

**Dr Alexandra Plows**

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**Paper title**

Egg Donation in the UK; Tracing Emergent Networks of Feminist Engagement

**Abstract**

This paper will firstly discuss recent controversial UK policy (HFEA) and scientific moves, and public responses, in relation to the sourcing and use of human eggs for biomedical research; in particular altruistic egg 'donation', for cell nuclear transfer (CNT) or therapeutic cloning (stem cell) research; and 'egg sharing', namely the exchange of eggs for free IVF cycles, also for CNT research. Rationales for the "future promise" of the science as expressed by a variety of prime movers will be outlined. The paper will focus primarily on growing feminist criticism, in terms of (health) risks and other issues, such as the possible commodification of women's bodies and issues of globalised political economy; broader socio-cultural concerns such as the stigma of infertility; and ethical problems with the concepts of "informed consent" and "informed choice". Identifying concerns regarding definitions of [moral] rights and duties in relation to women's relationships with bioscience is also key.

It can be argued that women are in the frontline; without constructing women as passive victims of technology, nevertheless the egg donation issue is just one of several linked arenas where it appears that its on women's bodies that some of the most significant moves in relation to genetic and reproductive bioscience will be having most of an impact, and also in terms of who is constructing potential duties and "choices" of female [bio] citizens. It is also important to emphasise the existence of complexity and ambivalence, and to avoid polarised "pro and anti" positions- to voice concerns about these issues is not to be "anti science" or "anti cures" or indeed even necessarily anti (embryonic) stem cell research per se, but to be alert to potential issues and impacts. Identified risks and purported benefits need far more unpacking.

As part of a broader research project<sup>1</sup>, "embedded" qualitative ethnography has traced and engaged with developing networks of opposition as they have emerged in "real time". Some feminists have formed "strange bedfellow" alliances with pro- life groups (Hands Off Our Ovaries!); others have (rightly) seen this as counter- productive and aimed to catalyse "organic networks" of opposition through information dissemination and networking. Prime movers mobilising like this have "strong ties" links to social justice and sustainable development networks, and to "watchdog" campaign groups framing criticisms about techno-scientific development under globalised market structures (the bio-economy).

Engaged, reflexive participant observation within such networks has thus been a conscious use of feminist methodological principles and tools, firstly enabling good ethnographic data to be collated amongst "latent" networks, and secondly contributing to 'stakeholder feedback'; furthering public engagement with the issues through catalysing debate in a variety of contexts (including this paper). The use of such engaged dissemination techniques as both data- producing method, and feedback mechanism, can thus input into public engagement goals. A recent UK feminist seminar on the issue of egg sourcing produced a statement of concerns available online. The statement also criticised the lack of user- friendly public engagement approaches; another key criticism of latest policy/ governance moves.

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Area of discussion: The paper is particularly relevant to two areas of discussion, highlighted below, but perhaps especially the themes within 'Facing impact: society and biotechnologies'

Bodies, cultures and scientific metaphors

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.cesagen.lancs.ac.uk/research/projects/newgentechs.htm>

## Facing impact: society and biotechnologies

### **Biography and Affiliation:**

Dr Alexandra Plows is a Research Associate at Cardiff University working at the UK ESRC centre CESAGen<sup>2</sup> (Centre for the Economic and Social Aspects of Genomics). She has recently completed work on a project, 'The Emerging Politics of Human Genetic Technologies'<sup>3</sup>, which between 2003- 2006 traced emergent (UK, EU) public engagement with human/ medical genetics across a broad spectrum of applications and issues within this rapidly developing area of biotechnology/ bioscience. Dr Plows has key research interests surrounding the ethnographic tracing, and the theorising, of social mobilisation and public engagement. She has a background in social movement studies, and her previous research and PhD work focussed on UK environmental and anti globalisation direct action social movements. Bioscience, health, environment, social justice, and sustainability are key research sites. She has a keen interest in qualitative methodologies, including feminist approaches; 'action research'; qualitative software coding; developing 'methods for mess'-engaging with complex social realities-; and in public engagement and policy processes.

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