GENDERCIDE UNDONE:
EVALUATING THE CAUSES OF SOUTH KOREA’S RETURN TO NORMAL SEX RATIOS

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“A woman must follow three men in her lifetime: her father, her husband, and finally her eldest son.” ~ Confucian principle of samjong-jido¹

“‘There are three unfilial acts: the greatest of these is the failure to produce sons.”’ ~ Confucius²

“[To] choose the sexes of our children . . . is one of the most stupendously sexist acts in which it is possible to engage. It is the original sexist sin . . . [Both pre- and post-conception technologies] make the most basic judgment about the worth of a human being rest first and foremost on its sex.” ~ Tabitha Powledge³

The modern world is facing a demographic and human rights crisis of astronomical proportions: one hundred sixty-million girls are missing from the world today. Throughout much of the world, and especially Eastern Europe and Asia, a decided preference for male babies is held by much of the population. Women and men in many cultures want to have sons—and are using modern technologies, such as sex-selective abortion, to unsure that they do so. In China, over 120 boys are born for every 100 girls, and in India 108 boys are born for every 100 girls. The slaughter of millions of female fetuses has resulted in a host of problems, including increased human trafficking and abysmally high suicide rates among women.

But in the midst of this dismal picture for baby girls throughout the world, one bright light stands out: South Korea. In 1990, South Korea was experiencing a gender imbalance almost as high as China’s today and the highest in the world at the time. Yet as of 2007, South Korea had brought its male-female ratio at birth down to a natural level. But how did South


² As quoted at www.eubios.info/EJAIB72010.pdf.

Korea manage this unheard-of feat in such a short period of time? And what implications and hope does South Korea’s experience hold for other nations—such as China and India—that are facing similar gender imbalances? This paper will examine the answers that various authors have given to these questions, ultimately concluding that demographic and reproductive law enforcement theories stand up better than do theories centering on the status of women in Korea. While a cursory look at the various theories might lead one to believe that factors that have elevated the status of women in Korea have done the most to decrease gendercide, this paper ultimately finds that demographic and reproductive law enforcement have played the most important role in ending gendercide in Korea.

Part I of this paper will lay the background for the remainder of the paper; it will flesh out terms and concepts utilized to describe woman-killing, explain normal sex ratios and modern sex ratios throughout the world, and briefly outline the development of modern sex selection technologies. Part II will give a brief history of sex selection and changing sex ratios in South Korea. Part III will outline six primary theories on what elements played the most important part in ending Korea’s gender imbalance. Part IV will form the conclusion of this paper and will briefly discuss the relevance of Korea’s experience to the experiences of other nations facing similar gender imbalances. Ultimately, Korea’s history of gendercide is a tragic and muddled one—yet, its experience is ringed about with hope.

**Part I: Background in Terms, Sex Ratios, and Sex-Selection Technologies**

**The Killing of Women: Terms and Concepts**

A plethora of terms and concepts are utilized in the discussion of various actions and crimes that result in gender\(^4\) disparities. When narrowly-defined, femicide means “the  

\(^4\) For the purposes of this paper, the word “gender” is used interchangeably with “sex.” This is consistent with the definition utilized by the International Criminal Court, which holds “that the term ‘gender’ refers to the
misogynist killing of women by men.”⁵ More loosely, femicide can be defined as “the killing of females by males because they are females”;⁶ in other words, all types of killings propagated by men against women for sexist reasons. In contrast, the term gendercide applies to any killings directed against a particular sex, regardless of whether the perpetrators of the killings were male or female. Mary Anne Warren, who originally coined the term, defined gendercide as “those wrongful forms of sexual discrimination which reduce the relative number of females or males, whether through direct killing or in more indirect ways.”⁷ Some authors, however, find gendercide to be a “somewhat misleading and limited term”⁸ since it has been used too broadly by some writers to portray every murder as an inherently gendered act. Notably, the term gendercide can apply to sex-based killing of men or women, while femicide includes only the killing of women.

Both femicide and gendercide may be loosely considered to fall under the broader category of genocide, which the United Nations’ 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide defined as “any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such: (a) Killing members of the group; (b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; (c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its


physical destruction in whole or in part; (d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; (e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.”9 Thus, femicide and gendercide are forms of genocide, because both involve the intent to destroy a large group of individuals based exclusively on their “indelible group membership.”10

Two key terms are commonly-used to frame the means by which gendercide and femicide are carried out against children at a young age. Infanticide, or the killing of infants, is one method. Infanticide has roots that extend far back into history; R.J. Rummel concludes that “the death toll from infanticide must exceed that from mass sacrifice and perhaps even outright mass murder.”11 While on an individual basis infanticide can be carried out against any infant, “there are almost no examples of groups engaging in preferential male infanticide as a universal social practice.”12 Another method of killing is feticide, or the killing of a fetus; in this paper, abortion will be included under the umbrella term of feticide. Both “infanticide and feticide have been used as the means to eliminate unwanted children throughout history; however these practices have been and still are disproportionately applied to females.”13 In general, as access to abortion and other reproductive technologies increases, feticide seems to be replacing infanticide as the preferred means of sex-selecting children.

In this paper, the term gendercide will be utilized, as it rightly encompasses the fact that sex-preferential policies and actions in South Korea were forwarded and instigated by both men


11 Ibid., 66.


13 Ibid., 53.
and women. Additionally, although gendercide can be committed against either men or women, this paper will utilize the term exclusively in the context of gendercide against women, and will be narrowly-utilized to apply only to the killing of women and girls inherently because they are female. While this paper will touch on infanticide, it will primarily focus on the feticide directed against females in South Korea. Ultimately, utilizing these basic definitions, this paper will seek to shed light on why South Korea experienced high levels of gendercide, primarily through feticide—and how South Korea managed to end widespread gendercidal practices.

