

# Reconstructing the Ideal Relationship between Men and Women: Insights from Biblical and Taoist Teachings

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**Abstract:** The relationship between man and woman is very important for the well-being of human beings individually and socially. Historically woman was almost universally regarded as subordinate and inferior to man, and was treated unequally in relation to man domestically and socially, which has led to the feminist movement starting from the western world in 14th century till now. Nowadays woman's relative status has improved greatly in many parts of the world, but total equality between man and woman is still a far-away dream. Woman's liberation increased the general well-being of human being. However, people's happiness is not necessarily increased because of woman's participation in jobs traditionally held by man. The ideal relationship between man and woman should be based on mutual respect and rational consideration of the physiological differences between man and woman. Relevant biblical teachings and the relationship between *yin* and *yang* in the ideology of Taoism can give people some infallible wisdom in this respect.

## 1. Introduction

The relationship between men and women has always played an indispensable and crucial role in maintaining social well-being. Matthew Arnold<sup>[1]</sup> argued that the path to perfection should be equally open to both men and women in culture and religion. This perspective is shared by *the Bible*, which views the two as a unified whole rather than separate individuals<sup>[2]</sup>. Similarly, *the Dao De Jing* uses the balance of *yin* and *yang* to describe gender dynamics. Instead of suggesting one side should dominate, this ancient wisdom emphasizes natural harmony. Across these traditions, the core message is that a balanced relationship is fundamental to human wisdom.

Moving these ideals into practice is often complicated. While *the Global Gender Gap Report 2024*<sup>[3]</sup> shows progress in narrowing inequalities, research highlights a happiness paradox. It turns out that women often report higher job satisfaction than men, even in roles with lower pay or prestige<sup>[4]</sup>. This is supported by Perugini and Vladislavljević<sup>[5]</sup>, who found that increasing gender equality does not always lead to more happiness for women. It suggests that workplace flexibility might matter more than simple numerical parity.

Instead of focusing on rigid sameness, we can find better models in old philosophies and modern cases. Taoist harmony and Biblical reciprocal love suggest that differences can be complementary. A practical example is Rwanda's Bandebereho program<sup>[6]</sup>. By encouraging men to share domestic duties through a culturally sensitive approach, rather than a forced model, the program successfully improved family well-being. These cases show that true equality respects individual differences while building a genuine partnership.

This study will combine *the Bible*<sup>[2]</sup> and *the Dao De Jing* to explore, from the perspective of the physical and mental differences between men and women, what's the ideal relationship between man and woman and how to promote it, whether it is possible or necessary to have the same ratio in education, health, economic and political participation between men and women. It will also explore whether physical differences may lead to different potentials between men and women, and whether

total equality will enhance the happiness of both men and women.

## 2. The Importance of Equality between Man and Woman

The relationship between man and woman is very important for the well-being of human beings individually, socially and culturally. As Mathew Arnold argued that the path to cultural and religious perfection must be accessible to all humanity, irrespective of gender<sup>[1]</sup>. What Arnold wanted to emphasize is that culture has the same obligation as religion, but from what he expressed we can see that the way to perfection should be accessed by each and all the human beings, be man or woman.

According to *the Bible*<sup>[2]</sup>, woman was created from one of man's rib and that's why the English word "woman"—being bone of man's bones and flesh of man's flesh. "For this reason, a man will leave his father and mother and be united with his wife, and they will become one flesh." (Genesis 2:24) That's to say, originally, man and woman are one and a whole. Man without woman is incomplete and nor is woman without man. From an empirical standpoint, contemporary data such as *the World Happiness Report 2024* and *the Global Gender Gap Report 2024* underscore this principle, revealing a consistent positive correlation between gender equality and societal well-being<sup>[3,7]</sup>.

