

“If women’s productive activities were better understood, policy could be designed to support rather than invisibilise their contributions” – Naila Kabeer

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*In June, the South Asia Centre held an event entitled “Tales of the Unexpected: gender equality and social progress in Bangladesh”. Sonali Campion spoke to panellist **Naila Kabeer** in greater detail about her research on the rapidly changing status of women in Bangladesh, the challenge of measuring women’s economic activities and how to design inclusive policy.*

SC: A lot of the discussions around the challenges that women face are treated as if those issues are somehow timeless. Could you start by talking about the progress that has been made on gender equality in Bangladesh?

NK: This business of the mutability of patriarchal structures has certainly been a feature of a lot of the literature on gender, particularly when it’s in relation to certain parts of the world, and if it’s in a Muslim majority country – somehow Islam seems to be equated with the eternal oppression of women. The Bangladesh story is quite interesting in the way that it confounds some of those stereotypes. What we’ve seen is a very poor majority Muslim country, where incomes have not risen that rapidly, where governance structures have not really improved, but where we have seen enormous social progress.

For example, not only have we closed the gender disparity in education at primary and secondary level, but in fact girls now outnumber boys at these lower levels – although definitely not at tertiary level. Secondly, in the past Bangladesh has been seen as part of the region of “missing women”, where many more women at all ages died than men so you had a very masculine population. That’s changed. What we’re seeing is not only that life expectancy has caught up, but girls in the under five age group are more likely to survive than boys, which is the pattern in most of the world. In the 1970s girls would live longer than boys in the first month of their lives but when social discrimination kicked in they were more likely to die. That’s an interesting fact. Our research – we did a paper in *Feminist Economics* – actually shows that this improvement in the survival chances of girls relative to boys has been accompanied by the decline in son preference and the revaluation of daughters. So something normative is going on.

We’ve seen maternal mortality going down rapidly, Bangladesh is held up as an example of a country that’s done remarkably well on the MDGs, better than some of its wealthier neighbours. We’ve seen a steady rise in women’s labour force participation, although much of it is in home-based work. That’s partly because of the importance of microfinance, which I see as somehow subsidising women’s withdrawal from wage labour. If you didn’t have subsidised microfinance you probably would find more women working in the public domain. But up until now the waged jobs that they get are so awful that most women would prefer to work at home, and be able to look after their children as well.

We are the country where we have had two women alternating as Prime Minister. I am not a great fan of people who say that having a woman in power is somehow going to change the world, but it does make the model of female leadership something far more routine than it otherwise would be. So I don’t think they’re better or worse than men but the fact that we’ve had – since 1990 – a woman in power is an enormous change at the symbolic level.

Of course not everything has changed: you see women in the public domain much more than you did in the 1970s, and I think we have garment workers to thank for that, but violence against women, particularly in the public domain remains an issue, which in turn restricts on women’s mobility. It is also still difficult for women to get into politics even

at the local level. So it's a mixed picture but one that still represents an enormous contrast to the 1970s.

Women in developing countries particularly are often painted as victims – the garment worker stereotypes and so on – but research by yourself and others has questioned this. In what ways did you find women mobilising for collective action?

As far as women in the garment sector are concerned there has been a real suppression of collective action. That is partly the government, partly the local employers, but it is that suppression of workers' independent action that has also made it attractive.

For a long time in Bangladesh we had these social mobilisation organisations, which have now mostly turned to microfinance. When they were social mobilisation organisations their focus was not on service delivery but on organising landless men and women to claim their rights. Unfortunately, microfinance came along – which in some ways was good. But they really squeezed out the possibility of social mobilisation because poorer people would obviously throng to an organisation that offered loans as opposed to one which said “fight for your rights!”

I don't think it was easy for those organisations to co-exist. In the study I've done where I compare microfinance and social mobilisation organisations and I would argue if we had many more of the latter in Bangladesh today, perhaps our governance would be better. Their members are much more likely to protest corruption, to demand that doctors be in clinics and teachers in schools, to fight for their land rights. They're much more actively engaged in citizenship action, and the more the microfinance model moves towards financial sustainability and this very minimalist notion of engagement with your members, the less likely its members are to demand more democratic governance.

That said, even now, there are some microfinance organisations like BRAC, which try to combine microfinance delivery with social awareness and legal literacy. Those do not perform as badly as very minimalist ones like ASA.

Could you tell me more about how problems around measuring women's economic activities impact on the design of social protection policies?

I would say there are different kinds of social protection measures, some are intended to provide support to those who are economically inactive, cannot be active or should not be active (i.e. children or the elderly). But there are other social protection measures which are aimed at those who are economically active. They would include employment guarantees, loans of various kinds for productive purposes.



Harvesting crops. Bangladesh. Credit: [Scott Wallace](#) / World Bank CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

If we had a better understanding of the kind of work that women are doing when their not doing easily measureable forms of work we might get more [agricultural extension](#) services, we might get labour market policies designed around women's work. If it was recognised that their activities – whether it's homestead cultivation, harvesting their own fields, rearing livestock etc. – were contributing to the things that GNP *ought* to measure, then you might engage with these women in a more productive way, rather than “invisiblising” them in the kind of policies you develop. I would say its less social protection, and more about productive efforts and thinking of them as economic actors of a different kind. If you help to make their enterprises and efforts more profitable, it is more likely to be counted and have a lasting impact on the lives of women and their families.

There's been some discussion recently about how the direction of policy is potentially undermining the goal of gender equality – what are your views on how policy can be designed in an inclusive way?

The problem with a great deal of policy is the silo effect, which is when you have different groups of people worrying about different things. That is possibly OK for a lot of men because they tend to focus on one thing at a time. For most women, what they need is policies that acknowledge that they have dual responsibilities, particularly those with young children and elderly relatives. This is a problem that ends up being solved in a private way, by hiring people, often migrant workers without rights. That's fine but I'm not sure the best way to promote the well being of the vulnerable is to put them in the care of people with no rights – people don't have a stake in what they do if they have no rights.

I think we really need to step back and start thinking of the economy in a holistic way, and start asking the questions that I think feminists and people interested in human development have always asked. Policy should be designed in a way that acknowledges both streams of production, and therefore should not reward one set of goals at the expense of the other. Don't make women *only* mothers and deprive them of the ability to earn a living, don't make women *only* into economic actors and deprive them of the ability to look after their families. That means a public responsibility for affordable care so women are supported in their care responsibilities and able to work if they want to.

What we're seeing is that a rebellion against some of this dichotomous thinking in the way that so many women are refusing to have children, refusing to get married, having to be paid to have children, bringing in migrants to care for elderly parents. There's things going on at a private level and we don't know what the costs of that are. So we need to start asking these questions in a holistic way, the problem is we look at one bit and not at the other.

Somewhere in that rethinking is the question of men and care. These very rigid models of masculinity which require men to turn their back on care roles. They can only be challenged in men's interests if the idea of men as carers becomes more widespread.

Catch up with Tales of the Unexpected: Gender Equality and Social Progress in Bangladesh in full with the video/podcast, available [here](#). You can also find the event blog [here](#) and the Storify [here](#).

This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the South Asia @ LSE blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

About the Author

Naila Kabeer is Professor of Gender and Development at the Gender Institute. Her research interests include gender, poverty, social exclusion, labour markets and livelihoods, social protection and citizenship and much of her research is focused on South and South East Asia.

Sonali Campion is Editor of South Asia @ LSE. She holds a BA (Hons) in History from the University of Oxford and completed her MSc in Comparative Politics at LSE.



