

## REPRODUCTIVE LABOUR AND ECONOMIC SURVIVAL AMONG LOW-INCOME SURROGATE MOTHERS IN NIGERIA

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### Abstract

*Debates about reproductive labour, women's bodily autonomy, and economic survival have become heated as surrogacy has grown in popularity in today's reproductive markets. This study looks at how low-income women who use surrogacy deal with the conflict between financial need and reproductive labour, paying special attention to the socioeconomic factors that influence their involvement in Nigeria. The study examines how surrogacy operates as a type of labor embedded within current systems of inequality using a gendered analytical framework. The study critically engages with the lived experiences of surrogate mothers, emphasizing the circumstances under which decisions are made and negotiated, rather than viewing surrogacy as a purely contractual or mutually beneficial arrangement. Drawing on qualitative interviews with eight low-income surrogate mothers in Nigeria and employing snowball sampling, the study explores participants' motivations, experiences, and socioeconomic outcomes within surrogacy arrangements. In order to investigate income utilisation, changes in economic status,*

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*social perceptions, and long-term welfare implications, the study centres the voices of low-income surrogate mothers in Nigeria through qualitative methods such as in-depth interviews and snowball sampling. Additionally, it takes into account the ethical and legal environment surrounding surrogacy in Nigeria. The findings indicate that economic hardship, childcare responsibilities, and financial instability were among the primary factors motivating participation in surrogacy, while financial compensation was widely perceived as an important means of economic survival and improvement. It highlights the need for more adaptable and protective frameworks for women involved in surrogacy practices while providing a nuanced understanding of how economic survival is pursued within limited circumstances.*

**Keywords:** Reproductive labour; surrogacy; low-income women; economic survival; gender inequality; Nigeria; socio-legal analysis

## **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

In modern societies, the development of Assisted Reproductive Technologies (ARTs) has profoundly changed kinship relationships, family formation, and reproductive practices. Due to the ethical, legal, economic, and sociocultural concerns surrounding the practice, surrogacy has become one of the most contentious reproductive arrangements among these technologies. A surrogate is a woman who carries a pregnancy on behalf of another person or couple who plan to become parents after the baby is born. Although surrogacy has gained increasing global visibility alongside the expansion of reproductive technologies, its emergence within developing contexts such as Nigeria has generated intense ethical, legal, cultural, and feminist debates surrounding

reproductive labour, bodily autonomy, women's rights, and socio-economic inequality<sup>1</sup>

The increasing prevalence of surrogacy in Nigeria is a reflection of broader changes in reproductive healthcare, shifting family goals, and increased access to fertility technologies among some social groups. Infertility continues to have significant emotional, cultural, and social repercussions in a society where motherhood is still strongly associated with social legitimacy, womanhood, and marital stability. This is particularly true for women whose identities and social value may be strongly linked to childbearing expectations.<sup>2</sup>

As a result, for individuals and couples facing infertility difficulties, alternative reproductive arrangements like surrogacy are increasingly becoming viable routes to parenthood. However, beneath prevailing narratives that portray surrogacy as a mutually advantageous reproductive arrangement, there is a more nuanced reality influenced by gendered economic conditions and class disparities. According to feminist academics, commercial surrogacy frequently relies on the reproductive labour of economically disadvantaged women, whose involvement is directly related to their need for money and their lack of opportunities<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Cyril Osilama Adamu, 'Ethical Issues in Commercial Gestational Surrogacy' (2020) 18(4) *AMAMIHE: Journal of Applied Philosophy* 88; Isaac A Obadina, 'Regulating Surrogacy in Nigeria: Issues, Challenges and the Role of Culture' (2026) *Journal of African Law* 1 <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021855325100843> accessed 12 May 2026.

<sup>2</sup> Raphael A Dimka and Simon L Dein, 'The Work of a Woman Is to Give Birth to Children: Cultural Constructions of Infertility in Nigeria' (2013) 17(2) *African Journal of Reproductive Health* 102.

<sup>3</sup> Amrita Pande, *Wombs in Labor: Transnational Commercial Surrogacy in India* (Columbia University Press 2014); Sharmila Rudrappa, *Discounted Life: The Price of Global Surrogacy in India* (New York University Press 2015).

Commercial surrogacy is frequently portrayed as a way for low-income women to improve their financial situation, but it also exposes them to forms of exploitation that stem from structural inequality, poverty, and unequal bargaining power<sup>4</sup>.

