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The Power to Choose: Bangladeshi Women and Labour Market Decisions in London and Dhaka

by Naila KABEER, London: Verso, 2000, 464 pp., ISBN 1-85984-804-4.

Naila Kabeer's book *The Power to Choose: Bangladeshi Women and Labour Market Decisions in London and Dhaka* provides a fascinating insight into the dynamics influencing labour market choices made by Bangladeshi women garment workers in Dhaka and London. Based on in-depth interviews with workers in both locations, the book begins by describing the global restructuring in the garment industry and its effect on the employment opportunities of workers in Dhaka and London. In chapter 2, Kabeer argues that a theoretical perspective integrating sociology with conventional economics is required to analyse effectively the cultural nuances determining workers' labour market choices and interests.

The next three chapters present the Bangladesh component of the research, while the following three deal with London. While noting similarities determining labour market decisions, Kabeer also highlights differences. These are further analysed in the final three chapters, with chapter 11 returning to the broader issue of the implications of the study for global interests and concerns.

The major argument stemming from Kabeer's study is that while living in "two cultures," "many echoes" frame the employment decisions of Bangladeshi garment workers in the two cities. Calling these "meta-preferences" of class, gender, race and social upbringing, Kabeer argues that because they determined Bangladeshi women's work, their labour supply did not necessarily reveal a "choice" but instead a "fait accompli" of societal norms and values.

However, although noting the similarities between Dhaka and London

women due to meta-preferences, Kabeer simultaneously identifies a paradox between the two groups by weaving the concept of *purdah* or the "territorial regulation of female sexuality and the institutionalisation of male power," into the analysis. Whereas *purdah* mainly restricted London Bangladeshi women's employment to "inside" or home work garment activity, Bangladeshi women in Dhaka renegotiated *purdah* with their husbands and community to legitimize "outside" work in garment factories. Using women's testimonies, Kabeer shows how home work became the only option available to London-based Bangladeshi women because of a "double closure" of gender and racial labour market segmentation arising from both *purdah* and meta-preferences. Although their labour supply was "segmented" to the garment industry, changing social norms and values about women's work nonetheless enabled Dhaka women to renegotiate *purdah*, broaden their meta-preferences and hence their labour market choices. In summary, Dhaka women living in developing Bangladesh, not London women living in industrialized Britain, had more labour market choice.

Kabeer proposes a number of explanations for this paradox. Firstly, she notes that whereas in Dhaka the garment industry was identified as a "female" industry, the social context in Britain meant that labour market options for London-based Bangladeshi men were also restricted to the garment industry. Hence Bangladeshi women in London competed with men as well as with others for garment jobs. As a result, the combined effect of meta-preferences and *purdah* resulted in further segmentation of their work "choice" to home

working rather than factory work, because factory jobs were also highly sought after by Bangladeshi men living in London.

Secondly, the worth of Bangladeshi women's work was enhanced by the lack of an external safety net provided by the state or the community. For example, whereas the children of London-based Bangladeshi women received state-provided education regardless of their work status, women in Dhaka did not enjoy this privilege. Coupled with high rates of unemployment amongst men, women's work in Dhaka increased in value because it provided for their immediate and extended families. This aided in renegotiating *purdah* and meta-preferences to broaden women's labour market options and include external factory work.

Thirdly, Kabeer argues that London-based Bangladeshi women were also caught in a "time-space" compression, the result of which was that the effect of *purdah* and meta-preferences on their labour market options reflected a "by-gone era." In other words, the interpretations of *purdah* and meta-preferences influencing London-based Bangladeshi women's employment choice reflected the time of their migration, rather than current social norms and values in Bangladesh itself.

Kabeer's analysis is useful in a number of ways. Firstly, it challenges neo-classical explanations of labour market preferences based on rational choice analysis. As Kabeer illustrates, the work choices of Bangladeshi women in Dhaka and London was anything but rational. Rather, it was the result of an "interplay of factors" that rational choice analysis fails to capture.

Secondly, in discussing the implications of the fieldwork in the book's final chapters, Kabeer confirms that ignoring social influences such as *purdah* and meta-preferences in international labour market debates can further disadvantage

rather than benefit groups such as Bangladeshi female garment workers in Dhaka. She refers to the campaign conducted by the American garment workers' unions against Bangladeshi child garment workers (many of whom were female) to illustrate this argument. Although the campaign led to a reduction in child labour in garment factories, this came at the expense of increased unemployment and a return to other labour market activities, such as prostitution.

Kabeer's rigorous methodological approach constitutes a third contribution. By using a qualitative approach, she challenges the pre-eminent notion that substantive research emanates solely from quantitative research methods. Kabeer's methodological note in the appendix thus provides a useful guide for qualitative researchers.

Fourthly, by unravelling the influence of "hidden dynamics" such as meta-preferences and *purdah* on women's work options, Kabeer makes a valuable contribution to the argument that possibilities for social emancipation within a neo-liberal world still exist. By illustrating that a social "other" rather than only an economic being shapes individual labour market choices, Kabeer opens the space for positive agency capable of transforming the individual's status. Rather than restricting this "space" to external locations, i.e., the state and capital, she confirms that individuals themselves can change their status by reworking interpretations of meta-preferences and *purdah*. In other words, rather than being "rational fools" or "cultural dopes," Kabeer shows that the individual is able to chart her own destiny. Using a case study of Bangladeshi women—who are generally typified as subservient and docile—to illustrate this agency, provides strong confirmation of this optimism. As Kabeer implicitly suggests, if these women can renegotiate a more acceptable destiny, others can too!

Finally, Kabeer's analysis is useful in debunking the notion that the status of workers in developing countries is inferior to workers' status in industrialized countries. By highlighting the way in which changing societal values and norms in Bangladesh widened the labour market options of women in Dhaka as compared with those in London, she challenges the widely held image of developing country workers as the "poorer cousins" of industrialized country workers.

One final strength of the book that deserves to be underlined is that it eas-

ily maintains the reader's interest. Kabeer's use of direct quotes from the many women who provided testimonies ensures that the book retains a real-life flavour. As a result, she is able to authenticate the discourse being woven, thus helping to both prove and disprove other discourses (such as economic explanations) about labour market choices facing female Bangladeshi garment workers in Dhaka and London.

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