

WWW.EFMN.EU The European Foresight Monitoring Network

# US Families 2025: Trends and Alternative Futures

Foresight Brief No. 144

**Authors:** Alexandra Montgomery [alexandramontgomery@yahoo.com](mailto:alexandramontgomery@yahoo.com)  
**Sponsors:** None  
**Type:** Workshop, research and writing project  
**Organizer:** Alexandra Montgomery  
**Duration:** 2005-2006      **Budget:** N/A      **Time Horizon:** 2025      **Date of Brief:** August 2008

## Purpose

In response to a call for papers on the future of feminism from *Futures*, the international scholarly journal of Futures Studies, an informal workshop was organized to explore changes to US families and how the roles of men, women and children might be influenced by such forces. The 'US Families 2025' workshop was conducted entirely on a volunteer basis and provided opportunity for both newcomers and experts in the field of futures studies to engage in foresight and futures methodology. The outcomes of the workshop were analysed from the perspective of futures literature and feminist theory to arrive at the article 'US Families 2025: In Search of Future Families' published in *Futures* issue number 40 (2008) for the purpose of broadening the insights to and interpretations of the future with particular regard for gender as it relates to roles within marriage, reproduction, childhood and parenting.

## Gender, 'Family Values' and the Future of the American Nuclear Family

In January of 2005, George W. Bush was inaugurated to his second term as President of the United States. The red state (conservative) vs. blue state (liberal) divide seemed to influence a prevailing mood of culture wars, a contentious environment of leadership wielding power (and threatening to use it) over matters such as women's reproductive freedom, children's access to public education and a 'marriage amendment' legislating the rights to wed – or not wed – the spouse of one's choice. To outlaw abortion, ban gay marriage, cut off funding for children's healthcare and starve social spending on education seemed an assault on the American family, not a championing of it. The sense that the US family had been exhaustively exploited as a pawn for political gain contributed to the idea behind US Families 2025: that an organized effort to explore fundamental changes impacting the family unit provided an opportunity to work on implications for the future of

gender and offer social critique, as well as offer recommendations toward addressing various challenges of social inequality in the US.

## Project Background

There are two parts to the project: a workshop and a research/writing endeavour. The workshop US Families 2025 set out to achieve two objectives. The first was to provide an event for interested participants to explore the future of families. An open invitation was extended to a futurist community via university listserv. All who wished to attend were welcomed as voluntary participants. In this sense, the objective was to engage any and all individuals in the local futurist community who felt the topic was of importance. The workshop was designed to collect and organize information about trends and emerging issues as they relate to US families.

There was an informal guiding process, but the exercise was mainly an open-ended exploration of family – including marriage, childbirth, divorce, cohabitation, caretaking, domestic life and cultural norms – as reflective of wider social patterns,



and the driving forces shaping the future of the US family unit. Families were defined as households with or without children, including single parents, ‘traditional’ two-parent households, same-sex partners, unmarried cohabitating couples, and arrangements of anything other than a single person living alone. Lists of trends, emerging issues and four briefly outlined alternative futures were the output of the workshop. The workshop was held with the intent of publishing the results and workshop participants were invited to contribute to the writing.

The second part involved analysis of the workshop outcomes with special attention to the implications for the future of feminism. The scenarios were interpreted with the role of gender in mind, supported with feminist theory and relevant futures literature. The desired end result was a publishable submission for the journal *Futures* in a special issue on gender.

## Workshop: US Families 2025

Workshop attendees were all from the Houston, Texas area, associated in some manner with the University of Houston-Clear Lake (UHCL) graduate program offering a Master of Science degree in Studies of the Future. Participants in the workshop were drawn from the student population, alumni and faculty.

