

# **Son preference and “missing girls” in Asia: What drives it, what might help reduce it?**

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# Outline

1. Measuring son preference (sex-selection against girls)
2. Drivers of sex-selection: economic, cultural, or both?
3. What exacerbates sex-selection?
4. What reduces sex-selection?
  - specific policies
  - broader changes
5. Insights from S Korea's shift to daughter preference

Conclusions

# Section 1. Measures of son preference

Son preference very widespread

- but few societies show sex-selection (excess mortality of girls relative to boys)

Measures of sex-selection:

a) **Child sex ratio** simplest (boys/girls aged below 5 years):

- Derived from census data, typically quite robust
- Includes postnatal sex-selection

b) **Sex ratio at birth (SRB)** commonly used, but problems:

- Needs good vital registration data (poor in all but most developed settings)
- Shifts policy focus from gender equality to banning prenatal sex-selection – low effect, cruel to women already under huge pressure at home

## Section 2:

Drivers of son preference:  
*economic, cultural, or both?*

# Common for daughters to offer lower economic returns than sons

Women's earning capacity limited:

- Pre-industrial societies frequently patrilineal
  - Men inherit the land, main productive resource
- Industrialized societies, women handicapped by:
  - Childbearing, domestic work burden
  - Choices steered by education system, parents, etc

***Why then is sex-selection not more commonly found?***

# Patrilineal family widespread in pre-industrial world

- *but differ in exclusion of adult daughters from helping parents*

## 1. Most offer some scope for helping parents:

- Can inherit land (esp. if no brothers), or remain single in parents' home (e.g. pre-industrial Europe, Japan)

**Generates mild son preference**

## 2. A few rigidly exclude scope for helping parents:

- Daughters must marry, support husband's parents  
(found in **all** the settings that manifest sex-selection)

**Generates strong son preference**

*Advantages: Patrilineages were corporate units, effective for managing & protecting citizens before the modern state (well-documented for China, Korea, parts of S.Asia)*

# Section 3:

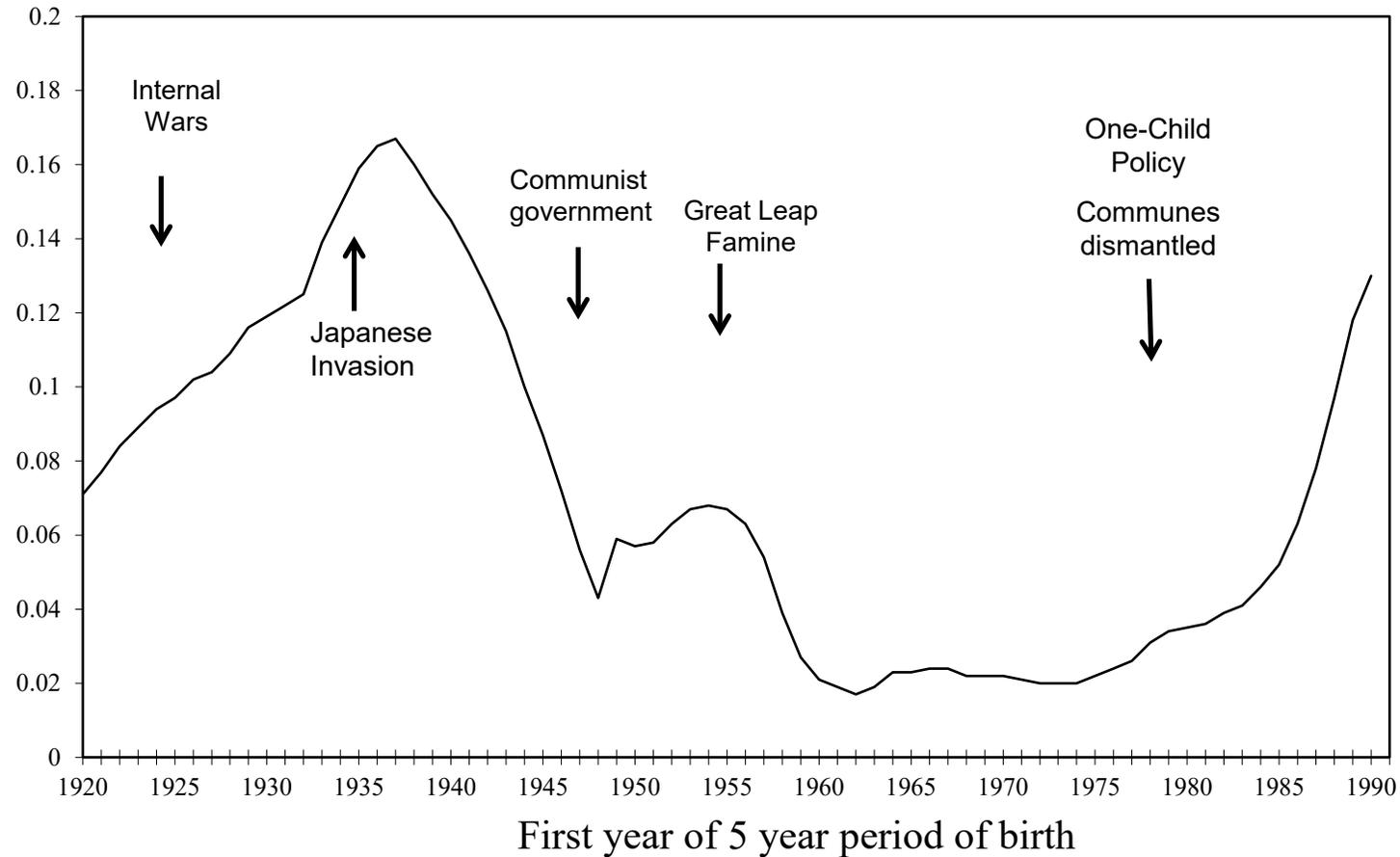
## What exacerbates level of sex-selection, ...within a given setting?

