



The Centre for the Analysis of  
South African Social Policy



# Lone Mothers in South Africa – The role of social security in respecting and protecting dignity

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## Themed Working Paper 2

### The impact of poverty and inequality on the dignity of lone mothers in South Africa

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By

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## Background

The purpose of this themed working paper is to explore lone mothers' accounts of what dignity means in the context of their lives and how the experience of poverty and inequality impacts on their sense of dignity. This forms part of a project entitled 'Lone Mothers in South Africa: The role of social security in respecting and protecting dignity'.

The project originates from research undertaken for the South African Department of Social Development (DSD) about attitudes to employment and social security (e.g. Noble et al., 2008; Ntshongwana, 2010a and 2010b; Surender et al., 2007; Surender et al., 2010). During the fieldwork for that programme of research, participants in focus groups repeatedly made the unprompted point that poverty eroded their sense of dignity. Given that the South African Constitution declares that people have inherent dignity and that dignity should be protected and respected (Republic of South Africa, 1996), we decided to dedicate a separate project to exploring the role that social security currently plays in relation to people's sense of dignity. Specifically we hoped to explore whether social assistance, as a financial transfer to low income people, serves to help to protect and respect people's dignity, or conversely whether there are ways in which the country's social security arrangements serve to undermine people's dignity.

Currently, there is no social assistance for low income people of working age, even though there is a commitment elsewhere in the Constitution to the progressive realisation of access to social assistance for people, and their dependants, who are unable to support themselves (Republic of South Africa, 1996: Chapter 2 section 27). We therefore wanted to additionally explore whether people thought that – in the context of very high levels of unemployment - some additional form of social assistance might be a worthwhile poverty alleviation measure that would help to protect and respect people's sense of dignity, or whether it might serve to further erode people's sense of dignity.

Although the issues around poverty, dignity and social security could be explored with any subgroup of the population, we selected lone mothers (broadly defined, as elaborated in Wright et al., 2013) for several reasons. First, they embody the societal expectations of caregiver and breadwinner – roles which are difficult to reconcile even if there is financial support from the state (e.g. Lewis, 2010; Mokomane, 2009). Second, as lone mothers typically have a low level of educational qualifications and in the context of high unemployment, any paid work is likely to be insecure and poorly paid. Third, if employment opportunities are available, state provided childcare facilities are inadequate in many areas, and even if private provision is physically accessible it is usually unaffordable for low income families (Goldblatt, 2001; Dawes et al., 2010; Ntshongwana, 2010b; Richter *et al.*, 2012), and so challenges are faced at every turn whether in work or not in work. Recent research indicates that lone mothers in South Africa experience particularly high levels of poverty, and suffer financial (and often physical) insecurity which is compounded by a lack of autonomy (e.g. Ntshongwana, 2010a and 2010b). In addition and as will be elaborated elsewhere, this group internationally and within South Africa are often the focal point for debates around the undeserving poor, dependency culture, perverse incentives and the unsustainability of the social security budget, and are often the object of negative sentiment in the media.

This working paper presents findings from thirty focus groups which were undertaken in the Eastern Cape and the Western Cape provinces in South Africa. One hundred and ninety-eight lone

mothers of working age took part in the focus groups. The focus group transcripts were translated into English and transcribed by members of the team, and were analysed in NVIVO (please see Annex 1 for an account of the methodology for this phase of the project).

Part 1 of this working paper focuses on lone mothers' accounts of what dignity means in the context of their lives. Part 2 then presents analysis of the ways in which the women described their dignity as being affected by poverty and inequality. As such, this working paper sets the context for the subsequent stage in the project which considers the role of social security in protecting and respecting dignity.

## Part 1 Portrayals of Dignity

“Yes, dignity touches all aspects of one’s life. At home, relations at home, at work, in the community – just everywhere, it’s important.” (Xesi, FG18)

### 1.1 Introduction

In Part 1 of this themed working paper, an account is provided of low income lone mothers’ portrayals of dignity in relation to their lives. A key objective of the project was to explore what ‘dignity’ means to low income lone mothers in South Africa in the context of their lives. This provides a framework for Part 2 of this themed working paper which examines lone mothers’ accounts of the impact of poverty and inequality on their dignity. Inevitably, the issues of poverty, inequality and social security arise in this first part of the paper but the primary focus is on dignity *per se*.

As will be seen in the following sub-section, the notion of ‘dignity as principle’ is prominent within the jurisprudence literature wherein dignity is regarded as indefeasible human worth. However, dignity can also be considered as a psycho-social phenomenon – ‘dignity in practice’ (e.g. Budowski, 2005). At times these two notions of dignity can seem disconnected (e.g. Phillips, 2011). Drawing from discussions with low income lone mothers on the subject of dignity, the extent to which there is any apparent connection between ‘dignity as principle’ and ‘dignity in practice’ can be explored.

The focus groups and indepth interviews used very different techniques to explore what dignity means to the participants.<sup>1</sup> Each focus group began with a quotation from the Bill of Rights in the South African Constitution, whereas the indepth interviews approached the subject less directly, although the indepth interviewees had previously taken part in one of the focus groups. The focus groups therefore began with an enunciation of ‘dignity as principle’.

Part 1 of this working paper draws in particular from focus group contributions that centred on whether and why dignity is important in South Africa; whether and why dignity is important to South African women in particular; accounts of the impact on dignity of being in paid employment and being unemployed; and examples of why dignity is important in relation to the self, the family, and the wider community (see Annex 2). Attempts to explore ‘dignity in practice’ have mainly occurred within the health arena (e.g. Chochinov *et al.*, 1982; Haddock, 1996). In a more recent study on dignity and health of Palestinian refugees, Khatib and Armenian (2010) identified four dimensions of dignity: worthiness, self-respect, self-esteem and autonomy.<sup>2</sup> This classification or taxonomy of dignity proved to be useful as a framework for analysing the focus group material and so Sections 1.2 to 1.5 are structured along these lines.

The rest of this section summarises the depiction of dignity in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the South African Constitution – examples of ‘dignity as principle’. The remainder of Part 1 provides an account of portrayals of dignity by the focus group participants.

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<sup>1</sup> Findings from the indepth interviews will be included in the forthcoming third working paper and the final report.

<sup>2</sup> Khatib and Armenian’s four dimensions of dignity also resonate with literature on ‘Eudemonic’ measures of subjective well-being (e.g. Dolan *et al.*, 2011).

### 1.1.1 Dignity as a human right

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights refers to dignity on five occasions including in the first words of the preamble which states that in order for there to be freedom, justice and peace in the world, people's inherent dignity must first be recognised:

'Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world'.  
(UN, 1948, Preamble)

As well as dignity being inherent, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that people are born with equal amounts of dignity: 'All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights' (UN, 1948 Article 1).

Later, in Article 22, it is stated *inter alia* that everyone 'is entitled to realization [...] of the economic, social and cultural rights indispensable for his dignity..' (UN, 1948 Article 22). The notion that a person's dignity requires that certain rights be realised can be interpreted as implying that the absence of those rights would be detrimental to dignity. Even at this high level, there is therefore an acknowledgement that dignity could be compromised.

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women which was adopted in 1979 by the United Nations General Assembly is sometimes referred to as a Bill of Rights for women, and also sets dignity in centre stage (UN, 1979). This was signed by South Africa in January 1993 and ratified in December 1995.

Dignity features very prominently within the South African Constitution. The chapter on founding provisions begins with the following:

'The Republic of South Africa is one, sovereign, democratic state founded on the following values: (a) Human dignity, the achievement of equality and the advancement of human rights and freedoms..' (RSA, 1996 Ch1s1a).

As such, dignity is recognised as a foundational value and is highly entrenched: any amendment to this section of the constitution requires approval by a larger majority than other components (Ackermann, 2000).

The South African Bill of Rights states that 'Everyone has inherent dignity and the right to have their dignity respected and protected' (RSA, 1996 Ch2s10). Writing about the South African Constitution, a constitutional court judge has argued that it is 'a reactive constitution [...] It highlights dignity, equality and freedom, because these are the rights that have suffered so much in the recent past.' (Ackermann, 2000: 539). In particular, he highlights the way in which black people were treated as means to an end during Apartheid, 'an almost complete reversal of the Kantian imperative and concept of priceless inner worth and dignity.' (Ackermann, 2000: 540).

In addition to recognition that the dignity has been compromised in the past, another constitutional court judge has suggested that dignity is still compromised by the high levels of deprivation experienced by many people: Chaskalson writes that:

‘As a consequence of our history, structural impediments remain to the achievement of “dignity, equality and freedom”. Millions of people are still without houses, education and jobs, and there can be little dignity in living under such conditions.’ (Chaskalson, 2000: 204).

In spite of the prominence given to dignity in the Constitution<sup>3</sup>, the Constitutional Court has not defined human dignity. It has, however, identified the right to dignity and the right to life as the two most important human rights (Currie and de Waal, 2005). Outside the context of the Constitutional Court, Ackermann has however ventured that:

‘Viewed in its historical context I understand dignity in the Constitution to connote innate, priceless and indefeasible human worth.’ (Ackermann, 2000: 541).<sup>4</sup>

Whilst recognition of inherent dignity exists as a foundational principle in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the South African constitution makes it explicit that everyone has the right to have their dignity respected and protected, very little exploration has been undertaken about what the concept means to people in the context of their own lives. In the rest of this part of the paper we present material from the focus groups reflecting on the various ways in which dignity is portrayed by the participants. The final section contains a discussion about the extent to which ‘dignity as principle’ and ‘dignity in practice’ intersect.

## 1.2 Dignity as worthiness

One of Khatib and Armenian’s dimensions of dignity is ‘worthiness’, which they describe as including ‘the ability to feel important and valuable in relation to others, communicate this to others, and be treated as such by others’ (Khatib and Armenian, 2010: 39). Issues relating to worthiness arose very prominently in the focus group material and can be grouped along three themes relating broadly to employment status, sexism and racism.

A very strong impression was conveyed by the participants that they felt ‘less worthy’ when not in paid employment.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> For an account of the role of human dignity in Constitutional Court’s human rights jurisprudence, and summary of critiques of the use of dignity as a value in constitutional adjudication see the introduction of Leibenberg (2005).

<sup>4</sup> Ackermann also describes dignity as a distinguishing feature of humanity: ‘It is that quality of being human which we gropingly call dignity that distinguishes us from other creatures. Whether one sees fundamental human dignity in purely secular humanist terms, or as the image of some divinity in which humans are created, it was the defiling of human dignity by apartheid that led South Africans to reject apartheid.’ (Ackermann, 2000: 556).

<sup>5</sup> Issues around paid and unpaid work straddle all four of Khatib and Armenian’s four dimensions of dignity and are mentioned in each of the respective subsections in this chapter, though see especially the section on ‘autonomy’.

“When you’re not working you’re not respected within the family. People speak to you any which way and even insult you. But when I have a job I’m treated differently, with respect.” (Paarl, FG28)

“Even in our families it does affect us, if there’s a family meeting, well those who are working, their words are final. They take decisions.” (Alice, FG21)

“We are poor, we don’t have jobs – this affects all our relationships especially in the community. There is no dignity.” (Dimbaza, FG17)

Many of the participants stressed how their sense of worthiness felt diminished when they were unemployed. The first two examples shown above relate to a sense of value in relation to others within the family: the first participant described how she is treated differently when not working, and the second woman spoke of the way in which her opinions are not taken into account when decisions are made within the family. Many other participants contrasted their experiences of how they are treated by others when they are in work and when they are not in work, referring to the reduced levels of respect within their families and communities. For example:

“When I was working my mother treated me well, she would even do my laundry and I would give her money. Now I am invisible to her, all her respect goes to my brother even though I worked for years before he did.” (Dimbaza, FG17)

Secondly, some of the participants spoke of being treated unequally to men. Both of the examples shown here include a reflection that it ought not to be the case. As such, sexism is being identified as an affront to dignity, as it is an example of being regarded as less ‘worthy’ than another person.

