

OUR BODIES OURSELVES

TRANSFORMING WOMEN'S LIVES AROUND THE WORLD

◆ An Emerging Global Debate: The 'Fertility Industry'

In late January, OBOS Executive Director Judy Norsigian attended a consultation in New Delhi, India, organized by the SAMA Resource Group for Women and Health. Titled *Unraveling the Fertility Industry: The Commercial, Economic and Ethical Aspects of Assisted Reproductive Technologies (ARTs)—Challenges and Strategies for Movement Building*, the invitational event brought together some 100 scholars, activists, and researchers from around the world. Participants explored emerging debates on reproductive and genetic technologies in the context of public health and policy, research, ethics, and practice.

As the organizers of the meeting noted, "The escalation of birth technologies into a 'fertility industry' is a result of a multitude of reasons, the most primary amongst them being the premium placed on motherhood combined with the social stigma associated with infertility... The importance and desire of having a biological child cuts across all class, caste, and community groups, and couples are willing to spend whatever is required to achieve this... Developing countries and the comparatively poorer populations within these countries have increasingly emerged as 'suppliers' of cheap labor (wombs) and services (both medical services and egg donations)."

"In a globalised economy," the organizers continued, "with uneven regulation across countries, couples manage to access the services either in their own countries or elsewhere. This has led to the super-specialized phenomenon of reproductive 'tourism' across the world. As part of this process, India is slowly turning into the surrogacy outsourcing capital

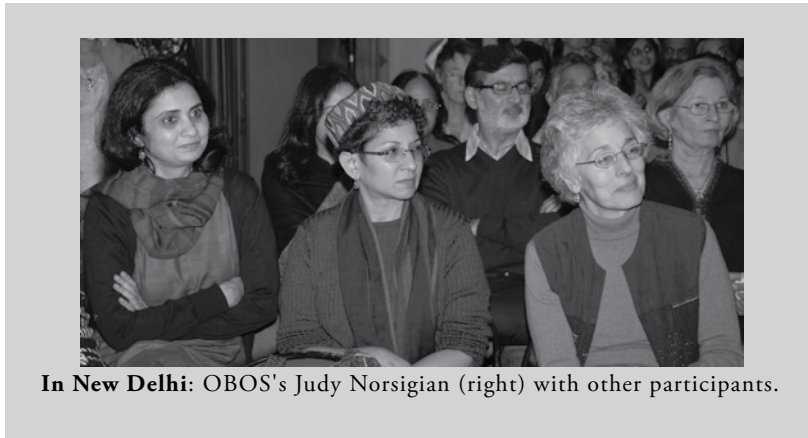
of the world because of the lower costs involved, the lack of regulation in provision of ARTs, prohibition and unavailability of certain procedures in (other) countries and minimum waiting periods. It is estimated that the surrogacy business alone is worth \$445 million in India. In Chennai, for example, 207 patients from abroad accessed ART procedures in a private IVF clinic in 2006. Given the extreme vulnerability of almost one-third of Indian women due to poverty, exclusion and marginalization in labour and job markets, patriarchal social and family structures and

low educational levels, the immediate financial gain through surrogacy becomes a key push factor."

The January consultation was an opportunity for OBOS to build upon its earlier work in this area, including the 2004 *Gender and Justice in the Gene Age* meeting

held at the Ford Foundation in May 2004 (see <http://www.gjga.org/report.pdf> for the 34-page report). OBOS looks forward to building collaborations with activists in several dozen countries concerned about the inadequate regulation of the growing field of assistive reproductive technologies (ARTs).

One of the contentious issues indirectly related to ARTs is that of stem cell research. As SAMA has noted: "India has a thriving IVF industry; 'spare' human embryos are already traveling from IVF clinics to public and private research laboratories. This practice has led to a thriving nexus between the (in) fertility clinics and the stem cell research centres, raising many ethical and other important concerns." Related to this is the failure to address infertility as a public



In New Delhi: OBOS's Judy Norsigian (right) with other participants.

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health issue, especially the underlying causes that are preventable (for example, much of the pelvic inflammatory disease that leads to occlusion of a woman's fallopian tubes).

The remarkable and exponential growth of infertility services across the globe, as well as the increasing use of ARTs that have not been adequately assessed for safety, require new and more effective alliances among feminists, public health advocates, ethicists, and others who recognize the serious threats to women's health—especially for more vulnerable women lured by misleading advertising and the prospect of “quick” income in a challenging economic climate. The New Delhi consultation signals a powerful step forward in building such global alliances and securing much-needed regulatory oversight of the field of ARTs.

¹IANS, (August 25, 2008), "Surrogacy a \$445 mn Business in India," *The Economic Times*.

² "Babies waiting to happen," Sumithra Thangavelu, *Businessline*, Feb 02, 2007.

OUR BODIES OURSELVES
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Expanding Our Reach and Impact

Over the years we have partnered with women in nearly every geographical region – women who, despite significant hardships, talk the talk *and* walk the walk when it comes to the health of their community.

Nearly four decades after OBOS came into being, our network consists of 22 women's groups from Asia, Africa, the Middle East and Europe, catalyzing change through culturally unique health resources based on *Our Bodies, Ourselves*. And our network continues to grow, to integrate individual goals with a global community of shared interests, to exemplify the power of women's voices raised in action.

