

Introductory Remarks

2023 Critical
Hope Lecture
at UTSC

About Professor Naila Kabeer

Professor Naila Kabeer, on behalf of the University of Toronto Scarborough and the Department of Global Development Studies, please let me extend a heartfelt welcome to you. All of us gathered here today are deeply honored and gratified that you agreed to give the 2023 Critical Hope Lecture at such a crucial time in world events.

Professor Naila Kabeer's impressive contribution to gender and development over several decades made her an ideal choice to give this year 2023 Critical Hope Lecture jointly funded with the IDRC Hopper Lecture. We were delighted when she accepted the invitation to give this year's lecture, the title is "**Building Collective Action on the Margins: Gender Perspectives from South Asia.**" I am sure that we will be inspired by what she has to say, as, many of the students present here are pursuing a degree in global development studies.

I humbled to provide this introduction because Professor Kabeer's work has been a constant throughout my career both inside and outside of the academe. I first read work by Professor Kabeer as an undergraduate. Just as many of you are now, I was then studying political science and international development at Saint Mary's University in 1990. I only first met Professor Naila Kabeer in person in 11 years ago (2012) when she gave a lecture at York University. Even though I work on regions in the world distant from those she studies – in my case, the Caribbean– her publications remain a touchstone.

Naila Kabeer is currently Professor of Gender and International Development at the London School of Economics. Earlier in her career, she was a tenured professor at SOAS, University of London and, prior to that, a professorial fellow at the Institute of Development Studies, Sussex. In the book, on Key thinkers in development Kabeer was cited for her feminist economic contributions and 'rebellious intellect' to the field. When the Graduate Institute of Geneva published an analysis of the most influential expert in the field of gender and development, they identified Professor Kabeer because of her clear impact in public policy making. This rings true for me, because when I was a development practitioner, we seldom had the time to read because we were busy managing programs, but if there was work to read, it was Professor Kabeer's work. For me it was her book, *Organizing Women Workers in the Informal Economy: Beyond the Weapons of the Weak*, that showed how women confronted patriarchy and elite politics by bringing in bottom-up economic systems to counter the mainstream systems. This work has stayed with me.

WRITTEN BY
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To this day, Professor Kabeer remains highly vested in transforming her research findings into policy outcomes because she is intent on ensuring that the voices of the women she meets are being heard and considered. Her empirical work – variously pursued in the fields of gender, social exclusion, labour markets and livelihoods, social protection and citizenship – has transformed our understanding of development. She is widely published, having written extensively on these multiple topics. She has authored 46 articles, authored or co-authored 6 books, and edited or co-edited a further 6 volumes. Along the way, she has won important awards and significant accolades.

My admiration for one of the world's leading development scholars has endured for decades.

Professor Kabeer and I are both feminist economists and are active members of the International Association of Feminist Economics IAFFE. While we study feminist political economy in different parts of the world, we are fundamentally connected by our mutual understanding of women's rights, and our knowledge of how economics can do far more in terms of social provisioning. We also share the belief that political science as a field needs to remember that contextual realities matter, and that we should not be so driven by grandiose theories that we lose track of local happenings and theory-making within community. When Professor Kabeer was president of IAFFE in 2018-19 she organized the

opening panel to focus on the challenge of intersectionality (never done before) and ensured that local feminist work was spotlighted and indeed, there is now an established space for these local feminisms at each meeting so that we can learn from one another. Professor Kabeer has a history of questioning mainstream feminist ideas and is constantly "making room," especially room for Black feminists, ensuring our work is cited and recognized. When one gets to know Professor Kabeer, one quickly realizes that her research is not research for research's sake; rather, her own lived experience motivates her commitment, and fuels her dedication to the social justice work she does.



So who exactly is Professor Naila Kabeer?

Professor Kabeer was born in Kolkata in post-independent India. In the face of the communal fighting that continued after the partition of India, her family was forced to move while she was still very young to what was then East Pakistan, now Bangladesh. Her schooling was at Loreto Convent, an Irish Catholic boarding school in the hills of Meghalaya (then Assam) in the north-east of India.

Professor Kabeer first learned about scholarly activism at home. She experienced first-hand what it meant to be displaced and to be forced to move because of social divisions, and the political and economic shocks that can result. Her mother, Rokeya Rahman Kabeer was a historian at Eden Girls College, a government institution, in Dhaka. Her mother had also been a student activist in Kolkata and was active in the Communist Party of Pakistan, which was banned. She eventually abandoned the academy to start a feminist civil society organization

for landless rural Bengali women. While Prof Naila Kabeer, unlike her mother, would choose to stay in the academy, her mother's influence is why she remains strongly connected to the realities of rural life and of the women she interviews. This connection explains why she wants her research findings to be applied, and to have a meaningful, positive impact on people's lives.