Yet, this normative vision of harmony stands in stark contrast to the pervasive patterns of female subordination documented throughout history and anthropology. Sherry B. Ortner famously characterizes the devaluation of women as a "pan-cultural fact"<sup>[8]</sup>. By deconstructing cultural ideologies, symbolic frameworks, and social apparatuses, she illustrates how societies have systematically engineered female inferiority—a reality reflected in the Confucian "Three Obediences and Four Virtues" and the pervasive objectification of women in classical civilizations. Ortner contends that this inequality stems not from biological inevitability, but from a symbolic binary: the association of women with "nature" and men with the "culture" that seeks to transcend it. Within this framework, as Bermann notes through the lens of Judith Butler, gender is less an innate essence than a continuous "performance" governed by social scripts<sup>[9]</sup>.

While feminist movements have made monumental strides in dismantling these oppressive structures, achieving total parity in health, education, and political power remains an ongoing struggle. However, the drive toward numerical equality, particularly in traditionally male-dominated sectors, prompts a critical inquiry: does statistical sameness always translate to human fulfillment? Evidence suggests a paradox where women, despite occupying roles often deemed inferior in pay or non-monetary conditions, sometimes report higher job satisfaction than their male colleagues, thereby complicating the linear equation between formal equality and subjective well-being<sup>[4]</sup>.

Given the tension between the ideal of equality and the complexity of its practical outcomes, this article offers a comparative analysis of *the Bible*<sup>[2]</sup> and *the Dao De Jing* to delineate an ideal model for gender dynamics. By examining their distinct perspectives on physiological and psychological variances, this study addresses two pivotal questions: first, is the pursuit of identical gender ratios across all socio-economic domains a necessary or universally desirable goal? And second, might an over-reliance on rigid equality inadvertently obscure innate potential, ultimately undermining the very happiness it aims to secure?

## 3. The Universal Female Subordination to Man

Man and woman have had unequal status both domestically and socially over history, with woman regarded as subordinate and inferior to man, which is, in terms of Sherry B. Ortner, "a pan-cultural fact." In her essay "Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture", Ortner listed three types of data that would suffice to constitute evidence that a particular culture considers women inferior: (1) elements of ideology that explicitly accord women less prestige; (2) symbolic devices, such as attributions of defilement, that imply inferiority; and (3) social structures that systematically exclude women from realms of high power and prestige<sup>[8]</sup>.

Ortner was sure that based on any or all of the three types of data women's subordination to men could be found in every known society. Looking back to history, she is right. Take China for example,

the Confucian doctrine of *sancong side* formally prescribed a woman's lifelong subjugation to male authority, while practices like foot-binding exemplified the extreme physical and social constraints imposed to conform to patriarchal aesthetics. Based on Hinduism which considers woman innately inferior to man, woman in India had very low status. Man tended to regard woman as his private property and might not allow her to go out in public. Woman has no economic rights or freedom to move about. In ancient Greek, Rome and Egypt, woman had relatively less power and rights than man domestically, economically and politically.

Although the degree of woman's inferiority to man were diverse in different parts of the world in varied periods of human history, the phenomena of female subordination to man is universal. Even in the contemporary society of the 21st century, this phenomenon continues to prevail, as highlighted by the 18 editions of *the Global Gender Gap Report*<sup>[3]</sup> published annually from 2006 to 2024. Compared to men, women still occupy significantly lower economic and political positions, especially in the Middle East and North Africa region.

#### **4. Theoretical Explanations for Women's Secondary Status**

There are diversified reasons for the pan-cultural secondary status of woman in society. According to biological determinism, there is something genetically inherent in the male that makes man the naturally dominant sex, while the female lacks that "something", which makes woman not only naturally subordinate but generally quite satisfied with her position. Ortner argued that biological differences only acquire hierarchical value within specific cultural systems<sup>[8]</sup>. She proposes an influential symbolic-structural explanation: women are universally devalued because they are symbolically associated with "nature", due to their physiological involvement in reproduction and nurturing, while men are aligned with "culture", which seeks to transcend nature. As Ortner concludes, women's physiology, their association with the domestic sphere, and their socialized psyche make them "appear to be rooted more directly and deeply in nature"<sup>[8]</sup>. Consequently, women are perceived as occupying an ambiguous, intermediate position between nature and culture. This intermediary status, Ortner argues, not only justifies their lower rank but also explains why cultures feel compelled to control and restrict them, as women represent the crucial yet dangerous "nature" that "culture" must subdue and transform<sup>[8]</sup>.