Surrogacy has been conceptualised more and more in feminist political economy scholarship as a type of reproductive labour where women's reproductive capacities are integrated into market relations and economic exchange<sup>5</sup>. The social, emotional, and physical aspects of pregnancy, childbirth, and caregiving within gendered systems of social and economic organization are all included in reproductive labour, which goes beyond biological reproduction. Therefore, the extent to which women exercise agency within reproductive arrangements shaped by structural inequalities is a crucial question raised by commercial surrogacy. Critical feminist scholars warn that "choice" cannot be separated from material realities like poverty, unemployment, and gendered economic marginalisation, despite liberal perspectives on surrogacy frequently emphasising bodily autonomy, freedom of choice, and economic opportunity<sup>6</sup>. As a result, discussions about surrogacy usually alternate between stories of empowerment and worries about exploitation, commodification, oppression, and unfair reproductive practices<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> C Shastri, 'Commercial Surrogacy As an Instrument of Exploitation' (2020) SSRN Electronic Journal [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=3637565](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3637565) accessed 14 May 2026.

<sup>5</sup> A Stoeckle, 'Rethinking Reproductive Labor through Surrogates' Invisible Bodily Care Work' (2018) 44(7–8) *Critical Sociology* 1103.

<sup>6</sup> Pande (n 3)

<sup>7</sup> J Attawet, E Alsharaydeh and M Brady, 'Commercial Surrogacy: Landscapes of Empowerment or Oppression Explored through Integrative Review' (2025) 46(10) *Health Care for Women International* 1081.

These conflicts become especially important in places like Nigeria, where there are still few and disjointed legal and regulatory frameworks pertaining to surrogacy. Nigeria still lacks a thorough national legal framework that expressly governs the rights, obligations, and welfare of parties involved in surrogacy agreements, despite the growing prevalence of these agreements<sup>8</sup>. Concerns about informed consent, reproductive risks, legal representation, and the possible exploitation of economically vulnerable surrogate mothers have grown as a result of the largely unregulated nature of surrogacy practices. Uncertainties about contractual obligations, healthcare responsibilities, and the protection of women involved in surrogacy arrangements are further exacerbated by current regulatory gaps. Surrogate mothers face uncertainty due to current legal ambiguities regarding parental rights, compensation, healthcare responsibilities, and post-birth arrangements. Despite the lack of comprehensive federal legislation that specifically regulates commercial surrogacy, the majority of surrogacy arrangements in Nigeria actually take place through privately negotiated contractual agreements between surrogate mothers, fertility clinics, agencies, and intended parents. Surrogate mothers rely primarily on constitutional protections, contract law principles, healthcare regulations, and emerging Assisted Reproductive Technology (ART) guidelines for legal and economic protection, despite the fact that surrogacy is not criminalised under Nigerian law. Economically vulnerable women may experience unequal bargaining power, insufficient legal protection, and increased vulnerability to exploitation within reproductive arrangements in the

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<sup>8</sup> Abiade Olawanle Abiola, T Adenipekun, A Olatunbosun and TY Akintunde, 'Perspectives on Surrogacy Practices and Law in Nigeria: A Call for Policy Intervention' (2024) 11(4) *Women's Reproductive Health* 988.

absence of sufficient institutional regulation. Ethical oversight and accountability mechanisms within the reproductive industry are further complicated by the informal and frequently privately negotiated nature of surrogacy in Nigeria.

Beyond legal issues, surrogacy practices in Nigeria are still firmly ingrained in sociocultural and religious realities that influence public perceptions of motherhood and reproduction. Social perceptions of assisted reproduction are still influenced by religious convictions, moral concerns, and cultural expectations regarding women's reproductive roles. Because of prevalent presumptions about motherhood, pregnancy, and family identity, women who engage in surrogacy arrangements may thus face secrecy, stigma, social judgement, and strained family relationships<sup>9</sup>. These experiences are frequently exacerbated for low-income women, whose financial circumstances may simultaneously make surrogacy a source of social vulnerability and a means of survival. Therefore, without taking into consideration the larger gendered and socioeconomic structures within which reproductive decisions are made, the experiences of surrogate mothers cannot be fully comprehended through biomedical or legal frameworks.

The socioeconomic experiences of low-income surrogate mothers themselves have received relatively less attention, despite the fact that existing research on surrogacy in Nigeria has made a substantial contribution to discussions on legal regulation, ethics, religion, reproductive rights, and the protection of surrogate mothers. Relatively

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<sup>9</sup> Abiade Olawanle Abiola, *Surrogacy Practice: An Alternative Path to Motherhood* (Princeton and Associates Publishing Co Ltd 2024).

little attention has been paid to how economically vulnerable women manage reproductive labour, financial survival, social perceptions, and bodily autonomy within surrogacy arrangements; instead, the majority of the literature has concentrated on regulatory issues, ethical disputes, and more general reproductive debates. This disparity is especially significant in Nigeria, where women's reproductive experiences are shaped differently by institutional protections, gender inequality, and economic instability. Therefore, it is crucial to comprehend how low-income surrogate mothers manage bodily labour, social perceptions, economic survival, and reproductive agency in order to have more comprehensive conversations about gender inequality and reproductive justice.

