

The Dignity Project

We all have dignity

That is why we show respect to those in our groups. We communicate well and work together. There is a purpose to this: it lets us discharge our God-given duty to care for one another. But fully respecting people isn't something everyone can do.

Some stuff we can all do, like being polite in our speech and observing social codes. We may win recognition by showing our unique qualities. But to be truly respectful, you need more: self-respect, a firm foundation, and autonomy. To get that, you need a lot of things - many of which are denied by a government and society is abusive and sometimes murderous. In that situation, you get derailed. You find other ways of winning respect: money, power, and violence.

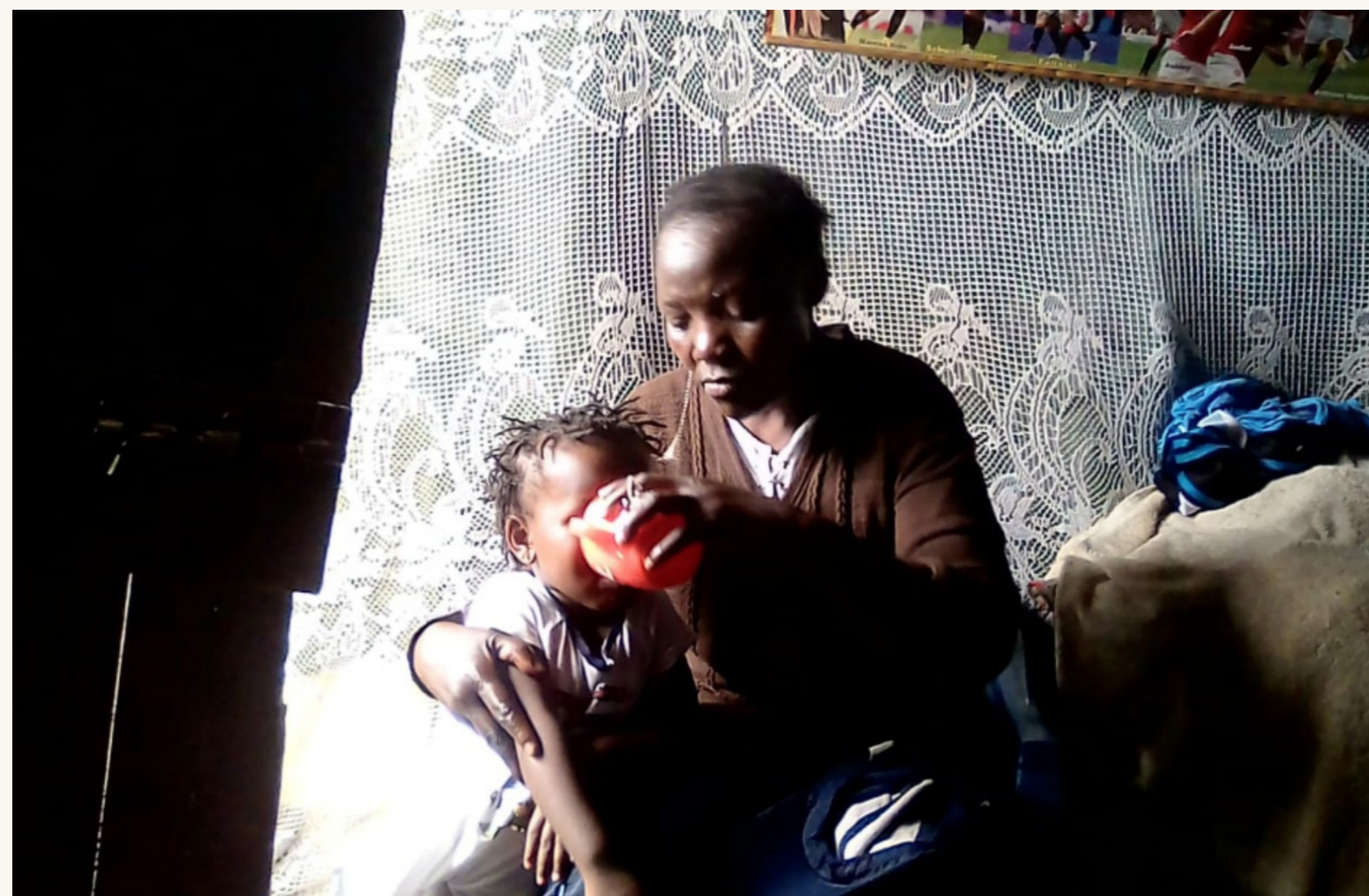
"There is a relationship between the able guy and the struggling man. There is respect here where the able person has build a dustbin here so that the neighbor can throw the litter in there rather than disposing of it anywhere, because if he litters the trash anywhere it will affect the people on the slope and if it rains all the trash will be carried to the doorsteps of the people down there. That is why the able man had built a bin to avoid problems and respect his neighbors...Hence there is a mutual respect between the two...So these two people try to live in a way to maintain peace."



