



Compass Interdisciplinary Virtual Conference

19-30 Oct 2009

**Lauren Jade Martin
(The Graduate Center, CUNY)**

COMMENTARY ON:

**Fertility and Inequality across Borders: Assisted Reproductive Technology
and Globalization**

Eileen Smith-Cavros
Nova Southeastern University

Smith-Cavros cogently synthesizes some of the debates and presenting issues surrounding the phenomenon of people crossing international borders in order to obtain assisted reproductive technologies (ART). That she chooses to use the term “Travel ART” rather than the more popular yet contentious phrase “reproductive tourism” highlights the firm neutral stance she takes in her description and analysis of practices that are rife with ethical dilemmas. Because this is a new field of research that is as yet understudied, Smith-Cavros makes a wonderful contribution by surveying the existing literature (both academic and mainstream), informing readers about what is already known, at the same time she asks questions and points to areas in which we should strive to learn more.

Most importantly, Smith-Cavros underscores the need to examine how issues of inequality across and within borders may or may not be exacerbated by Travel ART. She raises concerns about the impact of this practice on the people, economies, and medical services of the countries that are destinations for those seeking fertility services, especially when the direction of travel is by high-income individuals traveling to lower-income nations. Are egg donors and surrogates in host countries being exploited? Does reproductive tourism inflate the price of assisted reproductive technologies for the citizens of host countries who cannot pay as much as foreign nationals? What does it mean for the concept of human rights when the exercising of one person’s right to raise a family comes at the expense of another person or even an entire country?

Although the author is loath to use the phrase “reproductive tourism,” scholars and journalists who employ this terminology (as well as the broader term “medical tourism”), may be purposefully drawing attention to the non-medical goods and services that travelers consume as they cross borders, as well as to the marketing of clinics who explicitly advertise their medical services as part of a relaxing vacation getaway. We can draw insights from the already existing literature on medical tourism, but we should also be wary of assuming that Travel ART has the same dynamics as other forms of it. For example, much of what drives medical tourism is market forces: medical services such as surgery can be quite expensive, and savvy consumers may travel to different parts of the world in order to have operations or medical procedures for more affordable prices. This kind of bargain hunting tends to give rise to the flow of medical tourists from high-income nations, where medical services may be expensive and out of reach except for the very affluent, to lower-income nations. Smith-Cavros implies throughout her paper that flows of reproductive tourism take a similar path, from wealthy nations to less wealthy nations, from West to East, or from North to South.

However, what is unique about assisted reproductive technologies and services, as opposed to dental surgery, is the extent and the variability to which it is regulated throughout the world. Smith-Cavros does not ignore this fact, and posits that one motive for Travel ART is that services are illegal and/or highly restricted in some countries. I would argue that this motive must not be subsumed by the bargain-hunting motive, and that dynamics such as the direction of travel flows, the socioeconomic status of participants, and the criteria for choosing a country and a clinic may be drastically different. The mainstream media’s attention may be focused on India or Hungary as prime destinations of reproductive tourism, but if we take the bargain-hunting criteria out of the equation, we will see that high-income nations with lax regulations of ART such as the United States and Spain are also major destinations for those traveling from nations with stricter policies. This complicates discussions about the impact of reproductive tourism on global inequality.

As Smith-Cavros points out, we need more empirical data on this topic before we can fully understand its dynamics or theorize about its impacts. We need to know from which countries reproductive tourists are traveling from, and to which countries they are going. We need interviews with the travelers themselves to learn about their precise motives. We need longitudinal studies on how children born from transnational assisted reproduction are faring. We need health economics research on how reproductive tourism affects the global pricing of ART. And so on. This is a fascinating topic, and Smith-

Cavros does an excellent job at whetting our appetites for future research and insights.