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5TH / 6TH OCTOBER 2021

# WOMEN'S BIOCAPITAL. THE USES AND ABUSES BY TECHNOLOGY AND THE MARKET

# Women's Biocapital.

## The uses and abuses by technology and the market

The human body has long been the object of economic use and commodification. The novelty in contemporary capitalism is that market value is created from biological body components which generate profit, and are thus transformed in "biocapital". New bio-markets are possible because technological advancements enable fragmentation, conservation, stockage and transportation of organs, cells, fluids, tissues. Female bodies are particularly interesting lands of investment for new bio-markets. Their body parts are increasingly demanded: genetic medicine needs cord blood stem-cells; advancements in reproductive technology have increased demand of gametes and gestational

services; mother milk is extracted, frozen, and delivered transnationally; placenta and foetal material are used in pharmaceutical industry; women's hair is traded for cosmetic purposes. Whilst certain body parts are still protected from self-commodification, other biological components are heavily affected by a cultural shift encouraging individuals to sell them. In this workshop, we will explore how developments of technology have transformed female body components in economic resources and objects for transaction, and we will try to raise some of the most important implications for women, inequality and contemporary societies.

# Program 5th October

10.00 AM (CET)

## **Greetings to participants**

by the Coordinator of ESA RN33 “Women’s and Gender Studies”,  
Lise Widding Isaksen – University of Bergen (Norway)

Maria Carmela Agodi – Università di Napoli Federico II (Italy)  
*What’s in an image? The public life of fetal 3D images*

Julie Smith – Australian National University (Australia)  
*Trade and exchange of human milk – policy and regulation  
to ensure it helps not harms?*

Consuelo Corradi – LUMSA University (Italy)  
*Reflections on women’s biocapital as open access flesh:  
the nature-culture dualism revisited*

## **Chair**

Daniela Bandelli – LUMSA University

# Program 6th October

02.00 PM (CET)

**Firouzeh Nahavandy** – Université Libre de Bruxelles (Belgium)  
*Hair trade and poverty: the extraction of a new type of resource from the Global South*

**Sheela Suryanarayanan (Saravanan)** – University of Hyderabad (India)  
*Transnational surrogacy bazaar in India: impacts on surrogate mothers and their agency*

**Laura Corradi** – Università della Calabria (Italy)  
*Eggs and gestational markets: profit against women's health*

## **Chair**

**Daniela Bandelli** – LUMSA University

# Abstract

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## **What's in an image? The public life of fetal 3D images**

– *Maria Carmela Agodi*

The public life of fetal 3D images – followed on different social media through ethnographic observation (Picardi, Zollo 2021) – elicit questions about “surfacing the body interior,” to use Janelle Taylor’s expression (Taylor, 2005). How has ultrasound imaging surfaced the fetal body into public view? This is not simply a matter of technology, but of fetuses becoming public, socially and culturally. Fetal sonograms are representations that emerge out of particular material, always very specifically located, ways of working with bodily and other matter (Barad). How do particular ways of imaging bodies relate to particular ways of materially intervening in them? How do different forms of practice work together to stabilize or unsettle the fixity of bodily surfaces? Once we conceptualize the body as materializing in and through social practices, new perspectives open. It becomes possible to recognize bodies as having contours and boundaries that are not simply given by nature but accomplished through histories of collective human activity and power struggles. The dis-embedding of the fetus

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**Trade and exchange of human milk – policy and regulation to ensure it helps not harms?**

– *Julie Smith*

from the mother's body becomes a performative result of sociotechnical dispositifs while it enforces the possibility of thinking of it as a commodity in a newborn bio-market.

