

INEQUALITY AS INDIGNITY

Bilal Moin

Yale University

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The manifest specter of inequality has firmly entrenched itself at the forefront of economic discourse, igniting debates that traverse the realms of class, gender, sex, caste, race, and religious affiliations. These debates, centered around the questions of inequality ‘of what?’ and ‘for whom?’, examine the equitable distribution of resources, opportunities, and capabilities across socio-economic strata, thereby interrogating the structural determinants, measures, and remedies of inequality. A fundamental yet under-explored facet in these discussions is human dignity—a concept prevalent in the domains of bioethics, human rights, and moral philosophy, yet conspicuously absent in orthodox economic paradigms rooted in classical utilitarianism¹. Conventional empirical examinations of inequality tend to conflate indignity with indices of material prosperity, such as poverty, or with ‘neutral’ social indicators of education, health, or nutrition outcomes. Even if a distinction between dignity and economic status arises, it's axiomatically perceived that the former is wholly contingent on the latter². This essay posits that indignity is both a determinant and a consequence of socio-economic inequality. Arising from the interplay of social dynamics and economic disparities, this dialectic reveals a vicious cycle of economic inequality and social indignity. We argue that discussions surrounding the definition of inequality, its multidimensional assessment, and policy formulation are markedly incomplete without a thorough examination of the role of dignity. As Amartya Sen asserts, “[indignities] call for clearer recognition ... Indignities can survive both through omission and commission, and they have to be addressed in a comprehensive way.”³

The structure of the essay is organized as follows: First, we define dignity in the context of inequality. Next, we argue that indignity is uniquely intractable, given that it emanates from multiple interactional sources, and isn't necessarily predicated on other determinants of

¹ Peil and Staveren 2009, 86

² Kapur et al. 2010

³ Sen 2001a, 6

economic inequality. The notion of relative indignity (as status inequality) is explored as a potential stimulus for economic inequality, while both absolute and relative poverty are examined for their capacity to engender indignity, potentially resulting in a vicious circle of moral and economic deprivation. Lastly, we address the direct and proxied measurement of status inequality and policymaking avenues, aiming to appraise and mitigate the pernicious ramifications of indignity on inequality processes.

Defining Dignity

The discourse around dignity is often marked by its polysemic nature, leading to a plethora of interpretations that have evolved since Pico della Mirandola utilized the term in his 1486 ‘Oration on the Dignity of Man.’ The prominence of dignity has soared not only in philosophical and political realms but also within everyday cognition. This is exemplified by its incorporation as a foundational precept in many state constitutions and United Nations (UN) documents, wherein dignity is posited as the linchpin for human rights—as exemplified by the articulation in the International Covenants on Human Rights that rights “derive from the inherent dignity of the human person”⁴.

Before embarking further, it's imperative to establish the foundational assumptions that undergird our analysis: the principle of basic moral equality and social relativism. The former embodies the idea of moral equality irrespective of individual differences such as race or gender and the latter accounts for the contextual nature of social interactions and judgments⁵. Notably, while cross-societal inequality and interspecies rights are critical⁶, it is beyond the scope of this essay, and our framework and arguments primarily navigate the inequality within human societies.

⁴ UN 1966, 25(b)

⁵ Scanlon 2018

⁶ Stiglitz 2017; Nussbaum 2023

The notion of dignity can be bifurcated into ascribed and relative dignity. Ascribed dignity refers to the inherent dignity every individual possesses merely by virtue of being human. The concept hinges on the idea that all persons inherently possess a distinctive moral status, thereby obligating others to regard and treat them within certain inviolable ethical bounds, and is often articulated in terms of rights: every person is fundamentally entitled to respect simply because they are human. This principle also underlines a fundamental equality among persons, despite the manifold differences that may distinguish one individual from another. Respect, in this context, is a recognition of the moral standing of equal persons and serves as a crucial mode of valuing persons as such⁷. The UN documents, while intentionally ambiguous with their definitions, resonate with this idea, grounding human rights in the inherent dignity of individuals⁸. Kant's deontological perspective towards inequality underscores dignity as an unconditioned attribute of persons as “ends in themselves” with an “incomparable worth exalted above any price.”⁹ He argues that the capacity for self-determination and moral self-legislation are the fulcrum of human dignity, advocating respect amongst all human beings¹⁰. Importantly, while ascribed dignity is inherent to all beings and non-volatile, “it is still possible to degrade, dehumanize and humiliate human beings, in short to violate their dignity”¹¹.

