



Dignity and Human Rights

The Missing Dialogue?

Dignity and Human Rights

A missing dialogue?

Report of a Meeting at
The Rockefeller Foundation Bellagio Center
Bellagio, Italy
April 7-10, 2009

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Preface

PWESCR (the Programme on Women's Economic, Social and Cultural Rights), an international human rights organization with a focus on women's poverty, is continuously challenged regarding the relevance of human rights. The hardships of day-to-day survival for basic rights are screaming loudly and clearly of human rights violations and demand intervention. Working from its base in the Global South, PWESCR observes that the "top-down" approach to human rights with North-based articulations has limited relevance to Southern realities. The North-based approach fails to capture the nuances of history, cultural, society and local governance dynamics and to understand the challenges of working in such complex realities. The "technocratic" responses or solutions rooted in legal language and in limited interpretations are even more removed from women's realities in the South. The question with which we grapple is, can the human rights framework go beyond the rhetoric and address some of the most pressing issues of vulnerability, marginalization and discrimination that women—especially those from socially and economically excluded communities—face on a daily basis?

During PWESCR's fact-finding mission on Dalit women's economic, social and cultural rights (ESCR), for example, we came across a Dalit village, Bagarion ki Dhaani, just outside Jaipur, in India.¹ The average household income of this village is INR 300 per month which is about USD 8 per month for a family of four to five members. The village had nothing—no infrastructure, schools, primary health clinic, road, electricity, or water—only mud houses. Government-initiated social assistance programmes were very sketchy and covered only few. There are around 90 Dalit families living in this village. Agriculture, the main source of subsistence and livelihood, had collapsed completely with repeated drought; options for wage work are very limited. Several men had migrated to other states for work and a few women worked in stone quarries with horrendous conditions to earn less than a dollar a day. Women also did odd jobs such as cleaning toilets and cattle pens and removing cow dung for upper caste households in nearby villages. They received leftover food or buttermilk in exchange for this work. These poor Dalit women have no bargaining power and cannot refuse the work or negotiate a wage for it. As human rights advocates, we documented all violations and highlighted systemic oppression faced by the Dalit women.


¹*Dalit Women in Rajasthan: Status of Economic, Social & Cultural Rights*, a report from the fact finding mission can be found on http://pwescr.org/Dalit_Report.pdf

Can a long list of human rights violations capture the lived experiences of these women? Can it help change this reality? In such adverse conditions, what human rights conversations can one have? If one has only USD 8 for the whole month to feed a family of five, can such a person, in a state of such severe poverty, be in a position to even think about rights, equality, oppression and non-discrimination? Unfortunately, documenting these violations was the best we could do and so that is what we did. We have allowed human life to fall so much below any acceptable standard of living and people are surviving with less and less every day. I am deeply sad to say that the life women in Bagarion ki Dhaani live is not human life. It just can't be human life! The hard truth is that human rights, in all its glory and international acceptance, have no relevance here. This truth, as a human rights activist, was deeply disturbing and very hard to accept. It is disturbing as it hits at the core of one's own belief in principles of global accountability, international standards, and state obligations—a belief that human rights instruments with a promise of universality, equality and non-discrimination can address any issue connected to any human being in any part of the world. There is a need to be critical of such gaps in the way the framework is interpreted which in theory ensures a dignified life for all but in reality fails to address some of the most pressing issues women, especially those from the most marginalized groups, confront.

Unfortunately, Bagarion ki Dhaani is not the only village in India that suffers these violations. In addition, many such villages exist in numerous other countries throughout the world where people are living in extreme poverty. The reality of these villages is far below the internationally accepted core obligations and human rights standards—a total failure of the international human rights system. The current system fails to prevent and to address situations of such deprivation. Obsession with the language and the framework has made 'humans' in human rights insignificant and invisible. How do we bring 'humans' to the core of human rights? Harsh exposure to complex realities lead us to further explore these concepts of dignity.

As feminists, we talk about equality and non-discrimination as premised on the claim that there is a 'floor' or standard for a dignified human life to which we, as women, have a right. Yet, in today's global economic politics, this floor does not exist. People have less and less. Therefore, what is the relevance of a substantive equality framework in context of Bagairon ki Dhaani. What claims can women have to equality where living conditions for everyone in the village are unacceptable? We learnt that for women from socially and economically excluded communities, the language of 'human rights' or 'equality' is foreign and irrelevant to their realities. The language they use is of 'dignity.' For example:

Sarita, a day wager from Mumbai wants a dignified life for herself and her family. In order to save INR 10 per day, she chooses to hitch a ride with a truck driver as opposed to taking the public bus, and allows the driver to fondle her breasts as this INR 10 saved is food in her child's belly.



Naina, a rural Dalit woman from Rajasthan, in the absence of affordable hygienic sanitary napkins, uses dirt packed on a cloth in between her legs to stop her menstrual flow while she continues with her daily chores.

A 65 year old widow from Karnataka, who never worked outside the home, was denied social security on a technicality after her husband's death, is now begging for work to survive.

All of these women dream of a life with dignity. Women's realities in the context of women's social and economic vulnerabilities force us to think about principles of dignity. Dignity has not been brought into discussions on human rights as an attainable condition. If mentioned, it is as a wistful aspiration. But, the concept of dignity is part and parcel of the core international human rights instruments. References to inherent dignity; dignity and worth of human persons; and all human beings equal in dignity, leave no room for doubt that dignity lies at the heart of human rights. We cannot say human rights are respected, protected and fulfilled if people do not live in dignity.

What is human dignity? How can we use the concept of dignity to better advance our struggles for human rights? Can we expand the principles of dignity to provide the much needed floor that would prevent human life from sinking below a certain standard? Dignity is used by most women in an inherently natural way. It is the global language of the poor. Can the concept of dignity bring human rights closer to people and their realities? Dignity also acknowledges our spirituality—our humanness in recognizing one's own self worth and respect for the same worth in others. It demands states to go beyond provision of the material aspects of any human right and to be engaged with the non-material dimensions of rights. For example, a homeless person needs a house to realize their right to adequate housing. A house will provide the much needed shelter, but it fails to capture what it means to be homeless. Can dignity legitimize non-material aspects of human rights?

These questions were at the core of discussion at the Dialogue on Human Dignity and Human Rights that PWESCR hosted from April 7 to 10, 2009 at the Rockefeller Foundation Bellagio Center, in Bellagio, Italy. The meeting brought experts from around the world to share their thoughts and to develop collectively new strategies for human rights. This report captures the nuances of that four-day meeting.

Conversations around human rights and dignity also grapple with role of the state. The basic tension between the inherent dignity of all people and the policies states need to put into place to guarantee universal human rights fuelled the discussion that took place at Bellagio. We want to push the discussion to new ground by

searching for ways to incorporate the value of human dignity into the interpretation and implementation of human rights, to identify options to establish dignity as a legitimate expectation and to make dignity a tangible reality.

PWESCR's on-going exploration on dignity and human rights continues to contribute toward increasing the knowledge base and scholarship to explore new ways of thinking about human rights work and to develop strategies that can be used in diverse situations to counter current challenges to human rights. We decided to publish this report on this dialogue in hopes that it will stimulate further exploration and work amongst a wide range of audiences.

Priti Darooka
Executive Director
PWESCR



Introduction

Why this Conversation and Why Now?

The Human Rights Movement faces challenges of interpretation, application, and relevance to the realities of social justice activism. To put it bluntly, the Human Rights Movement is often criticized for its obsession with its framework and ‘legalese’ language and, in the process, losing sight of and contact with human beings and their aspirations. The Human Rights Movement is not singular in this regard. For example, Women’s movements have also been criticized for failures of theory and practice with respect to racial and ethnic minorities and other marginalized groups and with respect to issues of social and economic exclusion.²

The concept of dignity can respond to these challenges by re-energizing these movements – and others - by mending the fragmentation and bridging the widening divide between the Human Rights Movement and other social justice movements and empowering women’s movements globally. PWESCR has participated in on-going conversations and work, deepening its understanding of the power of the concept of dignity in making human rights a reality for all.³ Only the universal fulfillment of human rights in a meaningful way can make the concept of dignity real. We present here ideas that have evolved over several years about the relevance of examining and engaging the concept of dignity to achieve the goals of human rights and social justice movements.

PWESCR’s experience teaches that if we are to advance and make real the vision of a world in which all human beings enjoy all their human rights in peace, we must engage the concept of dignity. We have seen dignity, which underlies all human rights, become invisible. The ‘floor’ – the core minimum standard of a dignified human life

²Social Justice Feminism is a response to those failures of theory and practice. Burnham, Linda, *Report on the New Women’s Movement Retreats*, Ms. Foundation for Women, 2006; Kalsem, Kristin and Verna L. Williams, *Social Justice Feminism*, 18 UCLA Women’s Law Journal, UCLA, 2010, p. 131.

³PWESCR, based in New Delhi, 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. Its work and conversations inspired an essay “Thoughts on Dignity,” published in 2007. Since that time, PWESCR has continued the global conversation through an online dialogue cosponsored with Equal in Rights during July 2007, and a Dialogue at Bellagio Italy during April 2009.

to which each person has equal rights - is sinking and disintegrating. People, in particular women, children and groups traditionally discriminated against, are surviving with less every day, in the face of the devastating impacts of globalisation and mounting environmental challenges. We believe principles of dignity provide the much needed floor – establishing a standard for human life that is about more than survival. This contribution to the conversation is intended to generate a more holistic human rights approach that is enriched with dignity and grounded in people's realities.

This report summarizes the contributions from hundreds of activists to the conversation about the potential for the concept of dignity to power our individual and collective dreams of realizing a life of justice, peace and hope for every human being. In Chapter 1, we explore the concept of 'dignity', a word in common usage but in need of definition. We contend that this concept is both universal and offers meaning in specific social and cultural contexts.


In Chapter 2, activists make the case that dignity reinforces the foundation and legitimacy of human rights. Some within and outside the Human Rights Movement perceive this movement to struggle in connecting with aspirations and activism at the grassroots; we argue that dignity can bridge that disconnect.

