

Why is Son Preference Declining in South Korea?

The Role of Development and Public Policy, and the Implications for China and India

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Abstract

For years, South Korea presented the puzzling phenomenon of steeply rising sex ratios at birth despite rapid development, including in women's education and formal employment. This paper shows that son preference decreased in response to development, but its manifestation continued until the mid-1990s due to improved sex-selection technology. The paper analyzes unusually rich survey data, and finds that the impact of development worked largely through triggering normative changes across the whole society — rather than just through changes in individuals as their socio-economic circumstances changed. The findings show that nearly three-quarters of the decline in son preference

between 1991 and 2003 is attributable to normative change, and the rest to increases in the proportions of urban and educated people.

South Korea is now the first Asian country to reverse the trend in rising sex ratios at birth. The paper discusses the cultural underpinnings of son preference in pre-industrial Korea, and how these were unraveled by industrialization and urbanization, while being buttressed by public policies upholding the patriarchal family system. Finally, the authors hypothesize that child sex ratios in China and India will decline well before they reach South Korean levels of development, since they have vigorous programs to accelerate normative change to reduce son preference.

This paper—a product of the Human Development and Public Services unit, Development Research Group—is part of a larger effort in the department to study social institutions and development outcomes. Policy Research Working Papers are also posted on the Web at <http://econ.worldbank.org>. The corresponding author may be contacted at mdasgupta@worldbank.org.

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1. Introduction

Across East Asia and much of South Asia, child sex ratios have become more masculine in recent decades (Figure 1) — despite the region’s economic and social development, and many governments’ policy efforts to induce parents to value daughters more equally with sons.¹ Indeed, the only public policy that has demonstrably helped normalize national child sex ratios is in Mao’s China and North Korea — where an ideology of gender equality backed up by collectivization and control over private lives sharply reduced the scope for households to prioritize resource allocation among their members.² More desirable ways of reducing son preference are needed.

Until a few years ago, South Korea appeared to epitomize the pattern of rising sex ratios despite rapid development — with dramatic increases in levels of education, industrialization, and urbanization, as well as in women’s education and participation in the formal labor force (Table 1). By the mid-1990s, South Korea was officially included as a member of the developed countries’ club, the OECD. Yet sex ratios at birth rose steeply during this period (Figure 2). The sex ratio of the total population has not risen correspondingly, since female life expectancy at birth has risen more rapidly than male.³

This flew in the face of over a century of social science theory. Early theorists focused on the profound cultural and behavioral implications of the shift from pre-industrial to industrial economic organization.⁴ Essentially, this involved a shift from face-to-face communities bound by religious and other traditions, to more impersonal social groupings characterized by contractual associations. Accompanying this was a shift whereby people’s social status derived less from “ascription” based on characteristics such as their family of birth, and more from their individual achievements. Later theorists argued that “modern” societies and individuals are motivated by the pursuit of innovation and rationality, rather than adherence to traditions.⁵ The Korean experience also challenged the idea that increases in women’s education and labor force participation reduces gender inequalities in intra-household allocation of resources.

Since the mid-1990s, however, sex ratios at birth in South Korea have shown a steady decline, setting a new trend in Asia. This raises some important questions, which we explore in this paper. Firstly, what light does the South Korean experience shed on the complex issue of the relationship between “development” — a shorthand for the economic and socio-psychological changes summarized above — and son preference? Secondly, what light does the South Korean case shed on likely trends in other countries such as China and India, and what policies might help reduce son preference there? Or will they have to wait until they are as highly developed as South Korea before child sex ratios begin to normalize?

To understand the relationship between development and son preference, it is important to clarify some points. Firstly, sociological theory indicates that economic development brings about normative and behavioral changes primarily at a *societal* rather than merely an *individual* level. Analysts of the diffusion of innovations have pointed out that new ideas are first adopted by those who are most exposed to new information, and then spread in a snowballing fashion through a population.⁶ Yet most analyses of son preference have focused heavily on correlating *individuals’* characteristics with measures of their son preference, and therefore fail to capture the more important effects of underlying secular trends in a population. This may help explain why the literature shows mixed evidence that development mitigates son preference in Asia (Croll 2000).

A second point that needs clarification is the distinction between the *intensity* of son preference felt by people, and its actual *manifestation* on the ground in sex ratios — which is what most

studies focus on.⁷ These two phenomena can sometimes move in opposite directions, as in South Korea during 1985-1995 (Table 2, Figures 2 and 3). This can happen when social norms regarding son preference are weakening, while new technologies become available which make it easier to manipulate the sex ratio at birth. The same applies if better technologies become available for assuring children's survival after birth, since they can be used more assiduously for boys than for girls. Moreover, since educated women are typically better able to access and implement these new technologies, studies can even appear to suggest that gender outcomes for children are worsened by development, and even by improvements in the position of women.⁸

In this paper, we use these two distinctions to inform our analysis of the relationship between development and son preference in South Korea. Our analysis is made possible by the fact that South Korean fertility surveys actually ask women about their underlying son preference. The usual practice in fertility surveys is to ask respondents about their preferred number and sex composition of children. The Korean surveys ask a very different question: they ask respondents whether they feel it is imperative to bear a son. This provides a measure of the underlying intensity of son preference. We analyze not only the individual-level characteristics correlated with this variable, but also the secular trends in this variable.