This constructivist perspective is radicalized by the work of Judith Butler, as cited by Sandra Bermann<sup>[9]</sup>. Although Butler is discussing the issue of gender and sex and Sandra is dealing with the performing function of translation, their emphasis on the social construction of sexuality can also shed some light on the formation of the widespread phenomenon of female subordination to male. Recent sociological research reviews, such as those by Scarborough, et al., continue to emphasize that gender inequality, as a multi-level social structure, is continuously reproduced at the individual, interactive, and institutional levels<sup>[10]</sup>.

Actually, the universality of female's subordination to male has manifold causes, such as physiological differences, religious beliefs, economic states, political purposes, and in Marxist view, productive forces and relations of production, to name just a few. All these causes correlated and interacted with one another and combined to reinforce woman's inferiority to man. Whatever be the reasons, as is discussed previously, it is wrong, immoral and unwise to abuse, maltreat or belittle woman. Fortunately, human beings have gradually realized the faults and have been making efforts to achieve equality between man and woman.

#### **5. Historical Progress and the Contemporary Landscape of Women's Status**

Woman's struggle for rights and power may have begun ever since there were inequalities between man and woman in society. However, the struggle in the west that had the magnitude of worldwide influence might be traced back to feminist movement starting from France in the 14th century when Christine de Pizan, a French poet, became one of the first female artists to make a living through writing. One French writer, Olympe de Gouge, declared that "woman is born free and remains equal to man in her rights." In her work *The Declaration of the Right of Woman and Citizen* during the

French Revolution. She argues in her writing that women should have equality in all areas of life such as education, government, employment and the judicial systems. Many view de Gouge as the founder of the French feminist movement. Feminism in parts of the western world has gone through several waves. the first wave focused on suffrage and legal rights; the second broadened to social and cultural inequalities; the third addressed diversity and intersectionality; and the fourth wave, ongoing since the early 2010s, has weaponized digital media to convert testimonies of sexual harassment and assault into legislative reforms and platform-level accountability by the mid-2020s.

Although there were a few exceptions like the empress Wu Zetian in Tang dynasty, and Li Qingzhao, the most famous female poet in south Song dynasty, old China was dominantly a patriarchal society. Significant women's liberation movement might be traced back to the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom (1851-1864), women then were enlisted in the army with their own camps separated from male soldiers and were allowed to own land. Then in the latter half of the 19th century the missionaries from the west promoted the awareness of female rights. During the democratic revolution, under the influence of Marxists' ideas of liberating women, a group of scholars wrote many articles to call for the liberation of women politically and socially. Finally, after the establishment of the People's Republic of China, women's liberation was realized in laws and women's status has been increased fundamentally in various fields. However, thousand years of tradition is impossible to change overnight and woman in China has not been liberated completely in some aspects. For example, the son preference idea is still rooted in many people's mind.

To have a global view of the development of woman's status compared to man, *the Global Gender Report*<sup>[3]</sup> can provide much valuable information. With a view to measure one important aspect of gender equality: the relative gaps between women and men across four key areas: health, education, economy and politics, so as to serve as a basis for relevant countries to design effective measures for reducing gender gaps, *the World Economic Forum* has been producing *the Global Gender Gap Report*<sup>[3]</sup> annually ever since 2006. The 2024 report, which analyzes data from 146 countries, suggests that while overall parity is improving, the pace of change remains gradual. It is estimated that reaching full equality may still take several generations.