In 2015, a company called Ambrosia Milk began purchasing and exporting human milk from Cambodia to the United States. In 2017, the Australian government approved importation of donated human milk from India for sale to Australian hospitals. Such emerging markets in human milk have both promise and problems for women and children. Trade and exchange of human milk might exploit and disempower women, and displace mothers' breastfeeding of children. Alternatively, paid lactation work could improve women's economic autonomy, earnings, and job quality, and extend breastfeeding, and could assist advocacy for greater recognition of the value of women's unpaid household production. This presentation explores potential for markets in human milk to improve the visibility and valuation of women's unpaid breastfeeding and lactation work, from a feminist economic viewpoint. Looking at women's provision of breastfeeding and breastmilk as competing within an 'infant and young child food economy', it illustrates how contemporary market prices can make visible the large macroeconomic value of breastfeeding. However, key drivers of emerging markets for human milk are women's low incomes and insufficient maternity protection in both rich

and poor countries. Showing how markets for human milk and cows' milk formula products are interrelated, it argues for more comprehensive, integrated and gender equitable economic regulatory approaches to emerging markets and global trade in human milk. Such a framework for policy and regulation would prioritise human rights of women and their children through better maternity protection, creating decent work for mothers, and investing in recommended breastfeeding actions.

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**Reflections on women's  
biocapital as open access  
flesh: the nature-culture  
dualism revisited**

– *Consuelo Corradi*

Social theory and feminism offer several options to interpret the meaning and functions of women's bodies. The environmental awareness and, more recently, the Covid-19 pandemic, have shown how wrong it is to continue to conceive of the human body as completely unrelated to nature, which instead endlessly intervenes to destroy or nurture our lives. In my talk, I revisit the relationship of power and signification between women's bodies and the forces of technology and market, by reflecting within a non-dualistic nature-culture framework. Nature appears in women's bodies in many instances, such as eggs, womb, umbilical cord, milk, and hair. The fact that women's body parts related to reproduction are common to all mammalian females, is already an indication that they do not completely depend on the human will. Medical and genetics research tend today to transform women's

biocapital in open *access flesh*, a resource subject to relentless exploitation. We should not fail to see the inverted parallel between the growing sensitivity towards the way we treat animals, and the lack of sensitivity towards the expropriation of women's bodies. Just as we are seeking a balance between, on the one hand, the need to use natural resources to improve human life and, on the other, the need to preserve nature from unlimited exploitation, in the same way (albeit in different forms) we must actively reflect on a balance between women's freedom to dispose of themselves and defense against alienation, avoiding falling into the two symmetrical errors of essentialism and constructivism. The binary opposition between nature and culture does not help us to grasp the limit beyond which we cannot continue to manipulate or sell what is given, without relinquishing the integrity of who we are.

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**Hair trade and poverty: the extraction of a new type of resource from the Global South**

– *Firouzeh Nahavandy*

For many people, beautiful hair is a badge of beauty. Both wealthy consumers and people from less affluent classes from all over the world are eager to pay an enormous price to fulfill their dreams of beauty using either wigs or hair extensions. A modern trend is to use natural hair, which all the facts show comes mostly from developing countries, where women are poor enough to consider selling a treasured possession. The demand has turned the hair trade into a profitable business whereas it has also given

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**Transnational surrogacy  
bazaar in India: impacts  
on surrogate mother  
and their agency**

– *Sheela Suryanarayanan  
(Saravanan)*

to all sorts of trafficking. I argue that this process can be considered as the extraction of a new type of resource from the Global South.

The surrogacy practice in India had become a Bazaar where all kinds of biomaterial were on sale. IVF clinics providing surrogacy mushroomed all over the country. The problems began emerging when women lost their lives (both surrogate mothers and egg donors), children were abandoned, long legal battles left children without any citizenship, objectification and exploitation of women and children and trafficking young girls into surrogacy. The surrogacy (Regulation) Bill 2015 began the process of putting an end to commercial surrogacy, but it is still pending in the Rajya Sabha.

This paper examines the physical, economic and emotional impact of surrogacy on surrogate mothers and their children mothers in Western India from an impact-assessment study conducted in 2019. The study revealed that the poor households had to do at least 2 surrogacies to emerge from poverty. The remaining poor remained poor and some even slipped deeper into poverty. The physical impacts of surrogacy on the women's bodies were multiple. The emotional impact of surrogacy on women and their children were manifold. These detrimental impacts will remain even

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## **Eggs and gestational markets: profit against women's health**

– *Laura Corradi*

after changing the law in India to permitting only altruistic surrogacy. Some surrogate mothers did apply some agency by refusing to repeat surrogacy despite falling deeper into poverty.