Risk

Ease of sex-selection

# Risk levels affect extent of sex-selection

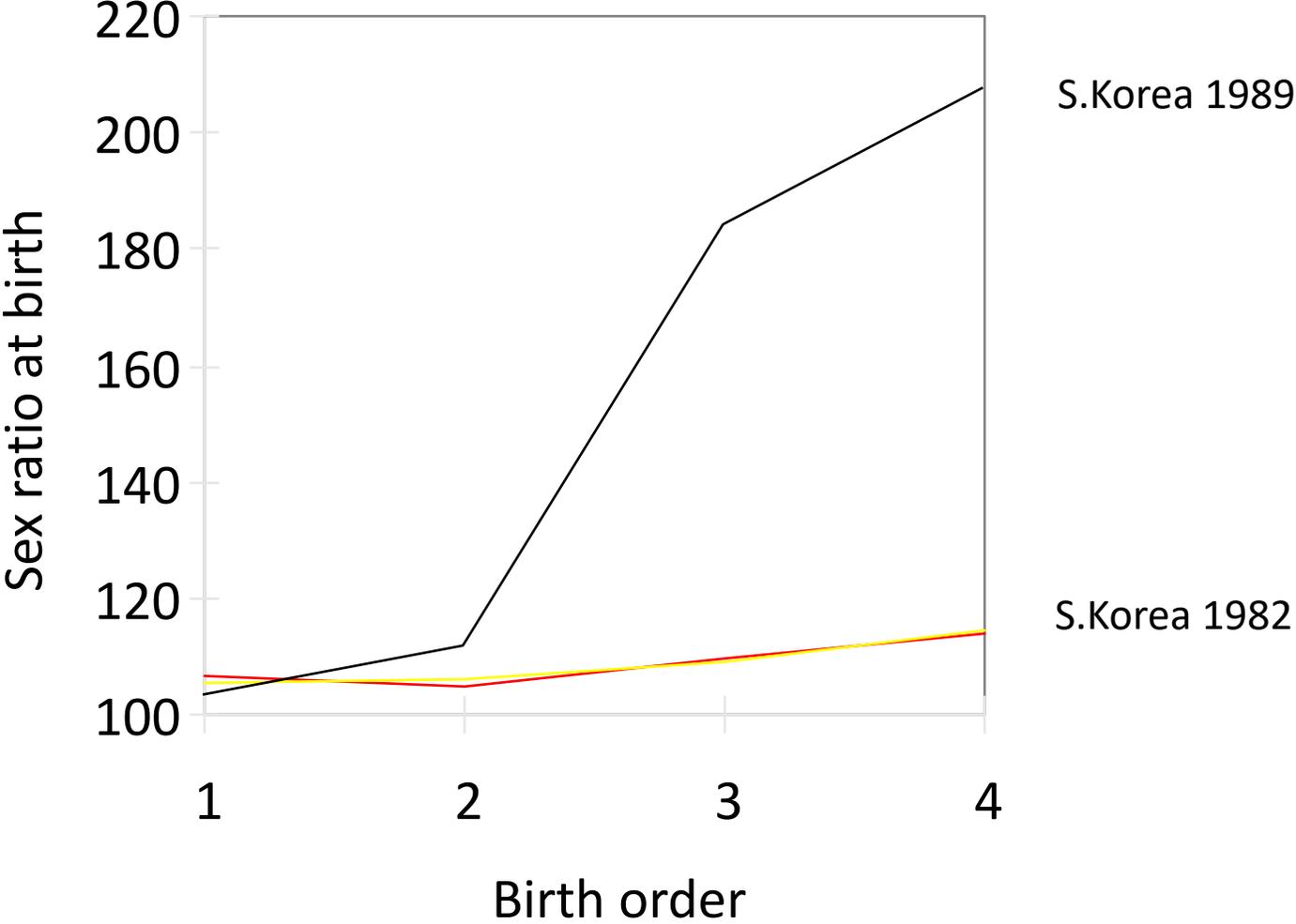
Estimated proportions of females “missing” by birth cohort, China 1920-90



