

# ECONOMICA

WOMEN *and the* GLOBAL ECONOMY

## PODCAST: Assert Your Worth: A Conversation with the Social Economist Naila Kabeer

**HOST:** Welcome to the International Museum of Women and this podcast for *Economica: Women and the Global Economy*.

**NAILA KABEER:** *There is work by feminists that show that some kinds of gender equality are good for growth, and some kinds of gender inequality are good for growth. [laughs] You know, what are you going to do with that?*

**HOST:** Social economist Naila Kabeer specializes in gender, poverty and social policy issues. A Professorial Fellow at the Institute of Development Studies at the University of Sussex, England, she has been active in developing frameworks and methodologies for integrating gender concerns into policy and planning.

*Economica* curator Masum Momaya sat down with Naila Kabeer at the 2009 conference of the International Association for Feminist Economics. They began by discussing the difficulty of defining the word “empowerment.”

**KABEER:** Gender inequality is a product of power relationships. Power relationships, of a very particular kind, because they’re not just about laws and public policies. They’re about what happens at home and in your private life and in your intimate life and in, with people that you care about. So a lot of the power is wielded by those that you’re married to or that, your parents and so on. And that power is used in a way to, in many countries, to deprive you of a sense of equality. That you are a person of equal worth with, with your brother or with your husband and so on.

So, I think for, especially for those us in countries like South Asia for instance, where patriarchy is very, very powerful in its cultural definitions of womanhood and manhood, empowerment was used as a way to talk about changing power relationships beginning with your sense of self, your own understanding of your place in the world.

So, for me empowerment has always been about consciousness and awareness—naming the problem, recognizing the problem. It is from that basis that you can then take, participate in action collective or otherwise, to change structures. I think for me the reason I found the concept of empowerment very attractive at the beginning, was it was a way of arguing, yes, people who say, “Yes, it’s all structural.” You know, “Unless

you change the structures you haven't done anything." Well, you can't change the structures until you change the agents that reconstitute structures. And the agents that are most likely to challenge the structures of those who have most to gain from the change in structures, and the case of gender inequalities is, is likely to be women.

So, until you got women to stand up and say, "I am a person of equal worth to anybody else. I can do many, many things and the only thing that stops me is society or my husband, or so on," until you got women to be willing to stand up and assert their own capabilities and recognize their own capabilities, structures are not going to change.

So, empowerment for me is very much, it starts with individual consciousness. And it starts with individual consciousness because I come from a part of the world where what is possible for women is very, very limited. So, women's so called preferences are very narrow and restricted. So, for me empowerment is telling you the importance of the power within, of the importance of consciousness, of the ability to recognize your own self worth, you know, to be able to demand recognition and respect from others.

But of course, it must then move on to collective action, or structural change, or public policy, or you know the things that happen in the public domain, which make a difference to the larger structures that effect all women.

**MOMOYA:** There are some people who would say that empowerment is a western concept for thinking about it in terms of individuals being empowered is a western construct. How would you respond to that?

**KABEER:** You know, I think, I have a problem with the word autonomy. For a lot of women, feminist economists included, they use the word autonomy to signal something about changing power structures. To me, autonomy is something that I avoid because to me, it sounds like the individual self.

Empowerment, to me, is about relationships, and one of the things I think is that the form that empowerment will take will vary according to different cultures. In a highly individualistic culture, like the United States of America, empowerment will take the form of individual—may take the form of individual self-determination, individual autonomy, and so on.

But in a culture like South Asia, where people are very strongly embedded in family and community relationships, empowerment is much more likely to take the form of a democracy, demands for democracy, to democratized relationships—that I too should be heard. So, it's not about becoming a highly western individual. It is becoming a part of society, a recognized and equal part of society. So, I don't see it as western at all.

**MOMOYA:** How is empowerment measured? It seems like it's a little difficult to measure.

**KABEER:** Well, people all have their own ways of measuring it and, you know, questions of individual consciousness are very difficult to measure. Because a measurement implies that you know the direction of change from the outset. Right? So, you have already decided this is the way things must change in order for you to be empowered.

Whereas, where I am located in my life and in my context, you know, one woman may see empowerment as, “I will go out to work.” Another woman may see empowerment as, “Why should I have to go to work? You must give value to the work I do at home and you must recognize it as valuable work.” So, you cannot measure empowerment. It’s very—quite difficult. So, you already have a very linear model of change.

However, having said that, we know that policy makers are constantly interested in change. So, increasingly, I think I have started to move towards citizenship. So, I’m asking, okay, women get empowered, they make their own decisions and choices about the kinds of lives they value, the kind of person they want to be, the kinds of change they want to bring about in their daily lives, and all of that. But there are certain forms of change that can tell that a woman is beginning to take her place as a member of the political public. You know, as a member of a movement for change.