On the other hand, relative (or status) dignity is associated with an individual's position of social standing, delineating a spectrum where dignity is perceived in degrees; some individuals, often referred to as ‘dignitaries,’ are accorded higher dignitary value than others based on their social positioning. Hobbes, expounds on this notion of dignity, defining it as the “public worth of a man,” which is the value ascribed to him by the commonwealth. This

⁷ Sensen, 2011, 47

⁸ Sensen, 2011, 150

⁹ Kant 1964, 90-98

¹⁰ Lutz 1995

¹¹ Neuhäuser 2016, 154

Hobbesian “public worth” is a construct of how others within a societal framework value them and lies at the core of what society commonly terms as honoring and dishonoring, where valuing a person highly translates to honoring him, and lowly, to dishonoring him¹².

Crucially, ascribed and status dignity, though intertwined, operate independently. For instance, as Laura Valentini argues, a discourse around status dignity could be fostered around non-human sentient entities, where the treatment meted out to them either validates or violates the dignity accorded to their status. When a lion is placed in a small cage, the strain of dignity, contrary to ascribed dignity, finds its justification not in inherent value but potentially in attributes such as sentience or consciousness¹³. Historically, certain groups are relegated to inferior statuses, barred from desirable social roles or occupations, and often subjected to demeaning treatment¹⁴. This treatment, inherently comparative, objectifies individuals as inferior and sketches the boundaries of worthiness, crafting a societal matrix where worth, and consequently respect, are tethered to this relative dignity¹⁵. Relative dignity gives rise to conditions that the sociologist Göran Therborn defines as “existential inequality” — an unequal allocation of personhood encompassing autonomy, dignity, degrees of freedom, and rights to respect and self-development¹⁶. This inequality, anchored in relative dignity, evokes a sense of inferiority and objection, especially when it violates the ideal of a society envisioned as an association of equals¹⁷.

Unequal societies, despite one's position within the social hierarchy, foster feelings of inferiority, alienation, and diminished self-esteem, all under a facade of uncontested social legitimacy¹⁸. In these contexts, ‘respect’ transmogrifies into a demand for rights and equal treatment, starkly in contrast with ‘disrespect’—a demeaning, discriminatory treatment based

¹² Hobbes 1967, 68

¹³ Valentini 2017

¹⁴ Scanlon 2018, 5

¹⁵ Waldron 2012a

¹⁶ Therborn 2014, 49

¹⁷ Bietz 2001

¹⁸ Hitlin and Harkness 2018, 30

on status attributes like race or culture. Michael Rosen posits that treating someone with dignity is tantamount to treating them with respect, emphasizing that the right to have one's dignity respected is pivotal, albeit not a foundational axiom for respect, and rights in general¹⁹.

Humiliation, a direct corollary of status inequality, is “almost endemic to social life” pervading through “asymmetries of intersecting attitudes – arrogance and obeisance, self-respect and servility, and reverence and repulsion.”²⁰ The “humiliating gaze” beholds humans through a prism of “untouchability, defilement, impurity or pollution,” compelling an aversion towards them²¹. To be on the receiving end of humiliation is to be relegated to a state of unworthiness, as if one's existence lacks the essence of significance in the eyes of others, and embodies a noncomparative harm as it flagrantly undermines an individual's dignity and stifles their capacity for independent agency²². Yet, as Ashis Nandy elucidates, the dynamics of humiliation encompass a bidirectional exchange of power between the tormentor and the victim; a dialectic where the humiliation process remains incomplete unless the humiliated accede to their tormentors by feeling humiliated, thus embodying a form of control over the oppressor in certain socio-cultural settings²³. Furthermore, it is imperative to note that not all deprivation is humiliating. As illustrated by nomadic tribes living in extreme but egalitarian poverty, or Sen's characterization of Gandhi, in instances where deprivation is a matter of choice, it can, contrarily, uplift the actor's respect rather than demeaning them²⁴. In summation, the dichotomy of dignity into absolute and relative forms cultivates conditions for status inequality in rankist societies. The gradations of relative dignity, manifesting as relative levels of respect, engender humiliation and disrespect, consequently nurturing existential inequality. This cycle of status and existential inequality, once set in motion, profoundly impinges upon

¹⁹ Rosen 2012, 61-2

²⁰ Guru 2009, 1

²¹ Margalit 1997

²² Beitz 2001

²³ Guru 2009, 41–58

²⁴ Margalit 1997; Sen 1983

self-respect and the capacity for agency among individuals, thereby perpetuating a self-perpetuating cycle of inequality and indignity within societal constructs.

