



Duncan Green

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Renegotiating patriarchy, Naila Kabeer's brilliant magnum opus

Duncan Green reviews a significant new book from one of LSE's most eminent scholars. He argues that an under-studied aspect of social and political change are the shifts in the tectonic plates of social norms – the ways society and individuals understand what is right and normal. Despite the omnipresent threat of backlash, the normative shifts on gender in recent decades have been remarkable, and Naila Kabeer's new book brilliantly captures that process in Bangladesh. This is a repost of a [From Poverty to Power piece](#) he posted last November.

Another big book in international development just landed. Not in terms of size (330 pages) but significance. [Naila Kabeer's Renegotiating Patriarchy: Gender, Agency and the Bangladesh Paradox](#) is a monumental achievement, literally: something the rest of us will be learning from, citing and pointing our students to for years to come. It's even Open Access (viva LSE Press!).

In a massive effort of synthesis, Naila pulls together 50 years of her own scholarship, accompanying the development of her home country since independence in 1971, through famine, upheaval, the emergence of a world-leading garment industry and, within all that, an extraordinary transformation in the lives of its women.



In terms of women's education, self-determination, access to jobs outside the home, and access to family planning, Bangladesh has long since left richer neighbours like India in the dust, despite its dysfunctional politics, slower economic growth and the rise of political Islam.

Hence the 'paradox'. Naila argues that the paradox is largely in the eye of outsiders wondering why Bangladesh defies their 'priors' – preferred prescriptions for what a country ought to do to develop (usually copy an often airbrushed version of the rise of the West). Instead, she has spent her career

minutely examining the changes in the lives of women, combining number-crunching with deep listening, to work out what happened. This book is the result.

She shows that the changes in women's lives were the result of multiple interlocking factors – economic growth, government policy, the role of Bangladesh's world famous NGOs, the relative liberalism of its variant of Islam.

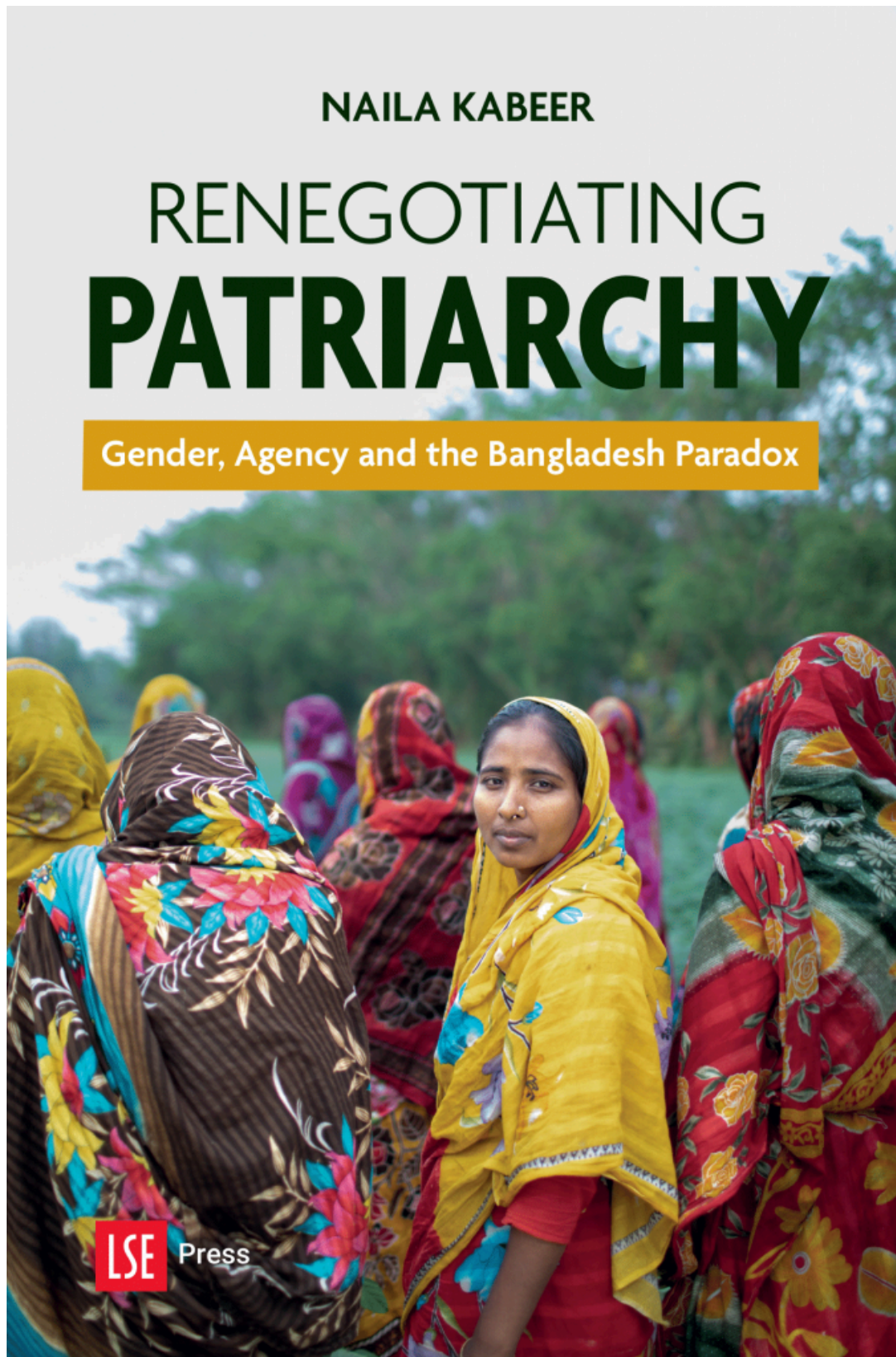
But what she adds to these largely top-down explanations is what happened from the bottom up, in terms of individual agency, an appreciation of how women exploited 'cracks in the system' (for example male migration to the Gulf weakening the presence of male sons and heirs in the family). With considerable courage, and often driven by poverty and necessity ('poverty dissolves constraints'), they moved into these small openings, for example leaving the home to become health workers, seek family planning, take jobs in garment factories or send their daughters to school.