In Oakland, California, on 9 November 2007, a group of feminists organized a seminar titled “Trading on the Female Body”. A campaign and a blog named “Hands Off Our Ovaries” ([handsoffourovary.com](http://handsoffourovary.com)) were launched and a network of international activists started to work with a common mission: the ban on the dangerous practices related to the commercialization of egg cells. Since then, such a commercialization has extended beyond our capacity to monitor its development. Since then, I have been doing research on this specific gendered articulation of biopower in terms of the feminist debate regarding the marketing of women's reproductive *organs* (such as eggs, as they have been regarded in European laws) and the commercialization of women's generative capacities. I tried to focus on a non-divisive topic: women's health – by examining the results of medical studies in Artificial Reproductive Technologies (ART) especially those related to eggs providers, surrogate mothers, and children born with Heterologous Embryo Transfer (HET). In my talk I will summarize findings and theoretical issues regarding women's body politics.

# The Speakers

**Maria Carmela Agodi** is Professor of Sociology at the University of Naples Federico II (Italy), and is currently the President of the Italian Sociological Association (AIS). In the last decade, she has actively participated in the scientific activities of many Research Networks of the European Sociological Association (including the RN on Women's and Gender Studies, Southern European Societies, and Science and Technology). She was elected member of ESA Executive Committee for two mandates (2011-2015) and was Chair of ESA RN 33 "Women's and Gender Studies" for three (2012-2016). Her research interests include the evaluation of public policies, the relation between gender and technology, and position of women in the scientific domain.

**Daniela Bandelli**, Ph.D. at the University of Queensland, is currently a Lecturer of sociology at the LUMSA University in Rome. As a Marie-Sklodowska Curie Fellow and visiting scholar at the University of Texas, she conducted the project "Women's Movements and Gestational Surrogacy" (WoMoGeS), with field-work in Mexico, United States and Italy. Her research interests span across assisted reproduction, domestic violence, social movements and feminism. She is author of *Sociological Debates on Gestational Surrogacy: Between Legitimation and International Abolition* (Springer, 2021).

**Consuelo Corradi** is Full Professor of sociology at the Department of Human

Studies, LUMSA University (Rome, Italy). She has held Visiting positions at Brandeis University (USA), the University of East London (UK), and the Universidade Nova de Lisboa (Portugal), and was Vice-President of the European Sociological Association in 2007–2009. Consuelo is widely published, with more than 120 scientific publications to her credit in English, Spanish, Italian and French. Her areas of specialisation are women's biocapital, femicide, violence against women, and the theories and critique of feminism.

**Laura Corradi** is Senior Lecturer of sociology and gender studies at the University of Calabria (Italy). In the last 25 years, she has been engaged in both teaching and research on women's health in India, Italy and the USA. Her most recent publication is "Assisted Reproductive Technologies and Health-Related Issues Among Women and Children: A Research Review," in *Dignity: A Journal of Analysis of Exploitation and Violence* (2021).

**Firouzeh Nahavandy** is a professor at the Université libre de Bruxelles, and President of the Graduate School of Development Studies of Wallonia-Brussels. Currently working on inequalities issues, she has published *Commodification of Body Parts in the Global South: Transnational Inequalities and Development Challenges*.

**Sheela Suryanarayanan (Saravanan)**, a social scientist, specialises on women's reproductive health, birthing practices, prenatal screening and selective abortions and surrogacy. Author of the book, *A Transnational Feminist View of Surrogacy Biomarkets in India*, she has also given input to the Surrogacy (Regulation) Bill 2019 at the Rajya Sabha Select Committee, India.

**Julie Smith**, Ph. D. is an Australian Research Council (ARC) Future Fellow, and Professor (Associate) at the Australian National University. Her current Fellowship focusses on the economics and regulation of markets in mothers' milk. In 2015, Smith

led a rapid evidence review for the World Health Organisation (WHO) in Geneva on marketing of foods for infants and young children, and her experience includes engagements as a technical expert advisor to the US Department of Health and Human Services, the WHO Western Pacific Regional Office, and international NGOs including UNICEF UK. Smith has published 35 articles in quality peer reviewed health, medical and economics journals, several book chapters, and two books. She has peer reviewed for journals such as *Bulletin of the World Health Organization*, *BMC Pregnancy and Childbirth*, *Maternal & Child Nutrition*, and *Public Health Nutrition*, and has been an ARC and National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) assessor.



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