

Human Dignity: Exploring the Concept in Betty Reardon's Work

Fuad Al-Daraweesh¹

The linguistic meanings, connotations, and implications for the concept of human dignity vary based on context and discipline. Sometimes, human dignity is perceived as equiprimordial between two disciplines or more; other times, it is starkly different. The concept of human dignity contextualized here, which is based on the writings of Betty Reardon, entails a commitment to the value of one's humanity as an inhabitant of earth. Reardon perceives this commitment not only as entitlement but also as an obligation by virtue of one's humanness. This article is an attempt to locate the concept of human dignity in Reardon's work and to highlight the implication of the concept in advancing peace and human rights education.

Reardon is a well-known peace and human rights educator, as well as a scholar who founded the International Institute on Peace Education and the Peace Education Center at Teachers College Columbia University. She has written extensively on diverse subjects—peace, human rights, disarmament, and feminism, to name a few. Most of her writing, activism, and advocacy has been buoyed by the concept of human dignity. The concept seems to be the foundation for any discussion about justice. In the following lines, I try to locate and explore the concept of human dignity from Reardon's perspective. At the outset, I start by defining and contextualizing the concept of human dignity and exploring the use of the concept in Reardon's writing. This includes exploring the idea of moral equality from a liberal perspective, which includes other diverse cultural traditions and feminist traditions.

There are many references to the concept of human dignity in international declarations and covenants. One of the first references to the concept is found in the preamble of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948): "Recognition of the inherent dignity and the equal and inalienable rights of all members of human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world." Kateb (2011) claims, "it almost seems as if the idea of human dignity is axiomatic and therefore requires no theoretical defense" (p. 1). Indeed, concept exists in all cultures across the globe, secular and religious, western and non-western, albeit with some differences and similarities. Because all cultures have some concept of human dignity, it constitutes a good starting point to cultivate worldwide agreement on the preservation and actualization of human dignity.

¹ **Fuad Al-Daraweesh.** Adjunct Professor at Center for International Studies and Programs, University of Toledo. fuadaldaraweesh@gmail.com

The concept of human dignity is foundational to any discussion about justice, rights, and peace. Human dignity provides the basis for a justification for human rights and duties, peace, capabilities in the capability approach, human security, disarmament, the abolition of war, and the abolition of all types of discrimination, including but not limited to race, gender, age, and sexual orientation. Yet, the concept of human dignity also encapsulates different views of the worth of humans. From a positive viewpoint, human dignity is employed to elevate the level of human's worth to a higher level of worth conducive to flourishing and consistent with justice, rights, and peace. In this view, there are certain ascribed and prescribed conditions that ultimately could lead to human flourishing, and constituting one's own conception of the good life that one chooses to pursue over time. However, from a negative viewpoint, human dignity as a concept is often invoked in worst-case scenarios when injustice occurs, whether caused by rights violations or by natural disasters and misfortune.

The concept of human dignity espoused by Reardon extends dignity to all humans, and is premised on the claim that humans are morally equal. Morally equality is the basic concept that inform justice, rights, human dignity, and freedom. Kateb (2011) states that the concept means "the equal dignity of every person" (p. 1). Moral equality requires equal treatment of citizens because of their membership to a specific moral community or to the bigger global community. Human dignity is based on the fundamental worth and sanctity of all citizens regardless of how a society or a certain political structure label them.

In her extension of dignity to all humans regardless of their sex, gender, moral powers, disabilities, age, geographic location, nation, state, religion, and so on, Reardon's approach to human dignity seems to align with Martha Nussbaum (2006), since Nussbaum testifies to the statement through her explicit reliance on human dignity as the foundation of justice. Furthermore, she argues that dignity is inseparable from capabilities which are "ways of realizing a life with human dignity" (p. 161). Capabilities are justified on the claim that they provide a life conducive to human dignity. Human dignity is the minimal conditions that governments ought to provide its citizens.

