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## (UN)WANTED FEMALE OFFSPRING

### FROM A TRADITIONAL CULTURAL PREFERENCE FOR SONS TO A PRAGMATIC PREFERENCE FOR DAUGHTERS IN THE REPUBLIC OF KOREA AND ITS EMANATION IN CHOSEN DEMOGRAPHIC ISSUES

#### ABSTRACT

The neo-Confucian tradition in South Korea had influenced the number of female Koreans that were born due to the patrilineality-caused aversion to daughters and pre- and post-natal sex selection. The introduction of ultrasonographic devices even deepened the sex ratio at birth (SRB), resulting in the state forbidding their use for prenatal sex determination. Since the 2000s, a preference for daughters has been visible, and SRB is considered natural. The paper aims to show changes in South Korean culture and approach towards the sex of the offspring. It also aims to prove that a stronger cultural aversion to daughters in the past in South Korea has changed as an result of cultural and societal transformations, but also surprisingly of the traditional approach to gender roles – it is not generally emphasized and it can accelerate the drop in an already low total fertility rate (TFR) in this country.

**Keywords:** socio-cultural transition of South Korea, wise mother and good wife (*hyeonmo yangcheo*), the total fertility rate (TFR), sex ratio at birth (SRB), demographic transition, pre- and post-natal sex selection, gender roles

## INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

Due to neo-Confucian traditional approaches to gender roles in South Korea, pre- and post-natal sex selection influenced the number of female Koreans that were born. The introduction of ultrasonographic devices in the 1980s deepened the sex ratio at birth (SRB) even further resulting in the state forbidding their use for prenatal sex determination. Since the 2000s, a preference for daughters has been visible, and SRB is currently deemed natural. This paper aims to show these changes in South Korean culture and their approach towards the sex of their offspring, and to prove that a stronger cultural aversion to daughters in the past in South Korea has changed as a result of cultural and societal transformations with some assistance of public policies.

The research hypothesis posed in the paper is that a slow shift from the traditional desire for male offspring to a pragmatic desire for female offspring can be observed as a result of social change since post-war Korea. The argument is structured around the research questions: What was the traditional cultural stance on child sex preference in the past? Are there any reminiscences of this approach in the Republic of Korea from then until now, and how has it manifested in the ROK's SRB? Has the state attempted to reverse the negative trend of too few girls being born? Why do parents prefer daughters in contemporary Korea? The findings show that the traditional perception of gender in Korea now plays in favor of daughters, which provides a twist in Korean society.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF PRODUCING A MALE HEIR IN KOREAN TRADITIONAL CULTURE

Undoubtedly, one of the leading causes of gender inequality in the Republic of Korea is considered to be patriarchal, which is rooted in the legacy of (neo-)Confucian ethics. Within this traditional, centuries-old framework, the family is the primary cell of the human community, and harmonious family relations lead to an equally harmonious society. At the same time, the hierarchical system defines each group member's position. Women's status in society has been determined by this philosophy, primarily through patrilineality, or the (in)famous 'three obediences' (*samjongjido*) of women, namely to father, husband, and son in that respective order <sup>2</sup>, and the constant fear of divorce.<sup>3</sup> The law of the time defined many reasons for a husband to divorce his wife. Amongst

<sup>1</sup> The paper applies the Revised Romanisation of the Korean language according to instruction from the Ministry of Culture and Tourism of Korea in 2000. Moreover, the name 'Korea' here is used for 'the Republic of Korea'. Korean names are presented following Western convention, with the given name preceding the family name. This rule is also applied to the Japanese names and concepts, though in accordance with the modified Hepburn's Romanisation.

<sup>2</sup> Hee-sook Han, "Women's Life During the Chosŏn Dynasty," *International Journal of Korean History*, vol. 6 (2004), p. 118; B.L. De Mente, *NTC's Dictionary of Korea's Business and Cultural Code of Words*, Chicago 1998, pp. 438-445.