This article explores the socioeconomic realities of low-income surrogate mothers in Nigeria, drawing on feminist political economy viewpoints and discussions of reproductive labour. The study investigates how surrogate mothers deal with financial necessity, reproductive labour, social stigma, and institutional uncertainty within surrogacy arrangements using qualitative methods, such as in-depth interviews carried out through snowball sampling networks. The ways in which surrogate mothers' perceptions of agency, consent, and bodily autonomy within unequal reproductive arrangements are shaped by financial necessity, as well as the ways in which sociocultural and legal structures impact their lived experiences, are given special attention. This paper adds to ongoing feminist and socio-legal discussions on surrogacy, economic survival, and reproductive justice in modern Nigerian society by highlighting the voices of women who hold structurally vulnerable positions within reproductive markets.

## **2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

## **2.1 Surrogacy and Reproductive Labour**

Scholarly interest in the connections between labour, gender, reproduction, and market economies has increased due to the global growth of commercial surrogacy. Surrogacy is increasingly understood in feminist scholarship as a type of reproductive labour that integrates women's reproductive capacities into contractual relationships, international reproductive markets, and economic exchange<sup>10</sup>.

Global fertility markets, where reproductive services increasingly function through transnational and market-driven arrangements, have emerged as a result of the growing commercialisation of surrogacy. Due to the availability of relatively inexpensive reproductive labour, nations with notable socioeconomic disparities frequently become significant locations for commercial surrogacy within these reproductive economies. These dynamics within the Indian surrogacy industry have been thoroughly studied by academics like Amrita Pande and Sharmila Rudrappa, especially the ways in which commercial surrogacy interacts with labour relations, class inequality, and women's economic vulnerability.<sup>11</sup> Even though their research mostly focuses on international surrogacy agreements in India, their analyses offer crucial conceptual understanding of more general feminist political economy discussions about structural inequality, commodification, and reproductive labour.

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<sup>10</sup> S Vertommen and C Barbagallo, 'The In/Visible Wombs of the Market: The Dialectics of Waged and Unwaged Reproductive Labour in the Global Surrogacy Industry' (2022) 29(6) *Review of International Political Economy* 1945.

<sup>11</sup> Pande and Rudrappa (n 3).

Surrogacy is conceptualised as "wombs in labour" in Pande's ethnographic work, demonstrating how reproduction increasingly operates within systems of economic production and exchange.<sup>12</sup> Her work demonstrates how surrogate mothers negotiate issues of agency, financial need, and bodily control while navigating relationships with clinics, agencies, brokers, and intending parents. In a similar vein, Rudrappa examines commercial surrogacy from the perspective of reproductive labour markets, showing how women's reproductive abilities are integrated into larger social and commercial exchange systems.<sup>13</sup> These studies are important for comprehending the intersections of gender, labour, economic inequality, and reproductive commodification within commercial surrogacy more generally, even though they originate from transnational surrogacy contexts. Recent research has also warned against reducing surrogacy experiences to stories of exploitation or inequality, highlighting the importance of looking at the intricate lived realities and regional contexts influencing women's involvement in surrogacy agreements<sup>14</sup>.

Scholarly criticisms of commercial surrogacy continue to centre on the commodification of women's reproductive capacities. The process by which human abilities, bodies, or relationships are turned into commodities to be traded on the market is known as commodification. Pregnancy and childbirth are contractual services that are negotiated through monetary compensation in commercial surrogacy agreements.

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<sup>12</sup> Pande (n 3).

<sup>13</sup> Rudrappa (n 3)

<sup>14</sup> H Jacobson and V Rozée, 'Inequalities in (Trans)National Surrogacy: A Call for Examining Complex Lived Realities with an Empirical Lens' (2022) 63(5–6) *International Journal of Comparative Sociology* 285.

Such agreements, according to critics, run the risk of turning women's bodies into reproductive tools in profit-driven reproductive industries, raising issues with objectification, bodily autonomy, and reproductive exploitation.<sup>15</sup> When economic vulnerability affects participation, concerns about commodification become especially important, posing issues with coercion, unequal bargaining power, and structural inequality.

Simplistic depictions of surrogate mothers as merely exploited are complicated by research on reproductive labour. Many surrogate mothers actively negotiate the terms of participation, according to studies, and they may view surrogacy as a calculated financial move given their limited socioeconomic circumstances<sup>16</sup>. Opportunities for housing, children's education, debt repayment, or economic mobility may be made possible by financial compensation obtained through surrogacy. However, academics also warn that women's decision-making in surrogacy agreements frequently takes place in larger contexts of economic instability, patriarchal inequality, and a lack of structural support<sup>17</sup>. As a result, reproductive labour in surrogacy arrangements occurs within conflicts between economic survival and bodily commodification, empowerment and exploitation, and agency and structural constraint.