In Chapter 3, we consider the potential for dignity to overcome the fragmentation of social justice movements. Some activists maintain that the Human Rights Movement suffers from 'silo syndrome' and has lost the power of an analytical frame that appreciates the panoply of rights as a 'bundle' rather than as separate and disparate spheres. We share thoughts on how the concept of dignity can bring the Human Rights Movement and other social justice movements into meaningful solidarity. We hear dignity as the language of the people that mends the disconnect between human rights rhetoric and the lived experiences of disadvantaged and oppressed communities.

In Chapter 4, we address the vexing issues surrounding the State. We re-create the State as a dignity-inspired entity and explain its primary roles from that perspective. The chapter elaborates initial thoughts on what a dignity-inspired, rights-based State would look like and some key areas for action.

In Chapter 5, we grapple with the economy and challenge the role of economists as the high priests of global society. Our starting point is that human rights should define the goals of the economic system, re-positioning economics as the science of provisioning, focusing on equality and poverty reduction. We see human rights as offering a valuable set of normative principles—core human rights obligations, realizing rights progressively, inclusion of transparency and participation in processes of development with non-discrimination and international cooperation as legal obligations. We advocate for a new approach in which the provisioning sector disciplines the state, which then disciplines the market.

In Chapter 6, we consider the complexities of the subjective and the objective in measuring or quantifying dignity. How do we know if we are 'there' yet? Or, if we are in 'violation?'



Chapter 7 explores the necessity of spiritual transformation in our individual lives, in our conceptualization of social justice organizations and work and throughout our social justice movements. We consider the attention that should be paid to the spiritual dimension of human rights realization and advocate non-violence as a way of life.

Finally, in Chapter 8, we sound a Call to Action to those who consider themselves within the Human Rights Movement, within other Social Justice Movements, and/or those who partner in this work through various roles as policy makers, influencers of social practices, media and philanthropy.

We hope you are stimulated to engage and to move this conversation forward through dialogue and action, and to continue this work by supporting efforts that push against and abolish the boundaries of limited and static conceptual frames.

We Who Toil⁴

(Translated from Hindi)

We who toil are one
We who fight oppression are one!


In Korea, in India,
In Russia, China and Japan.
In Africa, in England,

We exist in the heart of every true one in the world.
We are not black or white, we are just one, one!

We have to lighten up these hutments forever,
We have to make the golden fields rustle forever.
Raise your hand and let go of the fear of death,
We have to sing the songs of life forever,
We who laugh in the face of death are all one, one!

We do not sell the smiles of children,
We do not sell the longings of our mothers.
In this market place of desire, where everything is up for grabs,
We do not sell the lives of human beings.
Those mad about freedom are all one, one!

⁴Indian People's Theatre Association, "We Who Toil," *Defining Dignity: An Anthology of Dreams, Hopes and Struggles*, 2003, p. 169.



Dignity is universal

Manisha Gupte, MASUM

Exploring the Concept of Dignity

The first words of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) proclaim the ‘inherent dignity’ of each member of the human family.⁵ Further, The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966) and numerous subsequent international human rights treaties recognise that human rights: derive from the inherent dignity of the human person. The intrinsic quality of dignity in humans is the premise for human rights. Human rights are derived from the notion of dignity—rights cannot be realized without dignity.

The relational aspects of human dignity are reflected in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: *All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.*⁶ It is this recognition of common humanity that leads to our obligations to one another. It also leads to our vulnerability. As Harsh Mander, Special Commissioner of the Supreme Court on the Right to Food,⁷ captured: *Dignity is the basis of self-respect and unconditional respect from others; unconditional respect for difference in others. But how do we acknowledge the equal humanness of difference? This*

notion of difference is why you are able to subject another to inhumanity.’ It is the point where distinctions can be drawn. Vulnerability to suffering and degradation is a further aspect of our dignity. Inequality is an erosion of dignity, not only because it does not recognize ‘the inherent dignity of the human person’, but also and above all, because it denies the conditions for all human persons to live in dignity. One’s inherent dignity may become mired in suffering and degradation if it is not matched by living conditions that make dignity a reality.

Dignity, an intrinsic human characteristic, is not the property of self-selected segments of society. It is not acquired as class inheritance, earned by socially approved behavior or assessed by one’s industriousness or production. It is, instead, the companion to belief that all human beings are inherently worthy beings. Thus, dignity is not linked to any achievement, capacity or behaviour; nor is it lost due to failure to achieve, lack of capacity or reprehensible behavior. This understanding of dignity has been reinforced in the development of the international law of human rights, driven by a need to reiterate and protect the common humanity of the human family.

⁵Article 1, Universal Declaration of Human Rights, United Nations, 1948.

⁶Article 1, Universal Declaration of Human Rights, United Nations, 1948.

⁷In this report, quotations or comments given by individual participants at the PWESCR Dialogue on Human Dignity and Human Rights at Bellagio Italy will be noted within the text by their name and organizational affiliation for the first use, and name in subsequent uses. Quotations or comments derived from the Dialogue as a body will noted as such. Any other quotation or citation will be made as a footnote.


The World Dignity Forum (WDF) is a leading voice in conceptualizing the meaning and dimensions of dignity:

*'Dignity is a universal human concern. Its moral agenda is to attempt a dual evolution of the individual, on the one hand, and the social formation of community, 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.'*⁸

Dignity is our own sense of worth combined with the worth that we assign to others as human beings. It is a basis for unconditional respect for self and others; it is, in fact, the full recognition of our humanness. The connection to others is a critical distinction. Thus, while dignity can be framed as the assertion of autonomy, *'this is only if it is in support of universal autonomy. If it involves crushing somebody else's right, it is ego.'* (Ashok Bharti, Founder of the World Dignity Forum). Therefore, there is no dignity without respecting difference: recognising and valuing our own self is bound to the comparable recognition and value we give to others. Solidarity, then, is at the essence of human dignity. As Aton Fon Filho, Rede Social de Justica e Direitos Humanos, elaborated, when we talk of dignity, we talk of a human attribute. Because humans exist in society it is also a social attribute. This relational aspect signifies solidarity: at its heart it is the recognition of the humanity in another - of seeing respect of the dignity in others as respect to one's own dignity. In that sense, it is seeing our shared humanity.

In the same way, equality and respect for diversity are a natural consequence of dignity. When commonalities amongst human beings are recognised, differences do not justify discrimination and oppression. This recognition leads us to equality. Aton continues that: *'We are all different, but when I recognise you as a human being as I recognise myself as a human being, I recognise myself as equal to him and him to me. This social recognition also drives us beyond equality to respect for diversity. We share common value as human beings, we are equal, yet we are different. But in this diversity I can see equality, then her dignity is part of my dignity as it is part of humankind's dignity. If her dignity is unrespected, I can say that my dignity is unrespected. Then I can arrive at solidarity.'*

We contend for the conscious re-positioning of dignity as the foundational value that human rights have been created to affirm, protect and enable. This consciousness has implications for the human rights movement, in terms of strategies, norms, measures and articulated values.



Dignity inspires a holistic vision of human rights, illuminating their scope and far-reaching, transformational nature. It expresses the need to move beyond a violations framework to create positive models of a society that realizes human rights.

"In the era of globalisation, when the idea of community is shifting, when the markers and boundaries of identity are shifting, for the human rights movements to promote fresh ideas about brotherhood - common membership of the human family, these are the best safeguards against humiliation and degradation."

Ignacio Saiz

Centre for Economic and Social Rights

While dignity is more important to the human spirit than wealth, as Jacqueline Novogratz, CEO of Acumen Fund, recognizes, human dignity nonetheless requires material social well-being. Virginia Bras Gomes, United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, frames this understanding as *'a survival kit that prevents people from living below a decent standard.'* It conveys the support and autonomy required to achieve capabilities and enjoy opportunities to lead the life one chooses, to fulfill one's potential. Sandra Liebenberg supports this, citing necessary action from the State to create the conditions for each person to have their essential needs satisfied as a part of the meaning of dignity. She sees that in conditions of deprivation, human beings retain their dignity, but are deprived of the opportunity to live in dignity, to live in conditions that enable them to develop their capabilities and to participate as agents in the shaping of their society. *'Thus, to value the inherent dignity of human beings as a society is to ensure that the material conditions exist in which people can develop their capabilities and participate in shaping their society.'*⁹

For example, the India Supreme Court elaborated upon dignity's place at the core of the right to life:


*'We think that the right to life includes the right to live with human dignity and all that goes along with it, namely, the bare necessities of life such as adequate nutrition, clothing and shelter and facilities for reading, writing and expressing one-self in diverse forms, freely moving about and mixing and commingling with fellow human beings. ... it must, in any view of the matter, include the right to the basic necessities of life and also the right to carry on such functions and activities as constitute the bare minimum expression of the human-self.'*¹⁰

⁹Liebenberg, Sandra, *The Value of Human Dignity in Interpreting Socio-Economic Rights*, SAJHR, 2005, p. 173.

¹⁰Supreme Court of India, *Francis Coralie v. Administrator, Union Territory of Delhi and Ors.* 1981 1 SCC 608.


We see increasing efforts to capture non-material aspects of human rights. The *Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women* (1993) has been interpreted broadly by the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the United Nations *Basic Principles and Guidelines on the Right to a Remedy and Reparation* (2005), to provide for the restoration of people to their identity, family life, residence, employment enjoyed before gross violations of human rights, rehabilitation, public disclosure of the truth, guarantees of non-repetition and other measures in post-conflict processes to address the individual and societal psychological consequences of human rights violations.

These non-material aspects of realizing human rights, which are relevant to the obligations of the State and also pertain to non-State actors—including individuals—are illuminated when we think about living a life with dignity. As Aye Aye Win, Dignity International, captured: *'Human responsibility is important for human dignity: every human being also has a personal responsibility to give his/her best to contribute to the wellbeing of their family and society. The human dignity concept here goes well beyond legal obligations of a human rights framework to practicing human rights/human dignity as a way of life.'* Spiritual and emotional dimensions are present in the concept of dignity, which we discuss further in Chapter 7. Slowly, human rights work continues to push its own boundaries of interpretation. Dignity can ground this process and urge it forward.