“It’s very important, really, because it is important to listen to other people’s views, especially women. In the old days voices of woman were not heard, only men were allowed to talk and lead but now South Africa has changed, we are all equal, it’s supposed to be 50/50, but it does not really happen that way.” (Khayelitsha, FG3)

“Well, men’s dignity is always being put first, just in society in general. But it’s important that our dignity be respected and protected too. We are all human beings, we’re not less human.” (Butterworth, FG24)

Thirdly, many of the participants highlighted ways in which they felt that their dignity was more protected and respected in present day South Africa than during apartheid. The treatment of black people, and in particular black African people, during Apartheid in many respects epitomises the enforcement of a sense of unworthiness on a group.

“I feel like our dignity as black African people is now being taken into good consideration and respected. If I do some work for someone, they are expected to pay me, it’s my right so

that I can buy what they also have. It's no longer just white people's dignity that matters anymore." (Centani, FG23)

"Well I think at least the current government takes our dignity into consideration as black people. During apartheid our dignity did not matter to the apartheid government and dignity is very important." (Butterworth, FG24)

"There was a lot of things we couldn't do that time....You know what I am saying. Lots of our dignity was taken away from us and through the years we had to fight and stand up for our rights ...so that we can do what we doing today." (Mitchells Plain, FG13)

Many of the participants elaborated on the fact that although they feel that their dignity is respected and protected more than it was during the apartheid era, things have only improved 'to a degree'. The following quotations provide examples of women articulating that they are still treated as 'less worthy' than others. In these examples, a number of reasons are given for dignity being compromised, including limitations of government, intra-racial inequality, and ongoing racism between population groups.

"I think that since 1994 at least one feels like a human being, you can tell that government is trying to protect our dignity, or at least government knows they are meant to be protecting our dignity. That is their rule. During the apartheid era black people had no right to dignity and the apartheid government made sure that we are aware of this fact, no dignity for a black person. The problem now is that the current government has its limitations and we end up with a compromised sense of dignity." (Dimbaza, FG16)

"I think dignity is very important to and for South Africans. Our dignity didn't matter during the apartheid era to the white people that were running this country. But now it matters to a degree, because we're in a democracy.

Facilitator: Why do you say to a degree?

Respondent: Because with inequality there are blacks whose dignity matters more than ours because they are well off, educated and in good positions. At the end of the day though, every human being's dignity matters, it is our humanity and it's important." (Centani, FG23)

"I think it's crucial for people's dignity to be respected because as we sit here, most of us, our dignity is not protected. Apartheid is said to be over according to law, but in practice it's not. White people don't treat us with dignity in this country, there's still a lot of apartheid." (Nyanga, FG1)

### 1.3 Dignity as self-respect

Khatib and Armenian's second dimension of dignity is 'self-respect', which they say 'combines respect both for one's self and for others. Self-respect includes being responsible and reliable, a trait that makes a person respected by others' (Khatib and Armenian, 2010: 39).

Self-respect was mentioned very prominently in the focus groups, with women repeatedly making the point that it is necessary to them to respect themselves first, as only then would people treat them with respect: that is, self-respect is seen as a necessary pre-requisite for gaining the respect of other people.

"First of all I have to respect myself, because I know who I am and what I'm about. I'm a woman, I'm a mother and I'm somebody's daughter. I have to live my life with dignity and hopefully people will treat me with dignity too." (Paarl, FG28)

"We have to respect ourselves and protect our own dignity, first and foremost, before anybody else can." (Butterworth, FG24)

"I am who I am and at the core of that is my dignity. I have to respect myself and as far as possible, under my control, be dignified. People will easily disrespect you if you disrespect yourself." (Masiphumelele, FG30)

People also articulated the reverse order of this causal chain, and mentioned that respecting others aids self-respect:

"What I'm trying to say is that it's important for a person's dignity to be protected and respected because if I don't respect others, I am also disrespecting my own humanity." (Dimbaza, FG16)

"It starts with you as a woman, the way you carry yourself, the way you treat others, you can be a woman but not have dignity because of the way you are to people. If you respect others, you'll be able to respect yourself too.." (Alice, FG21)

A second theme to emerge within the dimension of 'self-respect' relates to 'respectable behaviour' which reflects a more conservative and patriarchal worldview and was most prominent in rural areas. A few examples of 'respectable behaviour' were given, including the importance of not gossiping, not drinking in public, and not wearing short skirts:

"Secondly it's important that as a mother and as a woman you stay in your own home with dignity and not go around gossiping about other people in other people's homes and getting in trouble." (Thafalofefe, FG22)

"I was going to say it's important for women to carry themselves well, and protect their own dignity by not going around getting drunk and things like that." (Qumrha, FG14)

"It's important that a woman leads her own life with dignity, handles herself well and not wear short skirts." (Dimbaza, FG16)

However, in an urban setting there was a debate about clothing and the point was made that being scantily clad did not confer a lack of respectability, but that the interpretation of scanty clothing had changed over time:

"I think it's also important for women to respect themselves and carry themselves with dignity. Times have changed, we live in aggressive and violent times. A scantily dressed woman could walk from one village to another, or in town, without harassment. For that matter, Xhosa traditional-wear for young unmarried women is scanty, not much to it at all and there never used to be a problem. Now, the white man introduces scanty clothing, it conveys a different message and some men get aggressive. In that sense a woman has put herself at risk. We have to change and adapt with the times we live in." (Masiphumelele, FG30)

Only one participant mentioned the importance of observing traditional ways as a means of retaining dignity:

"Back in the day black people used to slaughter an animal, certain sacrifices, as a way of saying thanks to their ancestors for being employed, since most of us are no longer following our traditional ways we end up not having a way forward in life. Such a person has no dignity" (Langa, FG7)

Lastly – a theme which is revisited later – it was reported that if people are seen to be misusing the Child Support Grant (CSG) e.g. spending it on alcohol, then they are not treated with respect and are seen to lack dignity:

"In most cases we are treated with respect, the thing is most parents have dignity, especially the ones that spend the CSG reasonably and well. You can be a parent and get the grant but not spend it on the children's needs, if it's a grant-day - you enjoy yourself with alcohol. If you're using the grant money people will see that you don't have dignity. (Alice, FG21)

## 1.4 Dignity as self-esteem

Khatib and Armenian's third dimension of dignity is 'self-esteem'. They refer to the work of Chochinov et al. (1982), "where they state that dignity refers to internally held qualities that may be based on personal characteristics, attributes, or an acquired world view, including continuity of self, role preservation, legacy, maintenance of pride, hopefulness, a fighting spirit, and other qualities that maintain one's self-respect." (Khatib and Armenian, 2010: 39).

A number of themes arose in the focus groups relating to self-esteem. Of greatest prominence, the point was repeatedly made that the reason why it is important for the dignity of women to be protected and respected is because of their roles of raising children and running homes. As a woman from Butterworth put it: "Dignity is an important part of womanhood and motherhood. They all go together." (Butterworth, FG 25). The following quotations contain examples

from the focus group participants of why the protection of their dignity is important, specifically in relation to role preservation:

"It's very important for our dignity to be respected, we contribute to society, we give birth to children." (Khayelitsha, FG3)

"It's crucial to protect women's dignity because women are the main caretakers of homes in our country. It's the mother who bears the burden of the home. For a home to stand with dignity, there must be a woman in it." (Nyanga, FG1)

"As women we are carrying a huge load. We bear the responsibility of raising children and giving them homes. It's important that our dignity be protected." (Mbekweni, FG27)

"As women we carry families on our shoulders, so we have to have protected dignity" (Qumrha, FG14)

Women distinguished themselves from men whom, they argued, played a smaller caregiving role if present, and found it easier 'to just up and go':

"it's very important that women's dignity be respected and protected. It's huge, what we do. This responsibility we carry of raising children on our own, with very little. The men are nowhere to be found. Sometimes, even if the men are there, they don't meet their responsibilities." (Paarl, FG28)

"It's important, especially for women who are mothers, we as mothers are the caretakers of the next generation. Children look up to us because we tend to spend much more time with them than their fathers. If our dignity is intact as women, it will serve our children well." (Qumrha, FG14)

"It's important because a woman, a mother for example, we care for and look after most of the children in this country. A lot of fathers can just take off and leave their children without consideration, most women can't do that. Our children are like chicks to us, and we are mother hens, we will do anything for them." (Centani, FG23)

Participants spoke of dignity being conferred from the mother to the child<sup>6</sup>:

"As women if we don't have dignity, then our children also won't have respect for themselves and us. It starts from us as the mother, you have to have the dignity because you

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<sup>6</sup> This resonates well with Haddock's (1996) operational definition of dignity where she states that 'Context and possession of dignity within oneself affects one's ability to maintain or promote the dignity of another.' (p930).

pass it over to your child. If we don't have it, then what's the use we raise our kids? So, it's very important for us women." (Mitchells Plain, FG9)

"in my identity as a mother I live my life with dignity so that my children can do the same." (Qumrha, FG14)

Examples were given of the need for a woman's dignity to be protected because children 'look up to' the caregiver, and learn from adults' treatment of one another:

"You need to have you dignity intact because you cannot raise children without dignity, they have to see that you are dignified." (Alice, FG 21)

"I think it's important because women are pillars in their homes. If a woman is not well treated and her dignity is eroded, when she has no confidence – for example if a husband beats his wife in front of the children, if there's a boy child, the boy will think that's the way to treat a woman or wife, and he himself will end up doing the same. Women must be treated with dignity, it's important." (Qumrha, FG14)

"we are role models to our children, so it's important that our dignity is respected, that we respect ourselves too." (Butterworth, FG25)

Another spoke of the way in which she felt she had to 'stand up and be strong as a parent' in the face of poverty, so as to impart hope in her children:

"We really have to be strong as women who are poor. My children sometimes ask why we don't have a toilet inside the house like their friend's houses or why our house is not plastered properly. You have stand up and be strong as a parent, tell your children it won't always be like this, there's hope. And that they should study hard so that they have better lives. I have to lift myself up and not sink in the mood of feeling a failure as mother." (Qumrha, FG14)

In contrast, a woman from Thafalofefe described how she feels when people can see that her children are well taken care of:

"You feel good and dignified when people can see that your children are well taken care of, that they are clothed like other children and well fed." (Thafalofefe, FG22)

These quotations demonstrate the way in which dignity is depicted as being strongly associated with the ability to fulfil the role of caregiver including meeting the material needs of those being cared for.

