

Armenia: Flouting Convention, Childless Couples Opt for Surrogacy

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Surrogacy is reportedly becoming a popular option for well-to-do, childless Armenian couples who desire children. But reconciling the practice with Armenia's relatively conservative social mores is proving a challenge.

As in all South Caucasus countries, Armenian culture places a heavy emphasis on the need for women to marry and to bear children. In the past, couples who could not have children sometimes asked relatives to bear a child whom they would then adopt. But the practice, though generally accepted, meant that the babies did not carry the DNA of either adoptive parent.

Surrogacy, by contrast, lets that bloodline continue, supporters affirm. "I think this is a chance for people who have a big wish to have their own baby," commented 48-year-old Yerevan homemaker Siranuysh Mamikonian.

The Ministry of Healthcare's chief specialist on maternal and pediatric health, Gayane Avagian, affirms that surrogate births are increasing in Armenia. Diaspora couples in particular take interest in such procedures, she added. Representatives of Yerevan hospitals note a similar trend. No accurate statistics have yet been compiled on how many children are born to surrogate mothers, however.

Thirty-five-year-old Lilianna Manukian (not her real name) is one of those mothers. To avoid what she terms "traditional Armenian criticism," Manukian, who will deliver a boy in May, said that she decided to move into another apartment two months ago and stay clear of relatives and neighbors.

Being pregnant without a husband – Manukian is a widow with two children – can invite widespread condemnation. For that reason, surrogate mothers selected by Healthy Mind, the only organization in Yerevan that matches Armenian and Diaspora couples with prospective birth mothers, often opt to live in relative isolation during their pregnancies. Alternative accommodation is offered as part of a package deal with the parents.

"Of course, it's difficult, but this is my deliberate choice," Manukian said. "Since I have my own children already, I look on my body as an incubator that can help develop a baby who has nothing to do with me."

A surrogate mother's services cost, on average, \$25,000 to \$30,000; a fee that includes medical exams and services, a monthly "salary" for the surrogate mother, lodging and transportation fees, food, clothing and an "honorarium" once the baby is born, plus legal services.

Healthy Mind's publicity statements describe surrogacy as "a bit odd, but a purely legal and praiseworthy way of earning money." Manukian acknowledged the desire to raise money for

her children's education as motivation for her to take on what she termed the "laudable" job of surrogacy.

Candidate surrogate mothers must be between 18 to 35 years old and undergo two months of psychiatric and medical tests. Women who already have children are preferred; women deemed "hysterical" are rejected. Aside from advertisements, candidates are "found via our friends and acquaintances," said Healthy Mind's founder, Dr. Davit Mkhitarian.

To reduce the risk of accidents, surrogate mothers must pledge not to use public transportation during their pregnancy; taxis only are permitted. Sexual activity during the pregnancy is similarly barred. "This is a very delicate and responsible area where every detail should be taken into account," commented Alexander Sirunian, an associate professor of law at Yerevan State University and one of the few Armenian lawyers handling surrogacy issues.

A 2002 reproductive rights law regulates surrogacy, but detailed contracts between parties are required to avoid future problems, he noted.

Unlike in the West, surrogate mothers do not have the option to meet the client parents; contracts with surrogate mothers provide for the child to be transferred immediately to the client parents upon birth, Sirunian said.

While the practice remains relatively new for Armenia, it has already attracted critics. One such opponent is 35-year-old librarian Narine Manasian who says that seeing how nature takes its course is better than opting for surrogacy. "I think there is no need to do something against God," Manasian said.

Representatives of the Armenian Apostolic Church did not express an official viewpoint on surrogacy to EurasiaNet.org, but Father Vahram Melikian, a spokesperson for the Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin, suggested that the practice was immoral.

"Irrespective of the child's origin, a strong spiritual and emotional bond is established between a mother and her fetus," he said. With surrogacy, "the woman is just playing the role of a vessel or an incubator. This violates the rights of both the woman and the child."

The Ministry of Healthcare's maternal and pediatric health chief specialist, Avagian, sees only benefits to the practice. "If the Diaspora supported the creation of a foundation financing in-vitro fertilization and surrogacy, that would not only encourage the birth rate, but also increase the number of happy families," Avagian said. "Having a child still remains an unattainable dream for many families, both for physiological and, particularly, financial reasons."

At 12.65 births per 1,000 people, Armenia's birth rate ranks second for the South Caucasus after Azerbaijan.

Editor's note:

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