Poverty won't allow him
to lift up his head;
dignity won't allow him
to bow it down.¹¹

¹¹Traditional Malagasy Proverb, Author Unknown.



The language of dignity is such that it may better facilitate movement on the need to create an enabling global environment for the recognition, respect and protection of human dignity. While there has been agreement to this in Article 28 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948 – ‘Everyone is entitled to a social and international order in which the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration can be fully realized,’ there is enormous political resistance to give this any true meaning.

Dignity Reinforces the Foundation and Legitimacy of Human Rights

The politicisation of human rights and the double standards by which States have applied them over the years have compromised their legitimacy and utility for advancing social justice. The deployment of human rights as political tools—in the form of conditionalities in funding, trade negotiations for Global South governments or as measures to meet political agendas in the UN Commission (now Council) on Human Rights—has contributed to State hostility from many Global South States. Within States, many campaigns of the powerful have further fixed a negative meaning to human rights, alienating people by presenting rights as designed only for criminals subject to State power.

These are some of the reasons that human rights are too often perceived as narrow, remote and legalistic. As Undaraya Tumursukh, National Network of Mongolian Women's NGOs (MONFEMNET), highlighted from her work with youth and women in Mongolia: *'Words such as human rights, gender equality and democracy do not reach the hearts of people - they sound too legalistic, too far from people's everyday lives. Human rights education has reinforced this belief, as it is typically approached through study in formal classroom sessions focusing on human rights as legal tools given by someone on the outside, rather than owned and asserted by each person individually. As a consequence, grassroots' embrace of human rights has been checkered, and has generally led to its poor relationship with other social justice movements.*

Emphasizing the grounding of human rights in human dignity challenges the political framing of Human Rights. As Ashok Bharti explained, *'The current limitations in human rights, such as its lack of perceived legitimacy as a tool of imperialism or the prevailing limited liberal economic interpretation, are rising only because human rights have been de-linked from their foundation – Dignity.'*

'The concept of dignity gives a common philosophical and ethical underpinning to the secular language of human rights, one which resonates with practically all spiritual and ethical traditions while not relying exclusively on any. It is thus a source of the moral legitimacy of the concept of human rights.'

Ignacio Saiz

'Dignity can help to ground moral, legal and political claims for an end to practices, policies, systems and conditions which result in the denial of human dignity. It can and has been invoked as a basis for abolishing the death penalty, ending prolonged detention without charge, eliminating violence against women or challenging the forced eviction of indigenous people from their ancestral lands.'

Ignacio Saiz

In recent years through the deepening inequalities between States and groups—as well as the dominant polarised global power structures—from cultural discourses to economic paradigms. Women and girls, especially those living in poverty, are particularly affected. Because the language of dignity confronts the privilege accorded those benefiting from these systems and exposes the denial of dignity implicit in the existing systems, we see a potent role for dignity in reinforcing the universality of human rights.


The language of dignity may, for example, provide an entry point to strengthen advocacy for transnational human rights obligations. The Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food captures the pressing need for recognition of extra-territorial obligations in an era of globalisation:

The primary obligations to respect, protect and fulfill the right to food of their people will always rest with national governments. However, in an age of globalization and increasing interconnectedness, when the actions and policies of every country can have far-reaching effects on people living in other countries, there is a need to extend a State's obligations under human rights to include extra-territorial obligations towards the right to food of people living in other countries.¹²

There are many arenas in which explicitly connecting human rights to dignity could expand both belief in human rights and the ability to obtain the conditions for people to live in dignity. Harsh Mander suggests one example, arguing that dignity can help to fight the enormous cultural barrier that tolerates inequality and the difference of dignity and worth of people of different identities, birth and gender. In India, he saw tremendous power in establishing an alternative regime of rights, not just in its operationalisation, but in the acceptance of its ethical legitimacy, which enabled its integration within both the values of society and its governing laws and policies. Dignity achieves this through its strong identification with people of all cultures and its personal ownership by the people. This, in turn, shifts attention from the compromising political use and international law aspect of human rights to a starting point that recognizes people's struggles and realities.

Dignity carries a powerful force to redress these issues as the grassroots level. It resonates and contributes hope, power and strength to people.

The limited realization of human rights has been exposed increasingly



'For us, human dignity is the central concept which gives rise to the formulation of specific human rights...once we get people to understand that it is their dignity that is the source of human rights, that when we talk about human rights we are trying to ensure that they are able to live fully and freely as human beings, they understand human rights much more easily and they feel inspired to protect and promote their own rights and the rights of others. Because, finally, they understand this is about living as HUMAN BEINGS, that it is about BEING HUMAN. Once people understand this central point, all the rest follows...'

Undarya Tumursukh

He goes on to emphasize the need for obligations to extend to powerful new actors including international organisations such as the World Bank, IMF and WTO, and private actors such as transnational corporations (TNCs). Realisation of the objectives of human rights demands this, he argues: *'The objectives of human rights was to limit arbitrary abuses of power by Governments against their citizens, but in an age when other public and private actors are more powerful than States, human rights must be extended to limit their potential abuses of power against people....With power must come responsibility.'*¹³

¹³ Ziegler, Jean., *The Right to Food*, Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, Jean Ziegler, United Nations, 16 March 2006.

Before¹⁵

Before I knew my ancestors were slaves,
I loved my life,
my room, my home,
my street, my community,
my city, my state,
my country, my world...

Before evil tongues spoke the word "nigger"
with demon eyes looking at me,
I loved to play at recess with my rainbow-colored playmates and
sometimes we'd fall out on the grass and look up at the sky,
and just laugh and imagine and dream
and feel joy, and peace and so much love.

Before In the mornings when we'd look up at the flag
with hand over heart and say the pledge of allegiance,
I didn't really know what it was all about,
But it seemed normal, and it felt good,
to be a part of something that everyone I cared for was a part of, and so

Before.. early on, I learned to love;
That is,
Before anything else,
I was love,
So it seemed so easy then to
Love first.

Before I learned politics or history,
or viewpoints, or racism, or prejudice,
or about ignorance or people with bad intentions,
I was a lover of all life and all people.

¹⁵ Lakiba 2009, "Before."

Before I knew that we couldn't ride in the front of the bus
or drink from any water fountain or vote in any election,
or go to any school, or get hired for any job,
or about poverty, police brutality, drugs,
black-on black or hate crimes,
I loved to sing America the Beautiful...

My voice.. ringing out the loudest.. the most melodious,
the most soulful, the most true, because
I was in love with myself, my class, my teacher, my school,
my friends, my family, my community,
my city, my state, my country, my world.

Before I grew up and began to know
my great-grandmother's pain, I felt joy even within
the held-back anger in her voice.
Behind closed doors she, African/Pawnee, taught us
how to work magic and how to treasure our power and protect our gifts, and too,
my grandmother scratched some of that pain in my head and braided
some of that wisdom and strength into my dreams.
So when my mother's heart spoke to me,
trying to explain why some people called me names,
I already understood part of it
even though I couldn't articulate it at the time

Before... what strengthened me were the values, the love and pride along with
the faith, courage, wisdom, humor, beauty, and 'all that'
our mothers, fathers and ancestors have been and are...

Before and even now
they're still living in me and in you..
in our cells, in our breath, in our hearts, in our souls,
in our voices, in our smiles, in our tears,
in our hair, in our noses, in our hands, in our memories, and too,
they're in the sky, in the stars, in the wind, in the fire,
in the sea, in the grass, in the trees, in this land,
in the echoes and in the whispers,
hiding behind the pictures in our bibles, in old boxes and photograph albums,
in old recipes and knick-knacks, and quilts
in the dust and in the corners...

Never far away...

And so it's not so strange
that Before and Now
I love knowing who I am and where I come from...
Where I've been and where I'm going
Because my people and I have been a part of it all...

A descendant of the strongest of the strong
A survivor of the middle passage and slavery
A survivor of the attempts to beat down the spirit,
A survivor of the attempts to create an amnesiac race
The true hate crime - Denying who we are
Attempting to make us feel insignificant.. undesired.. ugly..
implying incompetence..

Untruths require knowledge, wisdom and overstanding

just one sign..
a Mozambique woman forced to live in a tree for days
with rising life-threatening floodwaters..
had a baby in the tree
brought forth life for all to see
There's really NO-thing we cannot be or do..
'cause - no one owns the oceans
or the earth or the sky or the trees or our souls

Besides

Before.
My great-grandmother told me
We, A Mighty People!
So, if you should ever see me saluting the flag,
I guess it's because I remember a time
Before
when I thought it was about me and you and
Our liberty, Our freedom, Our pride,
Our presence, Our tears, Our light, Our song
Our hearts

Remembering how it felt before I knew all that I know today,
when I was just God's child on God's earth
Free to be me in all my power and glory

Before.

Dignity Overcomes Fragmentation

Transcending any particular movement, political affiliation, theoretical basis, philosophy or creed, dignity also has the potential to strengthen and unite diverse social movements and become a vehicle for social change. The power of dignity lies in its resonance with human experience, crossing all cultures—how people feel about themselves, their families and their day-to-day life. While many grassroots men, women and communities feel that they cannot claim their human rights in the face of abject deprivation and poverty, they can claim their dignity. Based on this, they can draw on and take action in their community. Thus, dignity has enormous added value in how we reach, engage with and mobilise communities deprived of the full realization of their human rights.

'Dignity is a particularly powerful and useful concept for asserting the human rights of marginalised and stigmatised groups whose common humanity is often denied through dehumanising discourses, such as the disabled, the elderly, dalit, indigenous people or minority ethnic groups, lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender people or sex workers.'

Ignacio Saiz

'Law may be the language of human rights and economics the language of development, but dignity is the language of the people.'

Bellagio Dialogue

Dignity confronts the disconnect between human rights rhetoric and realities on the ground. It overcomes the limitations of legalistic formulations that will always struggle to reach or connect with people. Furthermore, it effectively exposes legal systems that try to render human rights the property of those who shape and define systems of power.

