

# Thoughts on Dignity

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discussion paper

## Why Explore Dignity? Utility

If we are to advance and make real the vision of a world in which human beings enjoy all their human rights in peace, we need to consider the utility of the concept of "dignity". Are the problems of elasticity for analytical and ideological clarity a challenge to the strength of the term as political rhetoric and for political actions? Can it provide an umbrella for diverse political articulations? Experience has taught us that concepts of equality, non-discrimination, and economic empowerment/security are not enough. They have not united diverse social justice movements and, furthermore, hold the potential to get us only part of the way to that ideal world. Consider: what do claims of equal pay mean for a woman worker being paid less than her male colleague doing the same work when he is not being paid a livable wage? What do claims of discrimination mean when the employment sector from which one is barred demands work hours that are detrimental to physical and emotional health and to healthy families? What do claims of the right to work mean when the market forces of globalization drive wages below the level of a decent

livelihood and into the basement of merely surviving? What do claims of "economic empowerment" mean when one is, despite wealth, denied social and political inclusion because of gender, race, caste, or because she is a sex worker?

This essay discusses the possibility that the concept of "dignity" may help in advancing a holistic approach to theory and practice. After discussing the political utility of the concept of dignity to strengthen and unite social justice movements, the essay considers the challenges inherent in coming to a common understanding of the term "dignity", raises the significance of globalization, highlights the importance of developing appropriate measurement mechanisms, grapples with the role of the State, and concludes with an urgent call for activists to pursue engagement with the potential of this concept to advance social justice.

This contribution to the on-going discussion is intended to raise, not answer, questions and to suggest areas for further and deeper exploration. Its purpose is to engage people across all social movements in considering the possibilities. Perhaps the concept of dignity enables scholars and activists to

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\* Rather than interrupt this essay with a plethora of footnotes, an annotated appendix presents the research that contributed significantly to the ideas presented herein.

clarify understandings of common bonds across social justice movements and aspirations, strengthens alliances and collaborations, and enhances the capacity to take into account gender and the variety of socially significant identities that lie within each individual and group. Perhaps it is possible to avoid the “compartmentalization” of rights that have created divisions of theory and practice (e.g., economic rights, women’s rights, political rights, cultural rights) that have been detrimental to effective, collaborative work that responds to the multifaceted reality of real people and their lives. And, as we consider the realities of real people and their lives, we must be intentional in rejecting a gender-neutral vision. In the real world, theory and practice are irrelevant unless the differing situations of men and women are acknowledged, understood, and incorporated. Let us consider what a new politics of dignity might offer.<sup>1</sup>

## What is meant by Dignity? **Definition**

The term “dignity” is not new and its usage spans not only centuries but also national constitutions and laws as well as documents of international entities including the United Nations. The Preamble of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that “recognition of the inherent dignity and of equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world”.

Dignity is in such wide usage that its meaning is not clear. Is dignity

something with which human beings are born? Is dignity an acquired quality conferred upon those who benefit from existing inequalities and discrimination? If not an inherent quality conferred at birth, who then confers dignity upon a human being and what are the requirements for conferment? What is dignity to an individual? What is dignity in terms of a community? A society? A nation? A world? And as we struggle with the definition of this dignity, consider how much definitional and theoretical clarification is necessary for even the concept of dignity to become a politically, socially, and culturally powerful vehicle for uniting and invigorating social movements and effecting societal transformation.

The World Dignity Forum (WDF), an international initiative for dignity, rights and action initiated by Dalits and non-Dalits of India and South Asia to oppose castesism, racism, discrimination and exclusions based on caste, class, race, colour, gender, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, ability/disability, has opened a significant space for developing the concept of dignity through its website ([www.worlddignityforum.org](http://www.worlddignityforum.org)) and its work at three convenings of the World Social Forum, in India (2004), in Brazil

*“Dignity is universal and non-violable, irrespective of the context. It’s a gift that we carry since our birth. It cannot be challenged and if it is, it cannot be removed.”*

(Meena Seshu, SAGRAM)

*“Dignity is universal; its manifestations can be different for different people, depending on their economic, social, cultural situations. Without them dignity can’t be evaluated. Dignity as a concept is really difficult to define but we can try and locate its negative manifestations and they come to terms with the parameters of dignity.”*