**Global Sex Ratios: Gender Balanced and Imbalanced**

Across all societies that record births throughout documented history, between 103 and 106 boys are born for every 100 girls, this ratio “appears to be the natural order of things.” This slightly-skewed, natural ratio of male to female births appears to level out later in life due to the fact that mortality rates differ for men and women during different times of their lives. For example,

Males are generally more susceptible to death in the first year of life, with a marked difference in mortality rates during this period, and throughout childhood males continue to have higher mortality rates. In addition to increased vulnerability to genetic disorders, male infants are more susceptible to infectious diseases. . . . As males and females approach old age, males tend to die younger than females. Ultimately, “boys outnumber girls at birth because men outnumber women in early deaths.”

As of 2010, most regions in the world fall within the range of 103 to 106 males to every 100 females at birth. Africa’s ratio is 104:100; Europe’s, 106:100; South America’s, 105:100;


As the population ages, these ratios naturally drop and even reverse themselves due to the fact that men generally have a shorter life expectancy than women. For example, the overall male to female sex ratio of the population in Africa is 100:100; in Europe, 93:100; in South America 97.6:100; and in North America 97.5:100.\(^\text{18}\)

However, Asia falls far outside the normal range with 109 females born for every 100 males. This ratio is even more shocking when one compares this ratio with the ratio that some demographers believe should be prevalent throughout Asia; due to their high fertility levels and youthful age structure, Asian populations should exhibit sex ratios of 101 to 103 males born per every 100 females.\(^\text{19}\) In Asia, the wide gender disparity at birth is largely due to the abysmal birth ratios in India and China. Both India and China, along with various other countries in Asia, have troubling and unnatural sex ratios at birth; China’s ratio is 120:100, and India’s is 108:100.\(^\text{20}\) As China and India account for one-third of the global population, “their lopsided birth totals have already skewed the sex ratio at birth of the entire world, which has risen from 105 to the biologically impossible 107.”\(^\text{21}\) Gendercide against women has ultimately led to millions of missing women in the world—the World Health Organization places the number of missing women in China alone at fifty million, while other demographers put the number as high


\(^\text{19}\) Hudson and den Boer, 59.


\(^\text{21}\) Hvistendahl, 6.
as one hundred million. Overall, there are 160 million missing women in the world due to gendercide.

**Sex-Selection Technologies and Population Control**

South Korea presents a unique exception to the troubling trend of increasingly large sex-selection ratios in Asia; it “was the first country to report exceptionally high sex ratios and has been the first to cut them.” But before the ratio improved in Korea, the male to female birth rate was abysmal. New reproductive technologies and new mindsets helped to make sex-selective abortion prevalent in Korea, particularly during the 1980s. Yet, many of these new mindsets did not originate in Korea; rather, they were conceived and popularized in the West.

In the 1950s and 1960s, the use of different types of contraceptives was on the rise in the West, and technologies such as the ultrasound were being developed that would eventually enable parents to ascertain the sex of their child *in utero*. At the same time, a dangerous idea was coming into vogue—an idea that, when united with these new reproductive technologies, would prove to have dramatic affects on demographics worldwide. This idea was population control, and some of its promoters embraced radical solutions to what they believed was an impending demographic and resource crisis. Paul Elrich’s 1968 bestseller, *The Population Bomb*, advocated Malthusian ideas and claimed that world population would shortly outpace basic resources and production capabilities on a global level; he urged for radical responses to the purported population crisis. Among his solutions, he “helped popularize the idea that

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23 Hvistendahl, 6.

24 “Gendercide: The Worldwide War on Baby Girls: Technology, Declining Fertility, and Ancient Prejudice are Combining to Unbalance Societies.”
ensuring couples sons was an effective means of curbing population growth.”

This idea was quickly exported from the West. Initially, however, the curbing of population growth was not gendercidal, since reproductive technologies were not yet advanced enough to determine the sex of a child before birth. Thus, at this time, sex-preferentiality was exhibited through what became known as the “stopping rule”—the phenomenon that occurred when “couples kept having children until they had a son.”

Once they had a son, they would stop having children. This trend was especially prevalent in Asia, North Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America, and was so prevalent that demographers could often determine whether a couple would have another child by knowing the gender of the couple’s last child.

But technologies that determined the gender of a child in utero—such as amniocentesis and superior ultrasound technology—were soon developed and access to them quickly became widespread. In 1976 the United States government approved the use of amniocentesis for second-trimester pregnancies. Amniocentesis involves the extraction of amniotic fluid and the subsequent analysis of fetal material found within the fluid to determine various attributes of the embryo—including its gender. By 1979, amniocentesis “could identify fetal sex to nearly 100 percent accuracy.”

A few years later, cheap, mass-produced ultrasounds arrived on the global

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25 Hvistendahl, 97.
26 Ibid., 98.
27 Ibid., 97.
28 Ibid., 120, 122.
As the 1970s drew to a close, the scene was set for massive levels of both feticide and female-focused gendercide through sex-selective abortion.²⁹

**Part II: Sex-Selection and Sex-Ratios in South Korea: A Brief History**

The wide sex ratios that occurred in South Korea in the 1980s appeared partially because “the widespread use of sex-selective technology in South Korea preceded that of other Asian countries.”³¹ When the Korean War ended in 1953, South Korea experienced a baby boom that helped to make it “the next major crisis zone for population workers.”³² The groundwork for widespread sex-selective abortion was laid in the early 1960s, as the United States pressured Korea to increase its efforts to stem its population. The International Planned Parenthood Foundation formed the Planned Parenthood Federation of Korea on April 1, 1961, and the Population Council began officially working with the Korean government in 1962.³³

Western proponents of family planning—both employees of the federal government and workers for NGOS—wielded a large amount of influence over the South Korean government under Park Chung-hee, who ruled South Korea from 1961 to 1979. During the 1960s, Korea allocated twenty-five percent of its health budget to family planning, and 1,500 Korean family

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²⁹ Hvistendahl, 122.