While Professor Kabeer grew up in a home that enjoyed a degree of privilege, she was raised to believe there is an obligation to those with less privilege. It is not surprising then that she chose to study economics focused on women's lives, taking on this topic at a time when it was most certainly not the thing to do. She would have liked to attend The Delhi School of Economics, but the war between India and Pakistan in 1965 ruled that out as relations between the two countries deteriorated. Instead, Professor Kabeer left for the United Kingdom where she completed undergraduate and graduate studies at the London School of Economics. Her doctoral research was based on fieldwork in a village in Faridpur district and it was about reproductive behaviour at a time when son preference was very strong in the culture. Over the years she has continued to do research there.

What I read in Professor Naila Kabeer's work is a brave feminist scholar.

Professor Kabeer is one who knows what she must do to spark debate. She is unafraid to speak her mind and is prepared to shake up the academy when those with power engage in behaviour or actions she considers to be wrong. That is why we at the DISE Collective, wanted her to do the Foreword of our recent book *Community Economies in the Global South* because she sees the value of informal institutions, local knowledges and self-help on people's own terms.

I studied the politics of microfinance for more than a decade and her book *Money with a Mission* was part of a larger project which brought academics and MFI practitioners together to consider 'mission drift' in the sector, and its movement away from the concerns of the poor to the pursuit of financial sustainability through profit. One of the outcomes of this project were the impact assessment methodologies that would help organizations that were interested in the pursuit of transformational change to move beyond a narrow focus on repayment rates and enterprise profits to exploring impact on well-being, empowerment and wider social impacts. Her critiques of microfinance steer away from polemics and focus on evidence. She was able to show, for instance, that social mobilization organizations in Bangladesh (that prioritized savings rather than credit) were far more effective in achieving political (and in some cases economic) impacts than those which focused on a minimalist credit model.

One of my favourite pieces of hers was published in *Feminist Economics* which I read while living in Niger, West Africa "Globalization, Labour Standards and Women's Rights: Dilemmas of Collective (In)action in an Independent World." The article takes issue with the boycotting of MNCs by feminists and the Left. Professor Kabeer positions her critique to show how the very women whom feminists and the Left think they are helping through boycotts are, in fact, harmed. For poor Bengali women, paid work raised their status in the family and offered independence. To go after capitalist firms may be perceived as a win for those privileged, but it is an action that was taken without imagining the implications for Bengali women.



Professor Kabeer's form of critical thinking is vital in global development. She once told me that, at a young age, her life's work was influenced by her mother who instilled two key insights: first, all women must have some degree of economic independence, no matter how much they value their ties to family; and, second, the importance of being engaged. To this day, Professor Kabeer remains committed to these insights. She wants to ensure that she is fighting for economies that are concerned with women's lives, that allow women some degree of control over their own lives and that they too become engaged in the wider struggle to change the world.

What is key to remember

When Professor Kabeer began her work in the 1980s, she faced a formidable challenge: the highly structuralist depictions of patriarchal power that then dominated a great deal of the gender and development literature. The literature of the time left little scope for women's agency – as individuals or as groups – in countering these structures. While I was a grad student at Cornell, I read two influential books by her:

Reversed Realities; Gender Hierarchies in Development Thought and The Power to Choose: Labor Market Decision-making in London and Dhaka. Both impressed on me the ways in which economics and politics did not see the value of poor women's organizing in either the south and north.

Professor Kabeer's work examines power dynamics from within. It facilitates our understanding of what we mean by empowerment, and women's economic empowerment in particular. And, yes, while it is true that mainstream policy discourses now take on women's empowerment, this shift has also resulted in the concept being coopted. Professor Kabeer's work makes clear that the challenges associated with women's empowerment remain as relevant today as they ever were.



Today her lecture is about noting the role of marginalized women in sustaining economic democracy.

Professor Kabeer's lecture will be invaluable for all of us who want to see the human economy take precedence in our world. As we all debate the meaning of 'development,' her work on people-centred development underlines the reality that women engaged in development long before the Western fixers arrived, and have continued to do this work. Professor Kabeer's talk, based on decades of field work, will inspire us, guide us and teach us about why there is, in fact, a logic to collective action. We will also learn about what collective action means in the contexts in which she is immersed as a researcher, as well as how her own understanding of it has changed, what kinds of strategies have worked, and how it links up to the broader concept of economic democracy.

Without further ado, please join me in welcoming our most esteemed speaker, Professor Naila Kabeer of the London School of Economics.