(Manisha Gupte, MASUM)

*“Dignity is the quintessential of Human Rights.”*

(Justice V.S Verma, Ex-Director, National Human Rights Commission, India)

*“Dignity would mean ‘at par’, where they are treated as a human being, man and woman like any other, in spite of their differences”*

(Malobika, SAPPHO)

(2005), and in Karachi (2006). The WDF sees dignity as “the fulcrum for keeping the balance between its Dalit roots and its international collaborative spirit and the approach to multiplicity.” So, what is this dignity? At its most succinct, WDF defines dignity as “freedom to live in peace, health and hope”. Employment, education, health, freedom from hunger, guaranteed livelihood, social security and related economic and social rights are considered crucial to ensuring the dignified existence contemplated by this concept of dignity concept. Conceptually, WDF expands dignity as follows:

*Dignity is a universal human concern. Its moral agenda is to attempt a dual evolution of the individual community, on the one hand, and the social formation, on the other. In terms of the individual or the collective it assigns equal worth to all, without any distinction of colour, race, caste, gender, ethnicity, ability/disability, or language. It is intrinsically valuable and is hence non-negotiable. Dignity must be deployed as a moral concept, in order to measure the degree of decency of a civilization. The concept of dignity is therefore aimed at regulating the protocols that may undermine the socio-economic basis of dignity. Dignity is further linked to the concept of autonomy, defined in terms of freedom that an individual seeks from multiple structures of domination. Backed by a framework of rights, dignity creates a sense of self-respect, which can be reflected in demeanor and body language.*

Here, we see dignity as embedded along a social continuum commencing with the social context and embracing ultimately the individual’s sense of self-respect. Dignity is simultaneously universal and as individualistic as body language.

Though universal, its realm is the particular society, community, and individual. It challenges common mechanisms for exclusion – color, race, caste, class, gender, and other socially relevant factors.

The complexity of context is essential to this conversation; otherwise, we risk an abstraction that is irrelevant to the lives of real people and real political, social, cultural, and economic contexts. We are reminded of this by Dr. Geetha B. Nambissan who offers another succinct phrasing to understand dignity: “[I]n the broadest sense Human Rights is the right of every citizen in this country [India] to be treated with dignity regardless of caste, community, gender and thereby realize their own capabilities and capacities”.

Rajni Tilak and Sana Das expand our comprehension of the centrality of complexity by discussing the lives of Dalit women as impacted by poverty, lack of education, discrimination against women, caste, class, and gender. Denying caste as a problem for gender, they explain, places at risk the accuracy of theoretical and political work. We need to understand that “poverty (income and consumption criteria) is an inadequate measure to understand the situation of dalits and dalit women, who are discriminated not only by caste Hindus but also by their own men in their homes, and other women.” Thus, the conversation about dignity has to engage simultaneously not only gender, but all the mechanisms of exclusion and discrimination experienced by individuals and groups.

This is so, not only with respect to Dalit women, but in our analysis

of the situation of any individual, group, or community. The challenge is formidable; and, yet, women activists are doing this in their work every day. There is much to learn from them.

## Why Globalization Matters? **Context**

Globalization releases market forces that enhance poverty – the poor get poorer – and exponentially enhance wealth to the detriment of values of democracy and human rights. The public sector becomes smaller; the private sector becomes more avaricious. The number of marginalized people expands and misery is deepened among them as local livelihood resources are destroyed. Disastrous migration sets desperate people in motion

but the hope of jobs paying livable wages is a false hope. Communities are annihilated as social bonds are decimated. If any relief is offered by the State, it is in the form of minimalist welfare measures, not social justice.

The World Social Forum also demonstrates vibrantly that globalization also matters in the sense that social justice activists across the globe have developed responses to globalization and the particular forms of its impact upon their worlds. From the local to the national governments, from local businesses to multi-national corporations, through societies at all levels, the peculiarities of discriminatory and exclusionary practices and policies now combine with globalization to heighten their effectiveness in violating dignity.