We begin by describing the cultural underpinnings of son preference in South Korea: how these arose from centuries of social engineering designed to make Korea a strong authoritarian state, and how they have been re-shaped by development and by public policies since the 1950s. This is followed by an analysis of the National Fertility and Family Health Surveys conducted in 1991 and 2003 in South Korea. Throughout our analysis, we use the term "son preference" to refer to the underlying son preference, and not its manifestation.

Briefly, our analysis indicates that development has altered son preference primarily through setting in motion changes at the societal — rather than the individual — level. Son preference is as expected inversely related to individual socio-economic status, but our decomposition analysis shows that the overwhelming factor underlying the reduction in son preference is a secular trend of changing social norms cutting across all socio-economic groups. We argue that son preference declined in South Korea primarily as a result of ideational change triggered by changes in underlying social and economic conditions, analogous to the discussion in the demographic literature of the role of ideational change in altering fertility behavior.⁹ Interestingly, this has happened despite strenuous efforts by the government until recently, to maintain traditional family and gender relations, through legislation and other policies.

2. Factors underlying son preference and forces of change

The roots of son preference in Korea

The patriarchal family system that underlies son preference in Korea was introduced through a process of rigorous social engineering during the early-mid Choson dynasty (1392-1910). It replaced a much more bilateral family system, in which a couple might live with either the woman's or the man's family, and male and female offspring could both inherit their parent's property (Deuchler 1992:80-81).

Deuchler (1992, 2003) gives a detailed description of this transformation of the dominant kinship system in Korea. It was central to a Confucian strategy of building a strong authoritarian state,

borrowing heavily from readings of Chinese texts. The Confucians set out to obliterate Buddhism, with its emphasis of individual self-realization and salvation, which they felt detracted from loyalty to the family and state. They sought to replace this with a tightly structured system of kinship and political relations designed to promote stability and loyalty to a series of nested corporate groups — the household, the lineage, the state — underpinned by prescribed rituals.

The core of this system was a rigidly patrilineal kinship system, which specified in extensive detail the roles and status of each member of a household and lineage, under the unchallenged authority of the (male) head of the family. These authoritarian kinship relationships were mirrored through the political hierarchy, culminating in obeisance to the king.

“Neo-Confucianism not only masculinized the public sphere..., but also established the family as the proto-typical metaphor of social relations among individuals and groups” (Moon 2002: 478).

“Social organization was tied together by a threefold mechanism: the domestic sphere, represented by the wife, was subordinated to the public sphere, represented by the father and son, they in turn were the sovereign’s subjects”. (Deuchler 1992:111).

Ancestor worship was strenuously promoted, as a means of strengthening corporate bonds within the family and lineage (Deuchler 1992:133). This ensured that people were engaged not merely in assuring the welfare of their current family members, but that they sought to assure the well-being of previous generations of ancestors through specified ritual practices, as well as by bearing sons to ensure that the corporate group would endure over generations. Over several centuries, the neo-Confucians and the Department of Rites refined the details of this patriarchal authoritarian regime, and fought relentlessly against the survival of traces of the old bilateral system of kinship.

Strong supernatural sanctions ensured conformity to the Confucian rules. Kendall (1984) describes beliefs in ancestors and ghosts in rural Korea in the 1980s, and spells out how they served to generate a great deal of pressure to conform to the needs of the corporate group.¹⁰ Ancestors who bore sons, and are cared for by their agnatic (male-line) descendants can be a benign influence on their family. But even these can be restless and dangerous if they died with unfulfilled desires, such as seeing their grandsons. Those who died unmarried or without male descendants are filled with resentment and can create all kinds of problems for their siblings and other kin. It is apparent that there is much pressure from a wide range of family members to ensure that each individual performs their filial duties of marrying and bearing sons quickly, and caring for their ancestors.

This was a highly ascriptive system. Access to political power, as well as the economic and social assets of the lineage, was regulated through one’s position in the lineage. Appointments to government office depended on passing examinations, but candidates were only eligible to sit the examinations if they had the right position in a noble *yangban* lineage.¹¹ State sanctions reinforced lineage rules: for example, the sons and grandsons of widows who defied the ban on widow re-marriage were not allowed to take the civil service examinations.

Lineages formed part of larger superordinate lineages of increasing size and generational depth, which are sometimes referred to as “clans” in Korea.¹² Many villages had a dominant lineage, to which the majority of men belonged. It was common for lineages to hold some joint property, which was used to support ancestor worship rituals, and to help lineage members in need. Lineage members interacted frequently in the context of daily life and specified rituals, and offered a source of mutual support and mutual supervision: “the *p’a* (lineage) performed many of

the social services on the local level that are now provided by public schools, police, and social welfare agencies” (US 1990, parentheses ours).