³⁰ It is important to note that today sex-selection can occur without feticide (through sex-selective abortion) or infanticide occurring. Reproductive technologies such as in-vitro fertilization and artificial insemination allow parents to determine the sex of their child in the embryonic stage, and even before conception. However, “outside of the United States those technologies are still nascent. Today in the developing world, abortion is most of the story. For now.” (Hvistendahl, xviii).


³² Hvistendahl, 129.

³³ Ibid., 129.
planning fieldworkers placed themselves at the disposal of Western advisers. 34 In order to help Korea create a fleet of mobile population control clinics, the U.S. Agency for International Development donated eleven reconditioned U.S. Army Ambulances, fifty Jeeps, and fifty busses and half-ton trucks. 35

Meanwhile, Korean law and law enforcement were adapting to the new reproductive climate. While sections 269 and 270 of the Criminal Code of the Republic of Korea of 1953 prohibited abortion for any reason, with the family planning programs of the early 1960s “abortion became a common practice despite the legal prohibition, mainly because a large number of physicians were willing to perform abortions and the officials were reluctant to enforce the law.”36 The 1973 Maternal and Child Health Law established exemptions to this prohibition; 37 still, most abortions remained illegal. Yet the non-existent level of enforcement meant that abortion could and would become widespread.

Despite an influx of foreign support for family planning and a changing legal climate, the Korean populace was not initially keen on embracing contraception and abortion. Some women rejected contraception because they wanted to have a son. 38 Additionally, many South Koreans lived in rural areas that were difficult for family planners to reach. Here, the roving population control fleet came into play; small teams traveled the country, performing IUD insertions and sterilizations in the backs of the vehicles. Team members were incentivized to perform as many

34 Hvistendahl, 131.

35 Ibid., 130-132.


37 Ibid.

38 Hvistendahl, 130.
IUD insertions and sterilizations as possible, as they were paid on a per-procedure basis. While most abortions were illegal, the roving clinics did perform them, often pressuring women to abort and then undergo sterilization. Reports indicate that Korean women did not seek abortion at their own volition, and in some cases were even forced to have abortions or undergo sterilizations.

In the end, mindsets about abortion began to shift; in a 1971 survey “81 per cent of the women reported a strong preference for legalizing abortion.” By 1977, “doctors in Seoul were performing 2.75 abortions for every birth—the highest documented rate of abortion in human history.” Ultimately, the fertility goals of the population planners were met; the number of children born per women dropped from 6.33 between 1955 and 1960 to 4.71 between 1965 and 1970, and continued to drop, falling to 2.92 between 1975 and 1980. At the same time, the disparity between males and females born began to grow. Until 1970, the sex ratio at birth in South Korea was between 105 and 107 boys to every 100 girls; after 1970, it began to slowly climb, hitting a ratio of 108.3:100 in 1980.

In the 1980s, efforts to continue to decrease population growth in South Korea intensified. Korea’s new military ruler, Chun Doo-hwan, realized that population control “had

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39 Hvistendahl, 131.

40 Ibid., 131.


42 Hvistendahl, 133.


44 Hudson and den Boer, 55-56.
proven a reliable source of foreign aid” and eagerly continued to pursue funding for population control initiatives. The World Bank gave Korea a loan of $30 million that was earmarked for family planning and later transferred millions more to the country through the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development. Mobile clinics reappeared and a new slogan informed Koreans that “Even Two Is A Lot” as Chun implemented a policy similar to China’s one-child policy; he decreased the recommended number of children to one and denied social benefits to women who violated the policy. Ultimately, “the additional pressure the campaign placed on women to restrict their fertility no doubt played a role in South Korea’s 1980s binge of sex selective abortions.”

The long-term effects of two decades of extreme population control and gendercidal sex-selective abortion began to surface during the 1980s and early 1990s. The number of children born per woman continued to plummet, falling to 2.23 between 1980 and 1985 and to 1.60 between 1985 and 1990. The sex ratio continued rise; in 1990 it hit the abysmal number of 116.9 boys born for every 100 girls born—at that point in time the highest sex ratio in the world. The future of women in Korea looked to be increasingly dim, since “there were nearly

45 Hvistendahl, 133.
46 Ibid., 133.
47 Ibid., 133.
48 Ibid., 134.
50 Hudson and den Boer, 55-56.
51 “Gendercide: The Worldwide War on Baby Girls: Technology, Declining Fertility, and Ancient Prejudice are Combining to Unbalance Societies.”
25% more males born in 1980-84 than females of the appropriate age.”

By the 1980s, the shortage of women available for marriage could already be felt. Additionally, the ability to abort unwanted female fetuses in hope of having a boy enabled women to avoid the phenomenon that occurred with the “stopping rule.” This fact exhibited itself in the increasing male to female ratio with each birth order. In 1992, the male to female ratio for the birth of a first child was 117.9:100, a clear indication that parents were using prenatal technologies to ascertain the sex of their child—and in many cases to abort their girls. But this ratio rose sharply with birth order; in 1992 the sex ratio at birth for fourth children was 228.8:100. Thus, instead of waiting until they had a son to stop having children (as Korean parents had previously done), parents seem to have determined how many children they wanted and then began practicing abortion if they had not had a boy and were pregnant with their last desired child.

Yet from the mid-1990s to the present, dramatic changes occurred in South Korea. While the fertility rate remained very low (1.22 children were born per woman between 2000 and 2005, and 1.29 children were born per woman between 2005 and 2010), the sex ratio completely reversed itself. By 2000, the sex ratio at birth had dropped to 109.6:100. In 2007, the Republic of Korea announced that it had reached normal sex ratios at birth, and the United States Central

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53 Ibid.

