



# Lone mothers' portrayals of dignity and the impact of poverty on dignity

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# Outline

- ‘Dignity as principle’ and ‘Dignity in practice’
- Introducing the focus groups
- Four dimensions of dignity
- Impact of poverty on dignity

# Dignity as principle

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

# Dignity in practice

- The “embodied”, implicit (hierarchical)’ notion of dignity:
- ‘hierarchical notions of dignity and honor are pervaded with power as their attribution provides the symbolic legitimization of social positions, their range of action, their codes of conduct, and the respect they are accorded. It is this type of honor and dignity (with its counterparts, humiliation and shame) that structures local, traditional and national social orders.’ (Monica Budowski, 2005: 53).

# Focus groups – selection of provinces

- Eastern Cape and Western Cape (23% of lone mothers live in these 2 provinces, GHS)
- Represent the most and least deprived provinces so include homogeneously deprived and very unequal areas.
- Distinct and long-standing patterns of migration which intersect with the issues of work-seeking and social security claiming patterns,
- Main languages (2011 Census): EC - isiXhosa (79%) then Afrikaans (11%); WC - Afrikaans (50%) then isiXhosa (25%).

# The 30 focus groups

- Areas selected using SAIMD 2007
- Eastern Cape (13); Western Cape (17)
- Peri-urban townships (12); townships in more rural areas (5); rural former homeland areas (13).
- Recruitment at paypoints on CSG days

# Defining lone motherhood in practice - the FG recruitment

- Female
- A biological or foster or de facto caregiver of one or more children under the age of 18
- Not co-resident with a husband or partner
- Aged 16-59 inclusive
- Low income (below CSG means test)

# Profile of focus group participants

- 198 women all under the age of 60
- Marital status: 81% 'single, never been married', 6% widowed, 4% separated, 4% divorced, 4% married with husband mainly living elsewhere.
- When asked, as part of the screening questionnaire, whether they are mainly raising their children alone, 97% said 'yes', the remaining few specified that their mother helps and one referred to the father of the child.
- Respondents lived with 1.8 children on average. 42% lived with one child, 37% with two children, 16% with three children, 4% with four children, and 1% with six children.
- Home language: 84% isiXhosa, 10% Afrikaans, 6% English.
- Employment status: 86% unemployed with the remainder mainly being in part-time employment and only four women full-time employed.



# Analysis

- Focus groups were recorded
- Field notes
- Recordings translated and transcribed into English – checked
- Analysis in NVIVO
- Considered ‘terrains’ of self, family, community
- Applied the framework of Khatib and Armenian’s four dimensions of dignity: worthiness, self-respect, self-esteem and autonomy

# Dimensions of dignity

Worthiness - ‘the ability to feel important and valuable in relation to others, communicate this to others, and be treated as such by others’

Self-respect - ‘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’

Self-esteem – “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.”

Autonomy - ‘includes independence, control, ability to make one’s own decisions, and functional capacity.’

(Khatib and Armenian, 2010)

# Dimensions of dignity: worthiness (i)

People described feeling 'less worthy' when not in paid employment:

*“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)*

# Dimensions of dignity: worthiness (ii)

Issues were raised around gender and race:

*“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)*

*“I feel like our dignity as black African people is now being taken into good consideration and respected.. It’s no longer just white people’s dignity that matters anymore.” (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)*

# Dimensions of dignity: self-respect (i)

Women spoke of the importance of self-respect and respect for others:

*"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)*

*"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)*

# Dimensions of dignity: self-respect (ii)

The theme of respectable behaviour:

*“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)*

# Dimensions of dignity: self-esteem (i)

The main reason given for why women's dignity should be protected was because of their role as caregivers:

*"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)*

# Dimensions of dignity: self-esteem (ii)

Dignity is inextricably tied to sense of self, identity and humanity:

*“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, your dignity is the core of your identity.” (Thafalofefe, FG22)*



# Dimensions of dignity: self-esteem (iii)

Absence of dignity compromises sense of self and humanity:

*“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)*

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

# Dimensions of dignity: autonomy (i)

Main route to dignity: jobs!

*“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)*

# Dimensions of dignity: autonomy (ii)

Jobs do not automatically confer dignity:

*“My dignity was compromised at work. I was told I’d earn R1 000, at month end they gave me R800. 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)*

# Impact of poverty on dignity (i)

Techniques to survive poverty and their impact on dignity:

- *Tolerating poor quality paid work*
- *Casual work for neighbours or family*
- *Transactional sex*
- *Begging*

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

*“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)*

# Impact of poverty on dignity (ii)

Strained family relations:

*"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)*

# Impact of poverty on dignity (iii)

Reduced standing within the community:

*"I live my life with dignity but am not living a dignified life overall. Poverty takes away all my dignity. Everybody in 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)*

# Impact of poverty on dignity (iv)

The personal toll: *Impeded role as caregiver, Social isolation, Despondency through to desperation*

*“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)*

*“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)*

# Impact of poverty on dignity

- **Worthiness:** treated as less worthy by family, community members and society, especially when not in work
- **Self-respect:** although mainly an ‘exhortation to self’ this is put under strain by circumstances
- **Self-esteem:** severely compromised by inability to provide for children and own material needs
- **Autonomy:** significantly eroded by poverty, compounded by dignity-eroding survival tactics