The Vicious Cycle: The Interlinkages of Indignity and Inequality

In his seminal autobiography, B.R. Ambedkar, the visionary social reformer, recounts a perilous incident in a village in 1929. Due to his caste, local *tongawalas* (horse-carriage drivers) refused to transport him, compelling the ‘low-caste’ villagers to find an untrained driver, leading to a near-fatal accident. Reflecting on this, Ambedkar solemnly observes, “To save my dignity, the[y] ... had put my very life in jeopardy. It [was] then I learnt that a Hindu *tongawala*, no better than a menial, has a dignity by which he can look upon himself as a person who is superior to any untouchable, even though he may be a Barrister-at-law.”²⁵

This poignant narrative delineates the profound ramifications of indignity, which not only truncates the spectrum of resources, opportunities, and capabilities available to individuals but continues to elude the grasp of conventional economic metrics deployed in the analysis of inequality. Its propensity to endure, and perhaps even flourish, amidst social exclusion and no-contact scenarios further accentuates its intractability. The reciprocity between status inequality and economic inequality unveils a self-reinforcing dynamic, whereby the internalization and normalization of indignity among the disparaged perpetuates a cycle of entrenched inequality.

Indignities arise from multifarious sources and are rooted in both ascriptive and non-ascriptive identities. Non-ascriptive indignities, such as those based on class, are conceivable to overcome, unlike their ascriptive counterparts like those grounded on caste, sexuality, gender, religion, or race, where arising indignities are more palpable and markedly difficult to erase. The inflexibility of ascriptive indignities is exemplified by the rigidity of commensality within the Indian caste system or patriarchal honor systems embedded within religious

²⁵ Ambedkar 2005, 14

doctrines. Scanlon argues that these inequalities were typically either codified in law or deeply entrenched within social customs and attitudes, sometimes even relegating individuals of certain races to a status of “not fully human”²⁶ On one hand, the dynamics of social life challenge the archaic and humiliating social protocols inherent in feudal societies. Yet, on the other hand, the so-called modern social elites often reproduce the very structures—both institutional and moral—that undergird and renew the phenomenon of humiliation. Moreover, indignity suggests exclusion from societal taste-making, as delineated by Bourdieu. He emphasizes that individual consumption choices are not merely reflective of idiosyncratic tastes, but are deeply entrenched within constructed ‘social fields.’ These choices are often a mirror to individuals' self-conception and their perceived roles within the pre-ordained social orders, which morphs into symbolic violence when socially dominant taste paradigms are imposed across the societal spectrum²⁷. Enabling myths reinforce the inequality narrative by legitimizing it across social strata by providing a facile justification for upper-class privileges and deterring lower classes from challenging their status. Myths can either foster class-based stereotypes linked to racism, sexism, and nationalism, easily debunked but prone to re-emerge, or promote, a deep-seated cultural belief system about the social structure, which perpetuates established social hierarchies²⁸.

Additionally, indignity’s intractability is furthered by the fact that it persists even in the void of contact or basic interaction. This phenomenon emanates from both active and passive conduits—arising not merely from overt acts of discrimination or oppression but also from acts of omission or indifference. For starters, the conventional ethical axiom – treat others as one wishes to be treated – falls short in addressing the roots of indignity. The efficacy of this ‘Golden Rule’ is contingent upon the presupposition that the ‘Self’ endeavors to treat the

²⁶ Scanlon 2018, 5

²⁷ Bourdieu 1984

²⁸ O’Hara 1999, 507

‘Other’ with benevolence, expecting reciprocity. However, in environments entrenched with taboos or abuse, this presupposition crumbles. Illustratively, a racist individual may harbor aversion towards engaging with an individual of another race, opting instead to mistreat, oppress or, avoid them to stave off any reciprocal interactions. Research on emotional psychology demonstrates that people in low-status positions are seen as less good and others feel coldly about them, so much so that the mere act of engaging with a low-status individual is perceived as a tarnish to one's reputation²⁹. Demonstrably, the perpetuation of indignities requires no active engendering; even passive inaction in the face of indignity unfurls a net negative impact upon the societal fabric.