The primary subject in Reardon's writings is the actualization of human dignity. The idea of human dignity entails *reverence* as well as *responsibility* for other humans, including the actualization and the preservation of their dignity. In her acceptance address for the MacBride Peace Prize at Georgetown University, Reardon (2009) explains how human dignity encompasses

the core pursuits of the realization of our common humanity; the repudiation of violence and the realization of universal human dignity, the convergence of the human rights and peace movements, manifested as gender equality and general and complete disarmament, respectively the social and structural transformations from which can emerge the practical possibilities for a culture of peace. (p. 3)

In this speech, Reardon articulates the core elements that could potentially pave the way to the preservation and actualization of human dignity. Oppression is a common characteristic of all these elements. It hinders human flourishing in diverse ways and forms. An-

cillary to these elements, Reardon provides the tools to actualize human dignity manifested in social and political transformation.

For Reardon, human dignity, justice, peace, and human rights are interdependent, but the relationship between them is not explained. The co-existence of these elements lead to a dignified way of living, and the absence of any of these elements cause the violation of human dignity. Reardon starts with violence and war because violence causes more harm to citizens.

Moreover, the abolition of war—seems to assume a priority, since its opposite—the existence of war—is in total negation of human dignity. According to Reardon and Cabezudo (2002), “the relationship of human dignity to the abolition of war is the integral link between justice and peace (the institution of war is totally inconsistent with the value of human dignity)” (p. 49).

The concept of human dignity is recognized and revered in most cultures around the globe. Such a worldwide recognition has two implications. First, this recognition can serve as a justification to cultivate an agreement, based on an overlapping consensus, on the enactment, preservation, and the actualization of human dignity. Second, the global embrace of the concept could enrich our understanding of our shared humanity. In *Learning to Abolish War*, Reardon and Cabezudo (2002) explain,

We believe that such culturally varied and community relevant forms of peace education not only better serve the learners, but greatly enrich the entire field of peace education, increasing the possibilities of its being introduced into all learning environments throughout the world... While we argue for the universal need for peace education, we do not advocate the universalization and standardization of approach and content. We believe that peace education in whatever forms it takes must be a fundamental part of the socialization process in which education plays a major role. (p. 17)

Employing different culturally related forms of human dignity and peace enriches the learning environment and experience. These forms are important for three reasons; the forms have pedagogical, social, and democratic implications. They constitute a pedagogical approach to educate or teach for/about human dignity. In this case, educators utilize local (epistemic and ontological) knowledge to transform power dynamic. Relevant forms, also, pertain to information about the social fabric related to the power dynamic that needs transformation. Equally important, such recognition of other cultures globally is part of the democratic process(es).

Since the concept of human dignity is premised on the claims that humans are morally equal, consequently humans' various contributions and ways of life ought to be considered equal. Reardon and Cabezudo (2002) seem to be aware of the importance of employing different cultural forms in peace education across cultures and refraining from a standardized approach or set of contents. This awareness is based on two factors. First, as Dworkin (1978) noted, a liberal society does not adopt one particular substantive view about the ends of life or what constitutes it (as cited in Taylor 1994). In a liberal society,

people are free and equal insofar as they can choose their own conception of the good and make their own plan over a complete life, which might include a conception of the good that draws from a comprehensive doctrine or religion (Rawls, 2003, p. 24). Reardon's refraining from a standardized procedure is mainly grounded in the liberal tradition that one pursues his/her own conception of the good. In this example, human dignity could be constitutive of human good, or it could be a human good itself. Based on Reardon's approach, human needs are addressed through local approaches and sources of content, which is consistent with the notion of dignity in liberal traditions.

The second factor is clearly stated in "Human Rights as Education for Peace" in which Reardon (1997) argues, "the commitment to human dignity that is the essence of nonviolence inspires the struggle for human rights as the basis for overcoming the many forms of violence that impede a viable, just peace. This commitment requires consistency between means and ends" (p. 9). In other words, Reardon reaffirms the Gandhian principle that the ends should be consistent with the means. If we, as educators, aim to teach about democracy, then we ought to follow an approach that is consistent with the content of democracy. Likewise, if our end is human dignity, then our approach ought to be consistent with the content of human dignity, paying special attention to autonomy, an integral part of the concept of dignity. In this example of utilizing relevant cultural forms to teach for peace and human dignity, one role of teachers is to ensure a consistency between ends and means.

