

Another well-known name to have taken part in sex selection is Alec Baldwin. After having one girl and four boys with his Boston-born wife Hilaria (née Hillary Lynn Haywood-Thomas) and just five months after the arrival of their fifth child Eduardo Pao Lucas in September 2020, the couple welcomed baby girl Maria Lucia Victoria, born from a surrogate and the result of sex selection, in February 2021. They have since gone on to have another daughter, Ilaria Catalina Irena, bringing them to a total of seven children (or eight, including Alec's first daughter Ireland, aged 29).

And this phenomenon isn't confined to celebrity circles — it's becoming commonplace in the UAE, too. According to Dr Elsamawal El Hakim, medical director and founder of FertiClinic, which has branches in Abu Dhabi, Sharjah and Ras Al Khaimah, a significant proportion of 10 to 15 per cent of people who attend their fertility clinics seek sex selection.

"With many families having two working parents, along with a lot of commitments and a hectic life, people are trying to limit the number of their children. But to do this, they also feel the need for 'family balancing,'" the fertility expert tells *MOJEH*. "Many families want to have two, or a maximum of three children, and they want to have a mixture of boys and girls. We do see people coming in to select a gender to have a smaller family, but a balanced family."

Freya\*, who did not wish to disclose her real name, is part of one such family. Living in Dubai for the past 27 years, she and her husband conceived two boys naturally and wanted one more child — a girl. "I was told about gender selection by my gynaecologist," she says. "It is a blessing to have such an option. It changed our lives. All we wanted was to have a little bundle of joy — a baby girl — in our family. I was too scared to conceive on my own and have another boy and then potentially need to try for a fourth child." Although Freya believes her family is now complete, if she were ever to have another child, she would 'without a doubt' pursue the same procedure.

However, there is a psychological element worth considering for those who have their embryo picked based on gender — because while many parents may focus on the perceived needs or wants of their family, the children who result from these decisions may have a very different perspective indeed.

"A recurrent theme in therapy with children and young people is pressure from parents," says Charlotte. "This can be real or perceived, but the knowledge that a child was selected to be a particular sex implies its desired attributes. This may leave a young person questioning whether or not they meet the criteria for what a boy or girl 'should be like'. They may question whether they do indeed 'balance the family' if they don't believe themselves to be the perfect girl or boy. They may ask if this version of 'me' is still wanted, if I was worth the physical and financial investment and ultimately — one of our most important core beliefs — am I worthy? When a young person questions their worth this can lead to a lifelong, complex relationship with their mental health, specifically their sense of self and safety in the world."

In addition to considerations of mental health repercussions for the children of sex selection, there can sometimes be discord between those who are employing IVF for fertility reasons and those who are

Image courtesy of Tatiana Shepeleva

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CHARLOTTE FALCONER, THERAPIST AND  
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exclusively doing it to seek a particular gender. "On my group IVF Support UAE, we have women joining looking for 'family balancing', and I often suggest that they do not discuss that in the group as many of our members might find it offensive when they are just trying to have a baby and don't care what gender it is," says Cassie Destino, certified fertility doula and founder of IVF Support UAE. "It is a very emotive topic."

As technology advances, so does a possible global market for nonmedical trait selection, like hair colour, height and intelligence. In California, USA, a hub for IVF in the Western world, a clinic already offers the option to select eye colour. Such services, however, raise ethical concerns about the potential commodification of children customised according to parental preferences, leading to a slippery slope of eugenics — and further complex questions for the children born to fulfil them.

"The moral question of knowing you may not have been wanted for 'who you are' as a person rather than 'what you are' as defined by your sex can negatively impact the family connection," says Charlotte. "A child may be loved regardless, but children often look at the facts and not the feelings. Will they question if they were picked for a purpose? More and more parents are seeking private therapy for their children because there is a disconnect between understanding what young people need and how they feel," she adds.

There is little doubt that gender selection is a complex issue. For some, the wider implications surpass individual families and their wants. If gender selection were to become more prolific across the globe, it may exacerbate existing societal issues, including gender inequality and stereotypes. And if parents begin selecting a specific gender to conform to societal norms or expectations, it can reinforce the idea that one gender is inherently superior to another. Yet for those seeking sex selection, IVF represents reproductive choice and bodily autonomy, offering the opportunity for couples to realise their desired family. And while regulations and the price of IVF do currently act as gatekeepers to its use, perhaps there is another, more ethical question to be answered by parents set on determining the sex of their child.

"Speaking as someone who has been fortunate enough to receive 'free' NHS [National Health Service] IVF treatment and subsequent private IVF treatment in the UK to be able to have my one longed-for child, the message and motivation is that a healthy baby is a miracle, not a luxury," says Charlotte. (M)

IVF now allows for non-medical trait selection in children, raising ethical concerns. This could lead to child commodification and potential eugenics, with significant implications for the children born.