Those in power could transform Mathare - but they prefer to keep it underfoot. Photo by Stoneface.

Results from a focus group and participatory photo project with 8 participants in February-March 2019

Mathare versus the world



Led by Tom Wein for the Dignity Project. Conducted by Debrah Opiyo and Jennifer Omaa

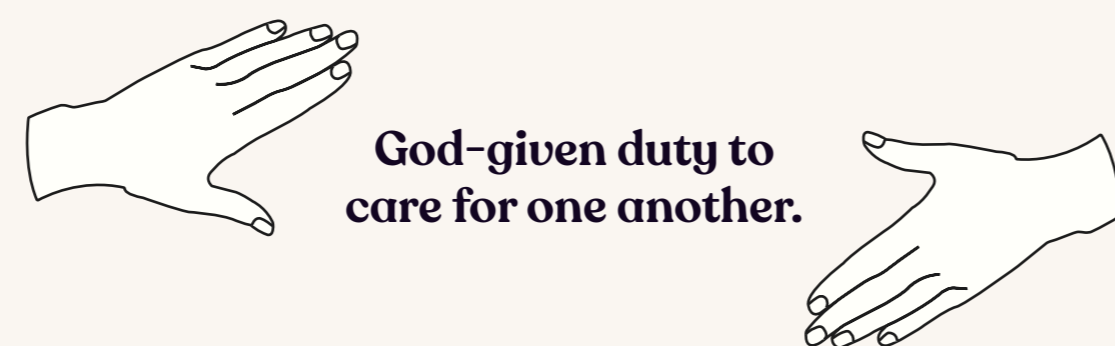
A mother in Mathare feeds her son. Photo by Benna.

Dignity in Mathare is about recognising the uniqueness in other individuals - and the environment and society that denies this.

Syrian refugees are quite similar. For them, karama means rights, respect and independence through self-reliance. South Africans take a similar view: they talk about the chance for each person to realise themselves. That's different to Rohingya. For them, ijjot is about expressing the group's social identity and religious practices. And in China, zunyán is more about national pride.

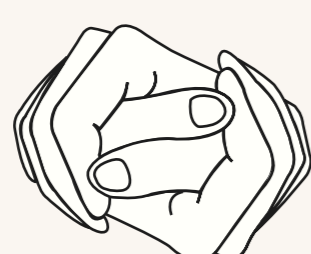
Western philosophers are quite similar to Mathare: they agree everyone has dignity, and therefore we should respect them - through autonomy, equality and recognising their individuality. Western philosophers don't worry so much about the environment and whether you have the ability to be respectful - they just say you should do it.

Recognising uniqueness



God-given duty to care for one another.

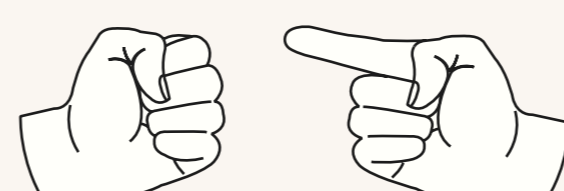
"We would prefer to have respect like those guys from the well developed areas whereby a police officer treats you with respect and they do not harass you. This is the life we would wish to have here with our police. Unfortunately these things happen only to the rich people. Here in the ghetto our situation is different..When you meet these people on the street the way they treat you, it's like you are a foreigner in your own country. They harass you, mistreat you and at times they can beat you for no reason at all. And when you want to explain yourself you are told to be quiet, you will explain yourself at the police station. That is the life that is here in the ghettos."



Self respect. A firm foundation. Autonomy.



Politeness. Social codes. Recognising the uniqueness in each other.



When society denies it, we fight for money and power.



Reggae artist Danito expresses his uniqueness. Photo by Daniel.

Our thanks to our participants, and to our hosts, Mathare Social Justice Centre.