



ReproKult Women's Forum on Reproductive Technologies

Position on the Harvesting and Marketing of Egg Cells

We demand a *ban on the use and trafficking of egg cells* for research purposes as well as for third party IVF throughout the European Union. We particularly demand a halt on the trafficking in egg cells from Rumania to the UK and (possibly) other European countries. We expect the responsible medical doctors, researchers and politicians – in the UK, Rumania and elsewhere – to stop the exploitation of women and their bodily materials throughout the world.

Generally, the debate about reproductive technologies is dominated by the pro-life vs. pro-choice controversy. Negative consequences for the women involved, however, are often neglected. The use of third-party egg cells in IVF treatment is prohibited in Germany by the 1990 Embryo Protection Act, which also prohibits embryo research. At the moment, there is no known use of human egg cells for research in Germany. The Stem Cell Act in 2002, however, legalised embryonic stem cell research and the import of embryonic stem cell lines (if produced before 1st January 2002). This shift in the political atmosphere in Germany and the British legalisation of embryonic stem cell research, including that which involves somatic cell nuclear transfer – or so-called "therapeutic cloning" – in 2001, create a foundation for the scientific community to lobby intensively for the legalisation of human egg donation for research purposes.

Egg cells are highly sought after for both reproductive and research purposes. The UK/Romania case shows that the commercialisation of egg cells can hardly be contained or controlled and might identify the possible risks of similar trade processes occurring in relation to research. In the case referred to, an infertility clinic in Bucharest, which had specialised in 'egg donation' for European citizens, was involved in the commercial export of egg cells from Romanian women receiving hormonal stimulation for the sole sake of selling the egg cells to the UK. The term 'egg donation' implies the voluntary nature of a woman's decision; however, women might be encouraged – via economic incentives or the promise of 'fee-reduced' IVF – to donate their eggs. Hormonal stimulation of the ovaries to produce higher numbers of egg cells per cycle is related to increased risks to women's health. Independent of whether women are undergoing treatment only to donate egg cells, or if so-called surplus egg cells in IVF are donated, there are third-party interests at play. We claim instead that in IVF the well-being of the woman must be the only focus. Egg cell donation entails the exploitation of the dependencies and economic needs of women, especially in the poorer European countries.

ReproKult strictly opposes donation and trafficking of egg cells!

- **Instrumentalisation of Women's Reproductive Capacities:** Many women are already being forced by financial or social incentives to provide so-called 'surplus' or left over egg cells for reproduction or research purposes of third parties. This development intervenes negatively in sociocultural values and puts women in the position of being suppliers of bodily materials for others. Making women's body parts available for research results in a further step towards the control of the female body and instrumentalises women's reproductive capacities. Women become the resource for third party's scientific or therapeutic 'successes'.
- **Large Scale Need of Egg cells:** Researchers assume that many egg cells are needed in order to produce one stem cell line. The most publicly visible research in which egg cells are currently used is somatic cell nuclear transfer, i.e. cloning for research purposes. However, egg cells are also needed for studies of egg cell

maturation and parthenogenesis. This implies a large scale demand for egg cells, which presumably can not be met if research relies on egg cells 'left over' from IVF treatment. Other – social or financial – incentives and pressures will have to be introduced in order to make women 'donate' their egg cells.

- **Exploitation of Poorer or Dependent Women:** Poorer women are already more vulnerable to the utilization of their economic situation. The trafficking of egg cells is situated in a socio-political situation in which research in more affluent countries is made possible via the exploitation of the financial or social situation of women in less wealthy countries, as well as economically disadvantaged or dependent women in the wealthier countries. Scientific prestige, as well as economic profit, are, thus, based on the encroachment on women.
- **Health Risks for Women:** Egg cell collection is a complex and invasive procedure. Women are induced with medication to produce several mature egg cells. Not only are the hormones administered for stimulation suspected of causing carcinomas (ovarian cancer) but they are also known to cause ovarian hyperstimulation syndrome – which can have life-threatening and fatal effects. The extraction of egg cells can lead to vaginal haemorrhaging and infections. Moreover, the treatment is a psychological burden. Hence, it is unjustifiable that this procedure does not focus on each individual woman's needs alone, but also serves a potential benefit for others, namely other women/couples, research and potential future patient groups. To put women at risk in a process that is not solely in their own interest, but rather in that of a third-party, is highly anti-social and politically unacceptable. We also reject the use of third party egg cells by women at the expense of other women.
- **Do Not Harm:** The commodification of egg cells as well as the so-called "altruistic" donation are detrimental to the practical and strategic needs of women. Even if there is no money involved, there may be enormous social pressures within families or social relationships to 'donate' egg cells turning 'donation' into a non-voluntary duty. Harvesting egg cells by medical doctors for the benefit of others than the women contradicts the medical imperative »Do Not harm!« which should continue governing medical practice.