54 Hudson and den Boer, 56.

55 Ibid., 56.


57 Hudson and den Boer, 56.
Intelligence Agency puts the current male to female ratio at birth at 1.069:100.\textsuperscript{58} South Korea is the only country in modern history to have a highly-abnormal birth ratio and then to reduce that number to fall within normal ratios.\textsuperscript{59} Perhaps even more significant is that South Korea experienced this transformation in less than twenty years. Given the surprising but encouraging anomaly that Korea represents, the means by which it righted its gendercidal problems must be examined, in order to determine what factors should be present in other nations with high sex ratios that hope to fix their gendercidal problems.

**Part III: Theories on the Reversal of Korea’s Gender Imbalance**

Several theories are prominent when one examines literature that has attempted to answer the question of why South Korea was able to right its gender imbalance in less than twenty years. These theories often are referred to by a variety of names and have a variety of nuances; thus, this paper has grouped such theories under six primary headings. Additionally, this paper has developed some of these theories to a greater extent than previous literature has, simultaneously fleshing out more coherent objections to each of the theories. The primary theories and objections to them that will be discussed are as follows: the changes in reproductive law theory, the industrialization theory, the education theory, the legal reform theory, the family structure theory, and the demographic shift theory.

A few comments are in order before this paper delves into those theories. First, the vast majority of authors that adhere primarily to one of these theories also accept elements of other theories. Different cultural forces that drive these different elements of Korean society are undoubtedly connected; for example, both increased education of women and industrialization


\textsuperscript{59} Hvistendahl, 133.
can help to break down traditional family structures. The lines where one of these influences disappears and another begins are extraordinarily vague.

Second, with the exception of the reproductive law theory and the demographics theory, all these theories are predicated on the basic concept that raising the status of women leads to a decreased preference for sons. Thus, the majority of theories assume that a specific variable or movement led to women being more highly-valued or gaining greater autonomy. Then, this greater autonomy and value led both men and women to more highly-value female babies; women especially would no longer see their value as being determined by the bearing of a son, and would see more opportunities for their female daughters. Conversely, theorists would believe that if the value of women did not improve due to a specific factor, a move away from sex-preference would not have occurred, and another factor must have been responsible for Korea’s shift in preferences. In contrast, both the reproductive law theory and the demographics theory claim that the move away from sex-selective abortion occurred for utilitarian reasons unrelated to the changing status of women. Ultimately, then, the debate over whether or not the status of women in Korea has improved over the past twenty years is inherently tied up with the debate over how Korea has ended its gendercidal trends.

**Changes in Reproductive Law Theory**

One theory on the decrease of female-targeted feticide in South Korea rests primarily on the efforts of South Korea to halt sex-selective abortion through stepped-up law enforcement and its efforts to change its troubling demographic trends through public awareness campaigns. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, legal reform in the area of abortion law took place in South Korea. In 1987, the new democratic government in South Korea outlawed the use of ultrasounds
and amniocentesis to determine the gender of a child. Additionally, “in 1990, the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs stiffened penalties for doctors caught in aiding women in sex selection”\textsuperscript{61} A series of well-publicized busts and sting operations followed; women were sent undercover to determine whether doctors were complying with the rules prohibiting prenatal sex determination technologies. Writing in the at the turn of the century, Valerie Hudson and Andrea den Boer believed that these laws and crackdowns were having some positive affects; they conceded that “tougher government enforcement of anti-sex-selection laws may now be influencing sex-selection behavior in South Korea”\textsuperscript{62}

Simultaneously, as fertility rates dropped below replacement levels, the Korean government began to move away from its radical family planning policies; specifically, it eliminated the incentive schemes encouraging parents to have only one child, supporting instead a two-child policy.\textsuperscript{63} On a broader level, Korea’s population programs “shifted emphasis from a policy of modifying fertility levels to maintaining the level and improving the quality of family planning programmes, improving maternal and child health care through prevention of unwanted pregnancies and induced abortions, and sex education for adolescents.”\textsuperscript{64} Additionally, the Korean government instigated a public awareness campaign, focusing on the demographic problems that would occur if the male to female disparity continued. In the mid-1990s this plan

\textsuperscript{60} Hvistendahl, 236.
\textsuperscript{61} Ibid., 236.
\textsuperscript{62} Hudson and den Boer, 56.
\textsuperscript{64} Ibid.
was commenced; it warned of the dangers of widespread sex distortions and included an “influential media campaign focusing on the anticipated shortage of brides.”

While critics of the Korean government’s policies to end sex-selective abortion do not generally dispute its efficacy at least in part, they do criticize the Korean government’s motives. It appears that the Korean government did not instigate these reforms out of some noble concern for women’s rights or human life; rather, the Korean government seemed to be driven primarily by demographic concerns. Mara Hvistendahl explains:

But it wasn’t that the Korean government had suddenly become concerned about the status of women. Instead demographic change moved it to action. . . . In 1995 demographers projected that half of boys ages ten through fourteen would not be able to find female partners their age range when they reached adulthood. The public information campaign that accompanied the 1990s crackdowns centered not on the status of women and girls but on the future dearth of brides.

However, the highly-publicized legal reforms and crackdowns had at least some impact on the gendercidal trends in South Korea.

**Industrialization Theory**

A dominant theory on why South Korea has experienced a decrease in gendercide focuses on the rapid industrialization that took place in South Korea during the 1980s and 1990s. Proponents of this theory ultimately argue that industrialization and increased participation of women in the workforce helped to eradicate the preference for sons. Kyung Ae Park calls this theory the “Western liberal modernization perspective” and explains that it “predicts that

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65 Sharma.

66 Hvistendahl, 236-237.
industrialization will remove traditional constraints on women, changing the traditional sexual division of labor and thereby fostering women’s liberation.”

