

# A taste of participant's input: Dignity Dialogue

Thanks to all those who sent or voiced contributions on the few questions we outlined to get the debate going: What does human dignity mean to you? How does it relate to human rights? What role does or can human dignity play to strengthen the struggles for realising human rights for all human beings? And your major expectations of this conversation.

We have drawn the following from your contributions, neither as a summary, nor as a comprehensive review of the issue – but just to mark some highlights, some pieces of perspective as a starting point to learn a little about each other and our thoughts. Please accept this in this light only.

## **What does human dignity mean to you?**

Generally participants, and in particular Ashok, Ignacio, Barbara, Harsh, Suha and Undaraya, firmly feel that Dignity is an intrinsic human characteristic: Dignity is something every human being is born with. Barbara argues that '[c]ontrary to some conceptualisations, dignity is not the property of self-selected segments of society. It is not acquired as class inheritance nor earned by socially approved behaviour. It is, instead, the companion to belief that all human beings are inherently worthy beings." Ashok further linked Dignity with humiliation stating that "Dignity is a struggle against humiliation on any level." In his opinion, Dignity is the assertion of autonomy, and the respect for decision-making and choices over humiliation. However, he clarified that: "Ego has nothing to do with dignity. So *only if it is in support of universal autonomy* is it dignity. If it involves crushing somebody else's right, it is ego." Therefore, there is no dignity without respecting difference.

***Dignity defines multiple struggles of multiple identities for multiple reasons. It is a unifying force for people's struggles.***  
**(Ashok)**

A number of participants, including Virginia, Butch and Aye Aye, explored other components of dignity as well, veering more towards dignity as 'capacity' oriented: while Butch argues that Dignity "is the ability of a person to sustain and develop his/her individuality", Virginia sees Dignity in terms of "a survival kit that prevents people from living below a decent standard." To Aye Aye, a life in Dignity encompasses the freedom to "political, religious/spiritual, social, economic, personal/sexual association" without persecution; to have adequate socio-economic assets and access to education; social and judicial security. She also emphasises that the principle of Dignity necessitates the respect of/for other people, and the active contribution to facilitate the betterment of family and society as a whole.

***"....many people have asked why the Palestinians in Gaza don't just 'prove themselves in front of the world as the victims instead of staging a hardly effective resistance, an attitude that would bring more sympathy from the Western world...well, if you have nothing left to lose but your dignity that's what you defend... so they will have to somehow engage with the uncomfortable truths..." (Suha/Suha's colleagues)***

### **Some points of contention**

Harsh separated this intrinsic worth from the reality of indignity for so many today by situating the issue not in whether every human being has intrinsic worth, but the fact that it is not acknowledged. Ashok also separated the experience of indignity from a lack of dignity – "Beggars have dignity, but begging is not dignity. Labourers have dignity, but where they are pushed to work against their will, in poor conditions, with pittance for pay, they still have their dignity, but this work is not dignity". He continued: Dignity can be suppressed, violated, crushed, but it cannot be destroyed. Even when people come to see themselves as sub-human, their human dignity is never destroyed. It remains in their very existence, in the spirit of fighting slavery. Barbara makes sense of this in terms of a degradation of the society itself:

***"To the extent that a society fails to honor the dignity of its members, that society itself experiences degradation that manifests itself in massive inequities and poverty of spirit." (Barbara)***

Another aspect of Dignity identified by Harsh as problematic is that "dignity and worth are assessed by progressive people and theories." Using Marxism as an example, he stresses that (for instance) theories using productivity as a basis for explaining and assessing Dignity are problematic as "what one produces is also culturally and socially determined". So when dignity is directly related to theories of production, we risk seeing people with limited access to production (e.g. women, people with disability, Dalits, minority groups etc) as dependent and incapable. This means that we must recognise the work and productivity of women in what they do now as well as in their potential, yet also we must oppose the basic premise here - that dignity is defined by what one produces. This has implications in terms of social security, for example – as to whether it centres on labour or on human beings.

Other issues of contention concern the influence of cultural, historic and social specificity on the conceptualisation of dignity. Suha felt that everyone's idea of dignity is different, as was reinforced by Ann who argues that "there is no universal understanding [of Dignity]." She believes that while Dignity might incorporate a certain overlap between cultures, one needs to fully consider the concept of cultural relativity when discussing Dignity. This is crucial because "Dignity is highly subjective – within and between cultures [...] How do we handle rights being experienced in different cultures in different ways?" This is a very important point, as different languages, groups and societies might not only have different words for "Dignity", but also different uses. Or, as Ashok points out, "there is no meaning even for the word dignity in Hindi." Ann believes that in order to establish where concepts of Dignity originate and what they encompass we need to ground our work on Dignity in people's different realities and experiences: 'Get out of realm of abstract. Explore the differences and then the source of meaning of dignity.'

## **So in which ways is Dignity important for human rights?**

All participants believe that Dignity forms the basis for human rights (although Suha notes that it remains unclear exactly how this dignity grounds human rights). Ignacio argues that the “reason that many international standards affirm that human rights derive from the inherent dignity of the human being” is Dignity’s basis in the “equal and inherent worth of every human being [and its] basis for self-respect and for the unconditional respect of others.” So the principle of Dignity “underpins the fundamental principle of the universality of rights and the prohibition of discrimination as the cancer which erodes this principle

***“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)***

Barbara similarly argues that “Dignity is essential to understanding the conceptualisation of all human rights [, because] it is the ‘subtext’ or the ‘thread’ that brings coherence to the ‘set’ of recognised human rights.” Aye Aye emphasises the importance of Dignity as articulating preconditions as rights rather than charity; “[h]uman rights are a moral and a legal expression of human dignity.”