Source: Das Gupta and Li (1999)

# New technologies make it easier to get rid of unwanted girls

Sex ratios at birth by birth order, S.Korea 1982 & 1989



Source: Park and Cho 1994

# Section 4: What helps reduce sex-selection?

Specific policies

Broader social changes

# Policies to reduce sex-selection

- Complex to implement, limited evidence of impact:
  - **Bans** on prenatal sex-detection / abortion
  - **CCTs**
- **Pension** schemes (outside formal employment): some impact (Ebenstein & Leung 2010; Ebenstein 2014)
- **Laws** for gender equity: show some impact (e.g. inheritance, political participation)
- **Mass media** advocacy: widely found highly effective for behavior change

*Sources:* Kumar and Sinha (2020); Das Gupta (2019)

# Broader social changes that reduce sex-selection

## 1. ***Urbanization:***

- Live and work in impersonal settings (apartments, offices)
  - not surrounded by patrilineage kin pressure
- Daughter OR son may live near parents and help them  
*Girls can be as valuable as boys*

## 2. ***Industrialization:***

- Access to income de-linked from lineage membership
- Wider possibilities for saving

## 3. ***Exposure to new ideas***

- Education
- Social norms changing around you

***Process of changing norms can be accelerated by media efforts***

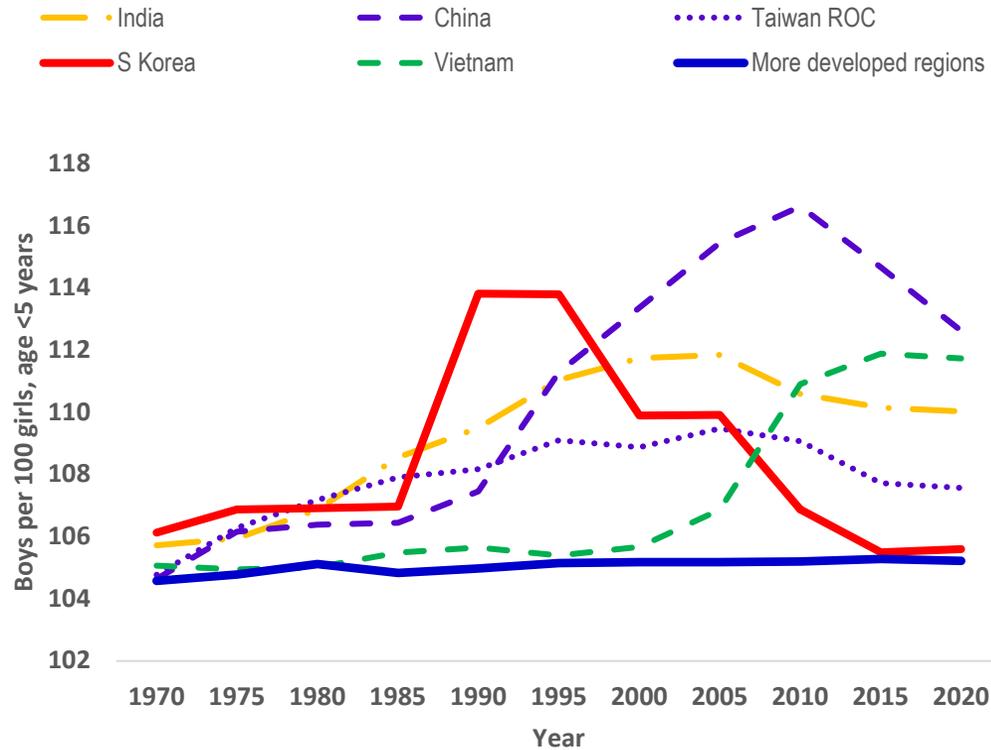
## Section 5:

Insights from S Korea's shift from strong son preference to daughter preference

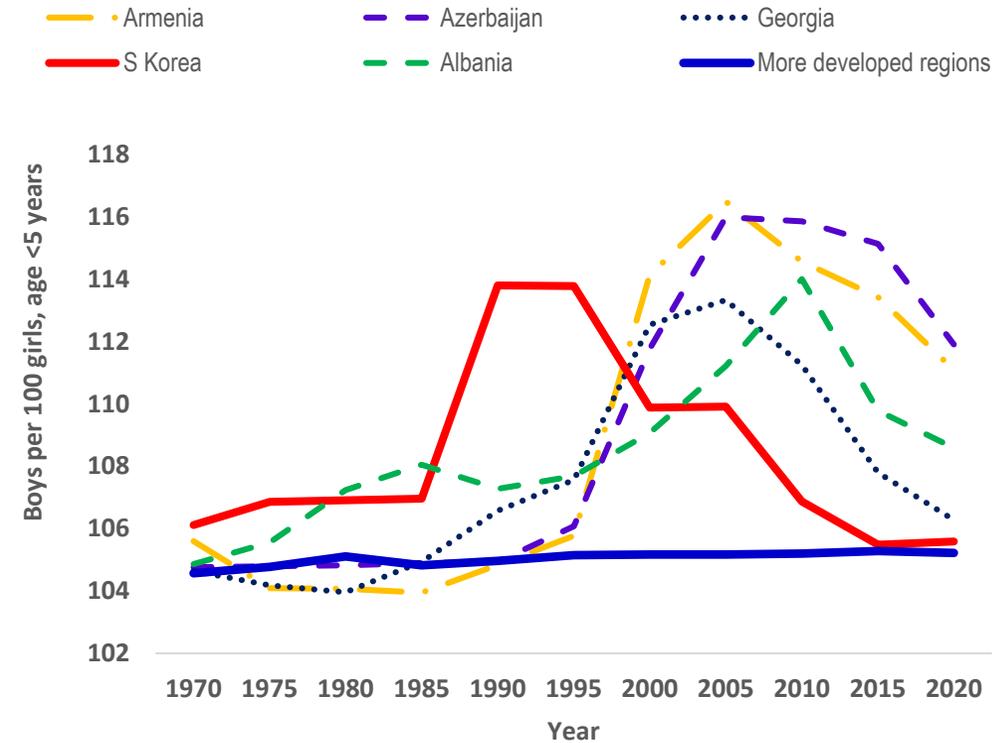
# S Korea unique in early rise & early end of sex-selection

## Child Sex Ratios 1970-2020, in countries showing high levels of sex-selection (child sex ratios capture both prenatal and post-natal sex-selection)