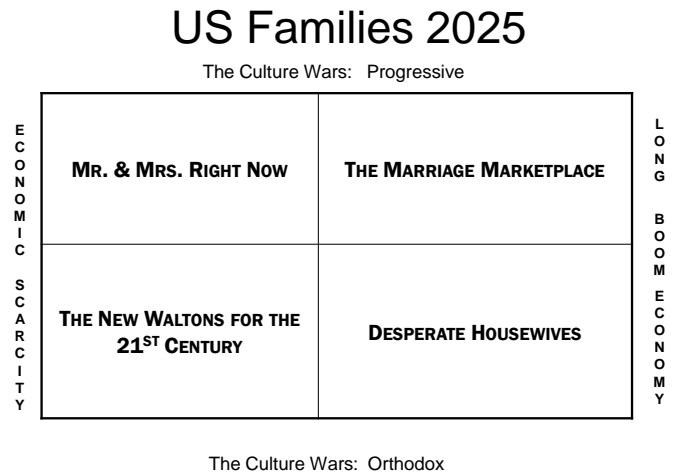
The workshop followed a simple format of brainstorming, trend identification, and discussion of emerging issues and led up to a follow up session for outlining four future scenarios based on a Global Business Network (GBN) methodology. The workshop was facilitated informally, eliciting responses from the participants based on a worksheet called ‘Big Questions about the Future’ designed by Dr. Peter Bishop of UHCL. A second meeting consisted of group collaboration on a GBN scenario exercise. Important uncertainties about the future of US families were identified; discussion of driving forces and four scenarios emerged.

Although the workshop was not largely publicized, the stakeholders may be defined as the entire US society at large. The topics of family and gender equality have impacts at personal and political levels. The ideas explored in the study might be of interest to policy makers, market researchers, family counsellors, activists and individuals making conscious decisions about family organizations. Religious, political and educational leaders may find the topic relevant to their audiences. As a contribution to the futures literature on the study of women and society, the subject is relevant to students and practitioners of futures studies with an interest in social change.

## Four Alternative Futures

Four future scenarios resulted from the US Families 2025 Workshop, resulting from a GBN-inspired scenario exercise where the two main uncertainties (economic conditions and culture wars) are represented in the axes. The horizontal axis describes two extremes regarding future financial conditions: scarcity and long-boom economics. The vertical axis reflects the two camps in the culture wars: progressive and orthodox,

which may also be seen as liberal vs. conservative or so-called ‘traditional family values’. The table below illustrates the scenario quadrants and their characteristics:



The scenarios each represent a quadrant of the GBN matrix in which two uncertainties were compared: economic conditions and the status of the Culture Wars. Each scenario reflects an extreme interaction of the two major uncertainties, a tactic that helps intensify the scenarios and generate urgency about the role of gender equality in terms of social/family structure.

Each of the scenarios also addresses a set of trends and emerging issues about the future of families. The trends are interspersed throughout the alternative future storylines and gain direction from the plot of the scenario. A conscious effort was made to cover economic, social/demographic and technological changes with the potential to impact the future of US families, and likewise be impacted. Emerging issues, such as the matter of workplace policies on employee absenteeism due to caretaker responsibilities, were addressed in terms of how resolution of the issue in one direction or another would impact social patterns.

### Selected Trends and Emerging Issues

- Smaller families having fewer children.
- Workplaces appealing to need for work-family balance.
- Number of single parent households, both male and female, increasing.
- Increasing status of fatherhood.
- Gender selection of offspring technology being utilized.
- Growing perception of demonstrable skills required for marriage and parenting.
- Merging/blending of office and home spaces.
- Increased use of government-funded financial incentives for marriage between men and women.
- Workplace absences due to caretaker responsibilities gaining attention as policy matter.

- Increased number of households located in exurbs and edge cities.
- Continued late age of parenting and marriage.
- Highly educated women participating in child-rearing rather than careers.

### Scenario Descriptions and Implications

The intent of the scenario analysis is to offer insights along the lines of the future of the nuclear family, marriage, childbearing, child-rearing, nurturing and care-giving, and the relationship between domestic/household arrangements and the status of women in society.