Dignity personalises human rights. As Suha Barghouthi, Palestinian NGOs Network, a Palestinian activist who was denied a visa by the Italian government to participate in the Bellagio Dialogue, observes about her people's struggle, *'I doubt anybody in the history of the Palestinian struggle has given his/her life because the Charter of Human Rights was violated, but rather, because their dignity was violated.'*

Understanding dignity demands a sensitivity and realism in human rights work, and highlights the inadequacy of talk about asserting human rights and accessing justice. For instance, the example of a Dalit

village where the average household of five persons earns roughly 300 Rs (about 5 Euros) per month begs for a nuanced and respectful approach. That is an approach that is conscious of demands on people and limitations caused by deprivation and supporting local leadership, and not insistent on imposing designated methods. Mercy Kadenyeka Hakijami, explains, *'If we are talking about moving the human rights agenda out in to the world and engaging with people who are not experts in the language or law, we need this term Dignity. We need it so we can actually realise these rights.'*

'I learned first hand the power of dignity to fuel resistance. I was detained at the Maskubiyyah Compound in Jerusalem where Israeli intelligence service agents used many forms of torture to extract a confession from me. They tightly cuffed my hands behind my back for long hours, confined me to a tiny plastic chair as a form of severe position abuse, deprived me of sleep for days on end, threatened to bring my mother and rape me in front of her, and they threw me into a cell with prostitutes who made advances at me. I defeated all these forms of torture and abuse through patience and a strong will.

But, one particular practice they used against me as a female political prisoner made me understand that their main intention was to target my dignity: they denied me sanitary napkins during my menstruation period. They were hoping I would beg for them and pay the "due" price; but I refused, preferring to ignore the indescribable humiliation. I was determined to deny them the pleasure of breaking my will. Finally, as a result of protests by a representative of the Red Cross who noticed the blood stain on my chair after I got up to shake his hand, I was provided with sanitary napkins.

In reaction to this attack on my dignity and to reempt any similar torture methods in the days to come, I decided to resist. I announced an open hunger strike. After several days of my strike and several failed attempts by my interrogators to force-feed me, they were compelled to change their treatment – though only partially. So, I ended the strike and celebrated my sweet small victory by carrying an unmistakable smirk on my face whenever my eyes met theirs. Then, I felt on par. I felt even.'

Suha Barghouthi

Dignity and the State

'What we must do is not to content ourselves with mere political democracy. We must make our political democracy a social democracy as well. Political democracy cannot last unless there is at the base of it, a social democracy. What does social democracy mean? It means a way of life which recognises liberty, equality and fraternity as the principles of life. These principles of liberty, equality and fraternity are not to be treated as separate items. They form a union in the sense that, to divorce one from the other is to defeat the very purpose of democracy. Liberty cannot be divorced from equality, nor can liberty and equality be divorced from fraternity.'¹⁶

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar

Dignity and the State

The role of the State is central in any discussion on dignity and human rights because we hold the State responsible for enabling people to live in dignity. At this time of global economic collapse, the immensity of suffering caused by neoliberal capitalism should trigger grave concern for human dignity, stimulate an awakening to the need to rethink and reconfigure social and economic structure and, therefore, change the role of the State. There should be more acknowledgment that there exists a fundamental problem in conceptualizing the State that needs redress.

A dignity-inspired State enables equal power relations of all citizens. Currently, the State is not only neglectful and negligent, but actively hostile towards its vulnerable citizens—ensuring their systemic exclusion from political, economic and social systems. Dignity highlights the universality principle of human rights and the role of the State to fulfill those rights. It challenges the notion of ‘deserving’ and ‘non-deserving.’ The consequences of the State’s current position include the intentional act of making persons on the margin invisible, and laws that criminalize conditions of poverty and that result in criminal incarceration and other forms of custody exercised by the State. Even democratic governments have not fulfilled their core obligations toward the most vulnerable—they have not considered economic, social and cultural rights not allocated maximum available resources for progressive realization. These are all insidious forms of maintaining the current status quo, ensuring that resources continue to be accessible to and used in the interests of the privileged.

The State can be re-envisioned as having these primary roles:

- To construct a framework that protects and enables all men and women to live in dignity. This demands a constitution, legislation and policy, implementation mechanisms and budgetary allocation to provide a vision and effective guarantees for the exercise of dignity, including protection against violations.
- To elevate human beings, in particular the most vulnerable, to the centre of the State endeavour. In terms of economics, for example, this would require a provisioning (rather than allocation) system, regulated by the State through legislation, policies and implementation mechanisms. Provisioning with dignity is human rights and provisioning without dignity is welfare/charity.

- To create a culture of respect for and celebration of dignity. This would infuse all aspects of the State, encouraging the expression of multiple identities without discrimination and eradicating structures of privilege.
- To promote active partnership and participation between the State, non-State actors and the person, individually and collectively, through democratic and representative structures, enabling a model of active citizenship and State accountability.


Governance and the judicial system should be oriented and equipped to monitor and provide legal and non-legal remedies to ensure everyone has the conditions to live in dignity. This accountability further demands attention to healing and re-engagement with communities whose dignity has been eroded historically by the dominant culture. This would include remedies such as apologies, truth and reconciliation processes, compensation, rehabilitation and justice, in addition to positive discrimination mechanisms and affirmative action where necessary.

Finally, States need to ensure that all international agreements are in full compliance with human rights obligations. Erosion of dignity through factors such as trade policies, development projects, displacements, loss of livelihoods, and foreign investment cannot be restored by simple provisioning or just taking care of the material aspects of the right. This is particularly important in light of prevailing Free Trade Agreements (FTAs). These agreements illustrate some of the current concerns with the dominant State system and the need to reorient this system away from economic growth as an end rather than a means.

There should be a central obligation to fulfill the minimum essential conditions for a life in dignity for each person in the State, consistent with international and national—and in particular, human rights—obligations. There should also be an obligation to ensure progressive realization towards universal fulfillment of all human rights. States cannot and should not consider that dignity only requires bare essentials; no State, even among those with a high level of economic and social development can boast that everyone living in its territory has the conditions to live with dignity. Even in rich States, pockets of poverty persist and are, in fact, increasing due to economic crises. Human rights systems and structures must be responsive to local realities, both in terms of ensuring rights are meaningful and accessible to those who need them most, and that rights provide access to redress those actors and systems responsible for violation.

It is increasingly evident that States acquire conflicting responsibilities when they enter these agreements, because they fail to recognize that extra-territorial obligations are part of existing international governance.¹⁷ As Ovet (2006) states: *'An ever-expanding web FTAs is quickly shrinking the policy space necessary for governments to make economic decisions that respect development commitments and human rights obligations with many.'* Agreements between Latin American States and North America containing intellectual property rules undermine

¹⁷General Comment 12, The Right to Adequate Food, para 36; Ziegler, Jean, *The Right to Food, Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food*, Jean Ziegler, 16 March 2006, p. 12; Kunneman, R., *The Extraterritorial Scope of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Introduction and Six Case Studies*, Extra-territorial Human Rights Obligations, Republic of Germany.



human rights obligations, including the obligation to ensure access to affordable medicines for all inherent in the right to life and right to health.¹⁸ However, extra-territorial obligations are a part of existing international governance.¹⁹

There remains little reflection of this practice as yet. The obligation to at least conduct a human rights impact assessment to determine the likely impact of FTAs and to explore alternatives²⁰ is either not undertaken at all, undertaken only partially, or undertaken and subsequently ignored. Even in those cases where impact assessments are undertaken, the prior and informed consent of those affected is hardly considered an essential component of the assessment. As a result, evident impacts on the human rights of those already suffering poverty are brushed aside or denied. For example, in Peru during 2004, a limited human rights impact assessment on effect of the proposed US-Peru FTA was conducted on the cost of medicines in Peru. With pressure from the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Health, it concluded that an extra 700 to 900,000 people would be excluded from treatment.²¹ This was reinforced by a similar subsequent assessment from the Intellectual Property Office of Peru. The Special Rapporteur also urged the United States, in accordance with its human rights responsibility of international cooperation, not to apply pressure on Peru to enter into commitments that were inconsistent with Peru's constitutional and international human rights obligations. However, ultimately, no substantive changes to the concerned provisions were made to the FTA.²²

Any State agreement should aim to ensure the benefit of trade filters reaches those most in need. However, as Indira Hirway, Centre for Development Alternatives, stated in the Bellagio Dialogue, this never happens:

¹⁸Ovett, D., *Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) and Human Rights: A Serious Challenge for Latin America and the Caribbean*, PUENTES, January – February 2006.

¹⁹Required under obligations to ensure that economic, social and cultural rights, particularly of the most disadvantaged and marginalized groups, are not undermined, Article 30, ANNEX, Guidelines on treaty-specific documents to be submitted by State parties under articles 16 and 17 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Note by Secretary General, E/C.12/2008/2, 24 March 2009.

²⁰Required under obligations to ensure that economic, social and cultural rights, particularly of the most disadvantaged and marginalized groups, are not undermined," Article 3(c), ANNEX, Guidelines on treaty-specific documents to be submitted by States parties under articles 16 and 17 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Note by Secretary General, E/C.12/2008/2, 24 March 2009.

²¹Hunt, Paul. *Report Submitted by the Special Rapporteur on the Right of Everyone to the Highest Attainable Standard of Physical and Mental Health, Paul Hunt: Addendum, Mission to Peru*, United Nations, 4 February 2005.

²²Ovett, D., *Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) and Human Rights: A Serious Challenge for Latin America and the Caribbean*, PUENTES, January – February 2006.

'If there is increase in employment, it is never for those with no qualifications; if there is improvement health, it is not for those already with no food or access to medicines. Development goals (employment, health, food security) and social safety nets are included in FTAs, however neither party pays them much heed and they are often violated.'

