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**Baby Makers 2099—A Critical View on Societal Change**



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## **Baby Makers 2099—A Critical View on Societal Change**

**Maila Mertens\***

This essay was one of two winners of the *Reproduction Writing Contest* organized by the research program “Human Reproduction Reloaded” in July 2025. The question of the contest was “What do you think human reproduction will look like at the end of the 21st century?” The award ceremony took place in November 2025.

### **1 The Scenario**

Sitting in seats eight and nine, row six, with a large bucket of salted popcorn to share, Noemi and Sarah are waiting for the romantic comedy ‘Bridget Jones’ Baby XIII’ to start. For forty years of friendship, it has been their tradition to meet every second Thursday of the month, go to the movies and afterwards reflect on their past and what the future might hold. While they joke about how eighty Swiss francs for a ticket at the shabbiest cinema in Zurich is quite a lot, the screen shows the movie’s title in large, pink letters.

The protagonist Shirin, an extremely educated woman in her seventies, just had her third baby with two baby daddies. She is glad that her body did not have to go through a so-called pregnancy and—God forbid—changes in her physique as female bodies had to back in the early 21st century when women actually gave birth to children. Now, having a family was so much easier since creating an embryo in vitro and vitrifying it for later use was the standard and the development of such a creature happened in a ReproDome. In there, Shirin could watch the fetus grow in all its perfection through the glass, being both beautiful and well-prepared for environmental hazards such as sixty degrees Celsius weather or genetic diseases—luckily, all the nasty genes were removed from its DNA. Even though money was never an issue for Shirin and her partners, they are still glad that all of this cost them less than a movie ticket. Now that the baby was fully developed and ready to enter the outside world, their only worry was finding enough NannyBots™ to supervise it so that neither of them would have to take a day off work. Shirin was glad that the discussion around who would have to take care of the child if they could not find enough NannyBots™, was left to her two male partners. Her job was simply too important and her salary too high for them to even think about a different solution.

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## 2 The Conversation

After 98 minutes of running time, Noemi and Sarah are glad the movie is over. With all the perfections in Shirin's life and simply no problems coming up, they found the movie quite boring and neither of them could relate to the protagonist's life. After all, it was pure science-fiction. While the two friends born in the 2050's imagined scenarios that were quite similar to what they just saw in their teenage years and medical influencers back then were sure that in the near future, every baby would be born outside the human body, none of it had become true so far. At least not for 99 percent of the people. While Jeff Bezos and Elon Musk managed to make themselves immortal and still produce offspring with the help of in vitro fertilization, frozen embryos, and cheap surrogates, ordinary mortals still have their babies the old-fashioned way—by having sex and carrying the child to term. With the environmental conditions being humans' worst enemy, pregnancy only happens for five to ten percent of couples and miscarriages happen in two thirds of the pregnancies. Those trying to have a baby and not being successful simply have to accept their fate as medically assisted reproduction costs four months' salary. "I wish I didn't still have to discuss with Sevi how we handled our parental leave, but to this day he thinks his job back then was the most important one in the world while I just taught kindergarten kids part-time", Noemi says, frustrated at the thoughts the movie put into her head. "Stop complaining", Sarah responds sarcastically, "I couldn't even get my goddamn ex-husband to pay alimony for any of our four children. But of course, the baby that grandpa just had with his new 25-year-old girlfriend gets the princess treatment."