In the context of modern feminist political economy research, these conflicts have grown in importance. Even though such labour is still essential to maintaining households, communities, and labour systems, feminist political economy scholars contend that capitalism heavily

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<sup>15</sup> SG Berkhout, 'Buns in the Oven: Objectification, Surrogacy, and Women's Autonomy' (2008) 34(1) *Social Theory and Practice* 95; Shastri (n 4).

<sup>16</sup> Pande (n 3); K Roychoudhury, 'Surrogacy and Women's Social Empowerment in India: A Study of Autonomy and Economic Security' (2026) 12(1) *Scientific Culture* 581.

<sup>17</sup> Roychoudhury (n 16).

depends on undervalued reproductive and care labour, which is primarily carried out by women<sup>18</sup>. Therefore, commercial surrogacy is an extension of capitalist market relations into the private realm of human reproduction, where women's reproductive capacities become sites of exchange and economic value. This viewpoint is especially important for comprehending the ways in which surrogacy practices interact with more general systems of economic precarity, gendered labour divisions, and class inequality.

### **Feminist Debates on Surrogacy**

Surrogacy remains one of the most controversial subjects in feminist scholarship because it brings up complex questions about bodily autonomy, reproductive rights, labour, exploitation, and women's agency. Perspectives that frame surrogacy as a form of reproductive freedom and reproductive justice and those that see it as an expression of exploitation, commodification, and structural inequality within patriarchal and capitalist systems are frequently at odds in feminist discussions of surrogacy.<sup>19</sup> These discussions highlight larger conflicts in feminist theory about how structural inequality and individual choice interact, especially in situations where women's reproductive choices may be influenced by their financial situation. By focusing more on the various socioeconomic and cultural factors influencing women's involvement in reproductive arrangements, contemporary research highlights the

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<sup>18</sup> Silvia Federici, *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle* (PM Press 2012); Nancy Fraser, 'Contradictions of Capital and Care' (2016) 100 *New Left Review* 99; H Weiss, 'Social Reproduction as the Reproduction of Capitalism' (2022) 2022(93) *Focaal* 105.

<sup>19</sup> M Lherbet and S Hmamah, 'Surrogacy from a Reproductive Rights and Justice Perspective: A Comprehensive Review' (2025) 40(Supplement\_1) *Human Reproduction* deaf097.224 <https://doi.org/10.1093/humrep/deaf097.224> accessed 21 May 2026; Attawet and others (n 7).

necessity of examining surrogacy beyond strict dichotomies of empowerment or exploitation<sup>20</sup>.

Liberal feminist viewpoints typically place a strong emphasis on women's autonomy and reproductive choice, contending that women ought to be allowed to make choices about their bodies and reproductive abilities. According to this viewpoint, commercial surrogacy can be viewed as both a voluntary contractual arrangement made by consenting adults and a legal form of labour. Proponents of this viewpoint contend that limiting surrogacy could jeopardise women's economic agency and bodily autonomy by preventing them from using their reproductive abilities in ways that they deem advantageous.<sup>21</sup> According to recent research, financial compensation in surrogacy agreements may serve as a crucial source of financial stability and autonomy in making decisions for certain women, especially in environments with gendered economic inequality and few opportunities for employment<sup>22</sup>.

Radical and critical feminist viewpoints, on the other hand, advise against interpreting surrogacy only in terms of personal preference. Reproductive decisions, according to academics in this tradition, cannot be detached from more general socioeconomic realities like poverty, unemployment, patriarchy, and gendered inequality.<sup>23</sup> As a result, financial desperation rather than true autonomy may influence the

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<sup>20</sup> Jacobson and Rozée (n 14).

<sup>21</sup> A Gheaus and C Strachle, *Debating Surrogacy* (Oxford University Press 2024).

<sup>22</sup> Roychoudhury (n 16).

<sup>23</sup> S Suryanarayanan, 'Poverty and Commercial Surrogacy in India: An Intersectional Analytical Approach' (2023) 8(2) *Dignity: A Journal of Analysis of Exploitation and Violence* art 4; A Clément-Saby, 'Surrogacy: A New Version of Patriarchal Myths about Reproduction' in M-J Devillers and A-L Stoicea-Deram (eds), *Towards the Abolition of Surrogate Motherhood* (Spinifex Press 2021) 33.