<sup>3</sup> Hee-sook Han, "Women's Life...", pp. 123-125.

them was breaking one of the 'seven vices for women' (*chilgeojiak*): disobeying one's parents-in-law, adultery, serious health problems, stealing, excessive jealousy and talking, and the inability to give an heir.<sup>4</sup>

This cultural legacy is still visible in Japan and South Korea, albeit in an altered form. Also, it should be kept in mind that each woman's position was not only determined by tradition but by the family circumstances and generalizations. The Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism of Korea (MCST) on its official website provide the maxims that to some extent could have summed up the society in Joseon times, such as: *man is the heaven and woman is the earth* or *a married daughter is no better than a stranger*, though emphasizing that there were more determinants of women's status.<sup>5</sup>

With the beginning of the Joseon dynasty (1392-1897/1910, Yi Dynasty), neo-Confucianism replaced Buddhism as the state philosophy of life and the basis of the legal system by blaming worsening public morals during Goryeo as the leading cause of the collapse of the former state. That idea led to a new approach to gender relations. This period marks the degradation of women's status into something comparable to servants from the moment they got married. However, it should also be noted that the status of women differed depending on their social class. Joseon Korea introduced the family as the primary social cell, led by the father, making it a model for the organization of other groups; for example, the ruler was the father of his subjects, understood as the head of the whole country, and had absolute power over his people. The men represented the 'outer' world, and on the contrary, women who belonged to the 'inner' world (*naeobeob*), as the wives were to be subject to their husbands.<sup>6</sup> The further into Joseon Korea, the more women's positions deteriorated, and a male-oriented moral system governed each family's relationship. Women were educated to become perfect virtuous neo-Confucian women and to master such skills as virtuousness, proper manners and style of speech, subtle features, domestic skills, and weaving and cooking – without excluding these from this list.<sup>7</sup> Patrilineality, which mentions traditional dependency on three men in a woman's life and other obligations and limitations, lasted until the 1960s when Korea was awaiting the industrial revolution.<sup>8</sup> Women sacrificed their privacy to serve their husbands and their families; they did not file complaints nor share comments with their husbands about the situation at home, as Korean women lived their lives in a climate of fear of divorce and abandonment.<sup>9</sup>

Despite some attempts at women's emancipation in the 1870s, half a thousand years of prevailing Confucian tradition had shaped Korean society and was deeply rooted

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., pp. 124, 152; M.J. Seth, *A History of Korea: From Antiquity to the Present*, Lanham 2011, pp. 161-163.

<sup>5</sup> "Having a Glimpse of the Lives of Women in the Past," *National Library of Korea*, 15 VIII 2024, at <https://www.nl.go.kr/EN/contents/EN32701000000.do>, 15 VIII 2024.

<sup>6</sup> Hee-sook Han, "Women's Life...", p. 118.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Insook Han Park, LeeJay Cho, "Confucianism and the Korean Family," *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, vol. 26, no. 1 (1995), pp. 119-120.

<sup>9</sup> Hee-sook Han, "Women's Life...", pp. 124, 152; M.J. Seth, *A History of Korea...*, pp. 161-163.

within it. The ritual of ancestor worship grew in popularity in the 16<sup>th</sup> century with its restrictive laws, such as the requirement that the ceremony be performed by the eldest male of the family. The outcome of such a tradition was enhancing male domination and putting pressure on women to guarantee giving male offspring to the family.<sup>10</sup> This led to a practice of searching among potential female spousal candidates for physical characteristics that would indicate their capability for giving birth to a male heir. Had a wife failed to do so, she could be divorced, or a concubine was also a solution as a potential mother of such a desired male offspring who would inherit duties and privileges.<sup>11</sup> Despite reforms introduced during the Japanese Colonial period on the importance of women at the home front, ‘good wife, wise mother’ (*ryōsai kenbo*),<sup>12</sup> in Korean, ‘wise mother, good wife’ (*hyeonmo yangcheo*),<sup>13</sup> the preference for sons dominated well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and this preference changed only during the Republic of Korea’s modernization period.<sup>14</sup>

## FERTILITY RATE AND SON PREFERENCE

The Total Fertility Rate (TFR) refers to the number of children a woman would give birth to over the entire childbearing period (age 15-49)<sup>15</sup> and it is currently extremely low in Korea. The sharp drop in TFR is the result of several factors, not only the consequence of changes in the development of the country’s economy from an agrarian to an industrialized one with high urbanization and educated citizens aligned with the second demographic transition, but also of Seoul’s deliberate post-war policies aiming at limiting poverty and enhancing welfare.

The data in Graph 1 from 1925 to 1945 until the end of the occupation period show a ratio for the whole of Korea (both Koreas today), but following the Japanese occupation, the graph presents only South Korean statistics.<sup>16</sup> Korea used to have a high TFR (even higher than Japan), which was way above 6, only to fall to 5.02 in 1950.<sup>17</sup> After the end of the Korean War on the southern side of the Peninsula, poor economic conditions were compounded by the presence of some 2 million refugees from the DPRK. In line with Rosset’s demographic laws of war and the demographic cycle borne

<sup>10</sup> Hee-sook Han, “Women’s Life...,” p. 134.