The symbiotic relationship between economic and status inequality unveils a self-perpetuating cycle of internalized indignity, which not only stymies social mobility but also ingrains a normalized narrative of mistreatment among the marginalized. Stigma is inherently divisive, ushering in negative discrimination that causes individual anguish but scarcely any collective benefit, thereby exacerbating labor participation woes and diminishing public voice and demands, with consequential economic repercussions. Social exclusion emerges as a significant facet of capability deprivation, resonating with Sen's notion of an individual's participatory role within the community fabric³⁰. For instance, exclusion from employment or credit accessibility can culminate in economic impoverishment, which may in turn usher in other deprivations like undernourishment or homelessness. Thus, social exclusion can be both constitutively a part of capability deprivation and instrumentally a precursor to diverse capability failures³¹.

The complex nexus between economic inequality and status inequality is underscored by both absolute and relative poverty, each delineating distinct avenues through which dignity

²⁹ Hitlin and Harkness 2018, 24

³⁰ Sen 2000b

³¹ Ibid.

is compromised. The ethicist Peter Schaber argues that the violation of dignity emanates not from a mere paucity of basic goods, nor from the curtailing of rights. Rather, indignity arises from the degrading dependency that impoverishment engenders, tethering the indigent to a life of reliance on others³². But, while absolute poverty strips individuals of the existential bedrock of self-respect, relative poverty is both self-perpetuating and propels them into a vortex of social exclusion³³. Ci proposes three ‘stakes of poverty’: subsistence poverty threatens the fundamental ability to meet basic survival needs due to monetary scarcity; status poverty emerges when financial deprivation hinders individuals from adhering to societal norms requisite for garnering respect; agency poverty is unveiled when monetary paucity stifles individuals' capability to function as ‘normal functioning agents’ within their societies, encapsulating essentials like employment and basic modern amenities like internet access. These facets of poverty gnaw at the self-respect of individuals, echoing Rawls's definition, by undermining the assurance in the worth of one's life plan and the ability to actualize such a plan³⁴.

Empirical evidence corroborates the intertwining of economic inequality with self-perception biases across diverse nations. Loughnan et al. identify a pervasive self-enhancement bias across fifteen nations and find that the magnitude of self-enhancement, an inclination towards viewing oneself superior to the average individual, markedly escalates in societies characterized by pronounced income inequality³⁵. Another study surveys social psychology research, concluding that “inequality impairs people’s self-respect by affecting the perceived sense of meaningful options available to them”³⁶. Poverty, and the load it imposes, consumes mental resources and impedes cognitive capacity³⁷. Thus, indignity is not merely a function of

³² Schaber 2011

³³ Stiglitz 2013; Neuhäuser 2016

³⁴ Scanlon 2018, 30; Ci, 2013

³⁵ Loughnan et al. 2011

³⁶ Kollar and Santoro, 2012

³⁷ Mani et al. 2013

material deprivation but a product of the societal disdain and exclusion that it engenders. As Sen asserts, it is this shame that lies at the “irreducible absolutist core of poverty.”³⁸

In fact, utilizing Sen's capability approach allows us to further deconstruct the dual-edged sword of indignity. Sen's relational framework posits well-being in terms of the valued beings and doings (functionings) and the freedom to choose and act (capabilities), rather than merely the material needs of living. Within the commodity space, escaping poverty necessitates a varying collection of commodities contingent upon the societal contexts, yet in the space of capabilities—the direct constituents of living standards—the escape mandates the absolute requirement of evading shame³⁹. As Therborn contends, inequality “is a violation of human dignity; it is a denial of the possibility for everybody’s human capabilities to develop”⁴⁰. Hence, indignity emerges as a formidable constraining force, both throttling the available resources and constraining capabilities across physiological, psychological, and cultural dimensions.

