

South Korea Welcomes Its Daughters

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In a nation where boys were kings, an economic revolution is helping to change long-held values and traditions

By *Choe Sang-hun in Seoul*



When Park He-ran was a young mother, other women would approach her to ask what her secret was. She had given birth to three boys in a row at a time when South Korean women considered it their paramount duty to bear a son.

Park, a 61-year-old newspaper executive, gets a different reaction today.

"When I tell people I have three sons and no daughter, they say they are sorry for my misfortune," she says. "Within a generation, I have turned from the luckiest woman possible to a pitiful mother."

In South Korea, once one of Asia's most rigidly patriarchal societies, a centuries-old preference for baby boys is fast receding. And that has led to what appears to be a decrease in the number of abortions performed after ultrasound testing reveals that a fetus is female.

According to a recent study by the World Bank, South Korea is the first of several Asian countries with large sex imbalances at birth to reverse the trend and move toward greater parity between the sexes. Currently, the ratio is about 108 boys born for every 100 girls, still above what is considered normal, but down from a peak of more than 116 boys born for every 100 girls in 1990.

Opening Doors

The most important factor in changing attitudes toward girls was the radical shift in South Korea's economy that opened the doors to women in the workforce as never before. This has dismantled long-held traditions, which so devalued daughters that mothers would often apologize for giving birth to a girl.

The government also played a small role starting in the 1970s. Alarmed by the rise in sex-preference abortions, officials launched campaigns to change people's attitudes. One featured the popular Korean slogan, "One daughter raised well is worth 10 sons!"

In 1987, the government banned doctors from revealing the sex of a fetus before birth. But experts say enforcement has been lax.

Demographers hope that sex imbalances will begin to shrink in other rapidly developing Asian countries, notably China and India, where the same combination of a traditional preference for boys and ultrasound technology has led to a shortage of girls.

In China, the ratio is currently 111 boys born for every 100 girls, according to Central Intelligence Agency data. The current ratio for India is 112 boys for every 100 girls.

The United Nations Population Fund warns that rampant tinkering with nature's probabilities could lead to increased sexual violence and trafficking of women, as a generation of men finds its marriage prospects limited.

In South Korea, the imbalance has been closing steadily since 2002. The centuries-old preference for boys was rooted in an agrarian society that relied on sons to work on family farms. Another factor is that in Asia's Confucian societies, men were accorded special status because they were considered the carriers of the family's all-important bloodline.

Once the eldest son married, he and his wife went to live with his family; he was expected to support his parents financially while his wife was expected to care for them in their old age.

"In the old days, when there was no adequate social safety net, Korean parents regarded having a son as kind of making an investment for old-age security," says Chung Woo-jin, a professor at Yonsei University in Seoul.

Korean men felt ashamed if they had no sons; some divorced their wives if they did not bear boys.

Then in the 1970s and 1980s, the country's industrial revolution began to remake society.

Sons started taking higher-paying jobs in the cities, leaving their parents behind. And older Koreans found their own incomes rising, allowing them to save money for retirement. Married daughters were able to help their own elderly parents.

'No Preference'

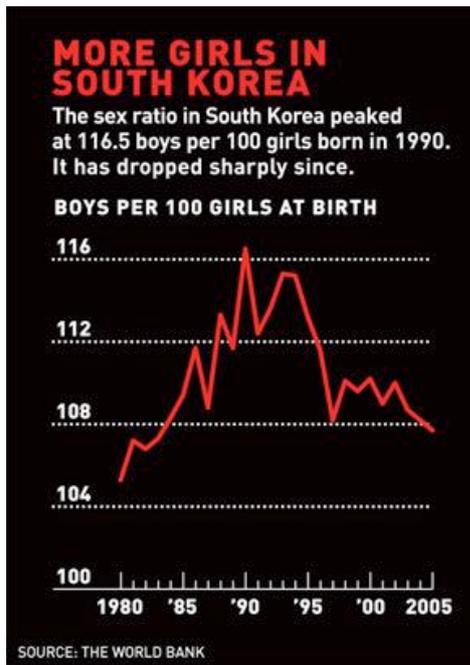
With the economy heating up, men could no longer afford to keep women out of the workforce, and women began to gain more confidence and respect.