<sup>11</sup> B.L. De Mente, *NTC’s Dictionary...*, pp. 5-6.

<sup>12</sup> Sungyun Lim, *Rules of the House: Family Law and Domestic Disputes in Colonial Korea*, Oakland 2019, pp. 93-94, 111.

<sup>13</sup> You Jung Seo, Charissa S.L. Cheah, Hyun Su Cho, “The Gender Ideology of ‘Wise Mother and Good Wife’ and Korean Immigrant Women’s Adjustment in the United States,” *Nursing Inquiry*, vol. 27, no. 4 (2020).

<sup>14</sup> B.L. De Mente, *NTC’s Dictionary...*, pp. 5-6.

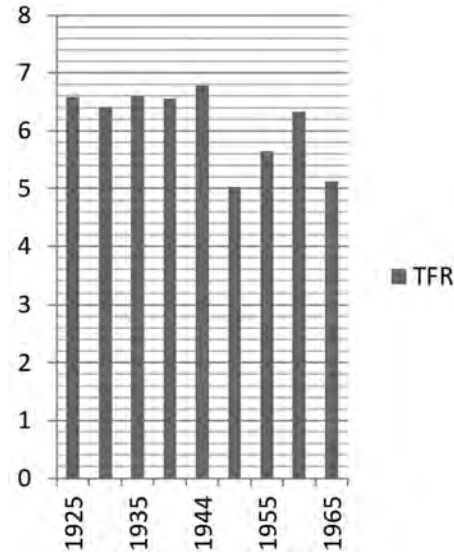
<sup>15</sup> “Pojęcia stosowane w statystyce publicznej,” *Statistics Poland (GUS)*, at <https://stat.gov.pl/metainformacje/slownik-pojec/pojecia-stosowane-w-statystyce-publicznej/3950,pojecie.html>, 15 I 2024.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

by the conflict, an extremely high fertility rate in the Republic of Korea became a problem because baby boomers realised that with an abundance of post-war generations, policies to encourage family planning became necessary.<sup>18</sup>

**Graph 1.** TFR in Korea from 1925 to 1965 in five-year intervals (except for 1945)<sup>19</sup>



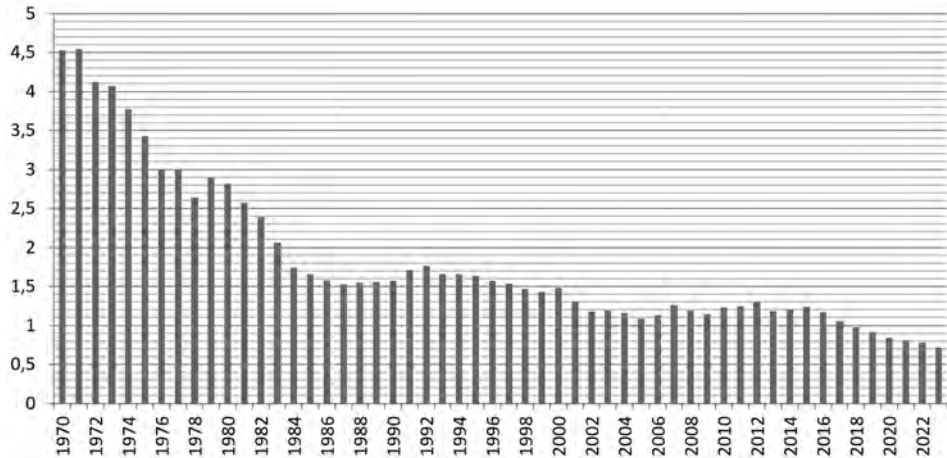
Own compilation based on: Jungha Yun, Chae Young Kim, Se-Hyung Son, Chong-Woo Bae, Yong-Sung Choi, Sung-Hoon Chung, "Birth Rate Transition in the Republic of Korea: Trends and Prospects," *Journal of Korean Medical Science*, 5 X 2022.