FTAs have not brought people out of poverty. Instead, those once a little deprived have moved up and those very deprived moved drastically down. Legal human rights obligations exist, but are not recognized. In fact, they are violated directly. Such violations theoretically leave the agreement open to challenge, but challenges are rare in practice. In recognition of this, the Costa Rican Supreme Court decision²³ on the Central American/Dominican Republic Free Trade Agreement with the US (CAFTA-DR) is a striking and potentially significant assertion, demonstrating the potential of human rights with an accessible and objective judiciary, and active civil society activism. This decision set aside legislation that changed the country's intellectual property regime without consulting indigenous groups on the basis of contravention with International Labour Organisation Convention 169, designed to protect and promote the human rights of indigenous populations.

While not all cases that challenge FTAs are successful, they all require enormous sums in legal recourses even when the claims of foreign corporations are dismissed (as illustrated by the recent mining case of Commerce Group Corporation against the government of El Salvador).²⁴

²³Costa Rican Court stalls CAFTA-DR Implementation, BRIDGES Weekly Trade News Digest, 1 October 2008, p.7.

²⁴Even though the case was dismissed, El Salvador paid nearly \$800,000 in legal fees for the initial stages of the hearing, according to the government's report to the tribunal; in addition, the tribunal ordered each party to split the costs of arbitration, or \$45,000 each. This is money that could have been much better spent by the government investing in economic growth, health and education.

Dignity and the Economy

Today the poor are less often dismissed, I hope, from our consciences by being branded as inferior or incompetent. We also know that no matter how dynamically the economy develops and expands, it does not eliminate all poverty.²⁵

Dr. Martin Luther King

Dignity and the Economy

The deepening of poverty and widening of wealth disparities are well known. The dominant Neo-Liberal economic model is measured in growth of GDP, liberalisation, privatization; creation of maximum opportunities for profit-making, all oriented toward guaranteeing returns for foreign investors and keeping fiscal deficits low. Rising global economic growth and global wealth have not eliminated extreme poverty but instead increased destitution and poverty, unemployment, barriers to access to health and education and eroded social protection where it existed before. This is demonstrated by the crumbling Welfare State and the systematic shift of responsibilities to the private sector.

This pattern of growth depends on growing inequality, and encouraging competition between countries and groups rather than working in solidarity, and on making livelihoods and living more vulnerable. At a time of unparalleled prosperity for some, 54 countries are poorer now than they were a decade ago. In 14, more children are dying before their fifth birthday. In 21, more people are going hungry. In 34, life expectancy has been reduced. Worldwide, the number of people living in chronic poverty and daily insecurity has not changed for more than ten years, with women and children suffering disproportionately.

We need to critique economic systems that deny human rights and dignity. Human rights must go beyond the symptom to the underlying causes and processes that lead to this symptom.

Reassessing the goals

In the current context, we see economic outcomes as detrimental to human rights. We see increased destitution and extreme poverty, growing unemployment and greater barriers to access to health and education; in short, alarming human rights violations. Workers are subject to the volatility of the global market, with its constraints

'Economists, the High Priests of global society, need to be accountable to policy makers and socially agreed objectives; we should not be setting objectives ourselves. Leaving development to economists is like leaving human rights to lawyers. It is very dangerous when one profession dominates. The future of this work and of human rights in development must be of an interdisciplinary nature.'

Bellagio Dialogue

The question we pose is: *if growth in the national and international order is based on inequality and is making inequality worse, then what is growth really for?* The human rights field should identify the attributes of a human rights-enabling and-fulfilling international and national economic order. What kind of economic model and policies will ensure that dignity is guaranteed? What should be the role of the state and the market? What strategies foster a living civil society that effectively advocates for ESCR? Increased dialogue between human rights advocates and development economists on dignity-friendly policies is fundamental to forming appropriate and viable answers.

impoverishing labour conditions and dictating low wages and decreased social protection. The current system assumes that economic growth is what we need, measured by gross domestic product (GDP), implying that goods and services are the greatest objective. The system values only those activities of people that support these priorities. There is no effort to ensure that everyone participates in economic activities to their benefit. Many members of society are priced out of economic commerce and forced to rely for their living on unpriced goods and non-market activities, which guarantees their further marginalization and degradation to the natural environment in which they live.

Globalisation and the global priorities of international organizations have become objectives in and of themselves, not as vehicles by which to improve living conditions.


Therefore, trade liberalisation, and low inflation are the system's main priorities, keeping the fiscal deficit low and ensuring a shrinking role for the State. This model does not address development goals including poverty reduction, human development, employment generation, gender equality and environmental sustainability in any way.

We have re-envisioned the economic system, redressing this fundamental gap between goals and outcome, with human rights defining the goals of the economic system. We use the human rights framework to add to the development framework's potential to transform the global economic system:

- (i) Human rights offer a valuable set of accepted normative legal principles which we need to operationalise and advocate for more effectively to determine and to assess what and how a state fulfils economic and social rights, both internally and in international cooperation. Examples of this include core obligations and progressive realisation of human rights based on maximum available resources. Human rights—not progressive economics—are the normative accepted international standard, so its use would obviate the need to introduce an alternative framework.

'We priests [economists] make all these worthless statues and convince everyone to worship them. How do certain ideas become gods that societies pay homage to?'

Manuel "Butch"
Montes, Freedom from Debt Coalition)

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- (ii) Human rights bring legal and political accountability, something that the development field lacks.
 - (iii) Human rights ensure that no one is left behind. They insist on universality, placing the most marginalised groups at the forefront of any development policy.
 - (iv) Human rights have the potential to expose and challenge power inequalities, demanding equality, universality and participation.

Reluctance of the human rights field to question the economic system itself, to consider trade and economics within its purview or to engage across disciplines has left this area underdeveloped. The UN Human Rights Committee, for example, has always said that human rights has nothing to do with trade, that trade is against human rights. What has often passed for a rights-based approach to development (RBA) is an impoverished view of a genuine RBA, co-opting the language but leaving aside the critical component of accountability, or failing to connect theory and practice. Action to realise the potential of RBAs is critical to preventing disillusionment with human rights. We present here a human rights-friendly framework and describe how it can meet its potential.

An alternative system

The goal of a human rights vision is not growth, but meeting the wellbeing and basic needs of people; in essence, the fulfillment of their human rights. The *composition of*, rather than solely *the quantity of*, growth is important, and includes agriculture, food security and health services. We need to replace GDP with measurements that take account human rights goals in development deliberations. Further, the global economic structure is flawed in its insistence on an international export-based economic model. A human rights model focuses more on the domestic market and sees globalisation and the export market as a means to growth, and not a goal. The composition, sequencing and speed of globalisation should be in the hands of the State, conducted according to the development goals of each country. The model needs to address existing structures of inequality and asymmetries of power, such as caste, gender and class. Human rights can enhance focus on food security; intellectual property rights; human health; adverse impacts of privatisation of public resources; , environmental degradation and its impact on livelihoods; and employment. No one should be left behind.

Using both feminist and environmental economist perspectives, as well as considering the progressive trends of the human development paradigm (commonly known as the heterodox model), will begin to move us along this path. These perspectives view economics as a science of provisioning, designed to serve goals which are relevant to human beings such as human development, equality, sustainability. It moves the

dialogue from the assumption of managing limited resources to one of equality by addressing asymmetries of power.

Economist Indira Hirway offers a model for progressive economics that embraces human dignity. The basic components of her model are:

- The provisioning sector of the economy should discipline the State, which would then appropriately discipline the market to serve the provisioning economy
- Addresses structures and asymmetries of power, including caste, gender, religion and others marginalizing social categories
- Include unpaid work
- Include the environment
- Accept RBA and basic right to social security
- Broad-based equitable growth: The employment guarantee model could be a major strategy for developing and developed countries to ensure minimum wellbeing, and to protect people from all kinds of disaster


The human rights framework is starting to be used in creative ways. Recent examples include the *UNDP 2000 Human Development Report*, with an introduction by Amartya Sen on what human rights brings to development; work by Action Aid, including on the IMF's *Confronting the Contradictions*; and International Budget Project's open budget index of 80 countries on participation and transparency of information in budgets. We do not, yet, have a fully transformative human rights approach. However, using the concept of dignity as a centerpiece, in combination with a grand collaboration between social justice activists and economists, would be transformative.

'The goal of development is to create conditions that respect, protect and affirm human dignity.'

Manuel Montes

International Economic Order

Dignity can play a specific role in international cooperation and assistance. The gross inequality in the international economic order is of great concern. The undemocratic nature of global economics, trade and the financial structure is a major failure of the UN, which lost control of trade to the WTO and finance to the Bretton Woods Institute. This, in turn, reinforces the entirely unequal power dynamics between the North and South. Major international reform is required, demanding democracy and accountability in international institutions such as the IMF so that those adversely affected by policies have a vehicle through which to change it. This




effort demands long term processes of change, but we must first determine the necessary steps to push this process ahead.

International financial institutions should be pressed to recognize the attainment of human dignity. Human rights should be defined to include the obligation of the State to ensure a global financial and economic order that is supportive of human rights. In addition, extra-territorial obligations must be further developed. Beyond the international financial bodies, other forms of engagement, for instance, with the business community, are important. The business sector is an engine of growth and development, a potential ally and key partner, but also currently complicit in violations of human rights. We also need work at the national level concerning the obligation of multinational corporations (MNCs) to protect human rights.²⁶

Examples of innovative new initiatives along these lines include: *Rethinking Macro Economics from a Human Rights Perspective* (Balakrishnan, Elson and Patel) and the NGO Consortium on extra-territorial obligations headed by FIAN and the University of Maastricht.

²⁶A statement was adopted by CESCR in its May session on the obligations of State Parties regarding the corporate sector and ESCR, which noted that 'the corporate sector in many instances contributed to the realization of economic, social and cultural rights through input to economic development, employment generation, and productive investment. However, corporate activities could adversely affect the enjoyment of Covenant rights through child labour; unsafe working conditions; restrictions on trade union rights; discrimination against female workers; harmful impacts on the right to health, the standard of living, indigenous peoples, and the natural environment; and the destructive role of corruption. The Committee reiterated the obligation of States parties to ensure that all economic, social and cultural rights laid down in the Covenant were fully respected and rights holders adequately protected in the context of corporate activities.' *Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights Concludes Forty-Sixth Session*, United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, 20 May 2011, http://www.unog.ch/80256EDD006B9C2E/%28httpNewsByYear_en%29/2B5FC0E5F95713CFC125789600441E45?OpenDocument.