Notwithstanding the prominence of the caregiver role, participants additionally ventured to describe dignity in more general terms in relation to their sense of self, rather than in relation to their roles within the family. For example, people repeatedly made the point that their sense of self and their sense of dignity were indivisible:

“my personality is linked to my dignity, it’s who I am.” (Alice, FG20)

“I’m proud to be South African, to be a woman, to be Xhosa. What holds all those parts of me together is my dignity.” (Masiphumelele, FG30)

“Yes, you cannot separate yourself, your humanity as your individual self, from your dignity. It’s one and the same thing, you dignity is the core of your identity.” (Thafalofefe, FG22)

Women provided examples of ways in which external judgement, humiliation, or lack of respect impacts on their dignity in terms of their sense of self:

“I wish people didn’t judge us, because that affects our dignity. They should leave us alone so that at least our self-perception remains intact.” (Butterworth, FG24)

“If somebody tramples on your dignity, inevitably your self esteem will suffer and go down, and when that happens – your entire life will be dictated by and defined by a low self-esteem.” (Qumrha, FG14)

“your dignity cannot be intact if you’re not respected, or if you don’t feel respected. If somebody humiliates me, for example, it impacts on my dignity, very badly and I end up wondering who I am, what I’m about. I question my own identity as a result.” (Masiphumelele, FG30)

Even more starkly, people spoke of how loss of dignity compromises their sense of humanity and (in the third quotation) the humanity of others:

“Without dignity we are nothing, nobody.” (Butterworth, FG26)

“When your dignity is compromised you’re not whole, as a person.” (Dimbaza, FG17)

“Yes, as we said dignity is a core part of a person, without it your humanity is compromised and the humanity of those around you too.” (Qumrha, FG15)

In these quotes we see linkages between 'dignity as principle' and 'dignity in practice'. The quotations particularly resonate with the interpretation of dignity provided by Ackermann (2000) as innate human worth.

“A human being without dignity is empty, nothing really.” (Xesi, FG18)

“Without dignity, you are not human, there is no human being there if there is no dignity.” [...] “Each and every person is born with their own sense of dignity, it does define one.” (Butterworth, FG24)

## 1.5 Dignity as autonomy

Khatib and Armenian's fourth dimension of dignity is 'autonomy' which they say 'includes independence, control, ability to make one's own decisions, and functional capacity.' (Khatib and Armenian, 2010: 39). The most prominent issue that emerged in the focus groups relating to autonomy centred on the linkages between dignity and paid work. The causal link is straightforward: paid work yields income which contributes to financial independence and an improved ability to meet the material needs of the family as well as one's own needs, and this not only enhances self-esteem but also a sense of one's autonomy.

This section begins with material that more generally depicts the linkage between paid work and dignity. This emerged most clearly at the end of each focus group, when people were asked what would help to further protect and respect their dignity: most women said 'jobs' and this was the most prominent response in each focus group.

Facilitator: What sort of things would help to respect and protect people's dignity?

Respondents: Sisi we need jobs (Khayelitsha, FG5)

Facilitator: I see, so what can be done for people to lead a dignified life?

1st Respondent: More job creation (*others agree*) at least when you are employed there is that hope of getting paid on month ends, so you don't worry a lot about problems because come month end they'll be sorted. (Langa, FG7)

"We need work. I look at other people my age, they are the ones helping out their parents, not the other way round. It really hurts, it's painful and erodes my dignity that I have to ask relatives for help at my age." (Masiphumelele, FG29)

Recent analysis by Ntshongwana (2010a) also shows that lone mothers value paid work highly, with two-thirds of black African lone mothers stating that a working age lone mother with a child under the age of five should go out to work to support her child, which is interpreted as a response 'to the dire reality of conditions without employment, in the context of no social assistance support.' (Ntshongwana, 2010a: 9). The findings presented here additionally reveal the way in which such attachment to the labour market is linked to a sense of dignity.

Earlier in the focus group, people were asked whether being in or out of paid work impacts on their sense of dignity. People gave examples not only of the negative impact on dignity of unemployment, but also of ways in which their dignity had been compromised when in paid work.

We begin with the first subgroup, to further demonstrate the negative impact on dignity of unemployment, manifested as a lack of autonomy, and how this has a negative impact in turn on self-esteem:

"Not working takes away your dignity, you end up doing all sorts of things, the children's fathers are nowhere to be found but the children are right there, in front of you, everyday, to be looked after." (Khayelitsha, FG5)

“Not working simply traumatizes my sense of dignity.” (Masiphumelele, FG29)

“When you don’t have a job you don’t have dignity, it’s like you’re nobody. You have nothing.” (Thafalofefe, FG22)

Not working, not having a job lowers my self-esteem. When you don’t have a job and feel so low, it’s like I was born for poverty and suffering. It’s humiliating. I watch people who have jobs and they look dignified. (Mbekweni, FG27)

A number of the women had been in work before, and so contrasted their experiences in relation to dignity from when they were in work and when they no longer had paid work, and stressed the lack of autonomy that they felt when out of work:

“There’s a big difference when you are working and when you’re not working. When you have a job you can do things for yourself, and when you don’t you may even end up stealing out of desperation. Even those thoughts affect your sense of dignity, just being desperate.” (Xesi, FG18)

“Not having a job does affect my dignity because I’m used to earning my own money. It’s painful, you cannot take care of yourself.” (Dimbaza, FG16)

It should be stressed however that work does not automatically *guarantee* dignity as autonomy. Although most of the focus group participants were not in paid work many of them had experience of having worked previously. In a focus group in Langa a particularly striking example was given of women’s compromised autonomy when in paid work: in an exchange between two women they revealed that due to the fact that their clinic only offers contraception injections during working hours they find themselves choosing between retaining their job and risking becoming pregnant, or avoiding pregnancy by going to the clinic for the injection and risking losing their job<sup>7</sup>:

Respondent 6: It’s like that everywhere, in clinics and hospitals as well, it’s just like that and there’s nothing we can do because we’re in need. For example at the clinic here, we can only go for the contraceptive injection at 2pm. You can’t go before or after, even when you’re working. And they know we can’t afford to pay the R50 to go to Clicks for the injection. Our dignity is definitely unprotected, it’s not seen as important. I don’t know about other places but that’s what happens here.

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<sup>7</sup> This example resonates well with Liebenberg’s (2005) comment on the Treatment Action Campaign case about the provision of an anti-retroviral drug where she observes that ‘For society to deny poor women and their newborns access to ‘a simple, cheap and potentially lifesaving medical intervention’ would clearly indicate a lack of respect for their dignity as human beings entitled to be treated as worthy of respect and concern.’ (p 13). In our example, if women find themselves compelled to choose between access to contraception or employment it similarly indicates society’s lack of respect for their dignity.

Respondent 4: Us too, we have to go for the injection at 2.

Respondent 6: If you want to work you're going to give the injection up because you don't want to lose your job. Then you end up being pregnant! (Langa, FG6)

Indeed, several participants described ways in which their dignity felt so compromised at work, that they decided to leave their jobs. Reasons included being misled about payment levels, poor working conditions when pregnant, and the inability to provide adequate alternative care for one's children:

"My dignity was compromised at work. I was told I'd earn R1 000 (approximately £62 per month), at month end they gave me R800 (£50). I gave up the job." (Xesi, FG18)

"They did not treat me with dignity, the reason I stopped working was the steam, because of the steam. I was pregnant at that time and they did not take that into consideration." (Alice, FG20)

"I used to be a nanny, it used to kill me making breakfast for the children at my workplace, I'd make them muesli and yoghurt. I felt like dying because I knew mine didn't even have a slice of bread at home. I'd watch them go to school, washed, clean and combed by me, while mine are on their own – doing all that for themselves. I was a live in domestic too, my children slept on their own. All that work and I earned R500. It wasn't worth it, I gave it up." (Butterworth, FG24)

## 1.6 Discussion

We have explored in detail various ways in which low income lone mothers have described what dignity means to them in the context of their own lives. The focus group material was examined in relation to women's sense of self, their relationships with family members, and their standing in their communities. We used Khatib and Armenian's four 'dimensions' of dignity, as a method for grouping the material as the arising themes corresponded well to their dimensions of worthiness, self-respect, self-esteem and autonomy.

Many of the emerging themes highlight the inherently social aspects of dignity. Liebenberg refers to dignity as a 'relational value' whereby:

'we are interconnected beings. Our sense of self-worth, personal development and well-being is inextricably bound up with the extent to which we are valued by others and by the society at large (Liebenberg, 2005: 11).

In relation to worthiness, women spoke of how they are made to feel less worthy by their families and communities when they are not in work. Examples were given of being insulted, not respected, and not consulted upon in family decision-making processes. Some also gave examples of sexism, when women's views are heeded less than men's, though this was not nearly as prominent as the issues raised around employment. A third theme to arise in relation to worthiness was the comparisons made between the apartheid era and the present day, with most of the participants

identifying improvements in terms of their dignity being protected and respected, although many examples were given of how such improvements had been only 'to a degree', with a lot left to be desired. This section demonstrates that within the context of their own lives, the women experience dignity as something that is compromised by unemployment, sexism and racism.

In relation to self-respect, a prominent theme emerged of self-respect being a pre-requisite to earning the respect of others (and to a lesser degree, respectful treatment of others aiding self-respect). Another prominent theme related to 'respectable behaviour', with examples given of the need not to gossip, drink in public, and for women to 'carry themselves with dignity', and 'remember that they are mothers'. This dimension manifested itself more as an 'exhortation' to the self.

The dimension of self-esteem contained within it a number of arising themes, most notably that of role preservation as caregiver of children. The main reason why focus group participants said that it was important for women's dignity to be protected and respected was because of their roles as caregivers. Another prominent theme that arose within this dimension was the way in which dignity was expressed by women as intrinsically linked to their sense of humanity, with it being commonly said that loss of dignity results in 'loss of humanity'.

Lastly, the most prominent issue to arise in relation to the dimension of autonomy was the link between dignity and paid work which enables women to meet their own material needs, those of their children, and in many cases also enables them to contribute to the needs of their extended families. As we have seen, when people were asked at the end of the focus groups about what would help to respect and protect people's dignity, the vast majority of people replied 'jobs'. Earlier in the focus groups, many women spoke of the negative impact on their dignity of being without paid work, being unable to meet their own and their children's material needs, and being looked down on by people and treated differently. Several examples were given, by women who had experienced being in paid work and were now unemployed, of how this new status badly affects their dignity. The conferment of dignity is by no means automatically associated with paid work, however, and several women spoke of how their dignity was so compromised when in work that they left their jobs.

The material provides insights into the complex ways in which dignity is perceived in practice by low income lone mothers. The focus group participants unequivocally identified dignity as something that is indeed important to protect and respect, and cited their roles as caregivers as the main reason. In common with the constitution, they described dignity as being an inherent part of their identity, which resonates well with Ackermann's description of dignity as connoting 'innate [...] human worth' (Ackermann, 2000: 541). However, the vast majority of the women provided examples of ways in which their dignity was compromised or eroded, which contrasts with the notion of dignity being 'priceless, indefeasible human worth' (Ackermann, 2000: 541).

The issue of the erosion of dignity is explored in greater detail in Part 2 where material is presented on the impact of poverty and inequality on dignity.

## Part 2 Lone mothers' accounts of the impact of poverty and inequality on dignity

“Poverty bullies my sense of dignity, it abuses it.” (Butterworth FG25)

### 2.1 Introduction

In this part of the paper, we present analysis of the focus group material in relation to lone mothers' accounts of the impact of poverty and inequality on dignity.

In the focus groups, participants were asked directly about the ways in which poverty and, separately, inequality impact on their sense of dignity, if at all. In Part 1 of this paper we saw that dignity is perceived in a number of different ways that can be grouped within the themes of worthiness, self-respect, self-esteem and autonomy. The focus groups also yielded many accounts of the various ways in which poverty impacts on each of these four dimensions of dignity. Rather than presenting the analysis along those four dimensions, the material is presented in relation to four key themes which emerged most prominently across the focus groups; as will become evident, they straddle the various dimensions of dignity discussed in Part 1.

The main themes to emerge in relation to the impact of poverty on dignity relate to the ways in which, in the face of extreme poverty, the women struggle to meet their own and their children's material needs; the ways in which they are treated by their families; their standing within their communities; and lastly accounts of the despair expressed by many of the women about their condition. The participants spoke most expansively about poverty rather than inequality, but section 2.6 summarises the focus group material on the impact of inequality on dignity and of their experiences of living 'at the bitter end of inequality'.