"choice" to engage in commercial surrogacy. Because commercial surrogacy disproportionately depends on the reproductive labour of economically vulnerable women, critical feminist scholars contend that it runs the risk of perpetuating structural inequalities.

Feminist analyses of surrogacy continue to centre on the conflict between empowerment and exploitation. According to some academics, surrogacy might give women the chance to become financially independent, move up the social ladder, and live better. Some argue that commercial surrogacy perpetuates unequal power relations by allowing wealthy individuals or couples to obtain reproductive services by using the labour of less fortunate women. These tensions are especially noticeable in developing nations where women's involvement in reproductive markets is influenced by large economic gaps and where commercial surrogacy is increasingly linked to broader issues of gender inequality and global injustice<sup>24</sup>.

In feminist discussions of surrogacy, issues of reproductive justice and bodily agency have also come up frequently. Reproductive justice frameworks take into account the social, political, and economic factors that influence reproductive experiences and decisions in addition to formal reproductive rights. Reproductive justice scholarship, which has its roots in Black feminist activism, emphasises that social justice, healthcare access, economic inequality, and structural marginalisation are all interconnected with meaningful reproductive autonomy.<sup>25</sup> From this perspective, meaningful reproductive autonomy cannot exist in contexts

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<sup>24</sup> V Panitch, 'Global Surrogacy: Exploitation to Empowerment' in FK Twum-Danso Imoh and N Ansell (eds), *Gender Justice and Development: Vulnerability and Empowerment* (Routledge 2017) 97.

<sup>25</sup> ES Zehelein, 'Reproductive Justice and (the Politics of) Transnational Gestational Surrogacy' (2018) 70(4) *American Quarterly* 889.

characterised by poverty, weak legal protections, healthcare inequality, and gendered marginalisation. Reproductive justice scholars therefore emphasise the importance of examining how race, class, gender, and economic vulnerability intersect within reproductive arrangements.

Feminist research has also focused on the psychological and emotional aspects of surrogacy, specifically how surrogate mothers deal with attachment, motherhood, and social identity. In many societies, motherhood remains culturally associated with emotional connection, caregiving, and biological reproduction. Because of cultural presumptions about pregnancy and maternal identity, surrogate mothers may experience stigma, secrecy, and social judgement<sup>26</sup>. These experiences show that surrogacy cannot be comprehended exclusively through legal or contractual frameworks without taking into account the larger sociocultural connotations associated with women's reproductive roles.

### **Surrogacy in the Nigerian Context**

Assisted Reproductive Technologies (ARTs) are becoming more widely known in Nigeria, which is indicative of broader changes in reproductive healthcare and evolving methods of managing infertility. Due to the cultural significance of childbearing, lineage continuity, and motherhood, infertility has serious social and emotional repercussions in many Nigerian communities.<sup>27</sup>. As a result, surrogacy is increasingly emerging as an alternative reproductive pathway for individuals and couples experiencing infertility challenges.

Nigeria presently lacks a thorough national legal framework that specifically regulates commercial surrogacy agreements, despite the growing prevalence of surrogacy practices. Concerns about legal

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<sup>26</sup> Abiola (n 9).

<sup>27</sup>Dimka and Dein (n 2). .

ambiguity, insufficient institutional regulation, and the vulnerability of surrogate mothers within mostly informal reproductive arrangements have been repeatedly brought up in existing scholarship<sup>28</sup>. The absence of clear regulatory structures creates uncertainties surrounding parental rights, contractual obligations, healthcare responsibilities, informed consent, and compensation.

Surrogacy agreements in Nigeria are primarily regulated by private contracts between intended parents and surrogate mothers due to the lack of comprehensive federal legislation. Women who participate in surrogacy agreements are indirectly protected by existing constitutional provisions pertaining to human dignity, personal liberty, privacy, and freedom from discrimination, especially in situations of economic vulnerability. Similar to this, Lagos State's healthcare guidelines and Assisted Reproductive Technology (ART) regulations make an effort to provide procedural oversight concerning medical accountability, informed consent, and ethical reproductive practices; however, these protections are still restricted and unevenly distributed.

Despite the structured economic and contractual nature of many commercial surrogacy arrangements, surrogacy is not officially recognised as reproductive labour or employment under Nigeria's current labour laws. As a result, surrogate mothers are frequently left out of labour laws pertaining to welfare assistance, healthcare benefits, workplace protections, and compensation guarantees. Concerns about exploitation, unequal bargaining power, and reproductive vulnerability among economically disadvantaged women taking part in surrogacy agreements are further heightened by these regulatory gaps.

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<sup>28</sup> Obadina (n 1); Abiola and others (n 8).

