counter movement could lead to increasing militancy as in the USA, Connolly's book is to be welcomed for its upbeat, optimistic reassessment of feminism and the women's movement in Ireland.

Taken together, these three books illustrate the advances in the study of the histories of women in Ireland. They offer an interesting representation of the stages reached in the project of reclaiming and retelling Irish women's histories. They also reveal some of the different and differing approaches to those histories, and the continuing debates over Irish feminism and its roles and meaning in Irish society. What they share in common is the call for more research, analysis and debate on Irish women and their places and roles in Irish society. In this sense, they reflect Irish feminism itself, often divided but united in the cause of Irish women.

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The power to choose: Bangladeshi women and labour market decisions in London & Dhaka

Naila Kabeer; Verso, London and New York, 2000, ISBN: 1 85984 804 4

Naila Kabeer's book was published in 2000, but its contribution to current ethnicity, gender, development, economic and socio-cultural debates is still entirely relevant. Although the book's scope is more wide-ranging than her previous work, *Reversed Realities: Gender Hierarchies in Development Thought* (Verso, 1994), it theoretically and methodologically builds on her earlier study in its engagement with and reflection upon the inter-disciplinary nature of development analyses. The title of the book indicates both the original scope of its theoretical parameters, its delineation of the political dimensions of ethnicity, inequality and gender on an international scale, and the specificity of its meticulous and detailed ethnographic research.

The work identifies a political lacuna, whereby recent consumption-led Western campaigns against conditions in exploitative trans-national textile and garment companies in Bangladesh have been accompanied by an ignorance about the historical, economic, cultural and gender specific significance that jobs have to women and/or children employed in the industry, and the parallel silence on the part of dominant culture activists concerning female Bangladeshi 'home-workers' in the East End of London. Kabeer addresses this issue by focusing her central argument on the transformative nature of social agency as integral to Bangladeshi women's different employment choices in the two countries.

In this way, gender and 'difference' are explored, not as essentialist components of fixed ethnic categories, but as a complex interweaving of the subjective and the social. Personal histories of migration, economic and social exclusion and inclusion and household conflict and/or transformation are analysed in the context of the history of a particular industry with a specific colonialist past, the economic, cultural and social institutions which Bangladeshi communities inhabit, and international market developments that both affect and are affected by the decisions made by individuals.

In a crucial chapter, entitled 'Rational Fools or Cultural Dopes', Kabeer argues against mainstream economic analyses that identify household choices as mere economic 'units' dependent on individuals' relative wealth or earnings, structuralist analyses that emphasize market supply as determining gendered decisions about employment and socio-culturalist paradigms. Kabeer stresses the problematic nature of these positions, in relation to analyses of Third World or Muslim women, which attribute human behaviour to the internalization of social and cultural norms. Kabeer slices through the literature perceptively and accessibly, bringing her own analysis to side with theoretical middle ground critics who consider agency and structure as mutually interdependent. In referring to economic, sociological, cultural and feminist accounts, Kabeer extends current debates in many fields, not least that of cultural studies in her critique of Bourdieu's notions of 'habitus' and individual choice in relation to '...the possibility of social change ...through a distinction between different levels of adherence to the established order.' (p. 45)

It is in this respect that Kabeer's position is unashamedly political on both a local and global level. In focusing on the detailed accounts of the ways in which real changes and conflicts occur in the everyday lives and power relations of Bangladeshi households, whether in the relative 'invisibility' of their homes in the East End of London, through the decision to take up 'home-work' in the textile and garment industry, or in the 'visible' market place of Bangladesh, through the increasing choice of young women to enter the work force as textile and garment factory workers, Kabeer does not merely "give voice" to the excluded (p. 52). Instead, she locates women's potential for understanding and transforming their

lives within the broader social context of oppression and economic or social exclusion and/or inclusion.

Individual accounts of women in both countries are often painful in terms of the degree of gender or racial harassment encountered, as a result of employment decisions they have made for complex reasons, varying from need to desire. But equally employment decisions are seen by both sets of women, in their different social, geographic and market contexts, as of real material and/or symbolic value in relation to the respect of their families and/or changes to their own lives and those of the next generation of Bangladeshi children, specifically that of girls. Thus broader political implications are indicated, in that East End of London 'home-work' decisions are not merely culturally determined as 'inert' acceptance of Muslim community gender imperatives, but rather represent an understanding by first-generation Bangladeshi women of their impermanent and specific economic transition towards social inclusion from a condition of isolation through language and familial constraints. Similarly, young Bangladeshi women often saw employment in urban textile and garment factories in Bangladesh as a transition towards material independence. The political implications of these choices reflect both an acknowledgement and critique of sweated clothing industry literature (e.g. Ross, 1997), which supports dominant culture attitudes in instigating global campaigns against Third World employment conditions and yet provide no suggestions for alternative economic survival, let alone self-realization.

The book is refreshingly free of academic jargon, although its analysis is necessarily rooted within an academic framework. In avoiding essentialist arguments and through revealing connections between individual choices and social structures, Kabeer contributes significantly to current ethnicity debates, while at the same time engaging with and furthering Bangladeshi, feminist and sociological analyses.

The only criticism I would have of the book is that, although manufacturing rather than consumption decisions are the focus of the book, reference to consumption theories that take social agency as a core tenet are omitted (e.g. Daniel Miller *et al.*). Naila Kabeer argues cogently, in line with global critiques, such as that of Mark Curtis in *Web of Deceit – Britain's real Role in the World* (Vintage, 2003), for '...the abandoning of notions of 'international competitiveness' as the solution to national regeneration', (Curtis, 2003: 440) and global policies inclusive of decision-making in local communities.

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