At this stage of analysis, it is worth at least mentioning an unprecedented 'export' of Korean children for adoption into North America, Australia and Europe that started after the Korean War. It remains unclear how many illegal private foreign adoptions of Koreans took place nor their sex due to the covering up of the story by the very agencies that used to cooperate with the government, but estimations say that the number could be about 200,000 as of 2023. The first official governmental investigation was started in 2022 due to widespread criticism of the malpractice, such as the unlawful removal of babies from their families or their mothers. These intercountry adoptions were encouraged by Seoul and profit-making agencies.<sup>20</sup> Also, it is worth noting that Graph 2 should be rather read as the children born, not all of whom stayed in the country to be brought up.

<sup>18</sup> E. Rosset, *Doktryna ludności optymalnej w rozwoju historycznym*, Warszawa 1983, pp. 300-301.

<sup>19</sup> Jungha Yun, Chae Young Kim, Se-Hyung Son, Chong-Woo Bae, Yong-Sung Choi, Sung-Hoon Chung, "Birth Rate Transition in the Republic of Korea: Trends and Prospects," *Journal of Korean Medical Science*, vol. 37, no. 42 (2022),

<sup>20</sup> Sang-Hun Choe, "World's Largest 'Baby Exporter' Confronts Its Painful Past," *New York Times*, 17 IX 2023, at <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/09/17/world/asia/south-korea-adoption.html>, 15 VIII 2024.

Graph 2. TFR (live births per woman) in the Republic of Korea 1970-2023<sup>21</sup>

Note: Data for 2023 are predictions as of March 2024.

Own compilation based on: “*Ingudongtaegeonsu mit dongtaeyul chui (chulsaeng, samang, honin, ibon). Surokgigannyeon 1970 ~ 2023*”, <“인구동태건수 및 동태율 추이 (출생, 사망, 혼인, 이혼). 수록기간년 1970 ~ 2023”> (Trends in population dynamics and dynamic rates (births, deaths, marriages, divorces). Covered period: 1970 – 2023), publ. 2024.03.19, Gukgatonggyepoteol <국가통계포털> (National Statistical Portal, Engl. version KOSIS, KOrean Statistical Information Service), [https://kosis.kr/statHtml/statHtml.do?orgId=101&tblId=DT\\_1B8000F&vw\\_cd=MT\\_ZTITLE&list\\_id=A2\\_6&scrId=&seqNo=&lang\\_mode=ko&obj\\_var\\_id=&itm\\_id=&conn\\_path=MT\\_ZTITLE&path=%252FstatisticsList%252FstatisticsListIndex.do](https://kosis.kr/statHtml/statHtml.do?orgId=101&tblId=DT_1B8000F&vw_cd=MT_ZTITLE&list_id=A2_6&scrId=&seqNo=&lang_mode=ko&obj_var_id=&itm_id=&conn_path=MT_ZTITLE&path=%252FstatisticsList%252FstatisticsListIndex.do), 30 IV 2024.

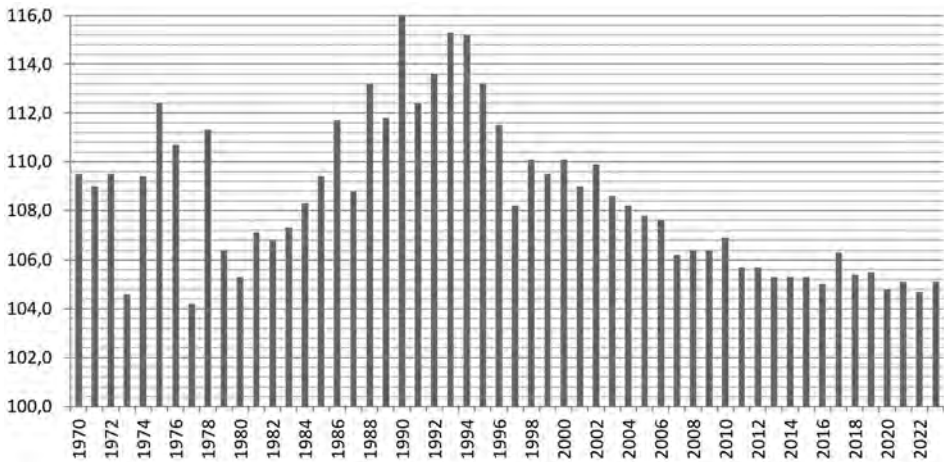
Seoul reacted with some sluggishness, and it was not sooner than 1962 when ‘3 3 35’, the first intensive campaign to encourage a reduction in childbearing, was implemented. The government urged women to deliver only three children born three years apart, with the last one delivered when a woman was 35. This policy complemented the already strong message equating giving birth ‘without any restraint’ with poverty and begging activities.<sup>22</sup> The TFR in Korea dropped to around 4.5 in 1970. At the beginning of the decade, the promotion of two children per statistical Korean woman began. By the middle of the decade, campaigns were aimed at men, encouraging them to use contraceptives