### 2.2 Techniques to survive poverty and their impact on dignity

#### 2.2.1 Tolerating poor quality paid work

As we have seen in Part 1, the case was strongly made that economic independence through employment was perceived as the primary means by which dignity as autonomy can be protected and respected, but that employment could also erode dignity, and examples were given of women who chose to leave their jobs for reasons linked to dignity. In this section material is presented where women describe ways in which their dignity is compromised at work, and yet how they feel they have no choice but to continue in these unsatisfactory jobs due to the financial pressures which they face. Examples are given of racism, sexual harassment, poor working conditions and poor pay.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> The recent OECD report on *Women in Paid and Unpaid Work* notes that 'Women still experience systemic barriers in almost every aspect of work, including: whether they have paid work at all (full-time or part-time), the type of work they obtain or are excluded from, their pay and conditions of work, their access to higher-

In terms of racism, the hierarchies of apartheid continue to be felt. For example one black African woman commented that she is given less flexibility around care of sick children than a coloured woman would be given:

“Also if something goes wrong at home, if my child is sick, I can’t stay at home and look after her because, if you don’t go to work you lose your job as a black person. Different rules apply for coloured people. A coloured person would be given a week to nurse their child to health, as a black person you can’t even have a day.” (Nyanga, FG2)

There was even a general perception amongst the black African participants that the coloured worker preference regime established by the apartheid government subsists:

“Coloured people are favoured in Cape Town. They are treated well, as people at work. We are degraded almost every day. We would be doing the same job as coloured people but they get much better wages than us” (Respondents agree). (Nyanga, FG2)

Several examples were given of sexual harassment at work. For example, in Masiphumelele two women discussed the impact of such harassment on their sense of dignity:

Respondent 3: It’s like what we were saying, some men make sexual advances at us in the work place. It makes things very difficult and it takes away our dignity. Things shouldn’t happen like that.

Respondent 7: I really hated it when my former boss, he liked to hit me on my buttocks, at the back at work. It just erodes my dignity, each time it happens. If I say something he treats me badly, shouts at me at work. I had to let him do it. It would be difficult just to get up and go to work. (Masiphumelele, FG29)

Several participants spoke about the negative impact on their dignity of extremely low paid work. For example, a woman in Mitchells Plain said:

“It does affect your dignity because if you work for that amount of money....R12 an hour and then you must take all that money and pay who’s looking after your child. So what you working for is nothing.” (Mitchells Plain, FG13)

In spite of such conditions, many women explicitly stated that, due to their need for an income, they felt they had no alternative but to tolerate their working conditions. In this first example, the participant explains that the levels of hunger at home cause her to remain at work despite verbal abuse:

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paying ‘male’ occupations, the insecurity of their jobs, and the unequal division of family responsibilities between women and men within the household.’ (OECD, 2012: 4).

“We endure and persevere, what can we do. Our employers are not always polite, they say hurtful things but the problem of hunger back home is much bigger than the pain at work. So I just persevere.” (Paarl, FG28)

In this second example, a woman speaks of how her dignity is lost due to the way in which she is treated 'like a slave or a doormat' and yet her situation has to be endured due to the need for the income 'back at home':

“I’ll give an example when your employee is way younger than you and lacks communication skills, disrespects you, there is nothing you can do because you are desperate for the job. When you think of your situation back at home you just swallow your pride and keep quiet even though you hate what is going on. You get demeaned, lose dignity because you’re treated like a slave or a doormat.” (Langa, FG7)

Many examples were given of poor working conditions, with accounts of how this impacts on their sense of worthiness and of dignity. In this first example, the domestic worker never knows when she will next be paid and this makes her feel 'worthless':

“My problem as a domestic worker is that sometimes my white Madam pays me, sometimes she doesn’t. I don’t know how many months I have not seen my salary. It hurts, you also feel worthless.” (Nyanga, FG2)

In this second example, a woman describes her work selling things in the street each day. She states that she feels that even though she has a small business she has no dignity because of the nature of the work:

“I have a small business. Dignity? No, I do not have. I carry a cheap, striped bag on my back and sit in the street the whole day selling things. It’s dusty most of the time so I’m always sweaty and unclean, people generally undermine me.” (Khayelitsha, FG4)

### **2.2.2 Casual work for neighbours or family**

Some women spoke about more informal types of paid work such as gardening or washing for neighbours. Although they depicted such work as being less demeaning than begging, they nevertheless describe how it impacts negatively on their sense of dignity. In Dimbaza, a very poor rural area in the Eastern Cape, a woman spoke about the humiliation of working in a neighbour's garden:

“you find yourself doing somebody’s garden because of poverty. It erodes your dignity, people point at you when they see you doing someone’s garden, they talk amongst themselves. It’s humiliating, but I need money..” (Dimbaza, FG16)

Several women in various places described the impact on their dignity of doing their neighbour's washing:

"Poverty destroys dignity. I do people's dirty laundry, I have to ask to do it, it's embarrassing because people look down on you even though I'm helping them and helping myself. I don't want to beg, I hate begging for food. Either way, your dignity is eroded."

"And when you do people's laundry, they don't pay when they say they will or give you the agreed amount. You're grovelling all the while until you're paid whatever suits them."  
(Dimbaza, FG16)

"I do people's laundry for money, in the village. It's humiliating because everyone can see, but I don't have a choice." (Butterworth, FG24)

"You end up doing things like people's washing, which is demeaning. They don't even pay you when they should or how much they'd promised. So yes, my dignity is definitely eroded by not having a job." (Butterworth, FG25)

In a number of instances, people spoke of doing work for neighbours or family and being paid 'in kind' with either alcohol or with food. A discussion took place in Alice about payment with alcohol:

"It happens a lot, you'll find that your neighbour will ask you to do something for her and pay you with alcohol."

"And when they do that it means they don't have respect for you. Because you are poor they pay you with alcohol. All that means is that they don't have respect for your family."

"There is no dignity in that and they kill them by giving alcohol instead of money." (Alice FG20)

In Butterworth a woman described payment with food whereas she would have preferred money:

"Sometimes they pay you with a plate of food because they know you are hungry. Meanwhile they are meant to pay you with money." (Butterworth, FG25)

In Mitchell's Plain in Cape Town, women spoke about the negative impact on their dignity of doing domestic work for family members:

"I haven't got a job. I am working at my sister's place, char. I mean your own family....it's taking away your pride."

"It's like what I said, we are like beggars at the end of the day. We have to go knock, we have to ask, we have to stand whatever we have to do. That is taking away our dignity at the end of the day. I mean going to your own family to look for a char so that your children can [inaudible] it's not right because they have it all and you are the one that's struggling. You can't even go to your own family for support...that's your life...you the mother of that children so you must support your children. Now you have to go around and ask for chars and that's also how your dignity is being taken away. Now, like I say...a child is a child....we

cannot blame our children for what [inaudible]. Legally, can they blame us [m] but at the end of the day the child must be fed...the child cannot go to school without anything in his stomach. Because they look at the mother....there's nothing to eat...Mummy...you as mother must go. (Mitchells Plain, FG13)

### 2.2.3 Begging

Many of the focus group participants, in both urban and rural areas, spoke of having to beg in order to try to make ends meet. There were frequent accounts of the negative impact of begging on dignity. For example, in rural Xesi in the Eastern Cape, women spoke of how begging takes away one's dignity:

“Begging takes away your dignity.”

“When you're not working you're inevitably poor and when you are poor you become a beggar without dignity. No, no, it's terrible.” (Xesi, FG18)

As a woman from Centani describes, begging is to be avoided if dignity is to remain intact:

“I think the best thing for us to do is to stay in our own homes, try our best on our own to support and look after our children, without begging, if we can. So that our dignity remains intact.” (Centani, FG23)

However, the point was repeatedly made that at times there was no alternative but to beg. People mostly described begging for food, but also to use others' electricity. In two urban townships in Cape Town, women spoke of having to beg from neighbours. A woman from Nyanga describes how her dignity is eroded by having to ask her neighbour if she can heat water or cook on the neighbour's stove, and how she has to beg for access in order to be able to look after her child:

“I stopped working in January. Not working can be humiliating because you run out of basic things all the time. I run out of electricity all the time. I have to ask my neighbour to use her stove to cook for my child, or to warm up water to bathe my child. She always demeans me and says nasty things, but I have to beg because it's for my child. If it was for me I'd just walk away. It's very bad, your dignity is eroded.” (*Respondent cries*) (Nyanga, FG2)

A woman from Langa describes how she begs for food from her neighbour and how she then feels gossiped about by the neighbour and scrutinised by the community:

“For example in the community, when I go to neighbour that's better off than me, when I go and ask for food, she doesn't just give it to me. She asks me to do her laundry first or clean for her, and then she gives me the food. Even so, she tells people in our community that I have nothing, that I'm dirt poor. So every time I go to her house, which I have to because I always run out of food, everybody knows I'm going there to beg for food. It takes away from your dignity, for sure.” (Langa, FG6)

A woman from Centani elaborates on what she goes through when begging for food, and goes so far as to state that 'poverty can kill one's dignity':

“Poverty is humiliating. When you go and beg for food, first of all you’re hungry, at that very moment, you’re really hungry. You smile and laugh at anything they say even if it’s not funny, maybe it’s even a jab at you, but because you’re begging for survival, you have to act stupid. So yes, poverty can kill one’s dignity. You may or may not get food. If you don’t you go on to the next house. When you walk out of these houses, your heart is in anguish.”  
(Centani, FG23)

A number of other respondents make the direct link between poverty and the erosion of dignity when speaking about begging. For example a woman from Butterworth in the Eastern Cape spoke of how poverty results in having to beg and thus 'dignity is forever compromised':

“When you are poor your dignity is forever compromised because you are always begging for one thing or the other...” (Butterworth, FG26)

This is echoed by a woman in Masiphumelele in the Western Cape who spoke of the desperation that causes her to beg from others:

“Well, when you’re poor you end up begging from other homes for food, out of desperation. No, there’s no dignity in poverty.” (Masiphumelele, FG30)

Finally, the desperation of hunger can lead *in extremis* to stealing, as described by a woman in the Eastern Cape:

“if you go to bed without food enough times you end up stealing the food. Then you get arrested – and there’s no dignity, at all.” (Dimbaza, FG16)

#### **2.2.4 Transactional sex**

Just as prominently as begging, the focus group participants spoke about how they had to use transactional sex as a method of survival, and of its negative impact on their dignity. A few women spoke in veiled terms but most referred to it directly. In some instances, people described having to have sex in order to secure a new job:

"We’re single mothers and need more than the CSG, for example. When we’re looking for work sometimes we find ourselves in a position where, if it’s men employing, they ask you to sleep with them before you get the job. Desperation can lead to you sleeping with the person." (Masiphumelele, FG29)

“Without a doubt, dignity is eroded. I am young and look even younger, so I go and look for work, men feel me up, they touch me wanting to sleep with me with the promise of a job. Sometimes you give in and get the job, at times you don’t. It’s terrible.” (Dimbaza, FG16).

Many of the participants spoke of having multiple sexual partners in order to acquire income for survival. The theme arose in rural and urban areas, and mainly in relation to obtaining money for food:

“A lot of women have multiple sexual partners just because they can derive some kind of income from these men – not because they want or desire these partners. At the end of the day, they are living with HIV/AIDS, it’s tragic. They throw away their dignity not because they want to, but for survival.” (Qumrha, FG15)

“Well, sometimes things get so bad that, you know when we all struggling with hunger, starving, sometimes I go and sell my body so that my family can eat.” (Xesi, FG19)

A group of women in Masiphumelele spoke together about transactional sex and its impact on their dignity:

Respondent 4: Yes, you end up selling your body to get money to live on. It’s terrible, your life becomes one big nightmare.

