

Delaware Law School Dignity Law Institute

2026 Dignity Law Symposium: The Role of the State in Protecting Human Dignity

The legal concept of dignity protects the core of the human experience, touching on such values as the ability to exercise agency over one's own life and bodily integrity, to possess a sense of self-worth, to express one's true identity, and to maintain respect as an equal among others. The recognition of human dignity has profound and diverse implications across virtually all bodies of law.

Dignity is the bedrock of the international human rights regime and has been the foundation of civil rights activism in the United States and around the world. It has been expressly named and recognized as a legal term in most national constitutions, and in key domestic and international case law. The American Bar Association (ABA) affirmed in a 2019 Resolution that "human dignity – the inherent, equal, and inalienable worth of every person – is foundational to a just rule of law" and that it is "fundamental to all areas of law and policy."

How, then, is human dignity meant to be protected across the diverse bodies of law and regulatory frameworks that govern our daily lives? What precisely is the role of the state in ensuring that the protection of human dignity is advanced as part of the pursuit of a "just rule of law"?

This Symposium explores these questions in both domestic and international legal arenas; employment discrimination and work, reproductive justice, criminal punishment, immigration, and the global arms trade. By convening leading scholars and advocates who work to advance dignity, the Symposium will provide an opportunity to reflect on precisely what it means to advance dignity in specific illustrative contexts. Further, the discussion will include consideration of both the achievements and shortcomings in state actions to protect dignity rights thus far, and forward-looking analyses of what it would look like to fully enshrine the promise of dignity rights in state practice.

Elizabeth Vartkessian will provide the Keynote Address. Ms. Vartkessian is the author of *The Deserving: What the Lives of the Condemned Reveal about American Justice* and the Executive Director of Advancing Real Change, Inc. whose mission is to create a more just world by advancing empathy, dignity, and equity within and beyond the criminal legal system.

The Symposium's strength will lie not just in the expertise of the panelists and speakers convened, but also in the robust and diverse experiences and perspectives among participants. We hope you will join us for this timely and important conversation.

Dignity, Discrimination, and Work

Policymakers across the political spectrum would likely agree that discrimination based on a person's characteristics not related to a given benefit (whether the benefit is a work opportunity, public benefits, or the right not to be detained) undermines human dignity—the inherent, equal, and inalienable worth of every person. Yet in furtherance of that nondiscriminatory dignity, some humans' dignity recently appears to be prioritized in law and policymaking over others'. For instance, federal policymakers aggressively pursue employment discrimination [claims on behalf of White men](#), while refusing to pursue [claims on behalf of transgender individuals](#). Meanwhile, other policymakers champion the “[dignity of work](#)” as a prerequisite to public benefits and healthcare coverage.

This panel will parse through these shifting dignity narratives within the contexts of discrimination and work, explaining whether recent developments undermine or support human dignity, and providing suggestions for proposals that would protect human dignity going forward.

Moderator:

Margaret H. Zhang, Delaware Law School

Panelists:

Stacy Hawkins, Rutgers Law School

Evelyn Rangel-Medina, Temple University Beasley School of Law

Tracee Saunders, Department of Political Science, Pennsylvania State University

Ryan Thoreson, University of Cincinnati College of Law

Reproductive Rights, Justice, and Health

This panel will look at reproductive rights and justice from a variety of perspectives. How do government regulations support or compromise reproductive dignity and autonomy? How have constitutions of different nations addressed and decided the permissible range of laws in this area? How can laws restricting abortion and access to contraception be analyzed in relation to the support, or lack of support, that governments and other actors provide to women, pregnant people, parents, and families?

Moderator:

John Culhane, Delaware Law School

Panelists:

Ashita Alag, University of Oxford

Erin Daly, Delaware Law School

Greer Donley, University of Pittsburgh School of Law

American Immigration Indignities

Migrants have always been a population vulnerable to demonization and attack. In the current moment, the indignity of US practices and policies around immigration and border security are actively advertised by the Trump administration as part of efforts to discourage migration to the US and encourage so-called “self-deportations” among undocumented individuals already living in the US. The regime has also taken the unprecedented step of deploying the military to carry out mass immigration raids in various locales across the country, along with other extreme anti-immigrant steps.

This panel seeks to map out and explore the genesis and legal ramifications of these ongoing “immigration indignities.” It does so through the lenses of both domestic and international law grounded at least partially in the protection and promotion of human dignity.

Moderator:

Randle DeFalco, Assistant Professor of Law, Delaware Law School

Panelists:

Glykeria Teji, Associate Clinical Professor, Seton Hall Law School

Juliana Macedo do Nascimento, Deputy Director of Federal Advocacy, United We Dream

Ioannis Kalpouzos, Visiting Professor of Law, Harvard Law School/Co-founder, Global Legal Action Network (GLAN)

The US in the World: Dignity and Security Assistance

The United States is a major purveyor of assistance to other countries, and the Foreign Assistance Act is a primary source of law regulating U.S. aid. The Act explicitly states that the purpose of U.S. development assistance is to help people globally “satisfy their basic needs and lead lives of decency, **dignity**, and hope” (emphasis added). But beyond development assistance, the U.S. is also the world’s largest arms dealer, and a major source of security assistance to state and non-state security forces globally. The Foreign Assistance Act includes several explicit regulations of security assistance meant to protect human rights alongside security. Of course, the international human rights framework that these provisions are meant to reflect is itself centered on the protection of dignity, as codified for example, in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights protecting against the arbitrary deprivation of life (“Recognizing that these rights derive from the inherent dignity of the human person...”).

This panel will review how current law already contemplates the protection and promotion of human dignity in regulating security assistance, how the United States government implements those laws, what enforcement mechanisms exist as a corrective, and what, if any, additional legal protections are needed.

Moderator:

Elizabeth Beavers, Assistant Professor of Law, Delaware Law School

Panelists:

John Ramming Chappell, US Advocacy Advisor, Center for Civilians in Conflict (CIVIC)

Anna Crowe, Lecturer on Law and Associate Director of Harvard Law School International Human Rights Clinic

Elizabeth Shackelford, Distinguished Fellow in International Affairs, Dartmouth College