We take self-ownership – personal liberty – as a given. And it is, in economically developed parts of the world. Yet, while formal slavery is universally condemned and prosecuted when exposed, many women in Asia and Africa are nonetheless denied the rights to the fruits of their labor.

Under the institution of arranged marriage, women and girls are still shipped off by their fathers to settle debts, pay for their brothers’ marriages, enhance family status – or simply to cement alliances. How did Osama bin Laden land his fourth wife? She was reportedly a gift from her father.

Of course, in arranged marriages, both men and women are denied the choice of partners. The burden of the practice, however, falls largely on women. That’s true in part because of the double standard that often allows a married man to stray, or to shed a wife or add another one. But there are subtler grounds for arguing that arranged marriage is worse for women.

**WOMEN AS SOMEONE ELSE’S PROPERTY**

The roots of marital inequality go back to the dawn of recorded history. In the Old Testament, Jacob did not work for Rachel to win her hand in marriage, he worked seven years for her dad, the decider. (Actually, Jacob put in a total of 14 years; Rachel’s father managed to make it a package deal by selling her sister Leah, too.)

Under Islamic law, a bride is a party to the marriage contract. But the difference is modest in practice: she cannot consent to marriage without permission from her father or some other male relative. The rationale is that the marriage contract is of such importance that she does not have the capacity to enter into it herself. This even applies to remarriage (arguably, a contract of lesser value that involves a woman who is both older and more competent in matters like marriage).

Islam, in contrast to some other religious/social systems, does allow women to defer marriage until after puberty. But this has had sinister consequences. You might say that a woman who lowers her marriage-market value – for instance, through promiscuity – steals from herself; Westerners thus might call her self-destructive. But when she is effectively owned by her male kin, her act becomes one of theft and subject to punishment.

Property-rights concerns are universal. Why, then, are so-called honor killings in retaliation for such equivalent “property theft” largely absent in Hinduism and Confucian-
ism? Ironically, honor killings may be seen as the consequence of the marginally greater autonomy granted women under Islam. They are, after all, parties to the contract, not just the property being transferred from one owner to another. And this partial control may give a woman the fatal idea that she can choose a partner to her own liking (be it for love or money).

Such notions were absent in Confucianism and Hinduism. Confucianism gave extensive powers to the patriarch, and daughters were sold as maids, prostitutes, concubines or wives, without much ado (or “I do”). Women only gained some degree of autonomy as chaste widows – and only at an age and in a condition in which their value as marriage property was much diminished.

Hinduism did not always prescribe prepubertal marriage for girls. Starting about 2,000 ago, though, having an unmarried daughter beyond puberty was believed to bring dishonor or worse to her ancestors. And often these children were married to grown men: The Laws of Manu, a standard text, recommended that the groom be three times the age of his bride. Today, a non-negligible percentage of Hindu girls are married before the age of 9, and half are married before the age of 18.

The trend in India is now toward marriage at older ages. But by no coincidence, honor killings have spread to Hindus in India, as women’s right to choose their spouses has begun to clash with parental authority backed by thousands of years of tradition.

**CHRISTIANITY AND WOMEN’S RIGHTS**

Christianity was different. Certainly, the status of women has been lower than that of men, and common law has allowed jealous or straying husbands more leeway than similarly inclined wives. The crime-of-passion defense has proved more effective in letting husbands off the hook in murder cases than infidelity by the husband has worked to exonerate the crimes of wives. And arguably, under the *feme covert* common-law doctrine, a woman’s legal personality was suspended in marriage. But daughters were not owned by their fathers or any other male blood relatives. And the fact that women decided themselves whether to enter into marriage made a big difference in practice as well as theory.

For instance, women were not relegated to separate quarters as in purdah, their feet were not bound, and rarely did 8-year-olds choose to marry men three times their age. A widow could remarry someone of her choice (and not necessarily her husband’s brother or uncle), and women were allowed more than one meal a day. There was no payment to the bride’s parents.

