the 'intended parents', focus on the message that there was sadness as they couldn't reproduce

normally and that things were made good after the surrogate came along.

Here are some of the books that were on display. A significant number of them featured male couples.



One book was told from a surrogate's POV - the 'Surro Fairy'.



SV said that ordinary procreation also can't be done without technology - requiring hospitals, drugs and midwives, thus ignoring the 1,000s of years of human history in which no such medical intervention was available, with exception of the knowledge passed down woman-to-woman.

SV said reproduction is always assisted and surrogacy is just the same only there are two additional women involved - egg donor and surrogate.

The promotional material from agencies represent women who act as surrogates just as pregnant bellies -

SV felt that this implied such women had no agency.



But she also felt similarly about feminists and said they used similar imagery which depicted these women as victims.

Second wave feminists in Belgium (where SV is from) coined the phrase 'Be the boss over your own belly'.

Talking about surrogacy as work was difficult, SV mused, and said 'reproductive labour' was also doing the washing up, the housework, preparing sandwiches, having sex with

your husband, and that having a baby was all part of that. Reproduction labour within nuclear families is not valued.

Agencies exploited the language of altruism. A wage is not paid to women who act as surrogates - all they get is a fee/financial compensation for their 'gift'.

Any problems that arise are regarded as health issues, not work issues.

SV said women are expected to be altruistic, yet no other element in the chain is unpaid.

One Georgian woman SV interviewed was too embarrassed to call it work and was doing it because she was

'desperately needing the money'.

Although it is legal in Georgia, SV argued that the stigma of not being considered a worker fuelled their feeling of exploitation and drew a parallel to sex workers being supposedly made vulnerable through societal taboos.

However the stigma SV appeared to refer to was the societal taboo of being an unmarried mother btw, no one could have any idea that they were in surrogacy.

SV then went full word salad again, using phraseology like 'binaries' and 'racialised and gendered'.

It's an argument which makes no sense though. Firstly it's a given that it's 'gendered' since only women give birth. Secondly it isn't particularly 'racialised' - people are going to the places where it is cheapest. It's the poorest women who are being exploited - whether they

are poor white Europeans (Georgians) or Indian or Mexican.

SV didn't really mention that much though, that the women signing up are desperately poor and desperate.

Most can't even read the English contracts they sign, let alone understand the long term effects of hormones.

[@ObjectUK](#) pointed out that surrogacy had virtually no safeguards on the suitability of baby buyers and no cap on the numbers of babies commissioned. The rights of the child was missing from the analysis.

[@ObjectUK](#) is running an event on the rights of women and the child in surrogacy on 22 March.



**Surrogacy - Women and Children Last**

Eventbrite - OBJECT presents Surrogacy - Women and Children Last - Sunday, 22 March 2020 at Central London. Find event and ticket information.

<https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/surrogacy-women-and-children-last-tickets-91773345547>

A woman asked whether paternalistic commodification assumed surrogacy could be altruistic, or was it assuming it could be commodified.

I didn't have a clue what that meant but SV did and gasped 'that's the million dollar question!' and went on to say that she used the 'labour

perspective' because she wanted to 'bypass these tricky questions'.

[#braveandstunning](#)

SV said surrogacy, sex work and porn have been very 'divisive issues' amongst feminists. If we look at it from the 'labour perspective' then we will make it more easy for women in this

industry to organise as workers (no insight given into why).

Discussions around whether to ban surrogacy are apparently 'immobilising' and the push to keep surrogacy as altruistic or to move to full commercialisation depended on whether society as a whole could recognise womens'

reproductive labour in the \*normal family set-up\*.

SV accepted that surrogacy is 'shitty' and exploitative but that also there was a lot of exploitation within 'normal/natural' families too, and that only looking at 'commodified surrogacy doesn't lead us anywhere'.

Q: It was pointed out that a key feature of the children's books on alternative families was love was necessary, when in fact this isn't true, in surrogacy nor in normal families. Did this erase the work out the reproductive labourers?

SV answered that it was difficult to bring in the financial element of the transaction into a children's story.



SV agreed that love was an over-emphasised element and that it was at the expense of many other things, incl. the state allowed statutory leave to \*all\* parents.

Q: Why do gay men choose surrogacy over adoption?

SV replied in Israel gay couples aren't allowed to adopt. People also see the birth mother of an adopted child as problematic and that adoption has many of the same issues of abuse that arise within surrogacy.

Q: What happens if a mother dies during her pregnancy? What happens to her existing children?

SV responded that in Georgia no medical complications are reimbursed, there is no life insurance, there is no extra care. Therefore there is no support.

Q: A question was asked about the restrictions contractions put on the women.

SV - differs from country to country. USA women form groups, aren't restricted from leaving homes, in Georgia women live in isolation, they have SM, they can have money deducted for rule breaking.

Yet again SV failed to address that the main difference between these groups is principally money.

Women in the US are far more likely to be doing surrogacy for 'altruistic' reasons (I'm guessing here) and certainly get paid way more than women in poorer countries.

So, there you go, yet another frothing-at-the-mouth academic talking shit, whilst literally shitting on the poorest women in the world by trying to shine one of the world's shiniest turds, which is surrogacy.

No doubt her insightful research will be used in some way to justify it in some manner.

[@threadreaderapp](#) unroll

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