### **SEX WORKERS AND DIGNITY**

*Sex workers are amongst the most marginalized communities in all societies. They are universally denied their sense of dignity and deprived of their rights as human beings. They are not recognized as citizens or workers by the States, societies, and communities.*

*Sex workers are socially ostracized and are continuously discriminated against. They are incessantly judged and compared to a 'good woman' and failing to resemble which, they are labeled 'undeserving' and hence not entitled to any rights. Moreover, they are also viewed as a threat to society as they are believed to pollute the social milieu and impinge on the dignity of others.*

*The oppression of stigma is used as a control mechanism to keep them vulnerable and marginalized. It not only diminishes their dignity but being 'socially unaccepted' also denies dignity to their children. Elderly women, who have left the profession for years continue to live with this stigma for life.*

*Sex workers are generally economically sound. They are able to earn and provide for themselves. This ensures some confidence, self respect, and decision making power which several other groups of women don't have. Yet economic dignity does not translate into social dignity for them.*

*Sex workers struggle to gain recognition as workers which will allow them social protection and other benefits. Acknowledging them as workers is seen as accepting the 'dirty business' of sex work by various worker's rights groups.*

Based on interviews with Meena Seshu of SANGRAM & with staff of DURBAR MAHILA SAMMANAYAN SAMITI



## How Low Can You Go? Measurement

Tilak and Das take us to the significant challenge of measurement. We know from experience that in the absence of appropriate and measurable indicators of social realities, the assertion of rights remains in the realm of the ephemeral. Thus, we are challenged not only to develop a shared understanding of the concept of dignity, but also to develop appropriate measures of dignity so as to understand the situation of human beings and their societies and to take appropriate action to move toward realization of dignity for all persons. As Tilak and Das note:

*The freedom from poverty has to address the "multiple patriarchies" and violence. It has to focus on a human poverty (defined as the denial of opportunities and choices to live a most basic or tolerable human life and capabilities) that bring to the forefront, dignity and community-relations in society, along with the possession or lack of assets, services, jobs, autonomy and time.*

Poverty alleviation under Millennium Development Goals is the buzz word in several circles. However, most of these poverty alleviation schemes are based on welfare model and not social justice that ensures human dignity. Relying upon the usual measures of poverty does not help the situation of Dalit or other

marginalized women. Use of those measure (income and consumption criteria) will, in fact, lead us in useless directions of policy, advocacy and activism – because these measures deliver false knowledge which is worse than no knowledge at all.

Since we are thinking about measurement, consider the creation of dignity impact studies. While, as the originator notes, such studies may sound utopian, this was true at one time of environmental impact studies which are now widely accepted. What matrix of factors and measurements would we envision?

Also consider the group nature of significant dignity violations. Not just individuals, but groups such as women, Dalits, sex workers, and indigenous groups endure dignity violations from cultural and social practices and accompanying practices and policies in employment, education, provision of social services, etc. Such violations of dignity of the groups are linked to structural patterns and require structural solutions. Thus, measures need to engage the group experience, the social and cultural practices and policies and practices in various spheres.

The key question would be "How low do you go?" What are the measurable manifestations in life that tell us whether dignity is realized in a particular context? What measurements constitute failure? How much is "enough" to attain dignity?

## Where is the responsibility to ensure dignity? **The State**

As is true of every other human right, the concept of dignity may remain an ephemeral dream and

*"Ideally the state should treat everyone in the same manner, but who is to decide what is that manner or level of equality. Moreover as the state has power to control and constrict, so whoever confirms to it is treated equally and with respect and others are not. Thus any one controlling the state also controls the concept of dignity."*

*(Meena Seshu, SANGRAM)*

slide into irrelevance unless we develop an understanding of this right and the State recognizes its corresponding obligations including the regulation of private actors.

The human rights framework has been grounded in the past on obligations

of the State and the United Nations institutions created to hold States accountable. However, in today's world, the traditional role and power of the State is in flux as powerful non-State actors emerge. And, communities and activists are experiencing the reality of a State that is unresponsive to demands for justice or that responds oppressively to those making such demands.