Individual consent was an innovation insisted on by the Roman Catholic Church, and since marriage had been elevated to a sacrament by the early Church fathers, it was difficult to tamper with its conditions. (Martin Luther did, however, want to reintroduce parental consent, or at least parental veto power, and he did throw out marriage as one of the sacraments.)

The West also led the trend toward granting other rights to women. In the late 19th century, there were reforms of married women’s rights to own property, followed by voting rights in the early 20th century and reproductive rights (contraception and abortion) in the last half century.

Why did notions of gender equality gain traction in the West? Rick Geddes at Cornell and Dean Lueck at the University of Arizona argue that rapid economic changes in the mid-to-late 19th century called for self-ownership for women. In this new economic envi-
ronment, the evolving nature of work – one in which tasks demanded more skill – made it more difficult to monitor workers. Thus, the logic of self-ownership of workers, servants and wives.

Raquel Fernandez, an economics professor at New York University, sees it differently. The main occupations of women in the 19th century were homemaking or helping in a family business, and it is unclear, she argues, that monitoring was needed to prevent shirking. Instead, Fernandez has theorized that the expansion of married women’s rights came about because of rising wealth. Fathers wanted to transfer more wealth to their children. And in order to prevent bequests to daughters being misappropriated by sons-in-law, they demanded the removal of coverture rules that suspended the legal rights of women in marriage.

I would add one other element to the mix. Under a parental-consent system, a father’s interests are aligned with those of the buyers; the customer is king. And if grooms want submissive, powerless wives, fathers will do what it takes – be it to bind their daughters’ feet or mutilate their genitals. In Western countries, by contrast, where individual consent was needed for marriage, women gained important allies in their fathers. As Ebonya Washington, an associate professor of economics at Yale, has shown, male legislators in
the United States vote differently if they have daughters, notably when it comes to reproductive rights.

THE ECONOMIC PAYOFF

So what do women’s rights have to do with economic growth? Until the 16th century, Europe was no more developed than China, India or the Ottoman Empire. But then the Scientific and Industrial Revolutions happened—and we know where. The explanation and credit for Europe’s rise are routinely assigned to both market forces and to individualism linked to the rise of Protestantism. The latter offered a stark contrast to the Asian collectivist ideal, which is nowhere more obvious than in the absence of rights of women.

It is noteworthy that, in the early-to-mid 20th century, East Asia introduced Western-style family law, a reform that was viewed as part and parcel of an effort to lift society out of backwardness. The Kuomintang government threw out thousands of years of Chinese doctrine in reforms promulgated in 1930. And while adherence was not immediate (and for mainland China, the real reforms arguably only came after the communist revolution) East Asian societies have undergone a remarkable transformation.

South Asia is a different story. Pakistan is a predominately Muslim country governed by Shariah law; in India and Bangladesh, family law has largely left parental consent intact. While prepubertal marriages are now the exception rather than the norm, the majority of Indian women are married off before age 18. Brides are still pressured into young motherhood—in fact, a woman’s raison d’etre remains that of producer of grandsons. While most societies greet the continuation of the family line with joy, Indian culture tops it up with promises of benefits in the patriarch’s afterlife.

Early child-bearing has detrimental effects on both mother and child. But knowledge of and concern about this reality are scarce. Even the most egregious side effects, like maternal death in childbirth, are treated as acts of fate. There are also more insidious effects that may appear decades later, when the fetal growth constraints brought about by suboptimal conditions in utero show up in adults as productivity-sapping diabetes and cardiovascular disease.

Our understanding of the impact of poor maternal health status is growing, but studies are complicated by the fact that poor health is correlated with other negative factors. Perhaps an adverse medical outcome happened because the mother had not completed her skeletal growth. Or maybe it was because she was malnourished and ignorant.

The evidence from animal breeding strongly suggests the age difference between mother and father matters a lot in determining the health of children. The hybrid offspring of a horse and a donkey has the same genetic makeup regardless of which breed the mother belongs to. But a mule is stronger and easier to handle if its mother is a horse, the larger of the animals.