Respondent 3: You find yourself hanging around cars, something I thought I would never do, so that I can bring back some food at home.

Facilitator: And that erodes your dignity?

Respondent 3: Yes, definitely. (Masiphumelele, FG30)

A group of women in Nyanga spoke about poverty causing them to enter into relationships for financial security:

"I’m going to be honest, poverty erodes dignity. I have gotten into relationships with a few men because they help me out financially. Not because I love them...*(respondent cries)*.

"It’s common, we meet older men and get into relationships with them because we need money for survival."

"Sexually we become easy because we need money to survive." (Nyanga, FG2)

Furthermore, they described how their survival strategies become publicly known:

"Our communities become aware, men know where to go, where it’s easy for them and that is ourselves, right here. Nothing is more degrading."

"What happens is that people in the neighbourhood bring you men because they know you need money." (Nyanga, FG2)

One woman describes how the fact that it is known that she will provide sex for income out of desperation means that her dignity is 'finished':

"Men end up discussing you, they know if they come to you they'll get sex. Your dignity is gone then, finished. It's not that you think it's the right thing to do, it's desperation."  
(Nyanga, FG2)

A very similar discussion arose in Khayelitsha where women described lack of money causing them to 'sell their bodies':

"It's important for people's dignity to be respected. But we don't have money as mothers. We end up selling our bodies because we don't have money, so it's difficult for our dignity to be protected under such circumstances."

"And not having money, ending up selling your body because of poverty, it takes away your dignity. We have children that look up to us, our dignity is important. The grant is too little, we can't do much with it." (Khayelitsha, FG5)

The discussion concluded with a woman commenting on the lengths that she would go to in order to provide for her children:

"A mother cannot watch her children suffer, we'll do anything so that our children don't suffer, so that they have clothes on their backs, there's electricity in the house and so on."  
(Khayelitsha, FG5)

Similar discussions took place in Langa, where prostitution was described as a consequence of poverty and hunger:

"Sometimes even though you do not like the idea of having sexual relations with them, you end up doing such because of hunger. People will start perceiving you as a prostitute and that hurts because circumstances forced you to sleep with someone for money and of course you lose your dignity."

"Others do it because they want clothing money and you'd find that half of the time you don't even like the guys that you are sleeping with. This is what I have personally experienced." (Langa, FG7)

A woman in Nyanga describes how some women lack documentation for themselves and their children and therefore cannot claim social security and feel that they can depend only on their bodies for survival:

"Some women can't access the grant because they have no documents whatsoever, no ID for themselves and no birth certificates for their children either. So they sell their bodies because it's all they have." (Nyanga, FG2)

In addition to these accounts, a few respondents spoke of remaining in abusive relationships because of having no independent means. One woman described how she remains with an abusive boyfriend in order to be able to pay for food:

“Well I have children to feed and I am poor, my children have to eat so I find myself with a boyfriend who beats me up and I tolerate it because he gives R100 a week. I never in my wildest dream thought I’d ever tolerate such.” (Butterworth, FG24)

Conversely, one woman spoke of choosing not to have a partner so that her grandchildren would be spared from abuse:

“Poverty, thinking about the poverty. Poverty erodes dignity. That’s why I don’t live with a man, because he’ll probably ill-treat my grandchildren because we are poor, so I chose to live with them alone to protect them.” (Dimbaza, FG16)

### **2.3 Impact of poverty on lone mothers’ dignity: strained family relations**

Many of the lone mothers lived with family members or had very close links with family members elsewhere. Based on the accounts, those family members were just as poor, or only slightly less poor than the women themselves. The over-riding issue that emerged regarding the impact of poverty on lone mothers’ dignity in terms of their family relations was that poverty puts great strain on those relationships and this in turn has a negative impact on the women’s dignity. Specifically, the strain of living in poverty causes family members to treat one another without respect and in some instances abusive behaviour was reported. In their state of poverty, the women were made to feel unworthy of support by their families in many instances; they were regularly insulted for their lack of financial autonomy and made to feel that they are a burden, and this all impacts negatively on their self-esteem.

Two women in Nyanga spoke about the tensions within the home generated by their lack of income. They report being treated badly, and treated without respect and of being excluded from decision-making:

“There’s a lot of conflict at home, I’m now treated badly because I have no income. My child sees this, it depresses him. He asks heartbreaking questions. You have no dignity when you’re not working. Even the community can see it.”

“It’s the same with me and my family, they treat me with no respect. They make decisions that affect my life without telling me just because I have no income.” (Nyanga, FG2)

The following discussion in Centani, a rural area in the Eastern Cape, sheds light on the direct linkages between income (derived from work) and people’s dignity as expressed by one’s standing within the family and ability to participate in decision-making:

Respondent 5: You know when we have family meetings, when we are going to have a family function, people say what they are going to contribute. My brother would say a cow, my sister all the vegetables. I sit there with my arms folded because I have nothing to contribute, I’m not working. Not working erodes my dignity.

Respondent 4: My family takes decisions without me because they know I don’t have

money, nothing to contribute. Where's my dignity in all that?

Respondent 3: Yes it's true, decisions are taken without us. We are like children. You see?

Respondent 7: It's terrible. It affects my health. It feels like I'm being chucked out of my own family. It's very painful when you have nothing to contribute. My heart wants to, but I have nothing. (Centani, FG23)

Participants described how they are made to feel like a burden by members of their family. For example:

"you become a victim to your own family because it's not like they are rich either, so you become a burden on them." (Khayelitsha, FG4)

Several other women spoke of how their mothers make them feel like a burden, and in some instances refuse to provide for the child of the lone mother, whilst others said hurtful things. For example:

"Even when you ask your mother, she says go look for a job, that affects your dignity because it seems as if you choose not to work and you feel like a burden." (Khayelitsha, FG3)

"say for instance you are living by your mothers place...even your mother gets fed up because of looking after you and your child and they nag and they like say things that hurts you and that also takes your dignity as a woman." (Mitchells Plain, FG13)

A woman in Langa describes how she is 'pushed away' from relatives who fear that she will ask them for support, even if that might not be the case:

"our relatives fear that we will want to depend on them, but that's not the case. One goes to see relatives for the love and emotional support. But you're pushed away because you're poor." (Langa, FG8)

Many of the family tensions and conflicts that were described centred around food. A woman in Paarl describes how her family reminds her that she did not pay for the food that she is eating:

"Even when I'm eating, my heart aches because I didn't buy for the food, or work for it, and my family tells me so too." (Paarl, FG28)

A woman in Langa further describes how she is made to feel to blame when the food runs out at home:

"When you're not working and at home, each time food runs out, people look at you as if you're the one finished the food." (Langa, FG6)

Another woman described the discord that occurs when people are hungry in the family:

“No, listen my cousin and I do not get along at all and the reason behind that is a small, unimportant thing, but as time goes on it escalates into something huge because of hunger. When there is food on our table everybody is happy and gets along very well, there is family love that used to exist when my mother was still alive. I wish it can be like that every day.” (Langa, FG7)

In a focus group in Dimbaza a woman described the conflict about food between herself and her sister with whom she lives, whilst another described the withdrawal of her mother's affection when she is unable to provide food for the family:

Respondent 4: I don't have a job and my sister is working. We live in the same house. There's a lot of conflict. She looks down on me because I'm not working. If I eat food from the fridge, she'll ask if I know how much it costs.

Respondent 3: When you've lost your job, like me, things change at home. You're told daily to gather your children and leave. But when you're working, things are different, your mother 'loves' you because she knows you are going to bring home bags full of groceries. (Dimbaza, FG17)

The direct link between parental affection (towards the lone mother) and income status (in terms of ability to pay for food for the household) was also made in Langa, depicting the way in which poverty reduces the person's standing in the family:

"Even parents prefer 'children' who work because they bring home the groceries..." (Langa, FG7)

An assumption is sometimes made that people within a family all 'share from the same pot' however in practice, the discord described above shows that this is not necessarily the case as between lone mothers and other family members (see also Mosoetsa, 2011). The following quote provides an example of a cohabiting sibling withholding his income:

"I have a brother who lives at home and is working. He does whatever he wants with his money, doesn't help us much, that's painful." (Dimbaza, FG16)

Women spoke of their discomfort having to ask family members for help with meeting their own material needs:

"I don't want to have to ask my parents to help me out all the time, I'm an adult. Being unemployed is a disadvantage because you end up annoying your parents, asking them to help out all the time and they think that I'm not doing anything to change my situation...[...] You end up feeling small when you want to ask for something." (Langa, FG7)

"I was alright then [i.e. when employed] even though I didn't earn much. I could do the necessary at home every fortnight, I could buy food and electricity, clothe my children. Now,

I'm scared to ask my brother for R20 to buy electricity because he has his own problems, so I just sit at home in the dark." (Dimbaza, FG16)

"It begins at home. Your own family does not respect you because you're jobless. You're even scared to ask your own parent for deodorant." (Langa, FG6)

A number of participants spoke about the way that they felt they had no choice but to live with their families, even though they are ill-treated. One woman from Xesi spoke of how she and her children live with her grandmother who ill treats them:

"It definitely affects my children. My oldest child is 8 years old, she takes everything in now and she understands when my grandmother is insulting us. She always asks why we don't go and live in X on our own? I would love to but I can't, the CSG looks after the children, after that I have nothing, we live on the same grandmother who ill treats us." (Xesi, FG18)

A woman in Nyanga described having to live with relatives who treat her and her child very badly:

"This story is too common here, I live under the same circumstances. I have to live with relatives, they treat my child and I very badly. So I sell sweets and caps to survive." (Nyanga, FG2)

Several of the quotes above contain hints of abuse. More explicit examples of abusive family dynamics included the women being verbally insulted by family members, food being locked away by drunken relatives, and fighting. In the first example, two women share experiences of living with alcoholics who lock food away when they are drunk:

"Not all is well at home, my family has no regard for me. I try to do all I can do, but there's no respect. I'm not working but I try to satisfy my family – I clean the house, I cook, I gather wood. I do all these things but it doesn't seem to make a difference, it's like I'm doing nothing. My grandmother is an alcoholic, she verbally abuses us when she's drunk and locks the food away and we end up not having anything to eat at times. So I'm not happy at home, there's no dignity."

"I'm in the same predicament at home. I don't have a job, the only income I have is the CSG, R270 a month. It's not even enough for my child. My mother is an alcoholic and she's abusive too, she also locks away food when she's drunk. So, no, there's no dignity." (Xesi, FG18)

In Langa, two respondents spoke of how poverty and overcrowdedness results in expressions of anger and violence towards one another:

"Our home is overcrowded because we are poor and there's no dignity. My sisters, cousins and all our children live together and we do not get along. Sometimes one of us would start a fight out of nothing, because they just need an excuse to express their anger from the overcrowdedness." (Langa, FG7)

## 2.4 Impact of poverty on lone mothers' dignity: reduced standing within the community

The third, prominent theme, in relation to the impact of poverty on lone mothers' dignity, was their accounts of their sense of reduced standing within the community. Women spoke of the way in which they felt that everyone knows that they are poor. There were accounts of being gossiped about, blamed for things going missing, looked down upon, and being overly scrutinised.

The following excerpt from a focus group in Nyanga contains examples of each of these issues:

Respondent 6: Poverty eats away at your dignity, day by day. You're nothing in your community when you're poor, nothing. You have to leave your own home, go to other people's homes and beg for food, for survival.