Religious and cultural perceptions also significantly shape societal attitudes toward surrogacy in Nigeria. In many communities, pregnancy and motherhood remain closely tied to moral expectations, family identity, and womanhood. Consequently, women who participate in surrogacy arrangements may experience secrecy, stigma, and social judgement due to prevailing assumptions surrounding reproduction and motherhood<sup>29</sup>. These socio-cultural realities contribute to the largely private and concealed nature of surrogacy arrangements within the Nigerian context.

Economic inequality further shapes surrogacy practices in Nigeria, particularly regarding the participation of low-income women as surrogate mothers. Existing discussions on surrogacy within Nigeria have increasingly raised concerns regarding reproductive exploitation, informed consent, and the socio-economic vulnerability of women participating in surrogacy arrangements<sup>30</sup>. Nevertheless, comparatively limited scholarly attention has focused specifically on the everyday socio-economic experiences of surrogate mothers themselves, particularly how women negotiate economic survival, reproductive labour, and social perceptions within surrogacy arrangements.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Feminist Political Economy (FPE), which offers a critical framework for comprehending the intersections of gender, labour, capitalism, and structural inequality within surrogacy practices, serves as the foundation for this study. Feminist political economy contends that reproductive activities are vital forms of labour in capitalist societies,

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<sup>29</sup> Abiola (n 9).

<sup>30</sup> Cyril Osilama Adamu, 'Ethical Issues in Commercial Gestational Surrogacy' (2020) 18(4) *AMAMIHE: Journal of Applied Philosophy* 88 <https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.26043.64803> accessed 14 May 2026.

challenging traditional economic viewpoints that marginalise or undervalue women's care and reproductive labour<sup>31</sup>.

The framework is especially pertinent to this research because it views surrogacy as a type of reproductive labour embedded in larger systems of gendered inequality and economic exchange rather than just as a private reproductive arrangement. Women's reproductive abilities are integrated into market relations through commercial surrogacy, where pregnancy and childbirth are turned into contractual and paid forms of labour. Therefore, feminist political economy offers crucial insight into how women's involvement in surrogacy agreements is influenced by economic vulnerability, class disparity, and gendered labour structures.

Additionally, the framework makes it possible to critically analyse the conflicts between agency and exploitation in commercial surrogacy. Feminist political economy emphasises that these decisions take place within unequal structural conditions shaped by poverty, limited employment opportunities, and patriarchal social relations, even though some women may see surrogacy as a source of economic opportunity or financial survival. The framework acknowledges the intricate negotiations women make within limited socioeconomic environments, as opposed to seeing surrogate mothers as either fully autonomous economic actors or passive victims.

This study investigates how reproductive labour, economic survival, social stigma, and institutional constraints intersect within the lived experiences of low-income surrogate mothers by applying feminist political economy to the Nigerian surrogacy context. Therefore, the framework offers a helpful analytical lens for comprehending how surrogacy practices and women's reproductive experiences are shaped by

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<sup>31</sup> Federici and Fraser (n 18)

larger systems of gendered and economic inequality in contemporary Nigerian society.

### **Methodology**

The socioeconomic experiences of low-income surrogate mothers in Nigeria's surrogacy market are examined in this study using a qualitative research methodology. Because the study aimed to comprehend participants' lived realities, perceptions, and experiences within the larger context of reproductive labour, economic survival, and gendered vulnerability, the qualitative approach was deemed appropriate. Qualitative research offered the flexibility required to capture complex experiences and subjective meanings related to participation in surrogacy arrangements, given the delicate and comparatively unexplored nature of surrogacy in Nigeria.

In-depth interviews with eight surrogate mothers aged between 27 and 36 years provided data for the study. Snowball sampling was used to choose participants because surrogacy is a sensitive and private practice in Nigeria. It was anticipated that initial contacts within surrogacy-related networks will make it easier to find more participants who fit the study's eligibility requirements. This strategy was thought to be especially helpful in reaching participants whose identities and experiences are frequently kept hidden because of stigma, privacy issues, and the informal nature of surrogacy agreements.

To enable in-depth engagement with participants and offer a deeper understanding of their lived experiences, interviews were conducted primarily through WhatsApp voice calls, voice notes, and chat-based communications. These communication channels offered flexibility and accessibility, particularly given the sensitive nature of surrogacy and the need to protect participants' privacy and comfort throughout the

interview process. Their use also allowed participants to share their experiences at convenient times and in settings where they felt secure. Because the interviews were semi-flexible, participants were able to discuss their experiences in great detail while still having the opportunity to respond to follow-up questions and provide clarifications where necessary.

Throughout the study, ethical considerations were given top priority. Informed consent forms and participant information sheets explaining the goal of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, confidentiality precautions, and the intended use of the data were given to participants. Before the interviews began, informed consent was acquired. Due to the delicate nature of surrogacy experiences within the Nigerian sociocultural context, pseudonyms were used to protect participants' identities and privacy, and all responses were handled confidentially.