So, I think there I guess “more recently, I’ve started looking at indicators of—in countries like India, and Bangladesh—you know, do women vote? Do they know who their MP is? Do they go to complain to the government about things that go wrong? Do they participate in protests? What are they protesting about?”

**MOMOYA:** Your connection between economic empowerment and political participation seems to be particularly feminist. When—the ways that empowerment is talked about, and often economic empowerment of women, is talked about as a precursor or as a necessary ingredient for a country’s economic development. It seemed like for a long time historically when investments were weighted and made in women in terms of education and job training, skills training, micro-enterprise development that the empowerment wasn’t necessarily towards the end of political participation, citizenship, and the claiming of rights, the exercising of capabilities, but for this, “Let’s empower women because this is the only way that the country, that economies are going to grow.” Is that, am I correct in that is a part of its history?

**KABEER:** You know, I think we kind of, feminists kind of became victims of their own success. In the sense that quite a lot of the early feminist literature showed that, you know, women used resources differently from men. So, these were very powerful arguments. They were very important arguments, because up to that point, public policies treated women purely in their reproductive roles. So, it was quite important to demonstrate that equalizing access to different kinds of resources would have repercussions that went beyond the woman herself. Right? It would have repercussions for the broader development process.

Now, that was very appealing to policy makers because policy makers do think of quite a lot of policy in terms of its instrumentality to growth. Right? And we in a way, made a set of arguments that actually linked itself to that.

If there is evidence that says investing in women is good for economic growth, I think we should make those arguments. You know, why not? I think women should be very careful not to make those arguments if they are not true. And I think we should be very careful to also say, investing in women is good for social justice. You know, that if you have a sexual society that is constantly treated as inferior and if that section of society is as much a part of your family, your workforce, etcetera, then you have a very lopsided and asymmetrical society and just on purely justice grounds, it doesn't make sense.

So I'm not against making justice arguments, but I think they have to be backed up by evidence. And I think there is work by feminists that show that some kinds of gender equality are good for growth, and some kinds of gender inequality are good for growth. Right? And you know, what are you going to do with that?

So, I think one has to be very sophisticated because gender equality itself is so multi-dimensional. You know, you may improve women's education, but not improve on wages. Her productivity goes up, her wages stay down, and they exploit her. Now, that is also a part of that broad argument. So, I don't think there is a simple story.

The other thing is, I feel that in countries like South Asia, a lot of these arguments about women and economic growth are made in Sub-Saharan Africa, where women are very active in the economy, in the fields, in farming, and so on. Nobody says, you know invest in the South Asian woman farmer and you will have no famine in South Asia. Because they know that have a very fairly, you know, very working class women work in the fields, but middle-income farmers, their wives do not work in the fields.

So, the productivity argument is quite limited in cultures where women are restrained from taking part in economic activity. The problem with those arguments is when we pin all our advocacy on them when they are so precariously balanced, you know, there are times when exploiting women is very good for growth, you know. So, we have to be very careful and never forget the justice argument, any society that treats half of its population as inferior is—does not deserve to be called a democratic society.

But I don't think that's the whole argument. You know, you don't say, "We should treat Black people in the United States better because it's good for the economic growth." You know, people don't say that. They say, "We should treat Black people better because otherwise we cannot call America an equal society."

**MOMOYA:** I like your framing of it as sort of dual, the need for dual arguments, for both the instrumental economic growth, but also for the social justice angle. I feel that in the current economic crisis that the argument for the—I see that the argument for, the

instrumental argument winning out, or at least more prevalent. It seems like a lot of people are saying, “Well, women are the solution to the economic crisis. Invest in women. Make them work more. You know, create industries and sectors where women can be employed.” And I don’t, I guess, I see the rights based argument and the argument that based in social justice not as prevalent in the discourse, both the development discourse and the conversations around fixing the global financial crisis. Is that consistent with what you’re seeing?

**KABEER:** Well, you could interpret what’s happening in—well, the thing is a number of things are happening at the same time, right? And you can also interpret the same thing a number of different ways.

One of the things I think the financial crisis is doing because it is the stem of the global crisis, but we have experiences from other financial crisis and we know that men and women get hit differently. And that regardless of whether it is women who lose their jobs first or men who lose their jobs first, women’s paid and unpaid labor is the safety net and last resort. It is the one that—

We also know that this financial crisis is the product of policy decisions and choices which has systematically prioritized market values, prioritized paid commodities, paid work and so on, and systematically undervalued precisely those kinds of activities and contributions that women make, which is the unpaid care work, and—or even the paid care work.

So, in a way a crisis often reveals the fundamental fault lines in a system. And I think one could also see this, as many people do, as an opportunity to say, you know people are saying, “We want a fairer, greener, gentler capitalism.”

