Can once imbalanced SRB become balanced? A case of South Korea

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The distorted sex ratio at birth (SRB) has been one of the major concerns of many demographers over the past three decades. Imbalance in SRB has observed from a number of countries where the first demographic transition took place. It is common, among the most countries with SRB imbalance, that people prefer son to daughter when they give birth to a baby, although the reason of son preference may differ across countries. It is also common that once distorted SRB hardly returns back to normal as we have not heard such a case yet.

Then we should ask a question. Can once imbalanced SRB ever become balanced? Or can people who have strong son preference imbedded in culture, customs, and/or religious belief change their mind?

There have been a number of studies on SRB imbalance, and most of them have paid attention to the emergence of the new case, country specific causes of son preference, and the possible social problems induced by this phenomenon. Since the case of reversed SRB has neither observed nor reported yet, demographers have not been able to come up with policy recommendations that can solve or at least ease the tendency of son preference and distorted SRB.

For last two decades, South Korea has also suffered from the SRB imbalance. During 1990s, South Korea was the most prototypical country of unbalanced SRB. For example, the SRB for all babies was 116.5 in 1990, and that of the third baby reached close to 200. During 2000s, South Korea experienced dramatic drop in total fertility rate (TFR). TFR has changed from 1.65 in 1993 to 1.48 in 2000 and to 1.18 in 2002. Since 2002, Korea's TFR has never been back to beyond 1.30. Surprisingly, as TFR becomes very low, SRB has gradually decreased and reached at a normal level (1.06.2) in 2007.

However, it was not really true to argue that South Korea's SRB reversed to normal at that time. It was because the SRB for the third and the forth babies were 115.7 and 115.3, respectively. That is, a number of Koreans still kept the culture of son preference and they had multiple children until they have a son. For instance, Chung and Das Gupta (2007) noted that South Korea was the first Asian country to experience reversed trend in SRB suggesting industrialization and urbanization as well as vigorous public policy to regulate sex-selection practices during pregnancy being attributable. But Kim (2012) examined SRB of one region in Korea where patrimonial culture was outstandingly prevailing. He found that overall SRB in this region was higher (109.8) than the national average (106.4) in 2009. UNFPA (2012) also

noted that it would not be correct to consider South Korea fully overcame distorted SRB since the SRB of higher birth order from 2000-2009 were still high at 141.7 (birth order 3) and 154.9 (birth order 4).

We agree on these arguments that the reverse in distorted SRB did not really take place in Korea during 2000s. However, authors found astonishing statistics that we are able to counter-argue that Korea now experiences totally reversed and balanced SRB since 2014. According to Statistics Korea, the SRBs at higher birth orders as well as the average have been around 104~106 for 4 continued years. If the normal level of SRB were seen only for a year or two, one may not be possible to argue that Korea's SRB has been reversed to be normal. However, it has been four years now to have a normal level of SRB even at the third birth order. As far as we know, it is the first case ever been reported to academia which is interested in SRB.

Our study will further examine the recent trends of SRB in Korea by separately analyzing regional changes in SRB. Further, we will discuss causes of reverse in SRB from imbalance to balance mainly focusing on the cultural and structural characteristics. In particular, three characteristics will be discussed: (1) Korean's equal treatment of son and daughter when born; (2) Transition of responsibility of elderly care from family to society with the strengthened welfare system; and (3) Changes in the relationship between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law. Findings and discussions of this study should be able to suggest policy implications to the countries that suffer from the distorted SRB.

Table 1. Birth-order Specific Trends of SRB in Korea

| | Birth Order | | | |
	Average	1st	2nd	3rd
1990	116.5	108.5	117.1	189.5
1995	113.2	105.7	111.7	177.2
2000	110.2	106.3	107.4	141.9
2005	107.8	104.8	106.5	128.0
2010	106.9	106.4	105.8	111.1
2013	105.3	105.4	104.5	107.8
2014	105.3	105.6	104.6	106.5
2015	105.3	105.9	104.5	105.4
2016	105.0	104.4	105.2	107.3
2017	106.3	106.5	106.1	106.4

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