<sup>21</sup> “*Ingudongtaegeonsu mit dongtaeyul chui (chulsaeng, samang, honin, ibon). Surokgigannyeon 1970 ~ 2023*”, <“인구동태건수 및 동태율 추이 (출생, 사망, 혼인, 이혼). 수록기간년 1970 ~ 2023”> (Trends in population dynamics and dynamic rates (births, deaths, marriages, divorces). Covered period: 1970 – 2023), publ. 2024.03.19, Gukgatonggyepoteol <국가통계포털> (National Statistical Portal, Engl. version KOSIS, KOrean Statistical Information Service), at [https://kosis.kr/statHtml/statHtml.do?orgId=101&tblId=DT\\_1B8000F&vw\\_cd=MT\\_ZTITLE&list\\_id=A2\\_6&scrId=&seqNo=&lang\\_mode=ko&obj\\_var\\_id=&itm\\_id=&conn\\_path=MT\\_ZTITLE&path=%252FstatisticsList%252FstatisticsListIndex.do](https://kosis.kr/statHtml/statHtml.do?orgId=101&tblId=DT_1B8000F&vw_cd=MT_ZTITLE&list_id=A2_6&scrId=&seqNo=&lang_mode=ko&obj_var_id=&itm_id=&conn_path=MT_ZTITLE&path=%252FstatisticsList%252FstatisticsListIndex.do), 30 IV 2024.

<sup>22</sup> K.M. Mahmoudi, “Rapid Decline of Fertility Rate in South Korea: Causes and Consequences,” *Open Journal of Social Sciences*, vol. 5 (2017), p. 42.

or even to undergo a procedure of vasectomy.<sup>23</sup> The data shown in Graph 2 proves that as early as the 1980s, the TFR was below 3, and the pace of the trend of declining number of children was accelerating to drop even below 2 during that decade. The economic crisis of 1997 sped up the drop in TRF.<sup>24</sup> This tendency has been prevailing, and recently, since 2018, it has been even below one child per woman: 0.977 for that year, 0.918 in 2019, 0.837 in 2020, 0.808 in 2021, 0.778 in 2022, and not yet confirmed but predicted 0.720 in 2023.<sup>25</sup> Such low figures are a recipe for a demographic cliff in the near future as it is far below the replacement rate of about 2.1. To make things worse, for decades, the sex ratio at birth (SRB, males per 100 female births) in Korea was artificially unbalanced.

Graph 3. Sex ratio at birth (SRB, males per 100 female births) 1970-2023<sup>26</sup>



Note: Data for 2023 are predictions. Own compilation based on: “*Ingudongtaegeonsu mit dongtaeyul chui (chulsaeng, samang, honin, ibon). Surokgigannyeon 1970...*”

Graph 3 presents data on the sex ratio at birth. The scale of prenatal sex selections is evident as the natural ratio of male children per 100 female births around the world is around 105 on average,<sup>27</sup> and sex selection was a widespread practice. H. Chun and M. Das Gupta (2022) even prove that it was not only the prenatal selection but also the post-natal.<sup>28</sup> The fluctuations in SRB were caused by superstitions

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, p. 43.

<sup>24</sup> Heeran Chun, *South Korea Case Study Report on the “Success Story” of Sex Ratio at Birth Transition*, UNFPA 2019, p. 6.

<sup>25</sup> “*Ingudongtaegeonsu mit dongtaeyul chui (chulsaeng, samang, honin, ibon). Surokgigannyeon 1970...*”

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> “Sidebar: Sex Ratios Around the World,” *Pew Research Center*, 23 VIII 2022, at <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2022/08/23/sidebar-sex-ratios-around-the-world/>, 30 IV 2024.