Beyond economic ramifications, inequality can translate into deprivation in fundamental aspects such as education, politics, and health, thereby incapacitating individuals from exercising a full set of functionings. Deprivation and disparagement render the lower strata of society susceptible to derogation and exploitation by the upper classes, perpetuating a self-reinforcing cycle of relative inequality between social echelons and preventing individuals from assuming responsibility over their circumstances, alienating them from essential political rights⁴¹. Andersson and Hitlin demonstrate an association between subjective dignity and several well-documented correlates such as relative social status, autonomy, material well-being, and social integration with mental and physical health⁴². Marmot further delves into the implications of low social status, associating the erosion of self-respect with escalated long-

³⁸ Sen 1983, 159.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Therborn, 2014, 1

⁴¹ O'Hara 1999

⁴² Andersson and Hitlin 2023

term stress levels. The physiological repercussions of sustained stress, including elevated adrenaline and cortisol levels, pave the way for an array of health adversities such as cardiovascular disease and heightened susceptibility to infections⁴³. Ergo, the overarching impacts of indignity manifest across economy, psychology, physiology, sociology, and politics. Indignity acts as a catalyst, exacerbating inequality across a spectrum of socio-economic domains.

Measurement

Having elucidated the theoretical underpinnings of indignity in the context of inequality and its societal machinations, we now examine the challenges of and methodologies germane to the measurement of indignity as a facet of inequality. The quandary of measuring dignity emanates from the inadequacy of our extant empirical models, which do not directly encapsulate indignity, and the fact that the vestiges of relative deprivation and competition may surface even amidst the satisfaction of basic living standards. The ensuing sense of being “less than” when juxtaposed against others—be it individuals in proximate social strata or coveted positions one aspires to—fosters a declivity into lower self-esteem, dissatisfaction, and potential alienation, notwithstanding one's affluence or suffrage⁴⁴. The intersection between redistribution of material resources and the cognizance—oft delineated as recognition—of self-respect has emerged to be more evanescent than initially envisaged by egalitarians. This is predominantly owing to the fact that respect is a commodity not effortlessly summoned by political machinations⁴⁵. A more holistic picture of the socio-economy necessitates the infusion of cognitive and social dimensions of inequality, encompassing self-respect, servility, and robust participation in the social milieu to generate more comprehensive measures of inequality⁴⁶. Two predominant approaches exist to measure societal ‘respect’—direct

⁴³ Marmot 2004; Mani 2013

⁴⁴ Hitlin and Harkness 2018, 26

⁴⁵ Chandhoke 2009, 141

⁴⁶ Stiglitz 2009; Kapur et al, 2010

measurement of dignity through qualitative and quantitative surveys, and the utilization of proxies that capture indignity.

Direct inquiries pose a binary assessment of dignity or employ a discrete measure scale, fostering a comparative analysis across temporal and spatial scales. An exemplar of this approach is the five-indicator measurement model for a subjective dignity latent variable, as employed in a 2017 Gallup Poll. The survey scrutinized various facets of personal and social dignity by asking respondents to rate items such as “I have dignity as a person”⁴⁷. The findings accentuated that, albeit material deprivation is a potent determinant, the perceived relative socioeconomic standing alone could explicate a subjective dignity gap. However, the labyrinth of definitional ambiguities surrounding dignity raises questions of measurement and survey validity and dilutes empirical rigor. Furthermore, the potential for direct questions to elicit feelings of shame from respondents impels a nuanced approach to survey design. Studies can account for this by deploying surveyors indigenous to the same marginalized community and geographical locale as the respondents, thereby eliciting trust⁴⁸.

On the other hand, we can use proxies to measure the complex, multi-dimensional construct of indignity. These manifestations of indignity present pragmatic instances that enable the operationalization of abstract constructs, thereby aiding efforts toward measurement and methodology design. The mediums through which contempt for human dignity is expressed may vary across cultural and contextual landscapes, yet they often resonate with common thematic undertones. In societies where marked demarcations of social status exist, deprivation of dignity typically manifests in treatments that symbolically relegate individuals to a significantly lower social stratum. Rosen posits that human dignity finds its expression in behaviors that highlight the demarcation between humans and animals. This distinction manifests in upright gaits, adherence to clothing norms, observance of table manners, and the

⁴⁷ Andersson and Hitlin 2023

⁴⁸ Kapur et al, 2010

private undertaking of certain natural acts—emblematic of a society’s moral and social decorum⁴⁹. Waldron renders these physical connotations of dignity as “social orthopaedics,” echoing the Marxist metaphor of “walking upright”⁵⁰. Respect, as an outward manifestation of recognizing dignity, necessitates more than mere goodwill. It demands a deliberate articulation through words and gestures that not only convey respect but do so convincingly. Respect is an ‘expressive performance,’ requiring a nuanced understanding and deployment of societal cues that communicate respect authentically⁵¹.