We measure time according to the movement of countless suns;
and they measure time by little machines in their little pockets.
Now tell me,
how could we ever meet
at the same place and the same time?

Kahlil Gibran²⁷

Measuring Dignity

Academic practitioners have sought ways to retain the objective notion of dignity while continuing to grasp for the subjective component—the human suffering—which the human rights framework has failed to capture adequately. We need to work more consistently at overcoming that failure. Chilton has begun to develop a means to measure dignity, incorporating a measure of quality of life at the individual level in place of the institutional claims that are made on duty bearers. Chilton seeks to establish that violations of individual or collective dignity have a severe and adverse effect on health. Through the embodiment of violence, poverty and discrimination, social and political relationships can physically manifest themselves in the body as health conditions. By bringing the adverse issues into a larger framework of dignity, these conditions can be reframed not simply as life circumstances, but as unjust, changeable social circumstances that should be addressed through the legal framework of human rights. In practical terms, she suggests application of either:

- (a) Nussbaum's (2000) list of components of dignity based on Amartya Sen's capabilities approach (1999), measuring people's quality of life through what they are actually able to do and to be. This includes more intangible qualities of emotions, the ability to establish attachments, to love and to grieve; or
- (b) A series of values that underline the UDHR and link with dignity, presented as an international law of dignity (McDougal, Lasswell and Chen, 1980 in Chilton, 2006). Examples include power, participation and inclusion, wealth, retaining fruits of labor and affection.²⁸

The Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights has worked on a number of illustrative indicators for compliance with human rights. The product is still a work-in-progress and needs further validation, but it has a number of strengths. First, it captures the characteristic attributes of the right questions to be asked; second, it uses the same approach for civil and political rights as well as economic, social, and cultural rights; and third, it seeks to measure the efforts of States through a number of process indicators.²⁹ Human rights measures are currently our designated means to protect and ensure the enabling

²⁸Chilton, M., *Developing a Measure of Dignity for Stress Related Health Outcomes, Health and Human Rights*, 2006, pp. 208-233.

²⁹*Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights*, United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, April 2011.


conditions for dignity for all persons. Human rights have been constructed to protect and enable the requisite conditions for the full enjoyment of dignity. Thus, our responsibility is to activate and hold them to this task. As legal entitlements with the potential of legal enforcement, political mobilisation and lobbying, better measurement tools translate to more powerful and better equipped mechanisms to protect and restore dignity today. Virginia Bras Gomes explains,

'Dignity is there in human rights but its explicit content is rather vague. Human rights put flesh on dignity: they prescribe the core obligations of state parties which are of immediate effect - the minimum essentials of each human right- the level below which dignity is denied. This allows us in the [United Nations] Committee [on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights] to look at legislative conformity, allocation of minimum resources and remedy for violations. Also the Optional Protocol to the ICESCR makes dignity more tangible, allowing individual complaints on violations of ESC rights.'

Efforts should be directed to ensure that the characteristics elaborated are made explicit and fully reflected in monitoring the realization of human rights.

We encourage activists to consider the development of a framework that emphasizes characteristics of a life lived in dignity. These measurable components would reflect the conditions required to maintain dignity. We believe that this approach would allow the flexibility necessary to enable contextual application and evolution in meaning, but prescriptive enough to allow for the designation of strategies to respect and protect dignity. In particular, it would fill the critical gap in policy formulation and advocacy necessary to reaffirm dignity. We envision that the overlap with human rights indicators will be strong, focusing on shelter, food, and other articulated rights. This has implications for how we conceptualise future solutions, ensuring that we reach even the most difficult areas of human rights: actions states should be taking to fulfill rights and not just redress violations.

Dignity Demands Spiritual
Transformation

The background is an abstract composition of warm, earthy tones including shades of beige, light brown, and deep red. It features various geometric shapes, some with diagonal stripes, and irregular, torn-paper-like edges. The overall effect is textured and layered.

Spiritualised activism, which works to transform all structures of hierarchy and exclusion, is based on a spiritualised understanding of ourselves, both as individuals and as part of a larger interconnected world.

Leela Fernandes³⁰



Dignity Demands Spiritual Transformation

As the exploration of the concept of dignity has evolved, social justice activists have excavated the layers of meaning in both theory and practice. When examining the non-material aspects of the concept, one must first acknowledge that dignity comprises more than materially measurable well-being in the realms of livelihood, housing, freedom from violence and democratic political participation. There is an element of mystery to dignity which must be defined.

How does belief in the intrinsic worth of the individual affect our very being? What should be our response once we acknowledge that engagement in oppression inflicts injury upon the oppressor, as well as the oppressed? What values underpin our societies and our individual sense of moral responsibility? How do we shape ideas of self-worth and respect for the worth of others? What do we do with 'difference'? With these questions in mind, social justice activists have turned to confronting the issues of power, exclusions and hierarchies within their own institutions and across the spectrum of institutions and social justice movements.

It is unusual for conversations among activists to excavate the terrain to this depth. Often, the space only allows for the discourse of practice—defining the issues, developing strategies, settling upon a set of tactics—or organizational development—instilling appropriate internal structures and culture, agreements upon principles of engagement and the like.

There is a perennial conversation at the global level about the more privileged, relatively well-resourced Northern NGOs and their foundations that neglect to recognize in their relationships with Southern NGOs the replication of the power relationships that perpetuate North-South inequality and subordination. Some foundations in the U.S., for example, enable U.S.-based feminists to determine the agenda of international conventions and issues of the 'global' women's movement that are worthy of receiving funding and to serve as 'gatekeepers' from whom all other women and feminist activists must receive the imprimatur of legitimacy. It is instructive that the African Women's Development Fund, now celebrating its eleventh anniversary as the second largest women's foundation in the world, was launched after African feminists ran into the proverbial brick wall of Northern donor arrogance.

Donors refused to make grants to address issues of leadership and labeled the subject area 'elitist,' even though it was determined by representatives of the movement to be a priority.

This replication of destructive power relationships both among and within social justice institutions and movements occurs everywhere. In the U.S., the feminist movement remains fractured, as its relatively well-resourced institutions remaining tone-deaf to decades of critique by American women of color and feminists from the Global South. This illustrates that an exclusive focus on gender reproduces hierarchies of race, class and sexuality. Furthermore, it ignores global issues of economic and political oppression, instead focusing on cultural practices such as genital cutting and veiling.

Given the appropriate space provided by PWESCR's support of these on-going conversations, the conversation has progressed to focus on the mystery at the core of social justice activism.. The door is now open to the foundational realm of spirituality. Where else will we find the tools powerful enough to transform the seemingly intractable challenges of power, hierarchy and inequality within ourselves and among NGOs and social justice movements? Where else can we find our transformative vision and the transformative response to our colleagues, to those with whom we struggle for justice, and to those who we perceive to be oppressors?

Leela Fernandes offers the possibilities of spiritualized social transformation that challenges all forms of injustice, hierarchy and abuse from the most intimate daily practices in our lives, to the larger structures of race, gender, class, sexuality and nation.³¹ Indeed, every social justice activist understands the monumental work necessary to break through the silos and fragmentation in order to build a broad, strengthened movement that achieves a just society.

Milner Ball admonishes those who consider forms of injustice unrelated to each other,

Racism is no more an exogenous element in our society than was anti-Semitism in Europe – or than is poverty, sexism, environmental degradation, or addiction to militarism and to drugs. A just society is not realized by trying to eliminate one or more unjust elements from the interstices, leaving the rest intact. We have to remake – always be remaking – the whole.³²

The conversation about dignity surfaced a deep frustration among social justice activists at their collective realization that they have not, yet, crafted satisfactory tools to create alternative forms of practice that do not replicate the problematic structures and privilege and that support the participatory democracy of the broad movement they envision. The concept of dignity is a powerful addition to that tool kit if we explore its spiritual dimension within ourselves, individually, and with respect to our work with and within institutions, among colleagues and across movements.

³¹Fernandes, L., *Transforming Feminist Practice: Non-Violence, Social Justice and the Possibilities of a Spiritualized Feminism*, San Francisco: 2003.

³²Ball, Milner S., *Colloquy – Response to Randall Kennedy's Racial Critiques of Legal Academia*, Harv.L.Rev. 1855, 1863 (1996), p. 103. See also, Ball, Milner S., Chicago: 1993.

Fernandes challenges us:

*'[F]rom a spiritualized perspective, a form of activism that espouses noble public principles and actions but rests on every day practices that draw on even subtle ego-based hierarchy, exclusion or competition cannot be transformative because they are acts that injure the spirit. At another level, movements for social justice that rest on strategies of retribution that are violent either in physical, material or spiritual terms also limit the possibilities of a deeper lasting form of transformation because they ultimately mirror the kinds of structures of oppression they seek to overturn. A spiritualized practice of non-violence can provide the elements for the development of a form of transformative feminist practice that can transcend the limitations inherent in older models of activism...'*³³

Social justice activists remain aware that the struggle for social justice is not an intrinsically ethical or spiritual practice. Activists have a basket of deeply concerning stories about the behaviors of colleagues, their own institutions, fellow activists and other organizations, with which they have attempted to collaborate. Fernandes pushes us to see that we must transform our own, personal daily 'practice' before we can transform our institutions and the social justice activism in which we engage. She makes a compelling case for what she calls the 'spiritualization of practice' through non-violence, with the caveat that we must understand non-violence *'as a way of life rather than simply a policy or tactic.'*³⁴ At the individual level, this adherence to non-violence can begin with understanding that compassion, humility and love are not just feelings, but practices.³⁵ Then, once we move into the realm of the 'public' practice of our institutions, our colleagues, our collaborators and our oppressors, the practice of non-violence means that we extend this compassion, humility and love even to those we perceive to be oppressors.³⁶ Fernandes's prescription of spiritualized practice-based non-violence responds to the struggles articulated by social justice activists throughout these conversations, *'[T]he practice of non-violence demands that activists struggle against all forms of injustice and hierarchy without reproducing a conflict-oriented model of the world.'*³⁷

The conversations in which PWESCR, and so many social justice activists, have participated continue to search for ways to build a broad-based, effective movement and compel serious attention to this realm of spirituality and exploration of non-violence as a way of life. We encourage continued exploration, practice and sharing of this important dimension to building a just society.