A seminal conversation occurred in Goa, India in 2004 among women from Australia, Egypt, Ghana, Puerto Rico, Brazil, Israel, Philippines, India, South Africa, Mexico, Malaysia, Chile, Argentina and the U.S.<sup>2</sup> The discussants illuminated the broad concern about State accountability for recognizing, respecting and protecting human rights as diverse influences are changing the traditional role and power of the State. States are contending with the power

of non-State actors such as the World Trade Organization, transnational corporations, international financial institutions, para military and armed groups, and even donor agencies and individual billionaires. The growing hegemony of these powerful non-State actors makes it even more challenging for activists and the people to engage democratic processes to influence the State and to hold it accountable for recognizing, protecting and enforcing human rights – especially those in the spheres of economic, social and cultural rights.

The Goa conversation emphasized the need for building social movements as a mechanism for enforcing State accountability. Unfortunately, the language of human rights is susceptible to co-optation by institutions like the World Bank (for example, the World Bank usurps rights language to assert its "rights based approach" to development) and to mystifying, elitest appropriation that serves to alienate and distance rights from the very people human rights are meant to protect. Even so, discussants saw the potential for social justice movements to be strengthened and united by the human rights framework because it aspires to full democracy and State accountability.

Discussants also noted the numerous critiques of the weaknesses of the United Nations system, including its treaties and conventions, and its failure to hold States accountable for human rights violations. On the one hand, there are advocates for strengthening the UN through innovative means to hold States

accountable and to challenge international trade systems that threaten human rights. Others observe that remaining with the current UN-centered approach has clear limitations with respect to the actions of non-State entities. The international trade regulations flourishing under globalization have resulted in the rise of systems parallel to the UN of international organizing and mechanisms of enforcement. An approach with some potential is to develop the obligation of the State to ensure that international trade agreements comply with human rights agreements into which the State has entered.

What can right to dignity bring to all the current discussions on the role of the state and state accountability given how neo liberal forces are continuously decreasing state accountability? Can dignity be the much need bench mark to evaluate state performance? How can we make dignity an effective tool to hold state accountable?

## Conclusion

There is an on-going global conversation about the potential for the concept of dignity to represent all to which we aspire in our diverse social justice work. If we understand

our work to be about the human right to dignity, there is the potential to see more clearly the goals to which we aspire and the strategies that are likely to be successful in the long term. There is the possibility to unite and strengthen social justice movements and to effect significant social transformation. This essay summarizes some of the challenges to realizing that potential. It is in response to this potential and these challenges that we need to engage in an intense, deeper analysis. This essay is a call to engage in that deeper conversation and, especially, to struggle with the significant challenges of definition, measurement and the development of indicators, and to make concrete proposals for the realities of State power and the rise of non-State actors. This deeper discussion must be intentional in rejecting a gender-neutral vision so that the new thinking engages the real world as lived and experienced by men and women.

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<sup>1</sup>In the United States, a recently launched conversation growing out of that particular context concerns the concept of "Opportunity" as a positive articulation of shared values and goals. A new organization, The Opportunity Agenda, led by Alan Jenkins, is a communications, research, and advocacy organization committed to building the national will in the U.S. to expand opportunity. The organization understands "opportunity" as the aspiration that has given rise to policies and peoples' movements in the U.S. The term is defined as "a collection of experiences anchored in a set of interrelated values, all of which must exist together and simultaneously. Those experiences are discussed under the themes of: community, voice, equality, mobility, security, and redemption. The Opportunity Agenda also asserts that Opportunity values are human rights values. For more information, see [www.opportunityagenda.org/humanrights](http://www.opportunityagenda.org/humanrights).

<sup>2</sup>*Crossing Boundaries: Women and Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* (PWESCR 2005), a report of a meeting in Goa, India during October 28-31, 2004

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PWESCR works to promote women's human rights, especially in the context of economic, social and cultural rights, by bringing a gender framework to policy, law and practice at local, national, regional and international levels, through ever-evolving strategies and activities in both conceptual and practical realms

## Goals:

- ❖ To establish links and foster collaborations in order to enhance learning, as well as develop shared strategies to advocate problem-solving alternatives at all levels in the context of gender.
- ❖ To build leadership and capacity of groups, organizations, activists and other actors in the field of human rights and economic justice in the context of promoting women's ESCR.