Six of 10 South Korean women entered college in 2006; fewer than one out of 10 did so in 1981. In the National Assembly, women now hold about 13 percent of the seats, about double the percentage four years ago.

And a 2006 study by the Korea Institute for Health and Social Affairs showed that of 5,400 married South Korean women under 45 who were surveyed, only 10 percent said they felt that they must have a son—down from 40 percent in 1991.

"My husband and I have no preference at all for boys," says Park Su-mi, 29, a newlywed.

"We don't care whether we have a boy or girl because we don't see any difference between a boy and a girl in helping make our family happy."



SEX RATIOS AT BIRTH
Number of boys born per 100 girls; 105 is normal

Country	Sex Ratio (Boys per 100 girls)
WORLD AVERAGE	107
INDIA	112
CHINA	111
SOUTH KOREA	108
FRANCE	105
UNITED KINGDOM	105
UNITED STATES	105

SOURCE: THE WORLD FACTBOOK (C.I.A.)

An interesting article I found:
Sex Imbalance in South Korea

In Korea there is an imbalance in the sex ration caused by selective abortion: "One son is worth ten daughters," exclaimed the exultant south Korean mother of a newborn boy. It's a harsh assessment, but one often heard in male-dominated Asian societies. In South Korea, however, the preference for boys has taken a disturbing turn. There are at least 113 men for every 100 women in Korea, one of the highest gender imbalances in the world which, according to sociologists has profound social implications. A shortage of wives perhaps is the most obvious of these, but more alarming is the willingness of many Korean women to abort female fetuses in pursuit of a son. About 30,000 female fetuses each year or one in every 12 girl births after tests to confirm their gender. The high rate of abortion is partially explained by the aborting of female foetuses,' Professor Cho says in her paper. She notes that in a national survey in 1991, nearly one-third of respondents approved of abortion of female foetuses. The abortion rate is extremely high in Korea. One survey says that half of women aged between 15 and 44 have had abortions, a rate that has stayed steady since the late 1970s. Abortions are a major factor behind the sex imbalance, particularly among third and, fourth-born children where there are more than 200 boys for every 100 girls. Most women pray for their first born to be a boy, consuming such bizarre folk medicines as raw rooker's testicles and holding religious services to boost their chances. They become increasingly desperate if they produce only girls, leading to more sex-tests and abortions. "When I felt that the fetus was a girl, I aborted my pregnancy," said one woman interviewed for a recent paper in the Asia Journal of Women's Studies published by Ewha Women's University. "I almost decided to abort my third pregnancy because my dreams and the shape of my belly told [me] it was a girl." In 1990 doctors were banned from telling parents the sex of their unborn child after ultra-sound tests or amniocentesis. The Government's aggressive campaign to convince Koreans that a well-raised daughter is worth ten sons has seen the imbalance dip since 1990 But, despite new moves to revoke the licences of offending doctors, a high number still take money to tell parents their child's sex, and the practice is almost impossible for the authorities to trace. In recent years ethnic Korean women from China have been imported by marriage agencies for rural men unable to find wives. The match often ends badly as many of the women are already married and agree to the match solely to support their families back home. "Nowadays the age of the girl children subject to sexual abuse is getting lower. The problem of sexual violence is high anyway and many people think it is due to the sex imbalance." The signs are encouraging that the imbalance will gradually correct itself, but its consequences will linger for - years as the pressure on women to bear sons is still immense.

The so-called 'son-preference' is rooted in South Korea's Confucian philosophy, which stresses the role of the son in carrying on the family's bloodline, and in various ancestral rituals. Bearing a son is regarded as a woman's most important role. Girls are secondary since they become part of their husband's family after marriage. But these traditions have been modified to suit South Korea's embrace of capitalism. It is a chauvinistic society where women have

little prospect of a well-paid job. Boys, simply, are a better bet for parents wanting financial support in their dotage. "Boys are seen, as a guarantee against economic upheaval," says Professor Cho. But she points out that South Korea's modernisation is slowly changing the attitudes of some young women: "Many young women don't want to live like their mothers."