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

Monica Das Gupta
Dept of Sociology & Maryland Population Research Center, University of Maryland, College Park, USA

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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)*

*Literature summarized in:* Das Gupta (2010)
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)

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)

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 (and Japan) much higher co-residence than rest of OECD (UN 2017)

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

Source: Chun & Das Gupta (2021)
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