### S.Korea, China, India, Vietnam, Taiwan



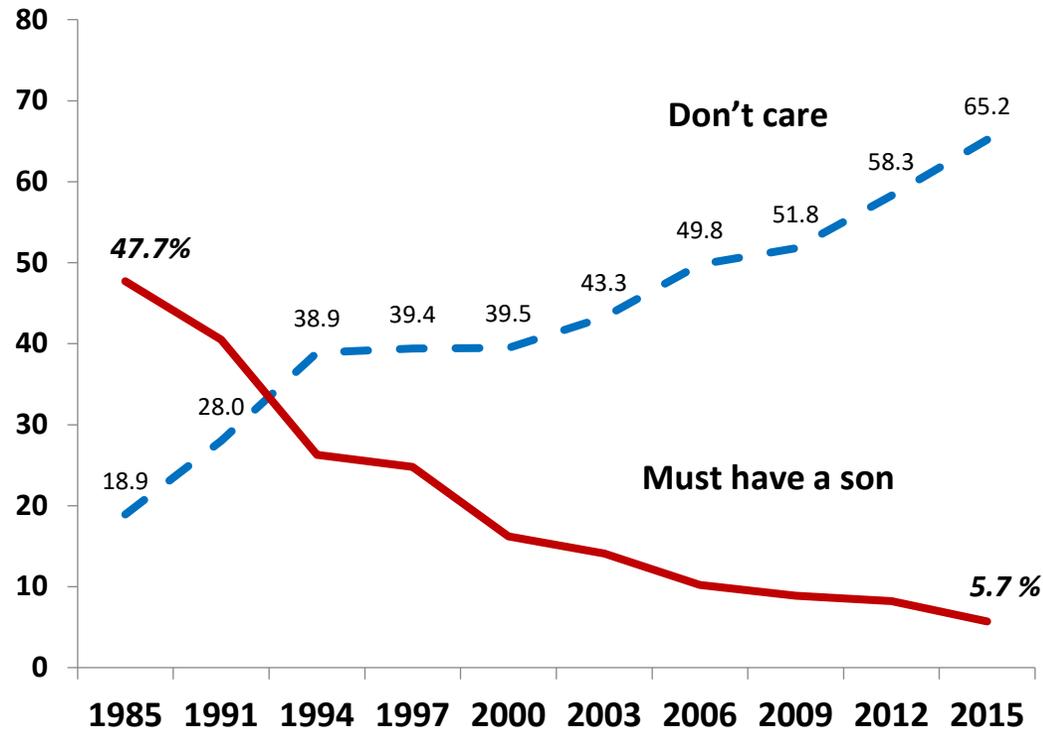
### S. Korea, S. Caucasus, Albania



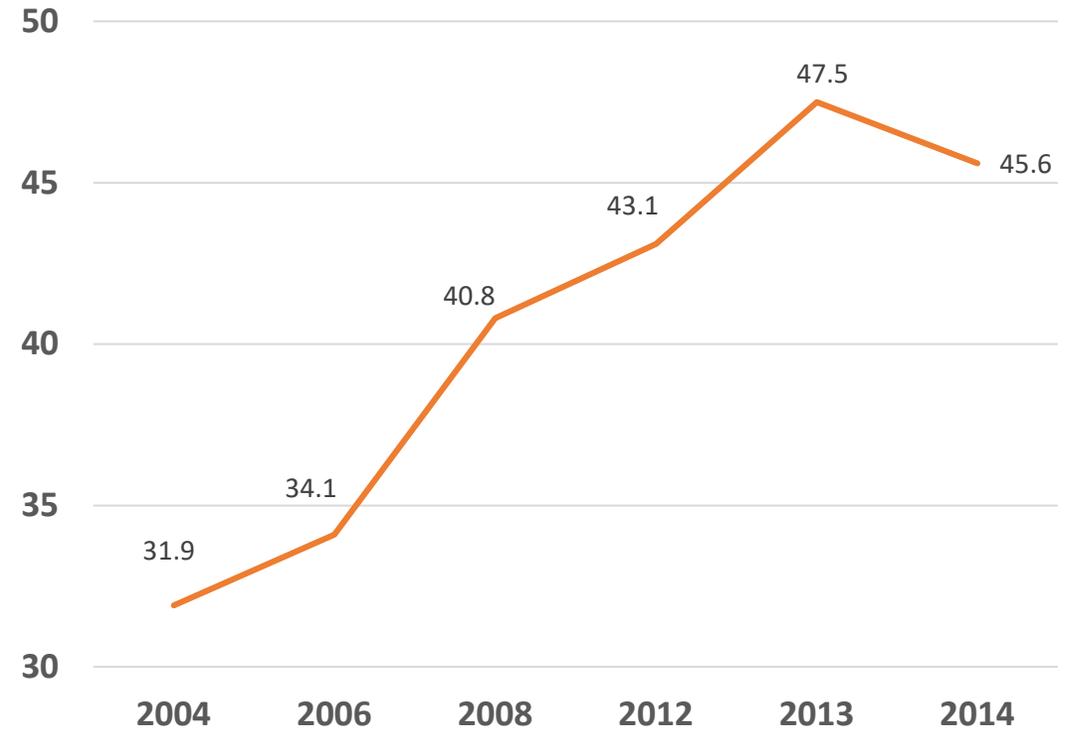
**Source:** Chun and Das Gupta (2021), based on United Nations World Population Prospects 2019, Online Edition. Rev. 1. The “more developed regions” comprise Europe, Northern America, Australia/New Zealand and Japan, where sex-selection is not widely prevalent.