## 3 The Dystopia

This essay explores possible scenarios around human reproduction at the end of the 21st century. The first two chapters provided a scenario that might be creative and fun to read. I, however, assume in this third chapter that there will be far less change by 2099 than we might currently think. While I do consider the science-fiction movie with artificial wombs and in vitro babies for everyone the more interesting and satisfying scenario, I will now lay out a future that is slightly more dystopic. This rather pessimistic assumption is based on several sociological observations on societal change:

First, societal change is neither an immediate nor a linear process—it happens gradually through shifting power relations and internalized norms (see Elias 2000). If individuals in (prosperous) countries always took up technological advancement immediately and independently of social norms, most PhD students would be sitting in a virtual reality home office and letting generative artificial

intelligence produce all of their work. After all, this would be possible today. But that is not the case because financial, social, and hierarchical constraints are present. If norms were irrelevant, more fathers would make use of paternity leave if their financial situation allows it—but they are still socially penalized for making their family the priority and allowing their partners to pursue a career. And lastly, if norms were irrelevant, sperm donation and egg donation would have been legalized at the same time, but the legality of the latter is still discussed (in Switzerland) and an egg donor's ability to emotionally separate from the child still questioned (see Almeling 2011).

Second, societal change does not happen in a vacuum—it is subject to processes of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis (Hegel 1807). Hegel argues that progress arises from contradictions, meaning that new developments (like in our case, reproductive technologies) provoke resistance, and only through struggle do new norms emerge. These developments are often politically instrumentalized: For instance, Graff and Korolczuk (2022) show how populist and authoritarian parties in Poland have used attacks on gender equality, LGBTQ+ rights, and reproductive autonomy to frame feminism and abortion as threats to national sovereignty and traditional family values. Further, the Human Rights Watch (2023) World Report 2023 documents legal and policy-level setbacks for abortion rights and gender equality globally—especially in the U.S., Poland, and certain parts of Latin America. The most prominent example of *Roe v. Wade* being overturned by the U.S. Supreme Court in 2022, it is evident that reproductive rights that were given at one point in time can be taken away again with political changes.

Third, at the moment, medically assisted reproduction is accessible only to a very limited number of people. Inhorn and Patrizio (2015) stress how technological advancement does not happen universally—it is entangled in gender, religion, and political hierarchies. They challenge the idea that we are moving toward a high-tech reproductive future. Instead, they point out that access to assisted reproduction is extremely stratified, both within countries (e.g., by income, education, urban/rural divides) and between countries, especially in the Global South.

#### **4 Conclusion**

In summary, it can be said that social change happens slowly and not in a linear fashion and that the benefits arising from this change are not accessible to everyone to the same extent. I expect only minor changes regarding human reproduction by the end of this century. Changes in our ways of reproducing might even progress and regress in waves—with reproductive technologies advancing significantly in the first half of the 21st century but then experiencing major setbacks in the

second half. While I do think that even more people will struggle with infertility by the end of the 21st century and thereby medically assisted reproduction will have a crucial role, I expect access to it to still be limited to rich couples who fit society's idea of the perfect parents—maybe even more limited than today. The costs of reproductive technologies will most likely be lower by that time because the supply side will adjust accordingly but at the same time, I expect an increase in demand to be exploited by suppliers. I therefore disagree with Greely's assumption that within forty years, most people will have stopped having sex for the purpose of reproduction and (almost) everyone will make use of in vitro fertilization, and it will be free (Greely 2018). After all, history appears to repeat itself, or as Marx (1852/1978) put it, it happens "first time as tragedy, second as farce." (594) The success of the right-wing party Alternative für Deutschland (Alternative for Germany) in Germany which strongly promotes the nuclear family and stresses the importance of genetic relations is a perfect example of this. Thus, even though I wish the scenario in my first chapter would become true, I expect that by the end of the century most people will still have children through sex, that many will still not be able to afford assisted reproduction, and the "back in fashion" traditional gender norms will continue to prevent queer couples from accessing it. Technologies like the artificial womb will have developed significantly and after lambs survive in it, it will also be possible for humans—however, this technology will remain a toy for the one percent, far removed from most people's reality. Similarly, gene editing to prevent diseases will be well established but not an option for most.

Hence, when it comes to technologies that go way beyond gamete donation, in vitro fertilization, vitrification, and surrogacy, Noemi and Sarah will be left with little more than movies and overconfident billionaires.

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