Writing in 1996, Seung-kyung Kim looked to Korea’s 1987 nationwide labor uprising, which involved the ideological union of both married and unmarried women who worked in factories in South Korea. She predicted that that “as industrialization begins to erode South Korea’s rigid gender roles” that an increased number of married and unmarried women in the workforce will “help to break down the segmentation of the labor force that holds down women’s wages.” Indeed, the number of women in the workforce increased fourteen times between 1963 and 1990. However, despite the massive influx of women into the workforce, the average women’s wage was always less than half the wage for male workers up until 1987, after which time the wage differential began to decrease slowly. Scott Fuess, Jr., and Bun Song Lee argue that while labor conditions are not perfect for Korean women, that overall “women appear to have benefited from South Korea’s economic development; women’s increased share of employment in paid SOCS [social overhead capital and services] work as well as their decreased share in unpaid work may compensate for the decline in their share of paid manufacturing.”

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69 Kyung Ae Park, 165.

70 Ibid., 166.

Similarly, industrialization in Korea drove individuals to follow work—into the cities; it “resulted in mass migration of young people from rural areas to cities.”72 A variety of authors argue that this migration helped raise the status of women by breaking down traditional, patriarchal family structures. In an extensive study, Woojin Chung and Monica Das Gupta conclude that

preindustrial social organization disintegrated in the face of industrialization and urbanization. . . . The accompanying urbanization resulted in people no longer being surrounded by patrilinieal kin in their place of residence and work. This also opened up a possibility for relationships between parents and their children to be driven by affect rather than by rigid rules of gender and birth order. All these changes helped undercut the bases for son preference.73

Thus, the industrialization theory encompasses two main components: the idea that industrialization opens up new jobs for women, and the concept that industrialization breaks down traditional family structures and roles due to physical movement away from the countryside and into cities. Chung and Das Gupta believe that ultimately industrialization led to a broad change in societal expectations and son preference. Their data “suggests that the impact of development worked largely through triggering normative change within the society as a whole, rather than just through changes in individuals as their socioeconomic circumstances improved”74

Yet, the industrialization theory is by no means watertight, and has a plethora of critics. The status of women workers continues to be poor in South Korea today; as of 2008 the gender gap in median earning of full-time employees in South Korea was just under a forty percent


74 Ibid., 777.
higher for men than for women.\textsuperscript{75} While this number is a slight improvement from the over fifty-percent wage disparity in the late 1980s, it remains the highest among any members of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, and over twenty percentage points higher than the OECD-26 average.\textsuperscript{76} This wage differential denotes that women are paid less even for the same levels of work, but, perhaps more fundamentally, denotes the fact that women continue to be primarily employed in low-level, low-paying jobs, while their male counterparts attain higher-level, higher-paying jobs. Much of Korea’s economy continues to be “predicated on low wage, unskilled, young female labor,”\textsuperscript{77} especially in the export-driven manufacturing sector. Kyung Ae Park goes so far as to argue that “female workers liberated by modern values sought escape from patriarchal oppression by achieving economic independence. Instead, they are subject to new forms of exploitation in multinational employment.”\textsuperscript{78} She views this as a problem of capitalism, claiming that capitalist patriarchy may be what underlies the marginal status of South Korean women economically, socially, and politically.”\textsuperscript{79}

**Education Theory**

Some authors also argue that increasing educational attainment for women played an important part in elevating the status of women. Increased educational attainment for women would, in theory, open up new, better-paying jobs for women. Additionally, it would help


\textsuperscript{76} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{77} Kyung Ae Park, 186.

\textsuperscript{78} Ibid., 186.

\textsuperscript{79} Ibid., 187.
women to attain new levels of economic independence and enable them to support their families in a way that sons were traditionally expected to do, thus decreasing the economic advantages that some parents saw in having sons.

Chung and Das Gupta argue that increasing education among Korean women played a parallel role to increased industrialization, and that the increase in women’s education contributed substantially to the decline in preference for sons.\(^{80}\) South Korean girls undoubtedly receive education on parity with boys at the lower educational levels; in Korea, elementary education is compulsory for boys and girls, and as of 1990 over 95% of Korean students attended elementary school.\(^{81}\) In 1975, 77% of Korean women had an elementary school education or less; by 2000 this number had dropped to 30%. At the same time, the percentage of Korean women who had completed high school without college rose from 8% to 37%. Additionally, the percentage of women who had completed college rose from 2% to 18% during the same period.\(^{82}\) Graduation rates from each level of education substantially increased as gendercide decreased; in 1966, only 33 percent of girls who graduated from elementary school continued on to middle school, and “the comparable figures for high school and university were 20 percent and 4 percent, respectively, during the same period. However, by 1998, the comparable ratios reached 99.5 percent and 61.6 percent for high school and university.”\(^{83}\) Chung and Das Gupta ultimately find a relationship between higher levels of education for women and lower levels of son preference; they conclude that “higher levels of women’s education are associated with

\(^{80}\) Chung and Das Gupta, 776.

\(^{81}\) Tae Lyon Kim, 189.

\(^{82}\) Chung and Das Gupta, 758.

lower son preference, and the odds of strong son preference with increasing education decline more sharply in the 2003 survey than in 1991.”

Yet education cannot be the sole cause of the rising status of women in Korea, as educational parity has not been attained. In the 1990s, Korean schools continued to “contribute to preexisting definitions of gender roles in two specific areas: (1) different curricula are maintained for male students and for female students and (2) teachers manifest different expectations for their students based on sex.” In Korea, girls must take mandatory classes in home economics and vocational training; such classes include subjects as woman as consumer and as child bearer. In contrast, boys must take courses in technology. Thus, the type of education that Korean students receive—even at the earliest age—reinforces the traditional division of labor along traditional gender lines. Additionally, the number of women in relation to men involved in the educational system continued to drop off as the level of education attained become higher; female college students constituted less than one-third of the entire college population at this time. As of 2000, only 15% of Korean men had no more than an elementary-level education, while twice as many of Korean women had only an elementary-level education. Additionally, 31% of Korean men had obtained a college degree, while only 18% of women had done so. Thus, in the realm of educational parity, South Korean women still lag behind South Korean men.