# Shift from wanting sons to preferring daughters, S.Korea

## % reporting “must have a son”



## % preferring a daughter, if were to have only one child



Source: Chun and Das Gupta (2021), from national surveys: Korean Fertility and Family Health Surveys, Korean General Social Surveys

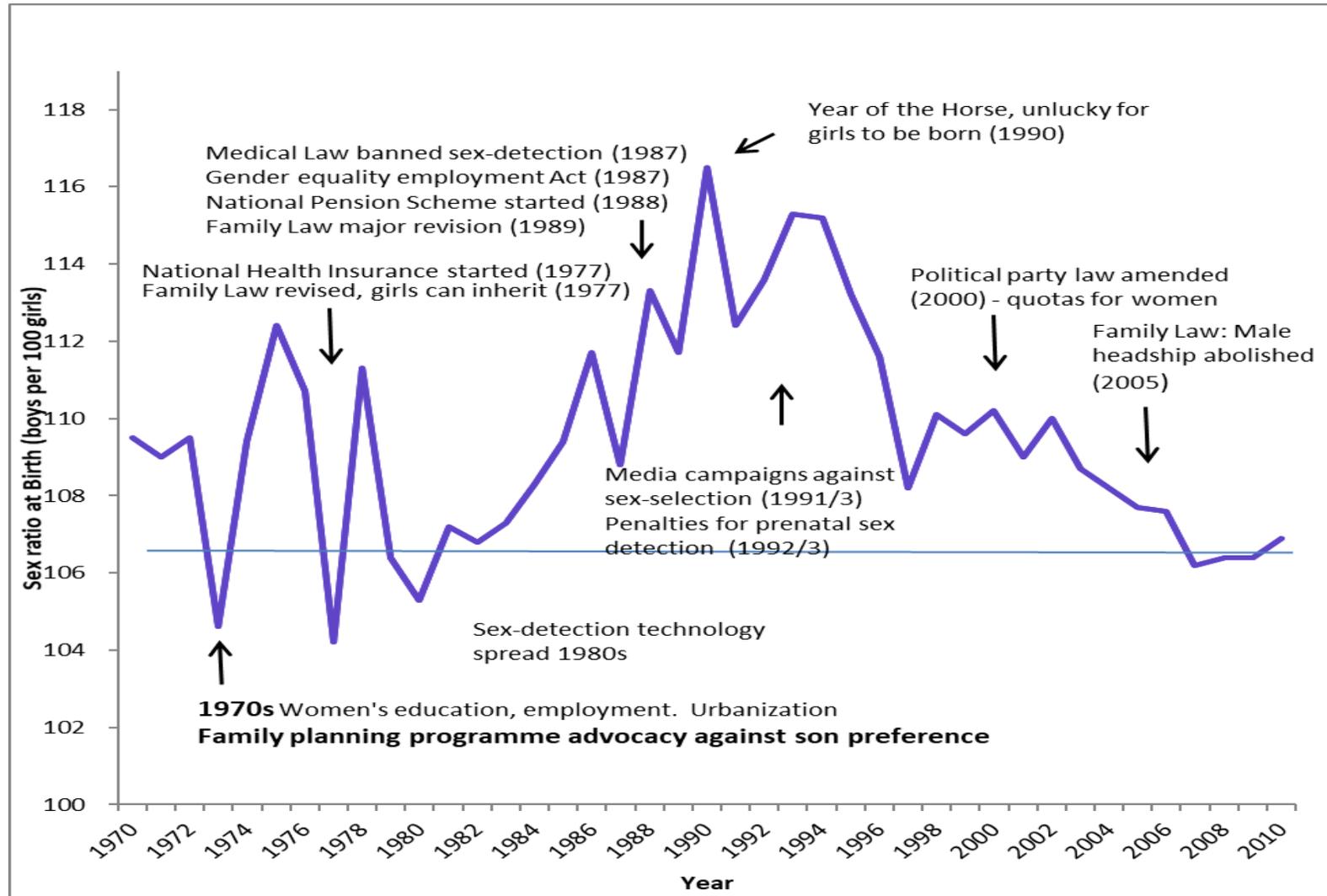
# S Korea: Wide range of policies that could reduce sex-selection

