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Give women the freedom to fix poverty

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Improving their property rights has incentivised Ethiopian women to enter the workforce

Even today, there remain 18 countries where husbands can deny their wife the right to work

A bizarre column in Australia's Daily Telegraph last month argued that it should be illegal to be a stay-at-home mom. The piece was met with ridicule, and rightly so. Women should be free to make their own choices about family and career. Fortunately, no country actually bans a woman's choice to be a homemaker. Unfortunately, in much of the world, a woman's options to work outside the home are severely limited by government meddling.

One of the more frightening revelations in the UN's recent Human Development Report concerns the state of women's economic freedom around the world. In 100 countries the government forbids women from working in some professions. Argentinian women are barred from running distilleries, Russian women from becoming woodworkers or freight train conductors, and Emirati women from "managing and monitoring mechanical machines".

For too many women around the world, economic freedom is a distant dream. Countries should adopt policies of economic freedom not only because women everywhere are capable of making their own choices, but because adopting such policies is a proven road out of poverty. Consider Ethiopia, one of the world's poorest countries. Before the turn of the millennium, Ethiopian women lacked fundamental economic freedoms, including equal property rights and the freedom to seek paid employment. Husbands could maintain sole control over joint property and deny their wives permission to work outside the home.

One Ethiopian man who emigrated to the United States lamented the loss of that power: "My wife and I came here together, but after a few short years my wife's ideas and behaviours began to change ... She discovered she could have her own job and money. That was something she could not do in Ethiopia. She then went out and got a job and earned money for herself. This new job and money gave her ideas about more freedom and more independence. She then decided to

manage her own money, buy her own car, buy her own clothing and other items she wanted – like American women do. She became so independent that I could no longer control her.”

In 2000, a revision to Ethiopia’s family code law granted wives equal authority to conjointly administer common marital property and enshrined the right to work outside the home without spousal permission. The legal revision was rolled out in some regions and cities before others, allowing researchers to examine the law’s effect.

The early adopters of increased economic freedom for women saw women’s labour market participation rise. More women engaged in paid work and work with higher education requirements, as well as year-round employment. “In other words, the representation of women increased in occupations that are likely to have higher returns,” the study concluded. The change was most dramatic among young, single women whose life expectations and household dynamics had not yet been set.

Wife-beating, unfortunately, is still a “pervasive social problem”, and in rural areas women’s economic freedoms are sometimes ignored. Over 70 per cent of Ethiopia’s women have personally suffered domestic violence at some point in their lives, according to one survey taken five years after the legal revision. An overview of 10 such studies found that lifetime prevalence of domestic violence against women ranged from 20 to 78 per cent in Ethiopia.

Unlike Ethiopian immigrants to the United States, it is clear that many women in Ethiopia still lack the ability to earn and manage money without interference. Still, the legal change is a step in the right direction.

Even today, there remain 18 countries where husbands can legally deny their wives permission to work. They are Bahrain, Cameroon, Chad, Comoros, Congo (Kinshasa), Gabon, Guinea, Iran, Jordan, Kuwait, Mauritania, Niger, Qatar, Sudan, Syria, United Arab Emirates, West Bank and Gaza, and Yemen. Perhaps their governments fear that economic freedom might give women “ideas about more freedom and more independence”. It’s time that women everywhere were free to make their own choices on whether to work in or outside the home.

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