Personal grooming is one such ‘expressive performance’ of dignity that transcends mere aesthetics and morphs into a silent dialogue of social standing and self-worth. Adam Smith, in his deliberation on “necessaries” claims that a dignified existence confers one with the “ability to appear in public without shame.”⁵² Smith’s argument hinges on a pivotal example - the linen shirt, not a requisite for survival, yet a symbol of social decency in contemporary times. The evil lies not in the possession of ragged garments or substandard housing, but in stark discordance between an individual's living standard and the accepted societal norm⁵³. However, keeping up appearances is not cheap. As individuals ascend the social ladder, the endeavor to mirror the grooming standards of the higher echelons becomes progressively taxing, both in terms of time and financial resources. The larger the social divide, the more pronounced the effort to bridge the grooming gap, epitomizing a perpetual struggle to align one’s self-presentation with the social strata they aspire to belong to⁵⁴. A study by Kapur et al. charts changes in the grooming habits of the grooming habits of Dalits – members of a ‘scheduled caste’ in India. Historically relegated as social inferiors, the Dalits often found themselves confined to lower or at least divergent standards of personal appearance. Citing the

⁴⁹ Rosen 2012, 160-1

⁵⁰ Waldron 2012a

⁵¹ Sennett 2011, 181

⁵² Smith 1979, 469-471

⁵³ Scanlon, 2018, 5-7

⁵⁴ Hitlin and Harkness 2018, 26

escalating and accelerated consumption of grooming products like toothpaste and shampoo among Dalits, the authors posit that the market served as a conduit for them to articulate their social status through enhanced self-presentation such that “changes in grooming and in dress itself are an assertion of public aspiration”⁵⁵.

The orchestration of spatial regulation in dictating access to public realms emerges as a potent mechanism in reaffirming and sustaining status hierarchies, offering yet another proxy for the measurement of indignity. This mechanism, predominantly engineered by high-status actors, imprints a tangible hierarchy onto spatial mobility, rendering movement and access a prerogative of status, thereby perpetuating a cycle of indignity and inequality. One notable illustration of this transition is the diminishing tradition of caste segregation during communal congregations, such as weddings. This transition is further accentuated by a substantial majority of non-Dalit visitors in both villages readily accepting hospitality and food and drink offerings, a stark contrast to the near-absent acceptance in the recent past⁵⁶.

Language, encompassing tone, grammar, and the lexicon deployed serves as another salient manifestation of indignity, reflecting and reinforcing the extant social hierarchies and inequalities. This notion finds resonance in Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*, a critique of the English class-system, where the accent of one's speech emerges as a stronger predictor of success and status than the content thereof. Tonal inflections and the use of grammar – particularly the employment of honorifics, or the choice between formal and informal registers – carry with them the weight of social standings and preconceived biases⁵⁷. Likewise, the frequency of derogatory terminology (such as slurs) or misgendering pronouns in discourses serves as a barometer for the prevailing attitudes towards marginalized or disparaged groups within a society. In one recorded interaction at an Indian village democracy, a member of a

⁵⁵ Kapur et al. 2010

⁵⁶ Kapur et al. 2010

⁵⁷ Analogously, ritualistic etiquettes like bowing one's head or the touching of feet represent traditional act of deference and can serve as proxies for restrained self-assertion.

scheduled-caste, while objecting to a proposal from a member of the upper-caste, feels compelled to cushion his objection with reassurances of respect—underscored by his statement, “Just because I talk like this, it doesn’t mean that I fight with you or disrespect you.” This scenario articulates the deep-seated impact of social hierarchies on communication, where individuals navigate a minefield of potential indignities even in civic engagements⁵⁸. The entrenched social inequality, exacerbated by factors such as social exclusion and illiteracy, casts a long shadow on the discursive styles, often obliging individuals to adhere to unwritten, yet rigid, linguistic hierarchies as a means of social survival.