**Legal Reform Theory**

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84 Chung and Das Gupta, 771.
85 Tae Lyoon Kim, 191.
86 Ibid., 191.
87 Ibid., 191.
88 Chung and Das Gupta, 758.
Other authors emphasize the important role that legal reforms played in elevating the status of women, thereby decreasing gendercidual attitudes. The *Economist* argues that South Korea achieved gender parity “because the culture changed. Female education, anti-discrimination suits and equal-rights rulings made son preference seem old-fashioned and unnecessary. The forces of modernity first exacerbated prejudice—then overwhelmed it.”89 Such arguments emphasize the role of civil-rights laws and rulings that benefitted the status of women in Korea.

During the 1990s, dozens of legal reforms were passed in South Korea that helped ensure legal and labor-based rights for women; such legal reforms included the Equal Employment Act and the Special Act on Sexual Violence. These reforms were aimed at elevating the fiscal and societal standing of women.90 The Gender Equality Employment Act and the Gender Discrimination Prevention and Relief Act provided the crucial groundwork to implement affirmative action, which succeed in boosting the number of women hired in civil and foreign service jobs.91 In 1999, the Presidential Commission on Women’s Affairs was created; renamed the Ministry of Gender Equality in 2001,92 its stated roles include the “Planning and Coordination of Women’s Policy, and Enhancement of Women's Position including the

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Promotion of Women's Rights.”

These major legal changes occurred during the main time period when Korea was reversing its gendercidual trends.

Other reforms came on the tail end of the reversal of the disproportionate sex ratios—and many reforms were led by women themselves. In 1987, the influential Korean Women’s Associations United (KWAU) was established; it connected twenty-one women’s groups under its umbrella. In the mid 1990s it helped to elect more women to local offices, and in the early 2000s it helped push through two landmark legal reforms: the 2004 Act to Prevent Prostitution and the 2005 abolition of the Family-Head System. Additionally, the increasing number of women pursuing legal careers should improve the status of women through increased protection of women under the law; the percentage of women passing the bar exam “has risen dramatically in recent years, and now approaches 25 percent.”

Laws and legal actions protecting women from sexual harassment have also arguably helped raise the status of women in South Korea. The problem of sexual harassment was largely ignored until the 1993 “Assistant Woo Incident,” which involved a male professor and a female assistant. This incident is credited with bringing widespread public attention to the issue of sexual harassment. Legislation quickly followed; Korea passed the Framework Development Act for Women’s Development of 1995 and the Act for Sexual Discrimination and Remedies of

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94 Seung-kyung Kim and Kyounghee Kim, 198.

95 Ibid., 199.


97 Dai-Kwon, 85.
1999. Under the Development Act, “the state, local governments and employers are required
to take necessary measures to foster a working environment for equal performance, including the
prevention of sexual harassment.” Choi Dai-Kwon argues that Korea’s embracing of codified
laws regulating the sometimes grey area of sexual harassment indicates a move away from the
Confucian system, which emphasizes a “common sense of propriety” rather than formal rules,
especially in interpersonal relations.

Yet legal reforms cannot fully explain the reduction of gendercide in South Korea
between 1990 and 2007. Many of the legal reforms came on the tail end of the righting of the
gender imbalance in Korea, so they are more likely to be correlative as opposed to causative.
Similarly, it is exceptionally difficult to draw a clear link between these legal reforms, an actual
improvement in the status of women, and ultimately a decreased preference for sons.
Additionally, the extent to which anti-discrimination legislation is enforced is not always clear.
For example, in South Korea’s anti-prostitution legislation “the South Korean government
vowed to eliminate prostitution as well as protect victims of exploitation and violence in the sex
industry. However, the legislation fails to achieve these goals due to inherent inadequacies in the
language and structure of the laws. . . . the legislation retains a discriminatory attitude towards
prostituting women and still criminalizes them unless they can prove their victim status.”

98 Dai-Kwon, 88.
99 Ibid., 88.
100 Ibid., 92.
Thus, while legal reforms have undoubtedly helped the status of women in Korea somewhat, the link between these reforms and a decrease in sex-selective abortion is highly-attenuated at best.

**Family Structure Theory**

Some theorists posit that changes in family structures have helped to bring down mindsets that promote gendercide—that the highly-patriarchal family structure adhered to within the Confucian system has eroded, giving women new freedom and a new desire for baby girls. Evaluation of the family structure theory is closely tied to an evaluation of the role of religion in determining the roles of different members of the family. Ultimately, this theory is inherently tangled up with the previously-discussed factors that purportedly raised the status of women, since factors such as industrialization and education for women are generally seen as havin the capacity to break down traditional family structures.

Most authors recognize the fact that traditional family structures rely heavily on traditional religious and cultural mindsets, especially Confucianism. While the 1995 census put the number of Koreans practicing Christianity at 26.3%, the number practicing Buddhism at 23.2%, the number practicing other or unknown religions at 1.3%, and the number practicing no religion at 49.3%, Confucianism has formed the basis of the Korean family for thousands of years. Confucianism views the family unit as the basic unit of society; it is highly-patriarchal and hierarchal. Ultimately, Confucianism is “a family-oriented religion, philosophy, and social ideology governing behavior from birth to death.”