This, therefore, seems the best time to recognize the network's collective strength and impact on the lives of women and girls.

We have begun by changing the program's name, from the Global Translation/Adaptation Program to Our Bodies Ourselves Global Initiative: Partnerships for Knowledge, Action, and Change to better reflect the collaborative nature of our work.

In other exciting news: **The Our Bodies Ourselves Global Initiative has been nominated for the 2010 Gates Award for Global Health**, established by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to recognize major and lasting contributions to the field of global health. In his letter nominating our network, Willard Cates Jr., president of research at Family Health International, had this to say:

"...(Our Bodies Ourselves) has had an incredible evolution from a small committed group in Massachusetts to become a global movement, a dynamic network of women in almost every region of the world working against the odds to inform, lead and change their communities."

Thank you, Willard. And thanks to all our supporters who help the program and its partners build knowledge capital in their communities and challenge existing paradigms on women's health.

Coming Soon: The 40th-Anniversary Edition!

It's been five years since the last edition of *Our Bodies, Ourselves* was published. What new information is there on women's reproductive health and sexuality? What has changed about how women—young and old—view their bodies, their health, and their lives? These are some questions the 2011 edition of *Our Bodies, Ourselves* will address.

The editorial team, comprised of Zobeida Bonilla, Christine Cupaiuolo, Judy Norsigian, Amy Romano, Wendy Sanford, and Kiki Zeldes, is working alongside hundreds of women and men who are sharing their personal experiences and their expertise. These collaborators are helping to determine what material in the 2005 edition is outdated, what content needs to be expanded upon, and what new issues need to be addressed.

When the first, stapled newsprint edition of *Our Bodies, Ourselves* was published in 1970, there were almost no other resources available for women to learn about their bodies and share their experiences. Now, of course, the amount of accessible information on women's health has grown exponentially. For this reason, the new edition will not attempt to cover all women's health topics, but instead focuses primarily on

reproductive health and sexuality.

One of the most innovative aspects of the new edition is an online discussion involving women around the country. Back in the late '60s and early '70s, the founders of *Our Bodies Ourselves* sat together in living rooms and around kitchen tables, talking at length about their experiences. The book grew out of these many and varied conversations. In an effort to bring more personal stories

"A wild, choral collection of voices and experiences...."

and new voices to the 2011 edition, we invited women, via our blog, to join a private Google site to discuss their experiences with relationships and sexuality.

The response was amazing: We received more than 200 e-mails from women who wanted to participate. We chose 36 women of varying ages and backgrounds, including heterosexual, lesbian, bisexual and queer women, women of color, women with disabilities, and trans women. For three weeks they answered (and asked) questions such as: How do you

define and express intimacy? What do you enjoy most about being sexual? How has sexual abuse and/or physical violence affected your relationships? What are the rewards and challenges of polyamory? When (and how) do you discuss having a STI? What effect do children have on dating or staying in a relationship?

The conversation was incredibly powerful, and many of their stories will appear throughout the pages of the new edition. Here's what one participant had to say:

"This discussion has been extremely helpful. I feel like it turned into a wild choral collection of voices and experiences that none of us would have otherwise had the chance to hear. The women in this discussion are all very brave and valuable. I am only sad we didn't get a chance to meet each other. I feel like the positive energy emitted from a room with all of us in it could change the seasons."

We plan to submit the manuscript to Simon & Schuster in October 2010, with a scheduled publication date of October 2011. Stay tuned to our blog and newsletters for updates on the new edition and for opportunities to contribute your own stories.

Zobeida Bonilla Joins Staff as Associate Director

OBOS is pleased to announce that Zobeida Bonilla has been hired as the organization's first part-time Associate Director.

Zobeida joined OBOS in 2001 to develop a training manual for community health workers. Since then, she has led the activities of the Latina Health Initiative, conducting outreach and health education in the Latino community with *Nuestros Cuerpos, Nuestras Vidas*.

Zobeida received her doctoral degree in anthropology from the University of Florida and a MPH in maternal and child

health from the Boston University School of Public Health.

She is currently an assistant professor in the Department of Applied Health Science at Indiana University and conducts research with community health programs and coalitions addressing the health needs of Latino populations in the United States and the Dominican Republic.





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Our Bodies, Ourselves: Your Name in Print?!

We're thrilled to announce the launch of the Our Bodies Ourselves Word by Word Campaign. Now you can support the work of OBOS *and* get your name in the next edition, slated for publication in Fall 2011.

Many people assume that OBOS has a big bank account because we have a big name. But we're actually a small nonprofit, and we rely on supporters like you to help us get accurate information about women's health into the hands of the public. This is a chance for you to be associated with these efforts in print.

There are different levels of support, and those who join the campaign can have their name (or a name of their choosing) listed in the 2011 edition of *Our Bodies, Ourselves*. Imagine, for example, giving your mom the 40th-anniversary edition of *Our Bodies, Ourselves* . . . with her name in it.

With your continued support, we're changing the world—body by body, woman by woman—through Word by Word.

ensuring the future of our bodies ourselves
For more details, visit www.ourbodiesourselves.org.