Embedded in the concept of human dignity is the moral sentiments of care and concern for others. Reardon (1988) describes human capacities of care, concern, and commitment as required in transforming realities that antithetical to human dignity. Reardon perceives capacities as abilities that pertain to a type of normative or moral force. Human capacities for caring about the well being of others are the seeds for transformational processes and education. The capacity to care about contemporary humans and future generations also extends to care about the environment and its sustainability to future generations.

Furthermore, this capacity of care in Reardon's conceptualization extends to the protection of the nature. Reardon's (1995) conception of dignity entails a respect for the natural world because, as she argues: "Ecological thinking derives from reverence for life. Reverence for life is a necessary complement to the core value of human dignity and integrity as it is realized in a sustaining and sustainable environment" (p. 24). Reverence in this context is characterized by care, responsibility, and accountability. The capacity to care generates citizens with a commitment not to cause harm to others or to the environment. Care embodies a concern and a commitment to the needs of others and to the needs of human dignity. The lack of care and the exclusion of others generate violence, which violates human dignity.

Reardon (1998) also believes that the exclusion of women and their perspective in the grand narrative of human security, peace, and human rights has led to violence and

the lack of a good human security system that based on dignity and justice for all. In her "Gender Analysis of Militarism and Sexist Repression," Reardon (1988) states,

It is unrefutably evident that women's concerns, feminine modes and perspectives and feminist values have little or no role in the formulation of public policy in general and in security and military policy in particular. They are most notably absent in the military regimes. But less obviously and more potentially detrimental to its very purpose they are sorely lacking in peace research. Most inquiries are carried out entirely by men, but also in masculine modes. Women's concerns and feminist perspectives are only considered at women's insistence. (pp. 13-14)

It is unfortunate that women's voices have been silenced or not included in formulation of public and international policies. A feminist perspective on oppression adds a new angle to improve the way the world is perceived. If this perspective were included, the focus would have shifted from expenditures on weapons and military development to a different paradigm focused on human needs characterized by the virtue of care to all humans, regardless of the geographical location. Reardon recognizes the importance of transforming the oppressive realities deeply ingrained in gender inequality, bias, and discrimination. She believes that patriarchy is one of the main reasons for wars and violence. Alternatively, Reardon points out that women's voices have advocated for authentic human security. Authentic human security is when "basic needs are met, when we experience human dignity and human rights, and when we have a healthy natural environment capable of sustaining life" (1996, p. 318).

The concept of human dignity is the foundation for any discussion about peace, human rights, and human security, and honoring human dignity constitutes the minimal demand of any just system. Reardon's career has been devoted to the preservation and the actualization of human dignity, and her ideas on justice and human dignity provide a coherent theory of justice based on a cross-disciplinary approach with implications that extend beyond education. For Reardon, as well as many scholars of human rights and peace education, the concept of human rights and its utilization are based on moral equality and equity among human cultures that contribute to the conception of individuals. Thus, recognizing other cultures, which is grounded on liberal traditions, is integral part of realizing human dignity. Consequently, recognizing other cultures opens the door for examining, and acknowledging the diverse conceptualization of human dignity across cultures. This requires the inclusion of women's voices in the formulation of an authentic human security system, as feminist voices could provide a great contribution to the idea of human dignity, since the group have been historically marginalized.

Reardon's concept of human dignity is premised on the claim that humans are morally equal. The concept is interdependent with the justification for human rights, peace, the abolition of war, disarmament, and all forms of discrimination and bias—including sexism, racism, and ageism—which privilege one group over another hindering the humans' potential and opportunities. Because, as Reardon argues, an authentic concept and system ought to include all voices, a global inquiry into the diverse manifestation of the concept

across cultures, and including women's voices, is crucial to the preservation of human dignity and is an integral part of politics of recognition in liberal traditions.

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