For thousands of years, Confucianism continued to place restrictions on women’s behavior through “physical and psychological segregation of women from men, mandatory subservience of women, confinement of women to

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102 United States Central Intelligence Agency.

their homes, and rejection of women from social activities.”¹⁰⁴ Women were to submit to three individuals: their fathers, their husbands, and their sons.¹⁰⁵ Thus, women were continually reminded of their inferior status to men—a condition that left both men and women with a notable son preference, which played itself out in the form of infanticide, and later sex-selective abortion. Undoubtedly, despite the fact that most Koreans have moved away from belief in Confucianism as a religious system, Confucian ethics and family mores continue to play an important role in Korean society, because “the adoption of monotheism and of the doctrine-centered definition of religion has not seriously threatened the hegemony of the this-worldly Confucian ethics of subordination of the pursuit of individual benefit to the needs of the community.”¹⁰⁶

Yet, the tenants of Confucianism have arguably shifted in tandem with modernization. Kwang Kyu Lee claims that the Korean family structure has shifted from a horizontal structure to a vertical structure, and that it has change from “a male-dominated and father-oriented structure” to a “matrifocal and child-oriented one that is attempting to preserve the integrity and continuity of the family in a competitive, changing social world.”¹⁰⁷ Choi Dai-Kwan explains that “some may wish Korea were still Confucian, but Korean society has considerably changed in its social structure and culture . . . Confucian culture has either disappeared or been rendered irrelevant to contemporary social life.”¹⁰⁸ These changes in Korean family structure, which

¹⁰⁴ Tae Lyon Kim, 188.
¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 188.
¹⁰⁷ Kwang Kyu Lee, 262.
¹⁰⁸ Choi Dai-Kwon, 92.
occurred in tandem with the reduction in gendercide in South Korea, would appear to have raised the status of women by improving their status in the most basic social group in Korea—the family.

Yet Christianity has also played an important role in the lives of women in Korea. For an extended period of time, women have constituted the “overwhelming majority of evangelical church membership.” Based on a study from the late 1990s—the time when gender ratios at birth were dropping—Kelly Chong found that “one of the first attractions and roles of evangelical faith for Korean women is as a means of coping with and seeking relief from domestic problems, especially by way of healing and empowerment provided through spirituality and institutional participation.” Writing in the mid-1980s, Donald Clark noted that women in Korea found that the Christian church offered them “historic new opportunities for growth and self-expression, which no Korean religion had ever offered before.” In churches, women could teach Sunday School and be elected to middle-level governing bodies, such as boards of deacons; these opportunities opened up new areas of leadership for Korean women—and possibly a new confidence in the value of female daughters.

Yet many writers argue that the system of Confucian ethics and family structure continue to trap women in a system in which they are undervalued and downtrodden, and that within the family systems women have been forced to take on more labor—adding work outside the home.

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110 Ibid., 366-367.

111 Donald N. Clark, Christianity in Modern Korea (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1986), 28.

112 Ibid., 28.
to their duties within the home. Kyung Ae Park explained that as of 1994 “the neo-Confucian tradition of male superiority is still very much alive in people’s belief systems.”

Other writers believe that Korea is still in the midst of transition, and that confusion is the primary attitude surrounding the role of women within the family. Tae Lyon Kim explained in 1993 that “Korean women are confused about their own understanding of gender roles. They anguish between what they learned through education and what, in reality, is imposed by society.” If women feel oppressed within their familial systems, history indicates that they are more likely to continue to show a son preference; thus, these views call into question the arguments that posit that the reform of Korean family structures has led to decreased levels of gendercide.

Evangelicalism may also have done more to hurt the status of women than to help them; concluding her study, Chong accuses evangelicalism in Korea of entrenching women into a system of religious patriarchy; women tend to generally be relegated to menial positions within the church and are often restricted from positions of leadership and teaching. She argues that “evangelical faith serves as an effective medium for women’s re-domestication” and that the religious structure within Korea “undercuts the emancipation possibilities inherent in their faiths” and ultimately “serves as a vehicle for maintaining existing social arrangements.”

Perhaps Hee An Choi best sums up the views of those who believe that the status of women within the family in Korea has not changed for the better:

In the midst of Korea’s many transitions—cultural, historical, social—the position of women is believed to have changed for the better. . . . The fact is that the systems of patriarchy and hierarchy have not truly changed. Instead, these systems have become stronger and operate in more hidden and ingenious ways to ensure that the strong

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113 Kyung Ae Park, 184.
114 Chong, 361.
115 Ibid., 367.
patriarchal value of family is still passed down from generation to generation in an unbroken chain. While women’s positions remain secondary, their social roles have become more complicated.\textsuperscript{116}

If women still operate within a highly-patriarchal system, the idea that they have suddenly gained an increased desire for daughters is quickly called into question.

**Demographic Shift Theory**

Others contend that South Korea has primarily halted gendercide due to its extremely low fertility rate, and that legal and social reforms played a minimal to nonexistent role. Mara Hvistendahl claims that “the fact that Korea’s sex ratio at birth is balanced obscures the important detail that Koreans have almost no children, male or female.”\textsuperscript{117} While she acknowledges the fact that crackdowns did occur on those providing sex-selective abortions, she argues that these reforms did not bring about the demographic shift; rather, “after years of penalties for out-of-quota births, incentivized sterilizations, and forced abortions, Korean women had finally given in and stopped having children.”\textsuperscript{118} Doo-Sub Kim, a demographer at Hanyang University in Seoul and head of the Population Association of Korea, seems to agree “Fertility decline has been too rapid . . . So couples’ number preference has become a little bit stronger than their sex preference.”\textsuperscript{119} Ultimately, Hvistendahl concludes that “the Korean example is not a model for solving the world’s gender imbalance”\textsuperscript{120}


\textsuperscript{117} Hvistendahl, 236.

\textsuperscript{118} Ibid., 237.

\textsuperscript{119} Ibid., 237.