The information gathered from the interviews was subjected to a thematic analysis. Patterns pertaining to economic survival, reproductive labour, agency, stigma, vulnerability, and institutional challenges were examined within broader feminist political economy perspectives thanks to themes that emerged from repeated engagement with participant responses. The study was able to link individual experiences to broader socioeconomic and gendered structures influencing surrogacy practices in Nigeria thanks to the thematic approach.

## **Discussion and Findings**

### **Economic Hardship and Entry into Surrogacy**

Among the participants interviewed, findings from the study revealed that economic hardship made up one of the major motivations for participation in surrogacy arrangements. The majority of participants were single mothers working in low-paying or unofficial jobs like teaching, hairdressing, fashion design, food vending, and petty trading. Prior to

surrogacy, a number of participants described their financial circumstances as unstable, challenging, or inadequate for fulfilling personal and childcare obligations.

Participants frequently clarified that surrogacy gave them the chance to start businesses, support their children, improve their financial circumstances, and attain greater financial stability. One participant described how her pre-surrogacy financial circumstances were "extremely bad" and that even her job at the time was insufficient to support her and her child. Another participant mentioned that her main motivation for becoming a surrogate was to get money to start her own business and establish herself.

The results also showed that altruistic intentions and financial motivation often coexisted. Many participants said they were driven by the financial compensation associated with the arrangement as well as the desire to assist intended parents in having children. This implies that surrogacy among the participants represents an overlap between reproductive assistance and economic survival rather than being exclusively attributed to either altruism or economic transaction.

These results corroborate more general feminist political economy claims that structural economic inequality, unstable working conditions, and a lack of opportunities for employment frequently influence women's reproductive labour. The results also refute the notion that women only engage in surrogacy due to coercion or manipulation, since participants often explained their choices in terms of survival and financial necessity.

### **Reproductive Labour and Economic Survival**

The findings show that most participants saw surrogacy as a type of labour that could lead to financial mobility and economic advancement. A number of participants referred to surrogacy as a "survival strategy"

that allowed them to better their living conditions, support their children, and fulfil their financial obligations.

Surrogacy compensation helped many participants experience longer-term economic transformation in addition to immediate financial relief. One participant described how she was able to start a boutique business and increase her overall financial stability after completing the surrogacy process. Another participant said that the financial rewards of surrogacy encouraged her to think about doing it once more. However, the majority of participants saw surrogacy as a short-term economic tactic rather than a long-term job and did not plan to engage in it frequently. Many said they planned to use the money to start their own businesses or find more secure livelihood outside of surrogacy.

The findings therefore imply that surrogacy serves as a type of reproductive labour that economically vulnerable women use to negotiate financial mobility, survival, and economic self-improvement. This discovery is especially significant in discussions about the mounting opposition to commercial surrogacy around the world. Participants in this study consistently identified compensation as essential to the economic value and practical significance of surrogacy in their lives, despite the fact that anti-commercial-surrogacy arguments frequently frame financial compensation as intrinsically exploitative.

### **Institutional Experiences and Uneven Protection**

The majority of participants reported having good experiences with the clinics, agencies, and medical professionals involved in the surrogacy process. Throughout the arrangement, participants often reported receiving good treatment, medical support, and sufficient information. Additionally, a number of participants reported that agencies offered regular medical supervision, emotional support, and help throughout pregnancy.

Nevertheless, some participants voiced concerns about unequal treatment across surrogacy agencies in spite of these generally positive accounts. One participant clarified that while her personal experience had been favourable, she was aware of other agencies where surrogate mothers encountered poor treatment following delivery, insufficient care, and delayed payments. The lack of postpartum welfare assistance and the potential for surrogate mothers to be abandoned after the pregnancy process was finished were other issues brought up.

The findings therefore show that rather than extensive legal protections, surrogate mothers' experiences in Nigeria are significantly influenced by the calibre of institutional arrangements and agency practices. The welfare of participants seems to be heavily dependent on the behaviour and professionalism of individual agencies and medical providers in the absence of a fully developed regulatory framework. Within the same larger surrogacy industry, this inequality raises the possibility of both supportive and exploitative experiences.

#### **Secrecy, Social Sensitivity, and Survival Negotiation**

The findings showed consistent patterns of secrecy and selective disclosure regarding surrogacy participation, despite the fact that many participants said they did not directly experience stigma. While hiding their pregnancies from larger communities, churches, friends, or neighbours, the majority of participants only told a small number of trusted relatives, especially mothers, sisters, or siblings.