<sup>28</sup> Heeran Chun, M. Das Gupta, “‘Not a Bowl of Rice, but Tender Loving Care’: From Aborting Girls to Preferring Daughters in South Korea,” *Asian Population Studies*, vol. 18, no. 2 (2022), pp. 169-189; Heeran Chun, *South Korea Case Study Report...*, p. 45.

connected with the Chinese Zodiac and the introduction of laws promoting women's rights.<sup>29</sup> As late as the 1970s, the government started a program supporting the idea of advocating against the preference of sons.<sup>30</sup>

The major impact on growth in sex selection was the introduction of ultrasound prenatal devices in the 1980s that made it possible to determine the sex of a fetus. This way, the gender disproportion of sexes in Korea started to rise to highly disproportional levels in this decade.<sup>31</sup> The most educated groups in South Korea were the pioneers in sex ratio transition because they were the first to widen the ratio in that decade and, interestingly, also led in a shift back towards the natural ratio.<sup>32</sup> In 1990, 116.5 boys were already being born per every 100 girls. At the same time, adult men were beginning to have trouble finding female partners, as there were noticeably more Korean men than Korean women.<sup>33</sup> Because of such large differences, there was introduced a law forbidding doctors to reveal the sex of the unborn child to the parents in 1987, a ban that was only lifted in 2008, when the ratio of the number of boys born per the number of girls born in 2007 was recognised as natural:<sup>34</sup> about 106.

It is also worth briefly recalling here the history of women's freedom in the context of reproductive rights, which was significantly restricted by the 1953 legislation banning abortion.<sup>35</sup> In 1973, amendments were introduced to allow the procedure in the case of pregnancy resulting from rape, incest, or health risks.<sup>36</sup> Despite the criminalization, abortions were performed illegally, and the number of abortions was significant. Between 1989 and 2009, 30-50 million abortions were performed, indicating their low detection rate.<sup>37</sup> Just for example, in only 1994, approximately 1.5 million abortions were carried out, constituting three times more than the number of actual births in that year.<sup>38</sup> The data for induced abortion in the period 1971-2000 show a staggeringly high percentage of married women aged 15-44 who had undergone the procedure from 26% in 1971, 48% in 1979, 53% in 1985, 52% in 1988, 54% in 1991, 49% in 1994, 44% in 1997 and 39% in 2000. Unmarried women's abortions were not recorded.<sup>39</sup> In 2005 alone, approximately 340,000 were carried out, but this was the

<sup>29</sup> Heeran Chun, M. Das Gupta, "Not a Bowl of Rice...", p. 174.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> L. Edlund, Chulhee Lee, *Son Preference, Sex Selection and Economic Development: The Case of South Korea*, Cambridge 2013, p. 1.

<sup>32</sup> Heeran Chun, *South Korea Case Study Report...*, p. 45.

<sup>33</sup> L. Edlund, C. Lee, *Son Preference...*, p. 1.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>35</sup> Kim Sunhye, Young Na, Yurim Lee, "The Role of Reproductive Justice Movements in Challenging South Korea's Abortion Ban," *Health and Human Rights Journal*, vol. 21, no. 2 (2019).

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Heeran Chun, *South Korea Case Study Report...*, p. 45.

<sup>39</sup> Heeran Chun, L. Doyal, S. Payne, Cho Sung-Il, Kim Il-Ho, "Understanding Women, Health, and Social Change: The Case of South Korea," *International Journal of Health Services*, vol. 36, no. 3, (2006), p. 584.



year of the introduction of stricter legislation,<sup>40</sup> hence, the number of abortions decreased to nearly 50,000 in 2017.<sup>41</sup> The depenalization of abortion only occurred under President Moon Jae-in in January 2021, which was preceded by a 2019 verdict from South Korea's Constitutional Court ordering a review of the abortion law by the end of 2020.<sup>42</sup>

**Table 1.** Sex ratio at birth (SRB, males per 100 female births) for 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th and over child<sup>43</sup>

Year	Sex ratio of live births total	1st child	2nd child	3rd child and over	3rd child	4th child and over
1990	116.5	108.5	117.1	193.7	189.9	209.9
1991	112.4	105.7	112.5	183.4	180.9	195.2
1992	113.6	106.3	112.4	196.4	193.5	212.0
1993	115.3	106.3	114.8	209.7	205.6	235.2
1994	115.2	105.9	114.2	206.9	204.2	224.6
1995	113.2	105.7	111.7	180.3	177.4	203.3
1996	111.5	105.2	109.8	166.1	164.0	183.2
1997	108.2	105.0	106.3	135.5	133.5	153.3
1998	110.1	106.2	107.7	145.0	144.2	152.0
1999	109.5	105.5	107.5	142.5	141.2	154.0
2000	110.1	106.2	107.4	143.6	141.5	164.5
2001	109.0	105.4	106.4	141.1	140.0	151.4
2002	109.9	106.5	107.2	140.6	139.5	149.8
2003	108.6	104.8	107.0	136.2	135.0	147.2
2004	108.2	105.1	106.2	132.4	131.6	139.6

<sup>40</sup> Kim Sunhye, Young Na, Yurim Lee, "The Role of Reproductive Justice Movements..."

