

A Boy or a Girl, Doctor?

By Kang Hyun-ju

Can you imagine that your young son should remain single all his life just because there is no woman to marry? You must take it as something unbelievable and painful. Recent reports say that such a situation will often happen in Korea in the future if the current condition that the number of female children is less than male children continues. In fact, however, our situation is not quite hopeless since the unsatisfactory male and female birth ratio, which is caused by a side effect of the population control policy in Korea, is getting balanced due to the government's regulation and parents' changing values.

Korea experienced disproportion between the male and female birth ratio over two decades. It is known that the natural ratio of male to female throughout the world is 106 to 100. Even though the number of newborn boys is much more than that of girls, the balance between them is accomplished about when they reach the marriageable age because the decrease in the number of boys, which happens naturally as time goes by, is much more than that of girls. But the provision of nature harmonizing males and females was lost in Korea long time ago. Statistics on the male – female birth ratio in 1980 showed the ratio of 103.9 boys to 100 girls and there was no problem. In the middle of the '80s, however, as the general birth rate sharply decreased, imbalance birth ratio began to occur – the number of new-born boys per 100 girls, was about 110 in 1985 and was going up to 115 in 1995, which gave Korea a shameful nickname of the country that the gap male-female birth ratio was widest all over the world. It finally came to a climax in 1996 as 117.9 boys per 100 girls were born. Population researchers forecasted that if such a condition continues, we would face the situation that one of ten men couldn't get his spouse in 2005. And they warned that lack of females would cause serious social problems like increase in sex crimes and suffering fraudulent marriage to females from other countries – they would pretend to marry to a Korean male in order to make away with his money.

What caused such an imbalance in the birth ratio? It is an unexpected side effect of the population control policy enforced by Korean government in 1960's and 1970's. The population policy itself was a good solution to overpopulation, but in combination with Korea's traditional value of predominance of men over women and advanced medical techniques to control childbirth, it caused unbalance of the male-female birth ratio. In past days, as a large family was preferred, they had only to keep on bearing babies until they got a son. However, encouraged by government to have just one or two children since 1960, parents suffered from an obsession that they should have a son out of the limited number of children they would have. As for the way to make their dreams come true, there were advanced medical techniques in the mid-80's, – gender detection enabled parents to know their unborn child's gender, and technical illegal operation made it possible to abort a female fetus artificially if they didn't want her. This phenomenon was especially serious when they already had one or more daughters because they hoped at least one out of all of their children would be a son. According to statistical data presented by Korea National Statistical Office (KNSO) in 1997, the birth ratio for first born was 106, normal numerical value. However, the ratio for second born was over 110 and in the case of the third born, it was 203. As a matter of course, there is no way to know the exact number of aborted girls because abortion was done secretly. But the anti-abortion organization in Korea presumes that early in 90's, over 20,000 female fetuses on an average were killed each year after being judged their gender, and the number of them amounted to 5% of newborn girls.

However, we don't need to despair yet as a ray of hope has been found. According to the latest statistics on the male and female birth ratio taken in 2000, the ratio is return-

ing to normal now. Recently, KNSO announced that in 1999, 322,000 boys were born while 294,000 girls were. It was ratio of 109.6 to 100, which compares with 116.5 to 100 in 1990 and 113.2 to 100 in 1995. This steady decrease in the disparity of the male and female birth ratio is the result of two developments. One is the government's strict regulation. Government revised the medical law in 1994 to prohibit detecting a fetus' gender and indiscreet termination of pregnancy. Under this law, if a doctor informs parents the gender of their unborn child, he or she will suffers a punishment with a fine, detention or suspension of the medical license. Another development is parent's changing values. In these days, many young parents who have a great notion of the equality of sexes don't want to know their unborn child's gender any more and just like to bear and bring them up well whether it is a son or a daughter. If the decrease continues, we can expect that the balance between the number of boys and girls will become satisfactory in the near future.

It is good luck for Korea that the future prospect is not bad. Although the population control policy caused imbalance in male and female birth ratio in Korea, our situation is changing for the better now thanks to the government's policy and parents' changing values. However, Koreans must not only feel relieved but also remember a good lesson they've learned, that every human life is dignified. As long as they remember that, making a country where both genders live harmoniously is not so very difficult.