#### 1. *Mr. And Mrs. Right Now*

Transient relationships and equal economic partnerships between spouses amidst a backdrop of socially recognized non-kin emotional bonds characterize the scenario. There is an emergence of sharing economic and emotional resources to meet familial needs, particularly those of children.

**Implications:** In this future, adults beyond biological parents are permitted greater and more intimate access to children’s lives. The implications of the dissolving of nuclear households could be either negative or positive for children, but it could balance the domestic responsibilities between men and women. Men gain appreciation for nurturing and care-giving with children and the elderly, which improves the empathy between men and women.

#### 2. *Marriage Marketplace*

Arguably a ‘baseline’ scenario in which contracts, resumes and proven competencies determine partnerships formed for the purpose of reproduction, cohabitation, marriage and child-rearing.

**Implications:** Marriage Marketplace hints at the potential for children to become valued only as material possessions, while men and women exist solely as commodities of the marketplace. The exaggeration of masculine and feminine is possible. Genetic trait selection, breeding and strict technological control over reproduction and offspring are possible.

#### 3. *The New Waltons for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*

Named for a popular 1970s television programme celebrating the ‘traditional’ American family, this scenario observes the extinction of dual-income families and the nuclear household.

**Implications:** Arranged marriage and polygamy threaten female autonomy while extended family households bear greater responsibility for survival of the domestic unit. As a consequence, there is widespread marginalization of any family forms beyond male-headed households. Furthermore, children are subject to strict behavioural expectations based on gender norms.

#### 4. *Desperate Housewives*

Women’s rights to reproductive freedom, employment and divorce are challenged in this future. Men obtain elevated status based on the number of offspring they claim. Financial incentives for marriage and childbearing are distributed as government stipends; the US childbirth rate explodes.

**Implications:** The elimination of extended family ties amidst overt patriarchy fractures contemporary women’s liberation. For men, a large number of children bolsters one’s social status; for women, they represent their lost access to birth control. Both women and men who deviate from the socially-prescribed gender norms are alienated.

Trends, critical uncertainties and emerging issues were taken to extremes to develop unexpected ideas about the future. For example, arranged marriages emerge in the New Waltons scenario as an expression of economic scarcity combined with stridently orthodox cultural values. Evoking such an unlikely event challenges the audience. The strategy of introducing seemingly implausible connections between gender and social equality to alternative methods of family and domestic social organization has the capacity to generate change in the present.

Important cultural differences exist between the US and the rest of the world in terms of families and relationships. At the onset of outlining the scenarios it was clear that many of the family forms we could project into the future probably already exist in other cultures. For example, while extended family is a norm in many cultures, it is all but obsolete in the US. However, immigrants from Latin America challenge the nuclear family with their extended households. Meanwhile many young children today are being raised by aunts, uncles and grandparents in the absence of biological parents. So the study avoids trying to identify anything ‘new’ about families. In fact, it may be impossible to construct anything new at all about families. The value of foresight to raise awareness about the present – for instance, conduct social critique – while imparting a sense of change, is strengthened by the potential to increase cultural sensitivity.

## Feminist Theory: Alternative Family Futures and Visions of Gender Equality

Feminist social critique of the US has often identified the family and women’s role in it as central to women’s disenfranchisement. This analysis of the US Families 2025 scenar-

ios, in terms of the future of gender equality, acknowledges mainly just one feminist premise: women’s reproductive, marital and domestic roles define her social status. Multiple theories for the advancement of female equality exist, thus there are multiple frames of interpretation applicable to the scenarios. Each particular theory may be viewed as representing a utopian ‘vision’ for the future of female equality. New social implications are drawn out of each alternative future under the theoretical ‘lens’ lent by a given ‘feminism’. Furthermore, this approach offers the suggestion that new theories

of gender equality will continue to emerge and challenge women's roles in society.

