

# SELECTING PERFECTION

It's an open secret in some circles — and pursuing IVF not for infertility but purely for sex selection is an option more and more UAE parents are taking. But will the pressure on these babies to become the 'perfect' son or daughter eventually have consequences? MOJEH investigates...

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It's the long-awaited moment many so expectant parents look forward to. In the darkness of the ultrasound suite, squinting at the black and white blobs that flicker across the tiny screen, there's one question on everyone's lips – boy or girl? However, there's an increasing number of parents that will never know that mystery – taking part in in-vitro fertilisation [IVF] not due to fertility problems, but purely for the purpose of selecting the sex of their baby, their child's destiny is set from the very moment of conception.

In new Netflix movie *Joy*, which recounts the story of how the first 'test tube baby' was conceived following a decade of work by British scientists, the highs and lows of IVF are explored in detail. With more than 12 million babies worldwide now having found their way into the world via the often-gruelling process, the soul-crushing despair of infertility has become a distant memory for many once-desperate families. And while IVF isn't successful every time, for those struggling to conceive it does provide a window of hope.

In the UK, where the process was developed and perfected, gender selection via IVF – unless medically required – is strictly prohibited. But in the UAE, along with the USA, Cyprus, Egypt, Brazil, Jordan, Japan, South Africa and Mexico, what's become euphemistically known as 'family balancing' – more accurately, sex selection – enables couples to select the gender of their child. Originally an optional 'bonus' for those undergoing IVF in countries that permit it, this advancement is now being increasingly used by couples otherwise able to conceive naturally to ensure they have a baby of their desired sex. So why would anyone be so concerned about the sex of their baby that they'd undergo IVF, with all its associated pain, inconveniences and risks, just to be able to choose whether the nursery is pink or blue?

In 2024 USA online political and cultural magazine *Slate* published a story entitled *The Parents Who Want Daughters – and Daughters*

In the UAE gender selection via IVF is readily available to those who can afford the costs, regardless of whether or not couples are faced with infertility. The process is now widely referred to as 'family balancing'.

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*Only*, about the rising number of American families leaning towards girls as their chosen gender. The website referred to a 2009 USA study that identified 70 per cent of white parents who were having their first child would pick a female embryo. Meanwhile, a 2010 study showed that American adoptive parents were 30 per cent more likely to prefer a girl to a boy and were prepared to pay additional costs to ensure that. In the UK, a 2012 study by the popular British parenting site Mumsnet found that 45 per cent of mothers desired a baby girl, with just 22 per cent saying they wanted a boy.

"Often people believe girls to be 'easier' especially when small, and there appears to still be this desire that some mums want a mini version of themselves," says Charlotte Falconer, a UK-based therapist and the founder of *LetMeListen.co.uk*, a counselling and coaching service with clients all over the world. "However, a person will turn out to be who they want to be, so all those parental expectations could be redundant. Sometimes people want to replicate the closeness of a prior relationship with a parent and believe mirroring the sex of that relationship, whether that entails having a baby girl or a boy, means they will have the same closeness with their child. Again, these desires are about expectations – expectations that can be damaging to children's individual self-image and development."

In many cultures there is a strong preference for males, which can lead to skewed sex ratios. Countries such as China and India – where sex-selective IVF and abortion are prohibited by law, as is sex determination via ultrasound – have witnessed significant demographic imbalances due to cultural factors that favour boys. Sex imbalance at this scale gives rise to gender discrimination, poor education for girls, increased human trafficking, child labour and forced marriage.

However, when it comes to sex selection via IVF in countries where the practice is permitted, its supporters say it's up to the individual family's choice – a trend reflected in the celebrity-driven, Insta-perfect vision of idealised family life. Grammy award-winner John Legend and his model wife Chrissy Teigen have been vocal in both their battle with infertility and their pursuit of a 'balanced' family. "I picked the girl from her little embryo," the model told *People* magazine during her first pregnancy. "I picked her and was like, 'Let's put in the girl!'"

Because gender selection is not universally supported, public reaction was mixed: "We didn't create a little girl," Chrissy responded on then-Twitter to the social media outcry. "We had multiple embryos. Girls and boys. We simply chose to put in a female first."

As of last year, the celebrity pair, who are very much a poster couple for sex selection, have two girls and two boys, with their two youngest being born five months apart, both via IVF and one through surrogacy. Ⓛ