A number of participants clarified that they refrained from public disclosure because surrogacy was still not well understood in their social contexts. In order to avoid social scrutiny, one participant talked about moving to a different area while pregnant and switching churches. Another participant recalled that after the surrogacy procedure, some people thought she had "sold her baby", while others doubted the

arrangement's validity because they were not familiar with surrogacy procedures.

These findings imply that surrogacy is still morally debatable and socially sensitive in many Nigerian communities. However, participants frequently adopted secrecy and selective disclosure as useful tactics for controlling social reactions while pursuing economic survival rather than confronting social judgement head-on. For many participants, the need for financial compensation took precedence over worries about potential criticism, especially when surrogacy presented chances for economic advancement that they would not have otherwise had.

### **Empowerment, Survival, and Structural Vulnerability**

The majority of participants said surrogacy improved their lives and gave them economic empowerment. Surrogacy was frequently associated by participants with better living conditions, childcare assistance, increased business opportunities, and financial independence. A number of participants stated that surrogacy had helped them become more financially stable and better able to provide for their children and themselves.

Simultaneously, the results also showed underlying structural vulnerabilities related to poverty, unemployment, and unfair economic circumstances. Participants often denied being described as exploited victims, but some admitted that exploitative circumstances could exist, especially in unregulated agencies or in situations where surrogate mothers received insufficient compensation.

According to one participant, surrogacy may entail both exploitation and empowerment at the same time. This discovery is noteworthy because it refutes oversimplified depictions of commercial surrogacy as wholly exploitative or wholly liberating. Rather, participant experiences indicate that surrogacy occurs within a complex intersection

of structural inequality, financial aspiration, economic survival, and reproductive labour.

Overall, the results show that moral or ideological discussions disconnected from women's economic realities cannot adequately explain commercial surrogacy among low-income Nigerian women. For many participants, surrogacy represented not only the provision of reproductive services but also a useful tactic for financial stability, economic advancement, and survival in situations of limited opportunities and economic hardship.

### **Conclusion, Recommendations, and Suggestions for Further Research**

With a focus on the socioeconomic factors influencing women's involvement in commercial surrogacy agreements, this study investigated reproductive labour and economic survival among low-income surrogate mothers in Nigeria. The results showed that the main factors influencing participants' decisions to become surrogate mothers were limited livelihood opportunities, childcare responsibilities, financial instability, and economic hardship. The majority of participants were single mothers who worked in low-paying or informal jobs and saw surrogacy as a useful tactic for establishing a business, improving the economy, and surviving financially.

The study also showed that, despite broader discussions that frequently frame commercial surrogacy primarily in terms of exploitation, most participants saw surrogacy as economically empowering. Participants' experiences and motivations were found to be heavily influenced by financial compensation, especially in situations of poverty and economic instability. Concerns were expressed about inconsistent agency practices, inadequate post-birth welfare support for surrogate mothers, and poor compensation structures in certain arrangements,

despite the fact that many participants reported positive experiences with agencies, clinics, and medical professionals.

Furthermore, the results showed that surrogacy is still socially sensitive in many Nigerian communities. Patterns of secrecy, selective disclosure, and social negotiation were prevalent, despite the fact that a number of participants denied directly experiencing stigma. To avoid miscommunication, criticism, or social awkwardness, participants frequently kept their pregnancies a secret or only told close family members.

Overall, the study makes the case that straightforward dichotomies of empowerment and exploitation are insufficient to explain commercial surrogacy among low-income Nigerian women. Instead, the experiences of the participants show how reproductive labour, economic survival, structural inequality, and financial aspiration are intertwined. The results thus imply that persistent calls around the world for the total outlawing of commercial surrogacy might not sufficiently take into consideration the survival circumstances and economic realities that influence women's involvement in surrogacy agreements, especially in situations where they are economically vulnerable.

Based on the findings of this study, the paper recommends creating a more comprehensive and lucid legal and regulatory framework for surrogacy practices in Nigeria. Informed consent, equitable compensation, medical safety, postpartum welfare assistance, and protection against exploitative practices should be given top priority in such regulations. Improved oversight of fertility clinics and surrogacy agencies is also necessary to guarantee moral principles and responsibility in surrogacy agreements.

Additionally, in order to address the stigma and misunderstandings surrounding surrogacy in Nigerian society, public education and

awareness campaigns are required. Raising public awareness could help improve support networks for surrogate mothers and lessen social criticism.

Lastly, more investigation is required into the long-term social, psychological, and economic experiences of Nigerian surrogate mothers, especially with regard to motherhood, family dynamics, post-surrogacy wellbeing, and institutional regulation. In order to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the changing surrogacy landscape in Nigeria, future research may also examine the viewpoints of intended parents, medical professionals, surrogacy agencies, and legislators.