**Liberal feminism** can be defined as legal equality for women. From this view, the Marriage Marketplace scenario may be most preferable, since men and women have equal access to the marriage and family life of their choice. Family roles are flexible and impermanent, unlike the New Waltons future where matrimony suggests females are the property of men. Similarly, the Desperate Housewives alternative strips women of their right to divorce at will. The harsh economic conditions of Mr. & Mrs. Right Now offer the opportunity to cooperate with male (or female) partners, although there is also the threat of highly competitive conditions emerging.

**Utopian feminism** maintains that women's unique characteristics are a form of social power. The potential for all women to express their autonomy is erased by the patriarchal slant of New Waltons and Desperate Housewives. A celebration of feminine qualities is observed in Mr. & Mrs. Right Now, since men and women alike take on child-rearing as a valuable and essential task. The value of nurturing activity, meanwhile, becomes more complicated in the Marriage Marketplace. Marriage and child-rearing are separate roles with different qualifications and neither may be entered without consent and understanding of the terms under which these roles will be enacted.

**Marxist feminism** looks upon the US capitalist system as a hindrance to female equality. Mr. & Mrs. Right Now demonstrates a future where capitalism largely suffers, suggesting this as a preferred future for Marxist feminism. Marriage Marketplace is a capitalist haven where women's authority over their own fate is respected and equal access to capital is the norm. Marxist feminists may not condone the free-market approach to gender equality, though. Desperate Housewives and The New Waltons commit women's fate to reproductive and domestic slavery, thus a far cry from the Marxist school of thought concerning women's rights.

**Postmodern feminism** interprets the marginalization of women as a by-product of the worldview where man is 'self' and woman is 'other'. Only the Mr. & Mrs. Right Now scenario pulls away from this duality by the introduction of

communal households and childrearing. In the Marriage Marketplace, women can slip into commodity status, while the New Waltons and Desperate Housewives futures portray women as little more than baby-making servants. The New Waltons in particular emphasizes the role of fathers in objectifying women by strategically marrying-off daughters to ensure their own social status.

**Radical feminism** takes the position that women are universally oppressed by virtue of their sex. There is little to be optimistic about in all four alternative futures in light of this view. Radical feminists might highlight the opportunities in the Marriage Marketplace and Mr. & Mrs. Right Now to avoid men altogether by entering all-female domestic arrangements. There is also the potential to enact a revolution in the face of blatant patriarchy evident in the Desperate Housewives future scenario. Women's complete subservience to men under the New Waltons conditions may also work to emphasize the importance of gender equality.

### In Search of Feminism in Public Discourse

The premise that female equality was secured by the women's movement of the 1960s and 70s contributes to the dismissal of gender equality in mainstream public discourse. There is a tendency to overlook the interaction between family and women's status and emphasize educational and employment opportunities as demonstrative of the advancement of female status. However, the rights of women are routinely challenged by efforts to restrict reproductive freedom, workplace policies that minimize women's labour through unequal pay compared to men and by fringe social movements toward returning women to their 'rightful' place as second-class citizens under the control of husbands and fathers. A more deliberate articulation and understanding of theories of feminism can correct the misconception that women's equality has already been achieved. Furthermore, with a concerted effort to bring women's rights to the table, it is possible that new theories of feminism will emerge. The application of genuine, practical and purposeful thinking about women and their social status will empower not just women but men and children as well.

## Sources and References

US Families 2025: In Search of Future Families, Futures, Volume 40, Issue 4, May 2008, Pages 377-387

**About the EFMN:** Policy Professionals dealing with RTD, Innovation and Economic Development increasingly recognize a need to base decisions on broadly based participative processes of deliberation and consultation with stakeholders. One of the most important tools they apply is FORESIGHT. The EFMN or European Foresight Monitoring Network supports policy professionals by monitoring and analyzing Foresight activities in the European Union, its neighbours and the world. The EFMN helps those involved in policy development to stay up to date on current practice in Foresight. It helps them to tap into a network of know-how and experience on issues related to the day to day design, management and execution of Foresight and Foresight related processes.