

Nominator: Sarah Topol - self

Position: Freelance, Contributing Writer New York Times Magazine

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Title: The Women of House Three: Eve was one of dozens of Thai women who traveled 4,000 miles — only to be trapped by the dark side of the global fertility industry.

Brief Description: Thai women answered Facebook ads promising \$16,000 for surrogacy work in the Republic of Georgia. What they found were conditions consistent with human trafficking: passport confiscation, confinement in a network of houses run by Chinese operators, constant surveillance, debt bondage, and medical procedures performed without explanation or consent. Women who wanted to leave were told to pay back what they "owed"—or sell their eggs. Multiple women underwent procedures they did not understand; several doctors who reviewed their testimonies believe some may have had eggs retrieved without authorization. Topol spent six months reporting across four countries, interviewing more than 100 people—including 30 surrogates—and gaining access to survivors in Thai safe houses. The investigation maps a global fertility industry worth tens of billions of dollars, tracing how it has hopscotched from India to Thailand to Russia to Ukraine to Georgia, reconstituting wherever regulations are weakest and exploiting the vulnerable women who follow.

Link: <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/12/14/magazine/fertility-surrogates-trafficking.html>

Nomination Letter:

Dear Members of the Anthony Shadid Award Committee,

I am writing to nominate Sarah A. Topol for the Anthony Shadid Award for Journalism Ethics for her New York Times Magazine investigation, "They Answered an Ad for Surrogates, and Found Themselves in a Nightmare," which required Topol to navigate an extraordinary series of ethical dilemmas over six months of reporting across four countries. Like Shadid, whose work was defined by patient relationship-building with people in dangerous circumstances and a commitment to documenting their lives with dignity, Topol embedded herself in a world that did not want to be seen and wrote about it with the same moral seriousness and restraint. Her decisions at every stage—how to earn trust, how to verify, how to confront, how to write—exemplify the ethical rigor the Shadid Award recognizes.

Topol's investigation documents how Thai women were recruited with promises of legitimate surrogacy work in Georgia, only to find themselves trapped in conditions consistent with human trafficking: passport confiscation, confinement and surveillance, debt bondage, opaque medical procedures, and threats of being "sold" to harsher conditions. The story presents credible allegations of non-consensual reproductive procedures, including what multiple doctors believe may have been unauthorized egg retrievals, and maps how the global fertility industry exploits regulatory gaps across borders to evade accountability. Topol interviewed more than 100 people, gained access to survivors in Thai safe houses, reviewed their medical records and contemporaneous messages, and confronted the operators and clinics responsible.

The ethical challenges began with the most fundamental question: how to win the trust of women who had been systematically betrayed by most figures of authority they encountered. The women at the center of this story had been exploited by recruiters, clinic operators, and intermediaries. Topol understood that she could not expect them to trust a journalist quickly. She built relationships slowly, promising confidentiality and demonstrating it through sustained, patient engagement. She let sources dictate the pace of interviews, returning to difficult topics only when they were ready. This approach took longer than conventional reporting, but it was the only way to earn testimony from women who had every reason to stay silent.

Conducting those interviews presented an ethical dilemma. Substantiating allegations of coerced medical procedures and trafficking required detailed accounts from women who had experienced profound trauma. The reporting process itself risked causing harm by forcing sources to relive painful experiences. Rather than pressing for comprehensive accounts in single sessions, Topol conducted interviews carefully over time, allowing sources to stop, revisit, or decline to discuss particular events. She prioritized their psychological safety over reportorial efficiency, understanding that re-traumatization was a real risk and that the story's credibility depended on sources who felt respected, not exploited by the reporting process itself.

Verifying allegations of unauthorized medical procedures performed in a foreign country by actors with every incentive to destroy evidence and not to cooperate presented its own challenge. Topol interviewed independent medical experts to review the women's recollections and medical records, corroborating patterns consistent with the procedures the women described. This rigorous verification process ensured that the story's most serious allegations rested on more than testimony alone.

The tension between source security, mental and physical, and the public's right to know ran through the entire investigation. Many of the women Topol interviewed remained financially dependent on the very clinics that had exploited them. They worried the clinics or networks would expose them on Facebook before their communities if they spoke out. Coming from conservative backgrounds, women typically did not want even their family members to know, as they worried they would be socially ostracized. Other women, like surrogates from Uzbekistan, could face criminal charges in their home country if their identities were exposed.

Some were threatened for speaking with her in front of her. Others were still living in the houses in Georgia, still under the control of the operators. Topol had to weigh the urgent public interest in exposing a trafficking network against the real possibility that publication could trigger retaliation. For women who were still in Georgia, still dependent on the clinics, or who had been directly threatened, Topol worked individually to determine what each source was comfortable having published. Some testimony was anonymized; some was omitted entirely.

Taking allegations to the accused — the clinics, the operators known as Joe and Cindy, and others — was essential for fairness and verification. But requesting comment risked identifying the women who had provided testimony, particularly those who did not want to be named. Topol made deliberate choices about timing: she completed interviews with vulnerable sources before approaching the accused, ensuring that the women most at risk were not exposed by the process of seeking comment. Both the clinics and Joe and Cindy spent weeks dodging interview requests. When they finally engaged, Topol had to craft every question carefully to seek comment on patterns of conduct and specific allegations without revealing which victims had spoken. This was painstaking work, calibrating each question to ensure fairness to the accused without endangering her sources.

Speaking with Thai women who were still in the houses was particularly fraught—Topol knew that any contact could put them at risk, and that confronting the operators might alert them to which women had talked. She persevered through the delays, understanding that fairness required giving the accused an opportunity to respond, and presented all allegations in a way that did not identify victims who wished to remain anonymous.

The story also required sensitivity toward intended parents, many of whom entered these arrangements unaware of the conditions surrogates faced. Some were themselves vulnerable, struggling with infertility, navigating an opaque market, and misled by intermediaries. The story

needed to hold the system accountable without demonizing people who may have been unwitting participants in exploitation. Topol wrote about their vulnerabilities — the pain of infertility, the murkiness of the market, the trust they placed in institutions — while still documenting the system's failures.

Finally, Topol faced the challenge of writing about human trafficking and medical procedures without sensationalism. The facts of this story were inherently dramatic: women locked in houses, strapped down for procedures, escaping in the night with luggage wrapped in towels to evade surveillance cameras. The writing had to convey the reality of what happened without exploiting the women's suffering for narrative effect, and without enabling the industry to dismiss the reporting as sensationalized. Topol made the deliberate choice to write in a controlled, intimate register that documented the system through the careful accumulation of verified detail. She describes a world that does not want to be documented, and she does so with the gravity the subject deserves, but without breathlessness or melodrama.

Topol faced personal risk for this work. Clinic directors threatened her, and she was harassed online by those implicated in the story. She continued reporting despite these pressures. The story had immediate impact. Thai authorities used it to support arrest warrants for the criminal network and to provide assistance to the women. It was cited in Australian Law Reform Commission discussions on surrogacy law reform and used in educational campaigns to prevent other women from entering such arrangements.

At every stage of this investigation, Sarah Topol made choices that prioritized the safety and dignity of her sources, even when those choices made the reporting slower and more difficult. She earned the trust of women who had been systematically betrayed. She verified their accounts without re-traumatizing them. She confronted the powerful without endangering the vulnerable. And she wrote about suffering with moral seriousness. For her ethical rigor in navigating these dilemmas, she deserves recognition with the Anthony Shadid Award for Journalism Ethics.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Sarah