



University of
Strathclyde
Humanities &
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BRIEFING PAPER

“ I Know it When I See it ”

*Can talking about ‘dignity’
support the growth of a
human rights culture?*

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Briefing Paper

This briefing paper accompanies a report on the findings of a research project which explores whether talking about 'dignity' influences how different stakeholders see the relevance of international human rights law to the contexts in which they live and work. The research assesses the significance of the findings for building a human rights culture in Scotland.

This briefing paper summarises the research motivations and findings. It builds on these to develop key recommendations for the Scottish Government and the Human Rights Bill Advisory Board, for civil society, and for organisations with duties under human rights law.





Why was the research carried out?

In 2021, the National Taskforce for Human Rights Leadership report included a recommendation that a new human rights framework in Scotland should recognise human dignity as the underpinning value of all human rights.

This builds on 'dignity' as used in international human rights law and on dignity language used in law and policy in Scotland, including in the National Performance Framework.

The research aimed to help understand any risks and opportunities in engaging with dignity language in public and civil society discourse around the new framework. In this way, it aimed to contribute to an evidence base that could inform strategies seeking to support a transformed and sustainable human rights culture.

What did people say?

So I think one of the issues of human rights and even with developing this new law is it can be seen as being very law-ish, very kind of legal and tricky, sort of complex but out there, a bit kind of divorced from people's lives.

(Interview 7)

I think dignity is something that people can understand. I think, unfortunately, it's something that is probably recognised more in the absence than in the realisation. So it's not so much that you know what it is when you see it, but you can see it when it's not there.'

(Interview 4)

[Human rights] will always be an add-on for busy public authorities unless there is a level of legal accountability in the background

(Interview 11)

I totally welcome [the inclusion of 'dignity' in the Bill], applaud it thankfully because I believe it's absolutely fundamental. [...] [I]t gives you that touch point, it gives you a base line, a reference point, however you want to describe it. But it's not just because [someone] wakes up one morning and thinks dignity's a good idea. It gives you that something to tie, tether yourself to and say, that's what we're about.

(Interview 2)

What did the research find?

The findings indicate that talking about 'dignity' as an underpinning value of internationally recognised, legal human rights standards, would have a different impact for different audiences.

At the same time, the findings indicate that engagements with dignity language across these audiences could contribute positively to the goal of developing a human rights culture.





What are the key recommendations for the Scottish Government and Human Rights Bill Advisory Board?

The Bill that's coming forward hopefully to Holyrood after the election to incorporate those international treaties, the recent incorporation of the UN Rights of the Child, all of these are hugely important. I don't think people in Scotland understand what our relation with human rights legislation is. [...] I just don't think people are aware of it.

(Interview 15)

- The Government and Advisory Board should see dignity language as a resource to support the growth of a sustainable human rights culture. There is clear support within civil society for the integration of dignity language in the new framework. Whilst the presence of dignity language is positive in itself, it is possible to go further and promote this language as a resource that can contribute to building a human rights culture. Dignity language is more accessible to most people than legal language, and as such is valuable for a range of stakeholders. Dignity language can provide 'heart' to human rights law, supporting stakeholders, from duty bearers to the general public, to see the value in the legal human rights framework and its duties. For this reason, dignity language can support the growth of a sustainable human rights culture, which requires a 'collective sense of understanding' of the value behind human rights law.
- The Government and Advisory Board should support human rights education and capacity building. For public and community-based human rights education, there are promising opportunities to use 'dignity' language as a resource, whereas for capacity building within civil society and duty bearer organisations, there are opportunities to focus on the legal dimensions of the human rights framework. Overall, supporting initiatives that build understanding and capacity in these ways connects to the role of the Government and Advisory Board in supporting the growth of a sustainable human rights culture.



What are the key recommendations for civil society in Scotland?

I think [dignity language is] definitely useful because it taps into, well, everybody's instinctive understanding I think but also, in terms of civil society, it absolutely gives organisations a way of talking about why they're talking about human rights almost, because it's about people's dignity [...].

(Interview 7)

- Civil society organisations could use dignity language to promote understanding of the new human rights law framework. Because people (in the general public, in communities and in duty bearer organisations) 'know it when they see it', dignity language resonates and can act as a 'gateway' to human rights law. Dignity language has potential added value in communication and engagement strategies.
- Civil society organisations need not see the lack of a fixed meaning of 'dignity' as a barrier. 'Dignity' is understood in different ways but indeterminacy in meaning is not necessarily a barrier; dignity language can capture a shared understanding and at the same time connect to individual experiences.
- Civil society organisations should continue to talk about human rights law and legal duties. Legal language remains critical when striving for accountability of duty bearers.
- Civil society organisations could benefit from even more engagement with human rights law, including international human rights law. Where there is already a strong understanding of the values and benefits of human rights law, more detailed understanding of the legal dimensions of international human rights has potential to further strengthen the role of civil society in influencing proactive change.



What are the key recommendations for human rights duty bearers in Scotland?

[...] if our colleagues, our peers or the staff that we manage or the staff who manage us, if there's a culture that doesn't allow honesty and reflection and constructive challenge, then it's not safe for us but it's certainly not safe for our service users.

(Interview 19)

- Duty bearer organisations could benefit from engaging directly with dignity language within the new legal framework. Doing so would align with the expectation in the National Performance Framework that public authorities will treat people with dignity and respect, and could further strengthen understanding of the value of giving effect to human rights law.
- Duty bearer organisations should primarily engage with the legal dimensions of human rights. Legal accountability is seen as central for those with duties under human rights law. Engaging with the legal dimensions of human rights need not be immediately conflictual; even if contentious, it could be seen as proactive and productive.
- Duty bearer organisations should see themselves as having a key role to play in supporting the development of a human rights culture. There are commonly perceived barriers that stem from cultures and structures within duty bearer organisations (surrounding gatekeeping, risk, and positioning human rights duties as problems or threats). At the same time, there is awareness within civil society of nuance and constraints within organisational cultures at different levels, and awareness of the importance of positive relationships. Building on these positives and addressing barriers would make a key contribution to transforming human rights culture in Scotland.

More info?

To read the full report of the research: [click here](#).

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