As society became accustomed to these small insurgencies, women kept pushing to expand them, moving into these new spaces to expand their 'freedoms to be and to do', in Amartya Sen's lovely description of the essential nature of development.

The result was a profound, but stealthy and cumulative, norm shift. Hence the title of the book – women renegotiated, but did not overthrow, patriarchy. Women were able to achieve a slow transformation, without rejecting either their families or their faith ('never show a man your power' – the book is full of wonderful quotes).

This is a book that is comfortable with complexity and multiple explanations. I loved the chapter on Islam, which was much more subtle than my discussion in *How Change Happens* of organized Islamic feminism (she asked me to say what the book added to HCH when I was a discussant for her book launch at the FAO). Rather than focus on social movements and other forms of organization, this is largely about how individual women 'negotiated' with their belief and the beliefs of those around them, navigating the tensions between the pressures to conform, and the pressures to feed their families and live more expansive lives.

Naila is a polymath, starting out as an economist, but growing frustrated with its focus on material incentives. She then started drawing from numerous other disciplines (anthropology, feminism) but combines them with her econ background ('I can't let go of the security blanket of numbers'). She draws the line at Randomized Control Trials though, which she feels are massively overhyped and often not very useful ('the absolute opposite of everything you want to know about context. Even if the intervention works, you don't know why.')



There are some gaps: I didn't see the literature on norm change (for example [Bicchieri](#)'s distinction between social v moral norms; or [Kwame Appiah](#) on the mobilization of shame to overcome practices like foot binding in China), although I suspect both could prove a bit crude for the level of nuance and detail Naila marshals here.

I also think at look at the more activist/practical approaches to understanding and renegotiating power would have shed some further light, and offer helpful heuristics/rules of thumb for people

trying to understand other such shifts, but unable to spend a lifetime poring over the process as Naila has.

But these are minor quibbles. The book is a masterpiece that combines meticulous scholarship and deeply human solidarity. It will be on my and many other reading lists for decades to come.

*This post first appeared on **From Poverty to Power**.*

About the author

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