Despite these gains, progress is uneven across the globe. While regions like Europe have reached high levels of parity, major gaps remain in political empowerment and economic participation. In contrast, disparities in health and education are relatively small. These patterns indicate that while the general trend moves toward equality, the pace of development is shaped by regional complexities.

## 6. The Happiness Paradox: Re-evaluating Equality and Well-being

While global efforts have steadily improved women's status, the pursuit of total gender equality, as quantified by metrics like *the Global Gender Gap Report*<sup>[3]</sup>, presents a complex paradox. The underlying rationale is often economic efficiency—the belief that empowering women enhances productivity. However, this instrumental view begs a more fundamental question: does the achievement of statistical equality directly translate into enhanced well-being for all?

The United Nations has formally recognized happiness and well-being as universal goals<sup>[11]</sup>. This perspective invites a critical examination of the equality-happiness nexus. A comparative analysis of *the World Happiness Report 2024*<sup>[7]</sup> and *the Global Gender Gap Report 2024*<sup>[3]</sup> reveal a general positive correlation, albeit with instructive exceptions.

As shown in Table 1, a significant overlap exists among the top performers: four countries (Finland, Iceland, Sweden, Norway) rank in the top 10 for both happiness and gender equality. Similarly, Table 2 shows the Democratic Republic of the Congo appearing in both bottom 10 lists. This pattern suggests a general positive correlation between gender equality and national happiness.

Table 1 Top 10 Countries: Happiness Rankings and Gender Equality Rankings 2024

(\* for countries present in both columns. # for exception.)

The top 10 Countries on <i>World Happiness Report 2024</i> (Ranks of Gender Gap in bracket)	The top 10 Countries on <i>The Global Gender Gap Report 2024</i> (Ranks of Happiness in the bracket)
1. Finland (2) *	1. Iceland (3) *
2. Denmark (15)	2. Finland (1) *
3. Iceland (1) *	3. Norway (7) *
4. Sweden (5) *	4. New Zealand (12)
5. Netherlands (28)	5. Sweden (4) *
6. Costa Rica (19)	6. Nicaragua (47)
7. Norway (3) *	7. Germany (22)
8. Israel (91)	8. Namibia (103) #
9. Luxembourg (46)	9. Ireland (15)
10. Mexico (33)	10. Spain (38)

Table 2 Bottom 10 Countries: Happiness Rankings and Gender Equality Rankings 2024

(\* for countries present in both columns. # for exception.)

The bottom 10 Countries on <i>World Happiness Report 2024</i> (Ranks of Gender Gap in bracket)	The bottom 10 Countries on <i>The Global Gender Gap Report 2024</i> (Ranks of Happiness in the bracket)
147. Afghanistan (?)	146. Sudan (?)
146. Sierra Leone (80)	145. Pakistan (109)
145. Lebanon (133)	144. Chad (119)
144. Malawi (?)	143. Iran (Islamic Republic of) (99)
143. Zimbabwe (52)	142. Guinea (102)
142. Botswana (57)	141. Mali (123)
141. Democratic Republic of the Congo (140) *	140. Democratic Republic of the Congo (141) *
140. Yemen (?)	139. Algeria (84)
139. Comoros (119)	138. Niger (110)
138. Lesotho (98)	137. Morocco (112)

However, the case of Namibia serves as a critical exception. Ranking 8th in gender equality but 103rd in happiness, it challenges the assumption of a straightforward relationship. As shown in Table 3, Namibia's high marks in closing gender gaps have not yielded corresponding levels of national happiness.

Table 3 Ranks of Namibia Globally and by Sub-indexes.

(from *the Global Gender Gap Report 2024*)

	Global Rank	Economic Participation and Opportunity	Educational Attainment	Health and Survival	Political Empowerment
Namibia	8	17	1	1	21

Namibia ranks relatively low in *the World Happiness Report 2024*<sup>[7]</sup>, yet performs strongly in *the Global Gender Gap Report 2024*<sup>[3]</sup>. This contrast suggests that a high level of gender equality does not automatically lead to greater happiness. Its achievements in areas such as education, health, and political participation do not seem to translate directly into higher well-being.