What can we do?

Having delineated the severe harms of indignity – both directly and as a compounding factor for other social harms – it becomes imperative to devise policies to ameliorate the deleterious effects of status processes. Transitioning human dignity to a central tenet of socio-economic policy entails a robust deconstruction of entrenched status beliefs, stereotypes, and norms.

A multi-pronged approach is exigent. On one front, legal instruments such as anti-discrimination laws directly confront institutions perpetuating racial or gender-based discrimination, thus cultivating an environment aligned with Margalit's vision of a ‘decent society’⁵⁹. Beyond instrumentalism, the procedural design of the law imbues a sense of dignity in individuals by acknowledging their agency, intellect, and ability to meet legal demands⁶⁰. However, the efficacy of legislation is stymied by the prevailing public-private divide, underlining the necessity for personal buy-in. For instance, studies of caste illuminate the dichotomy wherein legal strictures efficaciously mitigate untouchability in public domains, yet

⁵⁸ Rao and Sanyal 2010

⁵⁹ Peil and Staveren 2009, 88; Margalit 2009

⁶⁰ Waldron 2012

falter in the private sphere where discriminatory practices continue unabated⁶¹. Top-down initiatives also risk inadvertently exacerbating indignity by highlighting dependence or patronizing beneficiaries. Interventions like direct cash transfers can account for this by embodying a vocabulary of respect and fostering the beneficiary's 'dignity to decide.'

The remedy to inequality and indignity transcends mere legislative frameworks, necessitating a societal transformation towards mutual respect and the dismantling of ossified structures of status preservation⁶². Rancière's 'dissensus' underscores the importance of challenging foundational assumptions of the prevailing social order, fostering a public discourse that interrogates exclusionary governance principles⁶³. Here, public action emerges as a linchpin; dispelling doubts among the lower classes about the systemic roots of their relative poverty could catalyze collective action aimed at systemic change⁶⁴. The contact theory framework could bridge the public-private chasm, where increased contact between diverse groups nurtures a commonality of goals and interests, thereby diluting prejudice⁶⁵. Moreover, education about rights is crucial to spur public action and nurture a social ethos that promotes equality in daily interactions⁶⁶. Elevating self-confidence and opportunities for the marginalized through interventions like skill development, employment generation, and cultural enrichment is crucial. Babu et al. argue that affirmative attempts often aim to correct congealed attitudes, a remedial approach that might come too late. They advocate for earlier intervention, given the pivotal role of early childhood health in cognitive development, using primary education to foster 'an equal start' and inculcate respect amongst students at a young age⁶⁷. Promoting these bottom-up solutions help delegitimize negative stereotypes about marginalized groups by showcasing that a sense of agency is indispensable for any group's

⁶¹ Guru 2009, 143-144

⁶² Ober 2012; Cohen 2000

⁶³ Rancière 1992

⁶⁴ O' Hara 1999, 507

⁶⁵ Allport 1954

⁶⁶ Stiglitz 2013, 353

⁶⁷ Babu et al. 2022

advancement. Hence, it is vital to establish systems promoting universal respect or, at minimum, a meritocracy where dignity emanates from non-ascribed attributes, rather than the entrenched cyclical inequalities birthed from pernicious ascribed indignities.

Conclusion

In unraveling the complex tapestry of inequality, this essay shed light on the pivotal role of dignity, or the stark absence of it, in fueling socioeconomic divisions. Indignity emerges as a foundational hurdle to equality, with its tendrils extending deep into the socioeconomic structure, creating a climate where a person's value is often adjudicated by their social standing rather than their inherent human worth. We examined the unique intractability of indignity, unraveled its manifestation through status inequality, and delineated its nefarious cycle with economic inequality. The glaring realities of this indignity-fueled disparity call for a robust and urgent approaches for measuring and redressing indignity.

While the endeavor to overcome such entrenched inequality as indignity is daunting, there lies hope in the notion that once surmounted, the change is enduring. As Kapur et al. declare, “while incomes can fluctuate, and while there's always potential for shifts in social position, certain changes of magnitude are irreversible. Once dalits have met the gaze of upper castes instead of averting their eyes in servility, the dynamics shift forever.”⁶⁸

⁶⁸ Kapur et al. 2010

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