THE EDUCATION MULTIPLIER

A girl’s schooling need not end with her marriage. But in poor countries, it typically does. While a recent study by two Harvard economists, Attila Ambrus and Erica Field, showed that girls in Bangladesh whose marriages were delayed ended up with more schooling and substantially higher literacy rates, it’s not clear that knowing this would change parental behavior. The young daughter-in-law in the South Asian family is, after all, a beast of burden, there to serve.

The benefits of education ripple far beyond the women themselves, indirectly boost-
ing the pace of economic development. Education raises women’s productivity and thus the opportunity cost of child-bearing—a mother with a handful of young children can’t use her skills to bring home wages. Fewer children, moreover, means more attention and resources available per child, the start of a benevolent circle in which families invest more in the health and future productivity of their offspring, both male and female. When women are better educated and achieve the status of breadwinners, they may also get a larger say in how household consumption is allocated.

Everybody has exactly one biological mother and one biological father. So, on average (assuming balanced sex ratios), men have as many children as women, and are as related to them as are women. Why then do we believe that women care more about the “quality” of children in terms of care and education?

One explanation lies in the asymmetry of reproduction. A woman can have only a limited number of children, even if she devotes all of her fecund years to child-bearing. Men, on the other hand, are not restricted by biology, but by their ability to attract partners. Therefore, the “opportunity cost” of giving parental resources to an existing child is lower for women; beyond a certain age, she is not going to have more, whereas for men, hope springs eternal.
This surmise is backed by evidence. A number of experimental studies have shown that women have different priorities than men, and it therefore matters who makes the decisions – both in the household and in society at large. For example, a recent study by Grant Miller at the Stanford School of Medicine has shown that when women gained the right to vote in the United States in the early 20th century, spending on public health measures that reduced infant and juvenile mortality increased, with significant impact on child survival.

**When daughters are profitable to sell, other forms of savings (and investment) are crowded out.**

If women’s greater focus on their offspring’s quality stems from biological limitations in the quantity department, might not limiting the number of children to which men can aspire by allowing them only one wife have a similar effect? Actually, there’s a second, complementary explanation for the link between monogamy and economic growth.

In cultures where men have multiple wives (the technical term for the practice is polygyny), brides come bundled with the property rights implied by parental consent — the father of the bride, not the bride, gains from the transaction. And as Michèle Tertilt, an assistant professor of economics at Stanford, has pointed out, when daughters are profitable to sell, other forms of savings (and investment) are crowded out.

The natural experiments we have at hand to prove the link between monogamy and development are not conclusive, but it is worth noting that all the advanced industrialized economies limit the number of spouses a man can take. Christianity demands monogamy, and until recently did not allow divorce (thereby, absent widowhood, limiting the lifetime number of wives a man could take to just one). Islam allows men four wives at a time, but this is still a sharp departure from the pre-Islamic Arabian practice of no limit. Imperial China did permit men to have more than one wife at a time. But the practice was eliminated by the republican and Communist governments. Today, unrestricted polygyny is common only in Africa.

Outlawing polygyny does not guarantee change, but legislation is a first step. Individual consent in marriage is part of the United Nations’ Universal Declaration of Human Rights, right up there with the ban on slavery. Compliance is voluntary, however. By contrast, the UN’s Convention on Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage and Registration of Marriages, passed in 1962, is binding on the countries that choose to ratify it. The remaining holdouts, not surprisingly, are in Africa, the Mideast and South Asia.

**While still resisted in the name of tradition, honor and the stability of the family, individual consent in marriage may be the core right without which gender inequality and economic development are not possible. With individual consent, a man must compete for the favor of a prospective wife — not for the favor of her father. And with individual consent, women gain important allies in the struggle for gender equality: their fathers. Empowered with self-ownership, parents of daughters seek to prepare them for lives of opportunity, not submission.**