³³Fernandes, L., *Transforming Feminist Practice: Non-Violence, Social Justice and the Possibilities of a Spiritualized Feminism*, San Francisco: 2003.

³⁴Ibid, 67-68.

³⁵Ibid, 59.

³⁶Ibid, 67-68.

³⁷Ibid, 73.

the 1990s, the number of publications on the topic has increased steadily, with a marked increase in the last few years (Fig. 1). This increase is due to the growing interest in the topic, as well as the increasing number of researchers in the field.

The most common methods used in the studies are the case study, the survey, and the experimental method. The case study is used to explore the experiences of individuals or organizations in a specific context. The survey is used to collect data from a large number of individuals or organizations. The experimental method is used to test hypotheses about the relationships between variables.

The most common variables studied are the perceived ease of use, the perceived usefulness, and the intention to use. The perceived ease of use is the degree to which an individual believes that using a system will be free of effort. The perceived usefulness is the degree to which an individual believes that using a system will provide benefits. The intention to use is the degree to which an individual intends to use a system.

The most common findings in the studies are that the perceived ease of use and the perceived usefulness are positively related to the intention to use. This means that individuals who find a system easy to use and useful are more likely to use it. This finding is consistent with the theory of planned behavior, which suggests that the perceived ease of use and the perceived usefulness are important determinants of the intention to use a system.

The most common limitations of the studies are the lack of generalizability and the lack of control over the variables. The lack of generalizability is due to the fact that the studies are often conducted in specific contexts, which may not be representative of the general population. The lack of control over the variables is due to the fact that the studies are often conducted in natural settings, where the researcher cannot control all the variables that may affect the results.

The most common future research directions are the development of more robust and generalizable models, the use of more advanced methods, and the exploration of new variables. The development of more robust and generalizable models is needed to better understand the relationships between the variables. The use of more advanced methods is needed to better control the variables and to explore more complex relationships. The exploration of new variables is needed to better understand the factors that influence the intention to use a system.

The most common conclusions of the studies are that the perceived ease of use and the perceived usefulness are important determinants of the intention to use a system. This finding has important implications for the design and implementation of information systems. Designers should focus on making systems easy to use and useful to increase the intention to use. Implementers should focus on promoting the perceived ease of use and the perceived usefulness of systems to increase adoption.

The most common recommendations of the studies are to focus on the perceived ease of use and the perceived usefulness of systems, to use more advanced methods, and to explore new variables. These recommendations are based on the findings of the studies and are intended to improve the quality of the research in this field. By following these recommendations, researchers can better understand the factors that influence the intention to use a system and develop more effective information systems.

The most common keywords of the studies are information systems, perceived ease of use, perceived usefulness, and intention to use. These keywords represent the main concepts and variables studied in the field. They are used to describe the content of the studies and to facilitate the search for relevant information.

Dignity³⁸

Fat man lookin' in a blade of steel
Thin man lookin' at his last meal
Hollow man lookin' in a cottonfield
For dignity

Wise man lookin' in a blade of grass
Young man lookin' in the shadows that pass
Poor man lookin' through painted glass
For dignity

Somebody got murdered on New Year's Eve
Somebody said dignity was the first to leave
I went into the city, went into the town
Went into the land of the midnight sun

Searchin' high, searchin' low
Searchin' everywhere I know
Askin' the cops wherever I go
Have you seen dignity?

Blind man breakin' out of a trance
Puts both his hands in the pockets of chance
Hopin' to find one circumstance
Of dignity

I went to the wedding of Mary Lou
She said, "I don't want nobody see me talkin' to you"
Said she could get killed if she told me what she knew
About dignity

I went down where the vultures feed
I would've gone deeper, but there wasn't any need
Heard the tongues of angels and the tongues of men
Wasn't any difference to me

Chilly wind sharp as a razor blade
House on fire, debts unpaid
Gonna stand at the window, gonna ask the maid
Have you seen dignity?

³⁸Dylan, Bob, Dignity, Greatest Hits Volume 3, Special Rider Music, 1991.

Drinkin' man listens to the voice he hears
In a crowded room full of covered-up mirrors
Lookin' into the lost forgotten years
For dignity

Met Prince Phillip at the home of the blues
Said he'd give me information if his name wasn't used
He wanted money up front, said he was abused
By dignity

Footprints runnin' 'cross the silver sand
Steps goin' down into tattoo land
I met the sons of darkness and the sons of light
In the bordertowns of despair

Got no place to fade, got no coat
I'm on the rollin' river in a jerkin' boat
Tryin' to read a note somebody wrote
About dignity

Sick man lookin' for the doctor's cure
Lookin' at his hands for the lines that were
And into every masterpiece of literature
For dignity

Englishman stranded in the blackheart wind
Combin' his hair back, his future looks thin
Bites the bullet and he looks within
For dignity

Someone showed me a picture and I just laughed
Dignity never been photographed
I went into the red, went into the black
Into the valley of dry bone dreams

So many roads, so much at stake
So many dead ends, I'm at the edge of the lake
Sometimes I wonder what it's gonna take
To find dignity

Call to Action

In order for the dialogue to progress, the following must be acted upon:

1. Deepening understanding of dignity
2. Engagement through creative arts
3. Development of holistic systems of nurturing
4. Strategic shift: Engagement vs. confrontation
5. Models for change
6. Enriching community based work with dignity
7. Centering dignity within the human rights and human development agenda
8. Building a broad based movement – a platform for dialogue and change

Deepening understanding of dignity

There is a substantial need to expand, clarify, and deepen our understanding of the concept of dignity through engagement with the grassroots and cases analysis that will shed light on the interplay with human rights. Activists recognize a missing element in our current articulation of dignity. Indeed, we struggle to identify the substantive mechanism that takes dignity beyond a human rights-based framework to combat poverty and foster development. Harsh Mander reflects: *‘These sets of material and legal denials create conditions in which people’s dignities are being deprived. However, it doesn’t take us to what is the denial of dignity. How do you define denial of dignity? We need to understand what it is that is still missing, to take it beyond poverty.’* Reviews of literature and case law, as well as relevant conversations, emphasize the urgency of further clarification and guiding parameters for dignity. This will aid both our understanding of when and how to best apply dignity to advance human rights struggles and of how to enrich human rights—the framework, its interpretation and implementation—to better reflect dignity.

We encourage the testing and further discovery of our understandings, based on people’s beliefs and realities. New means to hear and to project the voices and faces of dignity on the ground should be explored. Components of

human dignity drawn from people's experiences and understandings in different contexts should be developed, creating inquiry into that which needs protection in different cultures, and how this can be done effectively.

Action research within the human rights and development fields to develop alternative models of power would be tremendously valuable. Inquiry should centre on power relations that affirm human dignity within and among community-based organisations, communities, NGOs and donors. We cannot hope to achieve change in the broader structures of our societies unless we start living alternatives and grappling with processes of change.

Mass outreach to people, particularly youth

Outreach on a large scale is critical. Often we see outreach done by those driven by hate reaching out and engaging people, particularly youth, in their movements, which include the poor and excluded. However, there are many of us working for a more compassionate world. Classrooms should reflect the world we want to see. Many of the barriers and boundaries of people who oppress the dignity of others arise in youth. Dignity should be part of the growing process, bringing young people in touch with dignity in a realistic way. We must create spaces and platforms where diverse young people come together as equal partners to learn and work together.

Engagement through creative arts

Popular education through media, film, arts, culture and especially music are also important in breaking down identities and introducing us to the others. The arts can be used to describe a better world. Priti Darooka shared innovative work on violence against women in North America. The Family Violence Prevention Fund works with boys on their identities as boys and men through blogs and other creative communications tools. The approach also engages sports role models and music/film stars in discussing gender issues, how they see themselves, in advocating non-violence and ultimately supporting boys in developing non-prejudicial identities.

Development of holistic systems of nurturing

The legal and criminal systems should not simply punish, but support, those in conflict with the law. Activists have called for more innovative legal remedies and state services that go beyond imprisonment; that include compassion and healing to restore dignity. The State can and should implement a variety of responses and services. Here, care is required to ensure that conflict resolution methods do not impose the burden on the victim and deny the experience of injustice. Within the human rights field itself, we also need to take measures to ensure we do not similarly dehumanize the culprits.

Strategic shift: engagement versus confrontation

All the suggested strategies signify a broader shift in approach. While oppositional strategies that confront oppressors are important, transforming hatred and prejudice also demands creative, active engagement with those who we consider opposed to our struggle. Oppositional strategies deny the complexity of oppressors and force them on the defensive, limiting their ability to negotiate change. Oppositional strategies also often alienate those most in need of human rights. Poor women, for example, often prefer the terminology and tools of negotiation - persuasion and consensus-building - because their reality involves constantly negotiating and renegotiating their strategic interests and material conditions.³⁹ Their sense of powerlessness, lack of bargaining leverage and the risk of backlash from State and non-State actors can render the typical human rights language of confrontation and assertion frightening and ineffective. Thus positive forms of engagement are critical for grassroots mobilisation around human rights. This is not to deny the relevance of and need for an oppositional stand – as Gandhi said, ‘Cooperate where you can, resist where you must.’ Working with human rights violators does not mean diluting or forgoing struggles for justice, but it opens up multiple ways to engage with the agents of injustice.

Models for change

Focused efforts are also necessary for developing strategies for effective advocacy within human rights grounded in dignity. For example, we need models in the field of development that include a human rights paradigm that places dignity at the heart of advocacy for respect, protection and fulfillment of human rights.