- *Economic policies*: Less financial dependence on sons
  - (1960s onwards): Industrialization, mass education
  - (1977 onwards): National programs reduced risk (health insurance, pensions)
- *Mass Media campaigns*: Encourage people to value daughters
  - (1970s - 1980s): Family planning messaging
  - (1990s): Messaging against sex-selection
- *Legislation* for gender equity
  - (1958-2005): Family Law: inheritance; divorce; family name; men's legal authority
  - (1987): Employment gender equality
  - (2000): Political representation quotas for women
- *Banning sex-detection* (1987)

Source: Das Gupta (2019)

# Sex Ratio at Birth and some Gender-related Policies, S.Korea 1970-2010

*(zigzags due to zodiac auspiciousness for girl's birth year)*



**Source:** Das Gupta (2019), based on KOSIS (2019), Shin (2006, 2014), ILO (1989), Kim (2004, 2013), Chun (2019), Chung & Das Gupta (2007), Na & Kwon (2015)

딸·아들 구별말고  
둘만 낳아 잘 기르자.



## Saturation mass media campaigns against son preference, S Korea (posters, television spots, etc.)

1. Family planning program advocacy 1970s-1980s:  
to discourage having more children till bear a son  
***Daughter or son, stop at two and bring them up well***  
(Father shown happy to have two daughters, no son)

2. Advocacy against sex-selection, 1990s

# Decline in son preference snowballed through S Korea

Odds of stating “must have a son” (*pooled sample of 1991 and 2003 surveys*):

- Declined with education, urban residence, etc
- Largest decline with passage of time (*survey year 2003 vs 1991*):
  - i.e. changes in norms snowballed across the country
  - Decomposition: 73% of decline attributable to changes in social norms, 27% to changes in education and urban residence

*Source:* Chung & Das Gupta (2007), analysis of Korean Fertility and Family Health Surveys (national surveys)

# Factors associated with shift to daughter preference

Analysis of national survey (KGSS 2012), which asked:

*If you have one child, which would you like to have - son, daughter, or no preference?*

Odds of preferring daughters higher if:

- More exposed to societal transformations (Urban; Educated; Younger)
- Less traditional values
  - Views on gender roles
  - Religion (Atheist / Protestant vs traditional religions)

Source: Chun & Das Gupta (2021)

# Studies indicate change in value of sons vs daughters, S Korea

Shift in intergenerational support from parent-son to parent-daughter:

- *Emotional support to parents* stronger from daughters (Choi & Choi 2012; Kim et al 2015)
- Women provide childcare more for their daughters (Lee and Bauer 2010)

Also, high expectations of intergenerational support

- S Korea (& Japan) much higher co-residence than rest of OECD (UN 2017)

*Not just erosion of son preference, but shift to daughter preference*

# People's needs for old age support have changed in S Korea

- Financial support: less important now
  - Earlier, sons inherited the land, supported parents
  - Now own savings, national health insurance, pension programs
- Emotional and physical support: more important now
  - Longevity increasing
  - Daughters perceived as better care-givers, than sons and daughters-in-law

What people now want from their children is

***“Not a bowl of rice, but tender loving care”*** (Sung 2012)

Source: Chun & Das Gupta (2021)

# Conclusions

1. Sex-selection driven by cultures that force parents to depend on sons
  - In these cultures, sex-selection rises with risk levels, technological ease
2. What can change such cultures?
  - Broad social changes:
    - Urbanization & industrialization reduce power of lineages
    - Exposure to new norms through education, mass media, community
  - Specific policies for gender equality (esp laws, mass media)
  - Risk reduction (e.g. savings instruments, health insurance, pensions)
3. Illustrated by S Korea's shift from strong son preference to daughter preference