Respondent 5: When you're poor, your neighbours know you're poor. They can see your electricity off because you can't pay. When they lose something, like clothing from the washing line, they blame you because you have nothing. Even food in their homes, getting lost, they blame you.

Respondent 4: Because you have nothing, you become nothing. That's how people see us. Nobody will have proof, but you get blamed all the same.

Respondent 6: Sometimes you get given something by a relative, something nice. You'll hear comments like 'where would she get that? she's so poor', nasty comments like that. Because you're poor, people think you are brainless or have some learning disability.

Respondent 1: Sometimes someone gives you something and then talks ill of you, even to your face. They'll say they made you more human, you can't talk back to them. It's degrading. (Nyanga, FG1)

Such experiences were just as prominent in rural areas, where people also spoke of being looked down upon:

"People tend to look down on you when you're poor. You go to somebody's house and already they know you're going to ask for food." (Xesi, FG19)

One woman in Centani spoke of how poverty prevents her from being able to live a dignified life within her community:

"I live my life with dignity but am not living a dignified life overall. Poverty takes away all my dignity. Everybody my community knows that I'm poor, that I'm single struggling with children whose father doesn't care for them. When I walk into somebody's house, already they think I have come to ask for something, for money or food. Even if I'm just visiting and I have not gone to ask for something, already people think I've come to beg. That is humiliating, I tell you." (Centani, FG23)

In Khayelitsha one group spoke of the way in which poverty causes divisions within society, resulting in one woman commenting on its destructive impact within society: "essentially poverty, desperation divides society. We break one another down." (Khayelitsha, FG3)

In another focus group in Khayelitsha a woman spoke about how the whole community will know if she asks someone for food - her poverty becomes public knowledge and she experiences this as an indignity:

"I wanted to go back to the problem of indignity in the community because it's important to me and it affects me. If you go and ask someone for a plate of food or a meal, the whole community will know that you go around asking for food." (Khayelitsha, FG4)

In Butterworth, women spoke of how children do not treat them with respect because they are poor, and that people are treated even worse for being single and for living in a shack:

Respondent 1: When you are poor, people don't respect you, even children. When you speak as a poor person, people don't respect the words that come out of your mouth. It's a completely different story if you have money and are rich, or course.

Respondent 3: It's even worse when you are poor and single, it just makes you that much more vulnerable and people don't even think you have a sense of dignity to be protected.

Respondent 6: People ridicule you for living in a shack. It's humiliating, living in a shack. There's no dignity in poverty, as hard as we may try. (Butterworth, FG26)

Another woman, this time in an urban area, spoke of the way in which single mothers are treated with hostility, but commented that she would not live with a man in order to feel safe as this would erode her dignity further:

"It's tough in our communities, most of us single mothers are treated with hostility. And I'm not going to live with a man just because I want to feel safe. That would just erode my dignity further." (Langa, FG8)

In a focus group in Langa, three women spoke about the jealousy within their community about the fact that they live in brick houses (rather than shacks) and are able to dress their children decently:

Respondent 5: People don't expect us to do well, or at least, let me say at the level that we are at because we are not doing that well here, they don't expect us to survive as we do because we are single parents, on our own. My children dress decently, I see to that, they go to school and we are fortunate enough to have inherited my beloved grandmother's house. So people get jealous in the community, because it's a poor community, and that jealousy can turn into something bitter and sinister. It's the brick houses we live in that make people bitter most of all.

Respondent 3: My children dress decently, and people get jealous of even that. They don't see how I can do it all, some suggest I'm a witch. (Langa, FG8)

To conclude this section, in another focus group in Langa several women spoke about the levels of scrutiny that they face within their community, and although discussed with humour, the 'lose-lose' situation that they find themselves in. If they return home with shopping bags, members of their community speculate as to whether they are working or engaging in transactional sex; if they don't ask neighbours for help this leads to further speculation about prostitution; and if they do earn a salary this makes their neighbours jealous and angry.

2nd Respondent: There is nothing that makes a person violent more than poverty (*laughs*)  
Respondents: She is telling the truth.

Respondent: Every time a person goes out carrying a hand bag the neighbours' peek through windows thinking "where is so and so going, to work maybe or to sell her body because she will come back with shopping bags". If you are an unemployed woman who does not ask for any assistance from them they always think you sell sex for cash at Dockson.

3rd Respondent: Also if you are employed and earn a salary that is enough to cover for you and your children's needs they'll have a problem with you, being independent makes them jealous and angry (*Laughs*) (Langa, FG7)

## 2.5 Impact of poverty on lone mothers' dignity: the personal toll

### 2.5.1 Impeded role as caregiver

In Part 1 we saw the way in which the focus group participants referred to their roles as caregivers of children as being directly linked to their sense of dignity and self-esteem. When poverty causes them to be unable to meet the material needs of their children, this impacts negatively on their sense of dignity. Many participants spoke about ways in which their inability to provide materially for their children – due to poverty and unemployment - eroded or even extinguished their sense of dignity.

For example, a woman in Butterworth described how she feels that she has no dignity, and that she is not regarded as having dignity by her child, as she is unable to provide for his needs:

"As a mother and in relation to my role as a mother, I have no dignity. In my child's eyes I am not dignified because I cannot provide for him. Even in comparison to other mothers, I have no dignity because I can see they can provide for their children much better than I can. My child can see this too." (Butterworth, FG26)

A woman in Mbekweni described her dignity as being 'crushed' when seeing her son watching others play, unable to join in because of his hunger:

"I see my son sitting and watching others play because he does not have the energy to play, he is hungry. You can imagine what that does to my dignity as a mother, it crushes it."  
(Mbekweni, FG27)

A woman in Xesi states that her dignity is affected by being unable to support her child herself and having to depend on help from others:

“Even though I get help from home to maintain my child, as her mother, I wish I could support my child myself, that’s how my dignity is affected.” (Xesi, FG18)

In Paarl, a woman described how her son derides her for being unable to provide for him, even a meagre R1 (6 pence).

“I can’t even give my child R1 if he asks for it. He’ll say: ‘what kind of mother are you, you can’t even give me R1?’... Poverty destroys our dignity as mothers.” (Paarl, FG28)

Another woman from Masiphumelele spoke of how she feels when she cannot provide things for her child's education:

"I can’t get my child the school things he needs. Even crayons. When I go to meetings, school meetings, it’s humiliation all the way for me." (Masiphumelele FG29)

### **2.5.2 Social isolation**

A number of women spoke of how poverty results in lowered self-esteem and a sense of isolation. For example in Thafalofefe and Butterworth in the Eastern Cape, people spoke of how they feel that they don't 'fit in', how they avoid being with other people, and how others avoid them:

"Poverty affects my self-esteem, it’s very low. When you’re with people they talk about this and that, buying new furniture and all sorts of things. So I don’t fit in because my concerns are about survival. I just get up and go."

"Poverty is isolating, I just avoid being with other people because they look down on me. They don’t treat me as a human being, it’s as if I’m an idiot because I’m poor. That’s how it is." (Thafalofefe, FG22)

“People don’t even come into your house when you’re poor. It’s isolating, you end up being on your own most of the time.” (Butterworth, FG24)

In Langa, a woman described how she feels unable to contribute towards social gatherings and is excluded which reduces her self-esteem and confidence:

"you can’t hang-out with those who are employed [...] even if they plan to have a sit-in or party they don’t involve you because they know you’re not going to be able to contribute to make that party happen and that reduces your self-esteem and I end up depressed, feeling hurt. These things, sometimes I don’t even have the confidence to look for work." (Langa, FG7)

### 2.5.3 Despondency through to desperation

A striking number of women shared information about their mental wellbeing, within the context of the impact of poverty on their sense of dignity. Some described their sense of despondency and defeatedness:

“you try to go forward in life but there’s always something coming in the way. You just can’t get where you want to be (Lavender Hill, FG10)

“I was born into poverty, I’m poor and my children live in poverty. As much as that is not mentality, it is the way things are in a practical sense. I had no opportunities to develop myself and my children’s opportunities are limited too. At the end of the day these things impact on your sense of dignity because you are unable to realize yourself in poverty.” (Qumrha, FG14)

“At times, you know I had told myself I would finish matric and go to nursing school because I know my family is struggling, I wanted to help them out, but unfortunately I fell pregnant and everything stopped, my world was turned upside down. My progress stopped and I had to look after my child and ended up living on this grant. Even with matric, I can’t get a job, but most of all I want to go to school. There are no government grants for poor people like me who want to continue with their education. I live the way I do and I’m not happy with it, I want to continue with my education. I am now becoming despondent. Maybe it’s our lot in my family because this plight started with my elder sisters, they got their matric but could never find a job until they were too discouraged and then too old. I fear my children, whom I am educating, will be in the same plight. (Qumrha, FG15)

In two focus groups people spoke of the strain of being unable to keep clean:

“Well first of all you end up being like a mentally unstable person. You never have proper or decent clothing, if you don’t have money for deodorant your arm pits stink amongst other people, people talk about you in a derogatory way, you end up mentally strained.” (Dimbaza, FG17)

"For example when I run out of deodorant, I feel bad, it’s embarrassing. I can smell myself, it’s bad when you don’t smell clean in the presence of others... (*inaudible*)..you don’t feel like a human being amongst other people. (Xesi, FG19)

Alcohol use by the focus group participants themselves was only referred to in two of the focus groups, and on each occasion it was described as a way in which to escape from the daily reality of their lives in poverty. In no instances was alcohol seen as recreational.

“I end up drinking so that I can forget the poverty, so that I don’t think about my situation and that takes.. erodes my dignity too.” (Butterworth FG24)

"No working class man with a car and a house wants to date a nobody like me who is unemployed and a drunkard, we really end up drinking heavily because of our circumstances, because we have nothing better to do with our time and want to erase the misery or depression that we are going through. [...] Yes that is the kind of life that we live, I don't know maybe we are living in the last days because I always ask myself 'why?'" (Langa, FG7)

Others spoke explicitly of how their state of poverty causes depression, anxiety or anger. For example, a woman from Masiphumelele described her depression:

"It's not right, our mother helping us out, she's too old to be doing that. It affects me, not working. I suffer from depression as a result. I'm on medication for depression, I ended up in [...] hospital because of depression. It's tough, but I'll keep trying." (Masiphumelele, FG29)

As a further example, a woman in Mbekweni described how her poverty causes her to feel stressed and angry and how she takes it out on her children, with negative consequences:

"I end up always snapping at the children because of the stress I feel. I'm always angry that I never have money for anything, I can't provide for my children. I end up taking it out on them and it affects them, they don't perform well at school." (Mbekweni, FG27)

The most extreme examples of mental torment all occurred in focus groups in urban settings in the Western Cape. One woman from Mitchells Plain described how she had felt like ending her life, and went on to describe her feeling of depression about living with her parents, supported only by her father's pension:

"As a woman, you get tired of struggling...You get tired of people looking down on you and you feel unworthy. You don't even feel like being around your children anymore because of the way of living...I mean you don't choose that life...It comes to you. Like myself, I also had high hopes for myself...at the end of the day...here I am...I'm back at my mom's place. I'm living from what my father's pension...so for me also, sometimes I also feel depressed you know because ....when I see some of my friends. I'm not saying because they better than me or whatever... just when you see some people succeed in life and here you still stuck where you don't want to be...."(Mitchells Plain, FG13)

In Masiphumelele a woman described how she is so under-nourished that she is unable to adequately breast-feed and how this causes her to feel like rejecting the baby:

"When my baby wants to be breast-fed, I feel like throwing her away from me because I have nothing in me to keep me going, no nourishment. I feel like she's sucking the life out of me." (Masiphumelele, FG30)

Similarly, focus group participants in Langa described how their extreme levels of poverty, and inability to provide for their children led them to desperate thoughts of suicide and infanticide:

"And when you are poor you are always depressed, angry and facing problems. When your child asks for food you take out all your problems out on him by insulting or beating him up just because you yourself are defensive about your lack of provision as a parent. Most of the time you end up feeling suicidal and thinking about ways to kill yourself and your children, like bombing my house is a fantasy sometimes. Really because if you only kill yourself who is going to look after your children?"