Lineage membership thus determined much of a person’s life chances. Genealogies were carefully maintained, showing the exact nature of each (male) member’s relationship with the lineage. The lineage was continued through the line of the eldest son in each generation, and other sons in each generation would start their own sub-lineages. This meant that the eldest son had the burden of caring for all the male ancestors, and it was especially important for him to bear a son to continue the family line (male descent line).

Women were severely marginalized by these strict rules of patrilineal kinship and inheritance which placed the father-son duo in the public sphere and relegated women to the domestic sphere. Strict rules of lineage exogamy meant that wives would be outsiders in their husband’s village: as a result, women were socially isolated whereas men were surrounded by networks of social support. At marriage, a woman and her unborn children would be formally transferred to her husband’s family: so only sons could care for their parents in this life and in their afterlives. A woman’s primary duty was to bear sons to ensure the continuity of her husband’s lineage.

State policies reinforcing patriarchy, since the 1950s

Between the 1950s and the establishment of democracy in 1987, the Korean state sought to reinforce Confucian traditions in order to maintain social and political stability under a series of authoritarian governments. The rules of patrilineal social organization were formally legalized into the Korean Civil Code in 1958, in provisions also referred to as the Family Law. *Inter alia*, these stipulated that family headship must be held by the men in the line of the eldest son, that inheritance should be through the male line, that men must marry outside their lineage, that women should be transferred to their husband’s family register upon marriage, and that the children belong to the father’s lineage even in the case of divorce.

From the 1960s onwards, successive governments in Korea used their authoritarian powers to effect rapid economic development through a series of highly directed initiatives. Promoting the traditional principles of loyalty to the ruler and filial piety, they freed themselves to a large extent from the need to cater to competing constituencies. There was active repression of citizen demands for democracy, and of trade union activity not approved by the military regimes, and calls for greater gender equity were largely ignored (Moon 2002).

This suppression of competing constituencies made it possible to channel national resources towards rapid industrialization. Wages were kept low, to permit high levels of investment in industrial growth, and to keep Korean exports competitively priced. For similar reasons, state expenditures on social welfare were curtailed. As late as 1989, when the country was just a few years away from becoming a member of the OECD, the government emphasized that families would continue to be primarily responsible for social welfare (Moon 2002:483). The state encourages people to support their parents through a variety of measures, including tax breaks, housing loans, filial piety awards, and the annual observance of an “Old Age Day” (Prendergast 2005). This means, of course, that women would continue to bear the burden of caring for the young, the old, the sick, and the disabled.

To use women most effectively for national development, women were hired in the labor force but expected to leave work when they married, and return to part-time work once their households needed them less. They have contributed heavily to the labor force in low-paid jobs in factories and offices. More recently, there has been a trend of greater employment of women

in professional positions, and towards women remaining in the labor market after marriage.¹³

Women's organizations were established by the state as part of national development drives. For example, the New Village Women's Association and Mothers' Clubs were established to implement state policies of population control and economic development, as well as inculcating political loyalty.¹⁴ There were some spontaneous women's movements, which pressed for greater gender equity, and especially for reforms of the Family Law. However, these had limited success until after the establishment of democracy in 1987. In 1990 the Family Law underwent some major reforms, but as noted above the government was at that time still highly committed to maintaining traditional family roles.¹⁵ Therefore the system of male family headship was retained, leaving women relegated to secondary position.

However, citizens came increasingly to question the relevance of these traditions for organizing their present-day lives. The women's movement gained momentum along with the success of civil society movements demanding an end to military rule, and was successful in obtaining court judgments challenging the constitutional validity of key aspects of the Family Law.¹⁶ Individual petitioners were also successful: for example, in 1997 the Constitutional Court of Korea ruled it unconstitutional to prohibit marriage within the lineage. In 2005, the Supreme Court ruled that women could remain members of their natal household after marriage, and that women and men have equal rights and responsibilities to care for their ancestors (Kim 2005). Eventually in 2005, the government abolished male family headship and allow parents who so wished to register their children under the mother's family name with effect from 2008.

Forces of change: the role of industrialization and urbanization

Industrialization and urbanization break the stranglehold of the lineage and family on the individual through many channels. As described above, in pre-industrial Korea a person's access to power, social status, and economic opportunities depended heavily on their gender, lineage, and even their position within that lineage. With the advent of industrialization, increasing proportions of the population became able to earn a living independent of their position in the family, through jobs which they could acquire purely on the basis of their personal skills and qualifications. Increasing proportions of people also obtained formal education, which further reduced their dependence on the family and also exposed them to new ways of thinking.

Another factor is that growing proportions of the population have retirement savings for their old age.¹⁷ As a result, people have become less dependent on financial support from their children. However, this does not reduce the need for sons to support them in their afterlife, as no earthly savings can take care of this need.

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