

India moves to ban booming commercial surrogacy business

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India's government Wednesday approved plans to ban the booming commercial surrogacy industry, a move that would block thousands of foreign couples who flock to centres to have a baby.

Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj said cabinet cleared a bill to restrict surrogacy services to local married couples, following concerns about the exploitation of young, poor Indian women who bear babies for others.

"This is a comprehensive bill to completely ban commercial surrogacy," Swaraj told reporters after the cabinet meeting.

"Childless couples, who are medically unfit to have children, can take help from a close relative, which is called altruistic surrogacy," she said.

Swaraj said foreign couples, along with all single or gay prospective parents, would be barred from surrogacy services in India if parliament passed the bill.

The government last year flagged the shutdown of the multi-million dollar industry, sparking an outcry from fertility specialists at the country's 2,000-odd centres.

Ranks of childless foreign couples have flocked to the country in recent years looking for a cheap, legal and simple route to parenthood.

But critics of the industry said a lack of legislation encouraged "rent-a-

womb" exploitation of impoverished Indian women who were denied rights in [surrogacy arrangements](#).

Swaraj said the bill would also address concerns about the welfare of the child, following reports disabled babies have been rejected by couples.

Some 2,000 infertile couples hire the wombs of Indian women to carry their embryos through to birth every year, according to the government.

India, with cheap technology, skilled doctors and a steady supply of local surrogates, is one of relatively few countries where women can be paid to carry another's child.

Surrogacy for profit is illegal in many other countries.

Swaraj said the ban would be introduced 10 months after the bill was passed in parliament, to allow pregnant women already in arrangements with couples time to give birth.

The industry criticised the move as over the top, saying couples desperate to have children would be left with few options.

"While we need regulations to ensure that no [women](#) are forced into surrogacy, an outright ban isn't logical," Archana Dhawan Bajaj, fertility and IVF consultant at New Delhi-based Nurture Clinic, told AFP.

Surrogacy mothers last year held protests against the government's plans, saying they would be denied an income, usually about \$5,000 per pregnancy, a huge sum in India where millions live in grinding poverty.

After opening up to surrogacy in 2002, India has become one of the world's leaders, generating between \$500 million and \$2.3 billion annually, according to various estimates.

Russia and some US states are among those that also allow commercial surrogacy. But India's clinics charge couples between \$20,000 and \$30,000, a fraction of the price in the United States.

Thailand passed a law last year banning commercial surrogacy for foreigners after a series of high-profile scandals.

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