"let me tell you as I have a two months old baby and when trying to breast feed sometimes the breast milk does not come out because I am malnourished. All the anger I have I just want to take it out on this poor innocent baby by crashing his head on the walls or drowning him but at the same time I think to myself that homicide and suicide is a way out for cowards. I believe that I was brought up to be a stronger person than that so I can't just give up now, but because of starvation and depression you end up thinking and acting like a mentally ill person. Sometimes I go for weeks not having eaten proper food, a full meal, bread and eggs is all you can afford sometimes you don't even have the basics like sugar."  
(Langa, FG7)

## 2.6 Impact of inequality on lone mothers' dignity

As noted earlier, participants spoke more expansively on the subject of poverty than inequality. However, the section of the focus groups that asked about inequality nevertheless did raise some salient points. Some of the focus group participants spoke in quite general terms about inequality, and - in both urban and rural areas - of being 'at the bitter end of inequality', for example:

"What can we say, we are at the bitter end of inequality in a way that those that are well off cannot imagine. It's hard to break it down further than that." (Qumrha, FG14)

"These things are all connected – poverty and inequality and they both badly affect dignity."  
(Paarl, FG28)

Although this did not occur in the Western Cape, a small number of people in the Eastern Cape spoke of their acceptance of their position in life, of their lot:

"We shouldn't worry about how wealthy other people are, we should just try to survive in our poverty, it's our lot." (Xesi, FG18)

"I think we have accepted that we are at the bitter side of inequality, it's just like that, no use crying about it." (Butterworth, FG24)

"Well I think we have to work at our hearts in that regard and accept where God has placed us, otherwise stress will kill you. Maybe life will be better for my children. As for me, if my children go to bed with something in their stomachs and they can go to school, every else will come in its own time. I can't compare myself to X who has a glass sliding door otherwise

I may end up prostituting myself going after the sliding door that costs R1 500 – charging R500 for 3 days to get there. It wouldn't be right, I accept where I am in life.” (Qumrha, FG15)

However, most spoke of the unacceptable nature of the state of affairs in relation to the extent of inequality that exists in South Africa:

“Inequality impacts on how we live and our sense of dignity. You heard us talking about basic things like water, toilets, shacks and brick houses. Such things should not be issues in 2011, in South Africa. This country isn't poor, on the whole when you look at it. The country needs to sort all this out. It's probably how I got TB, the mess, the filth, the overcrowdedness of it all. The next thing you get stigmatized because you are ill. People think you're going to pass the disease onto them. All this, these things take away a person's dignity.” (Langa, FG8)

The most prominent themes by far to arise out of the focus group material in relation to the impact of inequality on dignity related to housing and sanitation. The point was repeatedly made that living in a shack or one-roomed RDP house takes away people's sense of dignity:

“I live in a shack with 4 children and a grandchild. There is no dignity there, I don't see dignity in such a way of life.”(Qumrha, FG15)

“I live in an RDP house. It's just one room. We sleep in it, wash in it and cook in it as a family. There's no dignity or development. What success can come from such an environment? Our relationships are strained in this one-roomed home, it's not easy and there's nothing dignified about it.” (Mbekweni, FG27)

“I have four children [...] Do you know I stayed with all of them in one room? So, doesn't that take away my dignity? You don't have privacy. I don't have nothing...I can't move...I can't...how do you breathe in a room like that? Do you know what I am saying. At the end of the day, that does really take away my dignity.” (Mitchells Plain, FG13)

Similarly, people - particularly in urban areas - raised the issue of sanitation when asked about the impact of inequality on dignity.<sup>9</sup> For example, in Nyanga, living in a shack with no toilet was described as the 'lowest end of inequality':

"Where I live there are no toilets. They have these communal plastic toilets that shake when it's windy. Even when you're inside you're afraid because anyone can come and push it to the ground with you inside. When you go there there's always a queue. Imagine, you're desperate to use the toilet and you have to queue. When you go in a house with a proper

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<sup>9</sup> A recent study in Kenya about women's experiences of living in the slums of Nairobi similarly identified the prominent theme of the need for adequate sanitation for the protection of dignity (Amnesty International, 2010).

toilet and ask to use it, people refuse. You have to go back to the queue and wait. That's how we live, people who are better off do not help us poor people. Inequality lowers your dignity."

"I agree with X. We live in shacks, with no toilets. That's the lowest end of inequality."  
(Nyanga, FG1)

In Cape Town, the lived experience of inequality is particularly stark. Poor people still live in areas that are distinctly separate from prosperous areas and yet are exposed to people whose living standards are amongst the highest in the world. When asked about inequality, people often contrasted their position with others in relation to housing and sanitation. For example, in Nyanga a woman compared her community where there are no flush toilets, with wealthy areas where people from that community work as domestic workers and where there are several flush toilets per house:

"We don't have flush toilets where we live, there are people with 4 toilets in the same house and we clean these toilets for them. It's just not right. Apartheid has not ended in South Africa, that's the reality for a lot of people. [...] You don't feel free because your dignity is not protected." (Nyanga, FG2)

"It's painful, but the thing is we are not educated, so we have to go and work in suburbs as domestics, we don't have a choice because you want to raise your children. The inequality becomes stark when you compare where you come from and your place of work. Some people don't even have toilets, and some of these houses have 3 or 4, in one house. That's unfair inequality, right there." (Khayelitsha, FG4)

"Yes, inequality is very high here. We've lived in Mbekweni for many years, but we don't even have houses. I signed up for a house in the early 90's, yet I still don't have one. When they build RDP houses for us – it's a one-roomed house yet one has a number of children. You go to town and people live in suburbs, in luxury. When I do piece-jobs in these houses, it does hurt." (Mbekweni, FG27)

Within the Western Cape, people spoke of their negative experiences of living in hostels, sometimes described as being worse than living in shacks:

"Some of us live in X hostel. We use cardboard to divide our homes. It's just one big hall and you hear everything going on in the next home. Toilets are shared, it's bad, that's how deep inequality is in our country. While some have numerous toilets in one house, we have to share with other families and then people wonder why poor South Africans are so angry."  
(Khayelitsha, FG5)

In rural areas particularly, some women compared themselves to others with whom they had grown up:

"It's hard because there are people we grow up with who have had better fortune than us. They are well to do and we live the way we do, it's humiliating." (Qumrha, FG14)

"It does affect my dignity, for example, in my village there are people of my age group that went to school with me. They are working, driving beautiful cars, so it's embarrassing for me to be so poor." (Alice, FG21)

To conclude this section, this light-hearted but poignant exchange amongst participants in Khayelitsha who had worked in wealthy areas of Cape Town, compared their experience of pregnancy with those of wealthy white women, highlighting the lived experience of inequality:

Respondent 4: White people, they have money they invest for their children's future from the time a person is pregnant (laughter)

Respondent 2: For us it's very difficult when the baby kicks because of hunger, white people drink spring water and eat lettuce

Respondent 3 : Calamari (laughter)

Respondent 4: We black people eat samp, no beans.

Respondent 1: When they're pregnant they crave for MacDonald's and the husband will go and draw some money and buy MacDonald's, we just crave and go and buy the chicken feet that we can afford. (Khayelitsha, FG3)

## 2.7 Discussion

In this section of the paper material has been presented on the impact of poverty and inequality on dignity. First, women spoke of the impact on dignity of their techniques to survive poverty. These comprised tolerating poor quality work, undertaking casual work for neighbours and relatives, begging, and transactional sex. For example, one woman spoke of having to 'endure and persevere' poor quality work, due to 'the problem of hunger back home' (Paarl, FG28). People spoke of the humiliation of working for neighbours or relatives, and of the ways in which begging takes away their sense of dignity. In relation to transactional sex people spoke of their dignity not being protected, losing their dignity, and their dignity being destroyed.

Second, extensive accounts were given of the way in which poverty causes there to be strained family relations, with women being treated badly within their families – including being insulted, excluded from decision-making, and treated as a burden. People spoke of there being no dignity in poverty, and of their discomfort having to stay in homes where they are ill-treated but cannot afford to leave, and having to depend on others to meet their own material needs. Extreme examples were given of the violence within families seen as being a consequence of poverty.

Third, people spoke extensively about how poverty reduces their standing within the community, and how this negatively impacts on their dignity. People spoke of being looked down upon, and of being over-scrutinised. Vivid examples were given of the extent of jealousy and rivalry within poor communities.

The fourth theme related to the negative impact of poverty on people's self-esteem, ranging from despondency to desperation and despair. The previous part of the paper showed the prominence that women gave to their role as caregivers, and in this section we see the negative impact on dignity when unable to fulfil such roles, with women describing their dignity as 'crushed'

and 'destroyed'. Examples were also given of the ways in which poverty breeds social isolation and lowered self-esteem, as well as examples of more extreme thoughts of suicide and infanticide.

In section 2.6 findings are presented from the focus group discussions about inequality and dignity. People spoke of living 'at the bitter end of inequality', with a few women in the Eastern Cape expressing acceptance of their lot, though the vast majority across both provinces regarding their plight as unacceptable. People spoke most expansively about the negative impact on their dignity of living in shacks or single-room houses, and of lacking adequate sanitation. Whilst some women compared themselves mainly with people with whom they had grown up, others had a wider reference group particularly if they had worked as domestic workers for wealthy households.

Whether or not the themes identified in this paper can be extrapolated to other low income groups is not the issue at stake. Rather, the material has provided striking and personal accounts of the many and complex ways in which 'dignity in practice' is experienced by low income lone mothers, and the second half of this paper demonstrates clearly that the low income lone mothers who took part in the focus groups regarded poverty and inequality as having a negative impact on dignity. The next stage of the project will explore the role that social security plays within this context.

## Annex 1 Focus group methodology

### Sampling

The focus groups and indepth interviews were undertaken in two of South Africa's nine provinces: the Eastern Cape and the Western Cape. These two provinces were selected for a number of reasons. First, of the nine provinces in South Africa the Eastern Cape and the Western Cape are (or are among, depending on how it is measured) the most and least deprived provinces respectively. These two provinces therefore provided opportunities to undertake research in areas that were fairly homogenously deprived in the Eastern Cape, particularly in the highly deprived areas in the former homeland areas of the Transkei and Ciskei (e.g. Noble and Wright, 2013a), as well as in areas that are in closer proximity to less deprived areas. High levels of deprivation occur in rural farming communities and in townships on the outskirts of cities in both provinces, but in the Western Cape there are also areas of great affluence which might have an impact on low income people's attitudes on relevant issues (e.g. Noble and Wright, 2013b).

Second, these two provinces have distinct and long-standing patterns of migration which intersect with the issues of work-seeking and social security claiming patterns, and the research team have extensive experience of working in these areas previously (e.g. Du Toit and Neves, 2009a; Ntshongwana, 2010a and 2010b; Surender *et al.*, 2007).