For further information please contact:

Svea Luise Herrmann | s.herrmann@ipw.uni-hannover.de | 0049 (0) 511 762 19204

Dr. Ingrid Schneider | Ingrid.Schneider@uni-hamburg.de | 0049 (0) 40 42803 6311

ReproKult Women's Forum on Reproductive Technologies

www.ReproKult.de (including English pages) | E-mail: frauenforum@reprokult.de



ReproKult – Women's Forum on Reproductive Technologies

ReproKult is a coalition of women from various organisations and institutions working in the fields of women's healthcare and psychosocial counselling, from interest groups for women with disabilities, and from the fields of science, politics and media.

___ Dealing with pregnancy and childbirth, and human reproduction as a whole, is part of our human culture and thus embedded in societal rules, in processes of evaluation and judgement, in social relationships and balances of power. We have observed that the manner in which we deal with pregnancy and childbirth is increasingly being subjected to medical/technical regimentation.

___ The social debate on genetic engineering and reproductive medicine primarily revolves around the question of what is technically feasible in human reproduction. Research, the economy and segments of the medical profession are urging the use of new technologies. Women are often excluded from these debates and decision-making processes. They are expected to provide valuable raw materials, such as eggs and embryos, and are held accountable for producing "healthy" children. On the other hand, women also make use of biomedical services, which are supposedly offered in the interest of their needs.

___ The socio-political impact of these technologies still receives inadequate attention in the general public as well as in policy-making. **ReproKult** got involved in this debate in order to increase the focus on the social context and social impact of genetic and reproductive technologies, particularly their consequences for day-to-day life and the social situation of women.

___ **ReproKult** supports women's access to legal and safe abortion services. There is no "moral contradiction" or "double standard" in permitting abortion while prohibiting embryo research as the two situations – pregnancy and in vitro embryos – are legally as well as morally incomparable. Forcing a woman to carry an unwanted pregnancy to term entails a violation of her right to self-determination and bodily

integrity. An embryo in vitro, on the other hand, needs legal and societal protection because there is no corporal relation to the mother-to-be – a special and intimate relationship that no other person can ever have to the embryo.

___ **ReproKult** calls for participation in this discussion. It encourages public debate and specifically introduces the standpoint of women in social policy.

___ **ReproKult** members are: Arbeitskreis Frauengesundheit in Medizin, Psychotherapie und Gesellschaft (AKF); Arbeitsstelle Pränataldiagnostik/Reproduktionsmedizin beim Bundesverband für Körper- und Mehrfachbehinderte e.V.; Beratungsstelle für natürliche Geburt und Elternsein (Munich); Berliner Hebammenverband; Bund Deutscher Hebammen; Bund freiberuflicher Hebammen Deutschlands e.V.; Dachverband der Frauengesundheitszentren; Familienplanungszentrum Hamburg; Feministisches Frauen Gesundheitszentrum Berlin; Gen-ethisches Netzwerk e.V.; Institut Mensch, Ethik, Wissenschaft Berlin (IMWE), Netzwerk gegen Selektion durch Pränataldiagnostik; Weibernetz e.V. – Bundesnetzwerk von FrauenLesben mit Beeinträchtigungen; **and a number of individuals:** Dr. Giselinde Berg (Berlin); Prof. Dr. Kathrin Braun (Seattle); Sangeeta Fager (Hamburg) Dr. Sigrid Graumann (Berlin); Ulrike Hauffe (State Commissioner for Women, Bremen); Svea Luise Herrmann (Hanover); Dr. Elke H. Mildenerger (Münster); Gabriele Pichlhofer (Berlin); Ulrike Riedel (Berlin); Sabine Riewenherm (Berlin); Dr. Ingrid Schneider (Hamburg); Karin Schüler (AWO Bundesverband Bonn); Prof. Dr. Anne Waldschmidt (Cologne); Dr. Ute Winkler (Berlin).

ReproKult Women's Forum on Reproductive Technologies

www.ReproKult.de | E-mail: frauenforum@reprokult.de