Empirical studies offer some explanation. Janssen and Backes-Gellner find that women working in male-dominated occupations are often less satisfied with their work environment and job content, even though they report higher satisfaction with income. In other words, higher pay may come at the cost of lower overall workplace satisfaction, indicating a trade-off rather than a clear gain<sup>[12]</sup>.

All these researches mentioned indicate that complete equality between man and woman does not necessarily bring happiness. Then what's the ideal relationship between man and woman? In what aspects and to what degree should man and woman be equal so as to achieve the greatest happiness to all?

## 7. Reconstructing the Ideal Relationship: From Sameness to Complementary Harmony

The social relationship between man and woman should be distinguished from domestic relationship between husband and wife. No matter it is social or domestic relationship, the primary principle should be that man and woman share the same dignity as human being and enjoy the same human rights. Based on this basic principle, man and woman should have mutual respect, mutual understanding, mutual care and support.

The relationship between man and woman socially includes social roles and social norms. Those traditions and norms bearing features of discrimination against woman should be abolished and all the social rights and opportunities for man should also be equally accessible to woman. Since equality between man and woman can enhance the productivity of the society, we should promote it as far as it is good for both man and woman. However, the physiological difference between man and woman should not be ignored. Those jobs, professions and social roles traditionally favored by woman because of their innate difference from man physically and psychologically instead of out of prejudice against woman should not be regarded as less significant than or inferior to jobs, professions and social roles preferred by man. Stoet and Geary find that in more gender equal societies, differences in participation in fields such as STEM can become more pronounced, possibly reflecting the freer expression of individual preferences<sup>[13]</sup>.

The wisdom imbedded in *the Dao De Jing* has offered some wisdom for the social relationship between man and woman. According to Laozi, the world originates from *dao*, which begets one and one begets two. Out of two forms three and all things evolve from three. All things contain *yin* and *yang* and are in their harmony. With *yin* and *yang* opposing, altering and interacting with each other, myriads of things come into being. Man and woman are from one and should be in harmony with each other. As everything is evolving and changing, so are man and woman.

Man and woman should be given the equal opportunity and freedom of choice institutionally and legally. Absolute parity between man and woman in job participation and political empowerment is both impossible and unnecessary as long as the policy makers take the well-being of all people into consideration while making policies.

Domestically the relationship between husband and wife should also be based on the principles that have been discussed in the first paragraph of this part. The biblical teachings provide people with good guidelines for the ideal relationship between husband and wife. In his letter to the church in Ephesus, the fifth of his epistles, Paul explains the ideal relationship between a man and a woman in a marriage relationship. He advises wives to submit to their own husbands and respect them just as they do to the Lord. With equal vigor, Paul commands husbands to love their wives just as Christ loved the church and sacrificed Himself for the church's sake.

A wife submitting to her husband should not be regarded as inferior or subordinate, since it is out of love and respect and husband should also love and cherish his wife and pledge allegiance to her. It is mutual obligation and reciprocal love. If both can resist all the outside lures and temptations, their relationship is ideal, harmonious and holy.

## 8. Conclusion

Born to be equal as human beings, man and woman should enjoy equal dignity and human rights and also bear correspondent duties. Woman's liberation and improvement of equality between man and woman have enhanced the productivity and general well-being of human beings. However, due to innate physiological and psychological differences between man and woman, absolute parity between man and woman is impossible and unnecessary. They may have respective social and domestic roles, which bear no superiority or inferiority, but are complementary.

Ideal relationship between man and woman should be based on the principle of equal rights, mutual respect, understanding and cooperation both socially and domestically. Ancient wisdom of Daoism and biblical teachings has provided some infallible guidelines for people in dealing with the relationship between man and woman.

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