\textsuperscript{120} Ibid., 238.
On a correlative level, the data clearly indicates that fertility continued to drop as the male-female birth ratio normalized; both the fertility rate and the population growth rate hit all-time lows between 2000 and 2005, the height the turn of the tide away from gendercide (1.22 children were born per woman between 2000 and 2005, and the population growth rate for the same time period was 0.45%\textsuperscript{122}). These low fertility trends continued as Korea’s sex ratio reached normal levels and a negligible increase in fertility occurred over the next five years; 1.29 children were born per woman between 2005 and 2010, and the population growth rate for the same time period was 0.48\%.\textsuperscript{124} Thus, it seems unlikely that the correlation between Korea’s plummeting fertility rates and its decreasing sex ratios at birth is merely coincidental.

**Part IV: Conclusion**

Undoubtedly, none of the previously-discussed theories completely accounts for the decrease in gendercide within South Korea. Yet, which components played the most substantial role? Korean women today are most certainly better-educated than they were thirty years ago, and more of them have joined the workforce. But neither increased education for women nor more women in the workforce appears to have substantially increased the status of women within Korean society over the past twenty years. Similarly, the results of industrialization were mixed, since industrialization in some contexts pushed women into low-paying, low-level jobs that did little to increase their status. Additionally, the impact that legal reforms had on ending

\textsuperscript{121} Population Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat, s.v. “Total Fertility” in *World Population Prospects: The 2010 Revision*.

\textsuperscript{122} Population Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat, s.v. “Population Growth Rate” in *World Population Prospects: The 2010 Revision*.


\textsuperscript{124} Population Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat, s.v. “Population Growth Rate” in *World Population Prospects: The 2010 Revision*.
gendercide was minimal, since many of the legal reforms did not occur until after the trends had already been reversed. While each of these factors undoubtedly played a small part in elevating the status of women, it seems unlikely, even given the combination of all of these factors, that the status of women was sufficiently raised in Korea to result in a complete reversal in the area of son preference. In truth, conditions for women in Korea in relation to men remain abysmal, especially for a first-world country—with men earning forty percent more than women and graduating from college at almost twice the rate that women do.

Ultimately, the strongest evidence appears to support the idea that legal crackdowns in the area of reproductive law in tandem with radically decreasing levels of fertility among Korean women have played the greatest role in ending Korea’s gender imbalance problem. Today, few enough women even have children in Korea that many seem happy to merely have a child—even a girl. Additionally, sex-selection “was always something Korean couples turned to for second or third births”\(^\text{125}\); in a nation where women have, on average, one child, sex selection is less likely to occur since “the basic idea—to keep a female fetus if one comes on the first try”\(^\text{126}\)—endured as the birth rate plummeted. At the same time, access to technologies that enable women to sex select has been restricted, forcing women to keep their baby girls. But these trends in no way indicate an underlying improvement in the status of women; sociologist Whasoon Byun of the Korea Women’s Development Institute recently explained that even as Korean society becomes better and better off, “our gender empowerment measurement remains one of the lowest of any developed country.”\(^\text{127}\)

\(^{125}\) Hvistendahl, 237.

\(^{126}\) Ibid., 237.

\(^{127}\) Ibid., 235.
sex selective technologies, being forced to choose—to have their girls, many Korean mothers
would still prefer to have girls. One woman interviewed by Mara Hvistendahl sums up the
conflicted feelings of many Korean women: “I prefer boys because I have experienced sexual
discrimination myself.” Thus, gendercide in Korea ended because of changes in legal
enforcement and fertility patterns, not because of a new appreciation for women.

Korea’s experience in ending gendercide bodes both well and poorly for other countries
currently facing gender imbalances. On the bright side, public awareness campaigns—such as
those currently being pursued in both China and India—in tandem with enforcement of laws
prohibiting sex selective abortion may produce some results. If China and India took serious
measures to enforce their already-existent laws against sex selective abortion, they might begin
to see some hopeful trends in their sex ratios.

However, much of Korea’s experience cannot—and in some cases, should not—be
replicated. For example, under the one-child policy, the female fertility rate in China dropped
dramatically; however, while in Korea the sex ratio narrowed as fertility dropped, in China the
sex ratio widened as fertility dropped. Perhaps this indicates a more deeply-entrenched
preference for sons in China than in Korea; regardless of its cause, this correlation shows that the
reduction in fertility method that worked in Korea will not necessarily create the same results in
other countries. In fact, trends in China indicate that a loosening of the one-child policy—and
thus an increase in fertility—would be more likely to help China’s abysmal male-female birth
ratio. Likewise, the idea of pursuing a widespread decrease in fertility in order to balance the
male-female ratio is untenable on a variety of levels, and raises a variety of ethical questions that
should have been raised during Korea’s love affair with population control.

128 Hvistendahl, 234.
Yet just because elements such as industrialization, education, and changing family structures in Korea have failed to bring about equality for women and end gendercide does not mean that these factors will fail to do so in other nations. And raising the status of women throughout the world is of course a worthy goal in and of itself. But, realistically speaking, changing deep-rooted mindsets about the nature of women and their proper roles within the home, the workplace, and society as a whole will always be a difficult and lengthy task. And, despite the failure of trends such as increased industrialization, legal reform, increased education for women, and changing family structures to improve the status of women in Korea and thereby end gendercide, such trends may need to carry the bulk of the burden in ending gendercide throughout much of the rest of the world.

Thus, other nations can and should pursue legal and social policies that elevate the status of women, in hopes of eroding underlying mindsets that marginalize women and buttress gendercidal tendencies. But, it will take decades for such erosion to produce quantifiable results, and even more time for nations such as China and India to fix their sex ratios—much more time than it took for Korea to right its gender imbalance. Ultimately, Korea’s quick fix to gendercide will not occur in other nations facing the same problems. Sadly, in countries such as China and India, the road to equal opportunity for women—beginning with equal opportunity to live and breathe—will undoubtedly be a long and rocky one.
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