<sup>41</sup> Beh Lih Yi, "Only for 'Naughty Girls': Stigma Lingers after South Korea Abortion Ban Overturned," *Japan Times Online*, 19 IV 2019, at <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2019/04/19/asia-pacific/social-is-sues-asia-pacific/naughty-girls-stigma-lingers-south-korea-abortion-ban-overturned/>, 15 I 2024.

<sup>42</sup> Arin Kim, "Decriminalising abortion did not reverse the declining trend in Korea," *The Korea Herald*, 20 VI 2022, at <https://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20220630000712>, 15 I 2024.

<sup>43</sup> "Sex Ratio at Birth by Birth Order for Provinces. Annual 1990 ~ 2022," Gukgatonggyepoteol <국가통계포털> (National Statistical Portal, Engl. version KOSIS, KOREAN Statistical Information Service), updated 29 XI 2023, at [https://kosis.kr/statHtml/statHtml.do?orgId=101&tblId=DT\\_1B8000F&vw\\_cd=MT\\_ETITLE&list\\_id=A2\\_6&scrId=&language=en&seqNo=&lang\\_mode=en&obj\\_var\\_id=&itm\\_id=&conn\\_path=MT\\_ETITLE&path=%252Feng%252FstatisticsList%252FstatisticsListIndex.do](https://kosis.kr/statHtml/statHtml.do?orgId=101&tblId=DT_1B8000F&vw_cd=MT_ETITLE&list_id=A2_6&scrId=&language=en&seqNo=&lang_mode=en&obj_var_id=&itm_id=&conn_path=MT_ETITLE&path=%252Feng%252FstatisticsList%252FstatisticsListIndex.do), 30 IV 2024.

Year	Sex ratio of live births total	1st child	2nd child	3rd child and over	3rd child	4th child and over
2005	107.8	104.8	106.6	128.3	127.8	131.9
2006	107.6	105.8	106.1	121.9	121.8	122.7
2007	106.2	104.5	106.0	115.7	115.3	119.1
2008	106.4	104.9	105.6	116.6	115.7	124.0
2009	106.4	105.1	105.8	114.3	114.4	114.3
2010	106.9	106.4	105.8	110.9	111.0	109.7
2011	105.7	105.0	105.3	109.5	110.1	104.7
2012	105.7	105.3	104.9	109.2	108.9	111.5
2013	105.3	105.4	104.5	108.0	107.8	109.8
2014	105.3	105.6	104.6	106.7	106.5	107.7
2015	105.3	106.0	104.5	105.5	105.4	106.8
2016	105.0	104.4	105.2	107.4	107.3	108.3
2017	106.3	106.5	106.1	106.4	105.9	109.4
2018	105.4	105.2	105.7	106.1	106.6	102.8
2019	105.5	106.3	105.3	103.3	102.8	106.3
2020	104.8	104.6	104.8	107.2	106.4	112.0
2021	105.1	105.4	104.6	105.8	106.5	102.2
2022	104.7	104.9	104.8	103.9	103.4	106.4

Own compilation based on: “*Sex Ratio at Birth by Birth Order for Provinces. Annual 1990 ~ 2022*,” Gukgatonggyepoteol <국가통계포털> (National Statistical Portal, Engl. version KOSIS, Korean Statistical Information Service), updated 29 XI 2023, at [https://kosis.kr/statHtml/statHtml.do?orgId=101&tblId=DT\\_1B8000F&vw\\_cd=MT\\_ETITLE&list\\_id=A2\\_6&scrid=&language=en&seqNo=&lang\\_mode=en&obj\\_var\\_id=&itm\\_id=&conn\\_path=MT\\_ETITLE&path=%252Feng%252FstatisticsList%252FstatisticsListIndex.do](https://kosis.kr/statHtml/statHtml.do?orgId=101&tblId=DT_1B8000F&vw_cd=MT_ETITLE&list_id=A2_6&scrid=&language=en&seqNo=&lang_mode=en&obj_var_id=&itm_id=&conn_path=MT_ETITLE&path=%252Feng%252FstatisticsList%252FstatisticsListIndex.do), 30 IV 2024.