Mapping an approach to the economy grounded in human development for human dignity is critical and has the potential to play a strategic role in shaping understanding and possibilities for the next phase in restructuring the global financial and political structures. We challenge the human rights field to innovate, to claim our space and to advocate for revamping economic systems, rooting out the perversions of power deep within.

Harsh Mander encourages mapping the characteristics of a dignity-based State in India over the next period. Civil society has been successful in lobbying the government to support social security for informal workers. We are at an opportune moment to develop a comprehensive review of inter-disciplinary dialogues probing questions on State obligations, from practical public policy developments to philosophical discussions, across a range of notions—dignity, human rights, welfare, caring, social exclusion, discrimination, social protections, social assistance and social

³⁹Batliwala, S., *Taking the Power Out of Empowerment – An Experiential Account*, Development in Practice, August 2007, pp. 557–565.

security, among others. From this, a set of ideal obligations for the State, along with their implications for political, social and economic structures, can be developed.

Enriching community based work with dignity

Another major priority for action involves integrating the emerging understanding and benefits of dignity into grassroots strategies and community based-human rights awareness and education programmes. In particular, lessons learned will be integrated into training programs and modules on human rights based development.

Centering dignity within the human rights and human development agenda

Ultimately, efforts to understand and work with dignity need to be focused within the human rights and human development agenda. World Dignity Day provides one such opportunity. Inroads have already been made, with its acceptance as a recognised international day of the Global Coalition Against Poverty (GCAP). Ashok Bharti has been a leading force in this effort, and his coordination of the GCAP task force on social exclusion will facilitate greater engagement of a diverse base of organisations and institutes across disciplines in the quest for a broad platform for dialogue and action linking, dignity with the social exclusion agenda. Adeptly used, this could lend great visibility to dignity and progress in this area.

Building a broad based movement – a platform for dialogue and change

A platform for human rights using dignity within national contexts, building bridges with diverse disciplines and movements, is a necessary step in integrating and expanding the dignity discourse. Developing local strategies to incorporate the younger generation on the one hand, and approach government actors more easily, on the other, is also high on the agenda.

Learning and linking with others on an international level will fuel this process, broadening strategies and a base for action. In particular, we must also work to connect to powerful movements that define their work based on dignity, such as the Zapatista movement in Mexico. Forging strong connections with gender justice/gender democracy is also critical, such as through the feminist dialogues constructed around the World Social Forum and the African Feminist Forum. This work should build on and connect to the debates within feminism, interweaving race, caste, sexuality and other core issues. Annual World Dignity Day on December 5 is a prime opportunity to coordinate, build awareness and galvanise the movement. Follow-up efforts will be geared toward impact on this day.



Conclusion

Activists who participated and contributed to these conversations have described the experience as humbling. This report represents a small mark in a much larger journey and proposes some of the major collective tasks ahead of us. We conclude with this as our mantra:

Dignity is the personal and intrinsic drive behind our struggles for liberation. It is supported by the powerful normative framework of human rights, which provides legal, political and moral strategies, methods and instruments to help us realise the goal of human dignity for everyone. The urgency of this issue is such that we must move forward: it is the time for action. We must ensure that human dignity, and through it, human rights, is at the centre of our Movements.

Appendix

A Few Days More, My Love, Just a Few Days⁴⁰

(Translated from Urdu)


A few days more, my love, just a few days
are we fated to live in tyranny's shadow
Let us endure a little longer
oppression, writhing and tears.
All this is our legacy; we are helpless
Body imprisoned, emotions shackled,
thought chained and speech censored.
It's just our courage that keeps us going.
Life's a beggar's tunic that picks on patches of pain each moment.
But now the days of tyranny are numbered.
Just a little patience, since the days of entreaty are nearly done.

⁴⁰Faiz Ahmed Faiz 2003, "A Few Days More, My Love, Just a Few Days."

'I should be with you...Sad to say that I was prevented to attend because I was not issued a visa...When I read the note of the note from the Consulate about the denial of my visa...my immediate interpretation was I was perceived as a threat to security and public order...With the whole experience, I could not erase the issue of anti-terror tagging as one possible factor while I am also aware that Consulates of first world countries are tightening up their requirements and processes for visas especially those coming from third world countries like the Philippines (either in reaction to the global campaign against terrorism or the world economic crisis where entries are done in all ways by those seeking work abroad). On the security/anti-terror tagging issue, I am aware that some Consulates and governments have taken the campaign of the Philippine government which include progressive organizations in their "terrorist" tagging instead of rectifying its gross human rights record. If this was a factor, this is indeed abhorrent at how Consulates can be affected by repressive governments like the Philippines in further curtailing human rights. In fact the European Union has condemned the human rights record of the Philippine government and is continuing to monitor the actions of the Philippine government on the recommendations that EU has forwarded. I could not help think about all these possibilities...Not even respectable and credible host organizations like Rockefeller Foundation Bellagio Foundation are not heard by the Consulate. Most of all, it is a human rights violation and is degrading ones' dignity!

My contribution to the Dignity Dialogue would have been to share my thoughts on how dignity is perceived by indigenous women as my special area of work and how dignity is concretized by indigenous women and their communities...I just hope that discussions in this Dialogue will include experiences like what I have undergone as an issue of human dignity and human rights.'

Vernie Yocogan-Diano



A passionate, eclectic group met for four arduous but inspiring days at the Rockefeller Foundation Bellagio Center, on Lake Como, Italy, April 7 to 10, 2009, to grapple with some of these pressing issues experienced in the human rights movement today. The input was rich and diverse, from leading global economists from the Global South; social movement leaders and activists from Brazil, India and Kenya; feminist and youth organisers from Mongolia; international human rights practitioners, in particular focusing on ESCR and dignity; and United Nations experts. We were confronted with issues of dignity from the outset. Structural inequalities and abuse of power were highlighted with visa systems that denied the presence of three participants in Bellagio: Amal Abdel Hadi Abou Halika, working with health, culture and female genital cutting in Egypt; Vernie Yocogan-Diano working with indigenous women in the Philippines; and Suha Barghouthi working with women in conflict in Palestine. Channeling our outrage and sadness at the assumptions and operation of a global system which grades the value and acceptability of human beings based on their country of origin this experience grounded the meeting in reality.

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Participant List

The following is a list of those who participated in the Dignity and Human Rights Conversation, from April 7th to 10th in 2009, at the Rockefeller Foundation Bellagio Centre in Italy. Organisational affiliations are listed for identification purposes only and cannot be used to infer endorsement of the thoughts and ideas discussed at the meeting or in this report. In addition, organisational affiliations may have changed since the meeting.

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Acknowledgements

I am grateful to all the women who shared their stories with us during PWESCR's initial survey process and during other fact-finding missions and related activities. These are women from our part of the world, living in poverty, who challenged us to make human rights language and framework relevant to their realities. By doing so, they made us aware of the limitations of the framework in interpretation and application. PWESCR would not have started this exploration of dignity if it had not been for these women. I am extremely grateful to them.

I also appreciate the honest and sometimes hostile criticism of human rights framework by our friends from various movements. As they would say, 'it is okay to talk about rights but not human rights. Human rights are western and vague.' I am most grateful to my dear friend, colleague and mentor, Barbara Phillips, who not only shared my concerns regarding the limitations of the human rights framework and criticism of women's movements in addressing issues of economic and social exclusion and marginalisation that women face, but also shared my enthusiasm to explore dignity as a concept to help link the rhetoric of human rights with women's realities. Dignity is a concept close to Barbara and she helped PWESCR not only write this report, but also develop our initial paper Thoughts on Dignity.

I am grateful to Rockefeller Foundation Bellagio Center in Italy, especially to Linda Marston-Reid, Bellagio Center Coordinator, and her entire team, who saw value in having this conversation and invited PWESCR to host a four day convening on Dignity and Human Rights. All international travel was made easy thanks to support from Alec Rowe, Program Officer at the Institute of International Education. Laura Podio, Meeting Coordinator at Rockefeller Foundation Bellagio Center, assisted us with all logistics and made sure our stay at Bellagio was comfortable and productive.

Emma Sydenham, Programme Officer at PWESCR, was the coordinator of this meeting. I am grateful to Emma not just for the detailed logistic planning but also for her in depth research that was key to this meeting. Her energy brought creative thinking to the structure of the meeting and made sure the conversation was not just a cerebral one. Emma was assisted by Elen-Marie Meggison in the research.

The meeting was facilitated by Mary Kay Penn, who came to Bellagio with a determined energy to help create an environment where a productive dialogue could happen. It was Mary Kay's strategic maneuvering of the conversation, interspersed with poems, songs, quotes, and visuals, in which a space for personal narratives was created.

I am grateful to Ann Blyberg, Virginia Bras Gomes, Aton Fon Filho, Indira Hirway, Ashok Bharti, Harsh Mander, Manuel (Butch) Montes, Marcy Kadenyeka Okunyanyi, Barbara Phillips, Ignacio Saiz and Undariya Tumursukh. These experts came from different parts of the world and were willing to be challenged by each other in order to develop new ideas and new strategies. I am also appreciative of the generosity with which these people shared their experiences and learnings. It was their commitment that made the Bellagio meeting productive.

I also would like to acknowledge the contribution of two amazing women, Suha Barghouthi from Palestine and Vernie Yocogan Diano, an indigenous woman from the Phillipines. Although, these women, and Amal Abdu Hadi from Egypt, were denied visa by Italian authorities, they shared their thoughts from afar in the form of visuals and writings.

To capture the nuances of a rich conversation in writing is a challenging task. I am therefore also grateful to Barbara Phillips for writing this report. I am appreciative of Manuel (Butch) Montes and Virginia Bras Gomes for providing insights and comments to various drafts of this publication. Marjorie Brands-McCarthy was the copy editor for the report and Systems Vision designed and printed. The cover design is inspired by a painting of Akira Nonomura, from Design Positive, published by Kyoto Shoin, Japan.

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