Third, by restricting the focus groups to these two provinces, the project only needed to employ three of South Africa's eleven official languages. Although English is the language of South African government, according to the 2011 Census the main language spoken by people in the Eastern Cape is isiXhosa (79%) followed by Afrikaans (11%), and the main language spoken by people in the Western Cape is Afrikaans (50%) followed by isiXhosa (25%) (Statistics South Africa, 2012). The use of multiple languages greatly increases the complexity of qualitative and quantitative research (e.g. attempts to achieve conceptual harmony across languages, and costs of translation) and by limiting the languages to three the issue could be contained. Finally, given the large geographical size of country, the logistical costs of undertaking fieldwork (e.g. flights, car hire, accommodation) were also contained by focusing on two contiguous provinces.

The areas for the focus groups within these two provinces were selected in a two-stage process using the municipality-level South African Index of Multiple Deprivation 2007 (SAIMD 2007) (Wright and Noble, 2009) and the datazone-level SAIMD 2001 (Noble *et al.*, 2009).<sup>10</sup>

Table 1 summarises details about the locations of the 30 focus groups that were undertaken between November 2011 and June 2012, as well as the language that was used for each focus group. Seventeen were undertaken in the Western Cape and 13 in the Eastern Cape. Twelve were undertaken in peri-urban townships, five were undertaken in townships in more rural areas (which will include farm workers, particularly in Paarl), and 13 were undertaken in rural former homeland areas. In terms of the main type of housing in the area of each focus group, 12 of the focus groups

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<sup>10</sup> This and other aspects of the methodology including ethical considerations are described in more detail in the final report (forthcoming).

were undertaken in areas that comprised mainly formal dwellings, 3 that were mainly informal, 13 that were a mixture of mainly formal and traditional dwellings, and 2 that were a mix of formal and informal dwellings.

An additional consideration as part of the sampling process was that of population group. As seen in the profile of lone mothers in the first themed working paper (Wright et al., 2013), of the lone mothers identified 91% were black African, and 7% were coloured, with the remaining 2% being white and Indian/Asian. Most focus groups were in predominantly black African areas and were undertaken in isiXhosa and five focus groups were organised in predominantly coloured areas and undertaken in Afrikaans (though the sample was not intended to be a quota sample). The focus groups in Afrikaans took place in the Western Cape as more than half of the South African coloured population lives in this province.

**Table 1: Area characteristics for the 30 focus group locations**

FG No	Province	Area	semi urban/rural/former homeland	Housing type in area	Language	SAIMD range*
F1	WC	Nyanga (Gugulethu)	peri-urban townships	formal	isiXhosa	3 to 8
F2	WC	Nyanga (Gugulethu)	peri-urban townships	formal	isiXhosa	3 to 8
F3	WC	Khayelitsha (Lingeletu)	peri-urban townships	informal	isiXhosa	4 to 8
F4	WC	Khayelitsha (Site C)	peri-urban townships	informal	isiXhosa	4 to 8
F5	WC	Khayelitsha (Site C)	peri-urban townships	informal	isiXhosa	4 to 8
F6	WC	Langa	peri-urban townships	formal	isiXhosa	2 to 8
F7	WC	Langa	peri-urban townships	formal	isiXhosa	2 to 8
F8	WC	Langa	peri-urban townships	formal	isiXhosa	2 to 8
F9	WC	Mitchells Plain	peri-urban townships	formal	Afrikaans	2 to 5
F10	WC	Lavender Hill	peri-urban townships	formal	Afrikaans	2 to 5
F11	WC	Lavender Hill	peri-urban townships	formal	Afrikaans	2 to 5
F12	WC	Ocean View	Township in rural area	formal	Afrikaans	2
F13	WC	Mitchells Plain	peri-urban townships	formal	Afrikaans	2 to 5
F14	EC	Komga (Qumrha)	former homeland rural	formal/ traditional	isiXhosa	8
F15	EC	Komga (Qumrha)	former homeland rural	formal/ traditional	isiXhosa	8
F16	EC	Dimbaza	former homeland rural	formal/ traditional	isiXhosa	7 to 10
F17	EC	Dimbaza	former homeland rural	formal/ traditional	isiXhosa	7 to 10
F18	EC	Xesi, Middeldrift	former homeland rural	formal/ traditional	isiXhosa	6 to 9
F19	EC	Xesi, Middeldrift	former homeland rural	formal/ traditional	isiXhosa	6 to 9

				traditional		
F20	EC	Alice	former homeland rural	formal/ traditional	isiXhosa	3 to 9
F21	EC	Alice	former homeland rural	formal/ traditional	isiXhosa	3 to 9
F22	EC	Kentani (Thafalofefe)	former homeland rural	formal/ traditional	isiXhosa	8 to 10
F23	EC	Kentani	former homeland rural	formal/ traditional	isiXhosa	8 to 10
F24	EC	Butterworth (Cegcuwana)	former homeland rural	formal/ traditional	isiXhosa	8 to 10
F25	EC	Butterworth (Mission)	former homeland rural	formal/ traditional	isiXhosa	8 to 10
F26	EC	Butterworth (Mission)	former homeland rural	formal/ traditional	isiXhosa	8 to 10
F27	WC	Paarl (Mbekweni)	Township in rural area	formal	isiXhosa	4 to 8
F28	WC	Paarl (Mbekweni)	Township in rural area	formal	isiXhosa	4 to 8
F29	WC	Masiphumelele	Township in rural area	formal/ informal	isiXhosa	4 to 9
F30	WC	Masiphumelele	Township in rural area	formal/ informal	isiXhosa	4 to 9

Lastly, the final column in Table 1 gives an 'SAIMD 2001 decile range' for each focus group location (Noble *et al.*, 2009). This summarises the range of datazones (with decile 10 being the most deprived, and decile 1 being the least deprived) for the datazone in which the focus group took place as well as neighbouring datazones. So for example a range of '8 to 10' indicates that the datazones surrounding the venue were concentrated at the most deprived end of the national distribution, whereas a range of '3 to 9' indicates that the venue was surrounded by datazones with a wider range of deprivation.

## Recruitment of participants

Another important consideration when selecting areas was the practicalities of recruiting participants in those areas. Originally it was intended that the recruitment of participants would be achieved through local community organisations. However this carries a certain amount of bias by excluding women who do not use these particular services, and areas which lack these services. It was therefore decided very early on in the project that women would instead be recruited at social security paypoints on the payment days for the Child Support Grant. This method had been used successfully by members of the team previously (e.g. Surrender *et al.*, 2007).

Paypoints are distributed across South Africa, and are organised for set times during a month and use various buildings such as community halls, church halls, and in smaller areas local shops are sometimes used. The paypoint manager along with other staff members set up what are

essentially portable cash machines. Recipients queue up and identify themselves with a finger or thumbprint in conjunction with an ID card and their money is dispensed.

Paypoints are organised by the South African Social Security Agency (SASSA) on behalf of the national government Department of Social Development. Special permission to both access the paypoint sites and recruit women to participate in the research was sought and obtained from the provincial heads of SASSA in the Eastern Cape and Western Cape. SASSA in turn notified the private companies contracted by SASSA to implement the payments so that they would expect the researchers on specific dates.

Each paypoint location is active (i.e. set up to pay recipients their grant money) on between one to five days each month, so recruitment in a particular area could only take place on these specified days. Therefore logistical considerations about when and where it was possible to recruit women for the focus groups was a consideration when selecting areas.

Once a paypoint was identified, the research team arrived early at each selected venue, made themselves known to the paypoint manager, and approached women to ask whether they would be willing to take part in a focus group. Whilst at the outset the intention was to allow women to decide overnight about whether to participate (i.e. recruit on one day, and run the focus group the following day) this caused great difficulties for the participants who were unable to take time out to visit a paypoint on two days in a row. This requirement was therefore dropped and instead the focus groups mainly took place later on the same day.

If someone was interested in participating, then they were fully informed about the purpose of and benefits of the research, why and how they have been selected, what they would have to do, how the results would be used, what to do if they do not want to take part (emphasising that they could withdraw at any time without any negative consequences), and how their responses would be kept confidential and anonymous. They were also given details about the project and a copy of the information and consent form in their preferred language.<sup>11</sup> They also took part in a brief screening questionnaire to ensure that they fell within the group of women whom we were seeking to interview. The screening questionnaire is described in detail in the first themed working paper and so is not repeated here.

## The interview process

At the start of each focus group the participants were told about the project, and a number of 'ground rules' were articulated: that participants could leave at any time without penalty; that their participation had no bearing on their receipt of the CSG (i.e. what they said would not jeopardise their receipt of the CSG) and that the research team did not comprise members of SASSA or DSD; that the focus group would be recorded so that the material could be analysed but any details would be anonymised if used as part of the research so as to ensure that no individual could ever be identified; that any issues discussed by participants should be respected and should not be

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<sup>11</sup> The consent form and the interview schedule will be included as annexes in the final report, in English, isiXhosa and Afrikaans.

repeated by another participant outside the focus group; that there were no right or wrong answers, and that different and differing opinions are fine. This introductory stage was also used to ensure that none of the participants were related to each other, and that nobody felt that they were there under duress. Once it was certain that everyone understood and was happy to proceed, the participants were then given a copy of the information and consent form to sign.

The participants were provided with refreshments (soft drinks, biscuits and crisps) as well as a payment in acknowledgement of their time of R100. In addition to signing the consent forms, each woman also signed a document acknowledging receipt of the payment.

Each focus group was attended by at least two members of the research team. One person undertook the focus group facilitation, and the other person ensured that the recording was operational, took notes, and dealt with any logistical issues during the course of the session. On occasions a third member attended and took part in the debriefing of participants at the end of the focus group.

## **The focus group participants**

One hundred and ninety-eight women took part in the focus groups, all under the age of 60. The vast majority of the women (81%) were 'single, never been married'. The next largest group (6%) were widowed, with a small percentage (4% each) being separated, or divorced, or married with husband mainly living elsewhere.

When asked, as part of the demographics questionnaire, whether they are mainly raising their children alone, 97% said 'yes', the remaining few specifying that their mother helps with raising the child, and one referring to the father of the child. The respondents lived with an average of 1.8 children: 42% lived with one child, 37% with two children, 16% with three children, 4% with four children, and 1% with six children.

In terms of their home language, 84% spoke isiXhosa, 10% spoke Afrikaans, and 6% spoke English. Eighty-six percent of the participants were unemployed, with the remainder mainly being in part-time employment and only four women being full-time employed.

## Annex 2 Focus group questions (English version)\*

The South African Constitution says:

Human Dignity: “Everyone has inherent dignity and the right to have their dignity respected and protected.”

1. What does the word dignity mean to you?
2. (a) With all that South Africa has been through as country, in relation to the apartheid legacy in particular, how important do you think dignity is to South Africans in general?  
  
(b) And to South African women?
3. How do you think poverty impacts on your sense of dignity, if at all?
4. Is there a relationship between your job and your sense of dignity? If you don't have a job does this impact on your sense of dignity? If so, how?
5. South Africa has one of the highest rates of inequality in the world. Does this impact on your sense of dignity? If so, how?
6. What role, if any, does the Child Support Grant (CSG) play in your life in relation to your dignity?
7. If there was a social grant for the adult recipients of CSG in addition to the existing grant (which is intended only for their children's needs) how do you think this would impact on their sense of dignity? [Note: social security protecting dignity versus eroding dignity]
8. How does the actual experience of applying for (at the welfare office) and receiving (at the paypoint) the CSG intersect with your sense of dignity as a lone mother?
9. What is the relationship between social grants and *ubuntu*?
10. Do you think you are leading a dignified life, in general? What sort of things would help to respect and protect your dignity?

\* This themed working paper draws mainly from material relating to questions 1-5 and 10.

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