The high rate of abortions is visible in the SRB statistics of children born into a family, not the first ones. Just in 1990 only, the sex ratio among first children was 108.5, but for the second child, it grew to 117.1; for the third child, it was 189.9, and for the fourth child and over, it was 209.9 and that means that per every girl more than two boys were born. In the second half of the 2000s, the ratio normalised to some extent, and according to the newest data in 2022, the sex ratio among first children was 104.9, but for the second child, it was almost the same: 104.8; for the third child,

it was 103.9 and for the fourth child and over it was 106.4.<sup>44</sup> A change in the attitude towards daughters is evident in this SRB transition in South Korea. Researchers point out that the total sex ratio of live births total is natural. However, the data for the fourth child and over for the 2020 year cannot be omitted, as it grew by 6 compared to the previous year, implying a short return to the sex preference.

## A SHIFT TO PREFERRING DAUGHTERS

Since the early 2000s, there has been a strong tendency to shift away from patrilineal intergenerational support. As proven, unmarried daughters support their parents significantly as much as unmarried sons. Worth adding is that when married, female offspring support only a bit less than married sons.<sup>45</sup> The daughters-rewarding-mothers phenomenon has also been playing an important role. The oldest daughters and daughters-in-law are noted to feel compassionate towards their mothers' lives in a patriarchal society. Led by female solidarity as compensation for male-dominated society hardships, they often care for their female parents.<sup>46</sup> Emotional support towards daughters is also much more robust than towards sons, as proven in a 2011 survey.<sup>47</sup> Statistically, women spend less time at work than men, so they have more time to care for their parents.<sup>48</sup> Changes in customary housing patterns are also visible and manifest themselves in the gradual detaching of parents from living with their eldest sons.<sup>49</sup>

In a survey in 1985, 47.7% of Korean women agreed that 'sons are necessary' in a family, but this response 30 years later was as low as 5.7%.<sup>50</sup> Generally, until 2007, daughter preference was weaker than son preference.<sup>51</sup> The sex preference of a child in 2012 was as follows: 35.7% of respondents preferred sons, 43.3% preferred daughters and 21.0% expressed no preference. From the perspective of parents' sex, 46.9% of women preferred daughters to 38.7% of men.<sup>52</sup> A 2019 Survey by Heeran Chun shows that in the situation of having just one child, 64.1% of respondents would prefer a daughter and only 28.7% a son, with 7.2% staying indifferent. The top two reasons in the answers concerning daughters were as follows:

<sup>44</sup> "Sex Ratio at Birth..."

<sup>45</sup> Heeran Chun, M. Das Gupta, "Not a Bowl of Rice...", p. 174.

<sup>46</sup> Yuna Choi, Seok In Nam, "Daughters Rewarding Mothers' Piteous Lives: Eldest Daughters Caring for Ageing Mothers," *Journal of Women & Aging*, 2024, pp. 1-14.

<sup>47</sup> Heeran Chun, M. Das Gupta, "Not a Bowl of Rice...", p. 175.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Heeran Chun, *South Korea Case Study Report...*, p. 27.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 29.

<sup>52</sup> Heeran Chun, M. Das Gupta, "Not a Bowl of Rice...", p. 177.

- *friendlier and care for parents in their later life* (41.9%),
- *can be more agreeable and more enjoyable to raise* (24.6%).<sup>53</sup>

Interestingly, respondents are also aware of women's empowerment (22.2%) and the weakening of traditional values (11.4%), such as a male-centered headship system (*ho-juje*), ancestor worship, less involvement of sons in elderly parents' care, and others. They also point at character traits such as sensitivity, sympathy, and communication competencies of daughters and sum up sons as being more 'economically burdening'. In H. Chun's 2019 survey 75% of respondents were women, and 90% were in their 40s or 50s.<sup>54</sup>

## SUMMARY

Since South Korea started gathering detailed statistical information in 1970, due to the cultural and social change accompanied by the state's policy, Korea went from a traditional, pro-sons preference into a modern, penchant for daughters society. Contemporary preference for daughters is for different reasons to when South Korea was in favor of sons because, during those times, female fetuses were aborted or those which were born were neglected. The newest data confirm quite a natural level of SRB as of 2022, suggesting low prenatal sex selection. This transformation in Korea can be traced back to the 2000s and shows stronger intergenerational bonds and manifestations of the common perception of men as those who work longer and potentially can contribute less to their parents' emotional state than women.

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<sup>53</sup> Heeran Chun, *South Korea Case Study Report...*, p. 30.

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