Ann argues that “[h]uman rights create conditions to enable people to live with dignity” – human rights create spaces for people to pursue a life with Dignity. Undaraya’s experience in working with Mongolian civil society has shown her that “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.” She has hopes that Dignity will provide this link. Ashok similarly sees Dignity as an agent of change, stating that “Dignity has always led the process of change through history.” Suha agrees with this, feeling that Dignity brings in something much more personal and intrinsic to our struggles for liberation:

***“the real difference between Human Rights and dignity is that you’ll be always the object of a human rights discourse. It’s about a human rights charter approved by the UN not your own sets of demands. Human rights can be given to you by somebody else independent of what you do (like animal rights can be given). Dignity is different. In a discourse focused on dignity you are the subject. Nobody can define what your dignity is but yourself and nobody can give it to you. Either you build it for yourself or you lose it. The only thing that one has to ask from the others is not to vilify the efforts not to lose and to maintain dignity (hence your national liberation struggle) and call it terrorism” (Suha/Suha’s colleagues).***

## What role can dignity play to advance human rights?

Ashok suggests the Dignity could help enrich human rights interpretation and practice. 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. Ignacio expands on this, arguing that 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.” How it could do this though was not addressed.

Harsh argues 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, for example in India, “to establish an alternative regime of rights - not just in operationalisation but in the acceptance of its ethical legitimacy. In order to achieve this, Harsh underlines the need to integrate Dignity within both our values and structures of the state, “Dignity also has a role in insisting – in public policy responsibilities – that the state must be judged by how it deals with its weakest citizens. It is not a system of charity but recognising right.”



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***“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, dalits, indigenous people or minority ethnic groups, lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender people or sex workers.” (Ignacio)***

Ashok and Barbara also feel that Dignity has the potential to strengthen and unite diverse social movements and become a vehicle for social change. However, as Butch asks, “how useful is ‘dignity’ in a specific social and cultural context? To what extent is the application of ‘dignity’, if indeed it is a norm applying to individuals, in conflict with the rights of groups, religions, and classes?” Butch believes that ‘integrating dignity into human rights debates and strategies will require exploring definitions of Dignity in concrete terms.’ This would reduce the stress of cultural ‘gaps’, as commented by Ann and Harsh above. However, at the same time, as Ann emphasises, while human rights

have “generally been understood within a materialistic context”, a full conceptualisation of Dignity demands a closer study of “the non-material aspects of reality” as well. This could really aid our work with and effectiveness of human rights to reflect and support the struggles of people for a dignified life.

Ann also suggests approaching it from another angle – rather than starting with human rights, start with Dignity - “Dignity is this thing that we are trying to protect and enable.” Lets explore how and in what ways our concepts are similar or different around the world and how this very precious thing has been protected throughout time in different cultures? From this we can see what has been successful and what then needs to be put into place protect this thing called Dignity now. Suha supports a broader focus on Dignity itself, stating that “the Human rights discourse is definitely useful but can't be the final aim and ultimate rationale for the Palestinian (or any other) liberation struggle. There is a further instance, which is dignity, subjectivity. In fact, that's the driving factor of any liberation 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 because their dignity was violated). In order to understand and truly support a national liberation struggle, we need to take this into consideration and support the quest for dignity and the struggle (the major tool of maintaining dignity for an oppressed people).

Participants spoke of roles generally, but what this would mean concretely was not so much explored. Ann did express concerns about quantification and measurement, stating firstly that we could not really do it but also that “it is dangerous to try, because if governments say I have met all the indicators - then we are stuck: we have no trump card.”

### **What are our expectations of the Dignity Dialogue?**

Some participants focused on the conceptual side of the Dialogue as an opportunity to explore meanings and perceptions of dignity in contemporary human rights struggles and its relevance to advancing human rights (Ignacio, Barbara) or “how well-developed it [Dignity] is legally in the human rights field” (Butch). Undarya urges us to go further, imploring the Dialogue to “explore spiritual aspects of human dignity and human rights and human life, which is so often lacking on contemporary human rights activism.”

Many also want to delve into the strategies and practicalities in terms of how we can build on the concept in our human rights work: whether to identify the conceptual and strategic usefulness of Dignity in combating poverty, inequality and discrimination (Ignacio) or exploring how Dignity can be deployed efficiently as a “tool in human rights advocacy” (Undarya) or to advance the “structural change” agenda (Aye Aye). Virginia would like to see the dialogue work towards “making the concept of dignity a tangible expectation and not just a moral obligation; [seeing how] various components of dignity apply differently in different social, economic and cultural contexts to different communities and groups; providing concrete examples of how compliance with the principles of non-discrimination and gender equality can contribute to achieving dignity for women.” Barbara also sees an opportunity to explore “how movements might think differently about their affinity to other human rights movements.

Finally, Aye Aye and Ashok want to contribute to a follow-up work plan and make relevant alliances, with Ashok hoping specifically to at least identify where the struggle of dignity is one of life and death and to initiate a program to work with people to overcome it.

<b>Input received by</b>		
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3. Ann BLYBERG	International Human Rights Internship Program	USA
4. Virginia Bras GOMES	UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights	Portugal
5. Indira HIRWAY	Centre for Development Alternatives	India
6. Harsh Mander	Special Commissioner of the Supreme Court on the Right to Food	India
7. Manuel MONTES	Freedom from Debt Coalition; Financing for Development Office, UNDESA	Philippines
8. Barbara PHILLIPS	Civil Rights Lawyer. Author of PWESCR Discussion Paper, Thoughts on Dignity	USA
9. Ignacio SAIZ	Centre for Economic and Social Rights (CESR)	Spain
10. Undarya TUMURSUKH	MONFEMNET, National network of Mongolian Women's NGOs	Mongolia
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