You know, so is this an opportunity to make those arguments? Those arguments do not have to be made purely in economic terms and instrumental terms, but they have to be made in terms of values. That, you know, a democratic society is one in which the policy decisions that are made reflect some sense of the society that it is representing. Right? Up till now, we know that women do not participate in decision making processes. They are not in the financial system. They are not very active, not very influential in the political system. Would the world, would capitalism look different if we had women better represented? Now, I, I don’t know the answer, right.

**MOMOYA:** I was just going to ask you what you thought.

**KABEER:** I don’t know the answer, because I don’t want to say this, an essential difference between men and women. You know, we know that women can be as good capitalists as men. But we also know that when women do have forms of power, they seem to use it differently. Okay? And they use it differently, not because they are

genetically predisposed to using it differently, but because they have different sets of experiences and different responsibilities and so on.

So, we know for instance in India, we know that women who are elected to local government are much more likely to vote for public goods and, you know, irrigation, roads, etc., and much more likely to vote for cost effective ways of delivering public goods. We also know that more women are likely to participate in political meetings if a woman is leading the council. You know, we know that from India. We know in Norway that in municipalities, that if women are in the majority, childcare facilities are more likely to be provided by a municipality.

So, all I'm saying is you know, here is an opportunity to say, there are different kinds of values that people's life experiences have given them. And it may be that what we've had is such a skewed system, such a lopsided system because it, it embodied only a particular, very narrow set. I wouldn't say masculine values, but a particular hyper-masculine set of values. You know, so, one would want to see a greater democratization of the way capitalism is run.

**MOMOYA:** And what do you think are some of the ways that that can be brought about and who are the agents to bring that about?

**KABEER:** I think, you know, women are much more organized than they used to be. And they're also organized not just as women, but they're organized in you know, workplaces, they're organized in political parties and so on.

I think also because feminism, you know second wave feminism, whatever is you know, it has seen sons growing up through that period. There are many more men, I think that are less threatened by the idea of sharing power with women. So, I think it is a question of you know, continued dialogue between women's organizations, women, but also I think younger men. You know, because I think that my generation of men are a little bit stubborn in their ways. But I feel like there is a generation of young men in India and Bangladesh and the U.S. that are much more comfortable around women.

**MOMOYA:** So you mentioned a few minutes ago that for some economic growth and gender inequality go hand in hand. In other cases economic growth benefits from gender inequalities. So, how can we make so that growth and equality can continue to go hand in hand versus the other way, whereby people who are benefiting from growth in the system as it is, are benefiting, you know, because inequality continues to persist.

**KABEER:** Well, I think you know, I guess what one of the things you are saying is that a lot of people benefit from the systems as it is, right? And how do we destabilize that and how do we make sure that—well, one is of course when we talk about polarization. You know, that polarization, interestingly I think, has been between a few very wealthy people and a large majority of people who have not prospered as much, right? So, the

gap between the very top layer and bulk of society has widened. That's where the widening is. It's not between the poor and the middle classes. So, already it is a minority I think that prefer this, and the anger that people have expressed at the kind of benefits and pay packets and bonuses, the excess, reward excess, risk syndrome, I think that's very widespread and it's not confined to a minority of working class people. It is, there is disgust across the working class system, and this crisis had kind of brought it out into the open.

I think somewhere people have to accept that there is a trade-off, and that this excessive, you know, these rates of growth, which haven't been that wonderful in the West anyway, but the rates of prosperity that people have talked about have benefited very few people, that we may settle for slightly lower rates of growth in order to equalize.

You know, there may be, I don't know—people say that levels of inequality can curtail the rate at which growth translates into poverty reduction and well-being. So, if we want that growth to benefit the vast majority of people, we have to deal with inequalities and we have to address inequalities.

If this growth that we've had has led to these very high levels of inequality, if people say they are more stressed out than they ever were in, in rich countries, if the money that you're saving by not spending on welfare, you're using to put security guards everywhere, you know, what's the point?

**MOMAYA:** So there are those that would say that it's hard to be politically empowered if you don't have enough to eat and you don't have shelter, and you're struggling so much. It's hard to want to participate or have the energy or the time or the resources to participate in the political system. There are others that would say that that is the catalyzing force, like being so marginalized is—causes people to, to speak up, to stand up for things that they feel like are unjust.

What has been your experience and understanding of the relationship between economic empowerment or disempowerment and political empowerment or disempowerment?

**KABEER:** You know, I think the two are very closely intertwined. And I think it is true when people are hungry, and you know, their child is sick and they have no way of getting care, and they will turn to whatever means they have and very often it is to look towards patrons, you know patronage systems, and that's the way it happens in, you know, in my part of the world. Um, they may go out and steal. Or they may, you know they may do all kinds of things.

**MOMOYA:** They may sell their bodies.





