

ADDRESSING CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE IN INDIA THROUGH SEXUALITY EDUCATION  
AND TEACHER TRAINING

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INTRODUCTION

National level research such as the Government of India's 2007 survey in 13 states across the country suggests that child sexual abuse (CSA henceforth) has reached epidemic proportions in India with one in two children surveyed, reporting abuse<sup>1</sup>. Despite the GOI study of all forms of child abuse and a more recent national qualitative study by Human Rights Watch (2013)<sup>2</sup> specifically on CSA, there was little impact on the public discourse on sexual abuse of children, until the increased English media reporting of CSA in Indian private schools. The latter brought the issue into sharp focus at least in the minds of middle and upper middle class parents. As a consequence, there have been various forms of online and offline activism<sup>3</sup> and greater pressure on schools to increase vigilance on their campuses via CCTV cameras and police verification of teachers and other school employees. In this paper we argue that rather than merely increasing vigilance, we need to provide sexuality education to children and train teachers to effectively address CSA.

While recognizing that schools are not the only site or even the primary site perhaps where CSA occurs, we argue that schools have the potential to become sites of social change where the patriarchal attitudes and cultures of gender based

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<sup>1</sup> Loveleen Kacker, Srinivas Varadan Pravesh Kumar. Study on Child Abuse in India. Ministry of Women and Child Development, Government of India, 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Breaking the Silence, Child Sexual Abuse in India. Human Rights Watch 2013.

<sup>3</sup> Sources:

- End the rape epidemic (online petition to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh by concerned parents and citizens) [http://www.avaaz.org/en/delhi\\_rape/?bqCxjeb&v=24601](http://www.avaaz.org/en/delhi_rape/?bqCxjeb&v=24601)
- Ensure Parents are part of the implementation panel to monitor progress. **(Petition to Minister of Education, Karnataka to ensure that police guidelines on protecting children are implemented by schools)** [https://www.change.org/p/mr-kimmane-ratnakar-ensure-parents-are-part-of-the-implementation-panel-to-monitor-progress?utm\\_source=action\\_alert&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=175704&alert\\_id=otcnYAvLh\\_f7FHH%2BVeps%2BKIFT2r8PDnDcqiWRIHpARs%2Fk46FQ579Wb6NgYsULp7PaKeELKO4DX](https://www.change.org/p/mr-kimmane-ratnakar-ensure-parents-are-part-of-the-implementation-panel-to-monitor-progress?utm_source=action_alert&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=175704&alert_id=otcnYAvLh_f7FHH%2BVeps%2BKIFT2r8PDnDcqiWRIHpARs%2Fk46FQ579Wb6NgYsULp7PaKeELKO4DX)
- Two minors raped IT city observes bandh <http://ibnlive.in.com/news/two-minors-raped-it-city-bangalore-observes-bandh/489341-62.html>

violence that encourage CSA are interrogated. For this, both in-service and pre-service teacher training needs to prepare teachers to recognise the warning signs of CSA and to provide age-appropriate sexuality education to students<sup>4</sup>. This training should be part of a more generalized curriculum on gender equity education and the creation of a caring and child-friendly environment in schools. In the latter part of this article we will discuss this form of training in greater detail. For now we examine some of the implications of the existing research on CSA in India and the legal provisions for addressing different forms of abuse.

## PREVALENCE OF CHILD ABUSE IN INDIA

Given that research on CSA in India is nascent, we have few sources of data on the issue. The GOI's 2007 survey mentioned earlier includes all forms of child abuse (physical, emotional and sexual) and surveyed 12447 children aged between 5 and 18 years and 2324 young adults from 18-24 years. Of the children, 53% of the boys and 47% of the girls report being sexually abused. This finding not only indicates that CSA is rampant across India but also suggests that policies and interventions on CSA should recognize the vulnerability of both boys and girls.<sup>5</sup> Given that surveys of sexual crimes often carry the risk of underreporting due to associated stigmas, it is possible that actual incidence of the crime is even higher, than reported.

A much smaller study undertaken by Tulir (a sexuality education NGO) and Save the Children in 2006 with a representative sample of 2211 school going children Chennai found that 48% of boys and 39% of girls reported abuse<sup>6</sup>. The somewhat smaller number of children reporting abuse in the Tulir study is possibly because it did not survey children living on the streets or in Juvenile Justice Homes, two sites where abuse is rampant according to the GOI (2007) study (see Table 1) as well as a

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<sup>4</sup> Belliappa, J.L. 'Addressing a Parent's Dilemma' *Teacher Plus*, November 2014. <http://www.teacherplus.org/comment/addressing-a-parents-dilemma>

<sup>5</sup> The higher reporting by boys is not indicative of girls' diminished vulnerability, but could be an indication of girls' and their parents' unwillingness to report sexual abuse in a context where the stigma around sexual abuse is higher for girls than for boys. This is also reinforced by Tulir where low rates of reporting are directly attributed to the premium a society places on a girl's virginity and her compromised status if this information were to be disclosed prior to marriage.

<sup>6</sup> Research on Prevalence and Dynamics of Child Sexual Abuse Among School Going Children in Chennai, TULIR and Save the Children, 2006.

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study by the Asian Human Rights Centre (2013) which revealed that systemic abuse is almost endemic in Juvenile Justice Homes<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> India's Hell Holes: Child Sexual Assault in Juvenile Justice Homes, Asian Centre for Human Rights. 2013

Table 1- Percentages of Children Reporting CSA in GOI Survey, 2007

Category of Children	Yes (%)	No (%)
Child in family environment not going to school	53.1 8	46.8 2
Child going to School	49.9 2	50.0 8
Children at work (shop, factory or other places)	61.6 1	38.3 9
Children on the streets	54.5 1	45.4 9
Children in institutional care	47.0 8	52.9 2
<b>Total</b>	53.2 2	46.7 8

In relation to reporting of abuse, the GOI study found that most children who were abuse, even sexually assaulted did not confide in anyone (just 12% reported it to parents) and particularly police reporting was very low, thereby artificially lowering the rates in the figures in the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), a national repository of crime statistics. Even so, NCRB data indicates that reported cases of child rapes have been increasing at an alarming rate with a decennial increase of 336% from 2113 cases in 2001 to 7112 cases in 2011<sup>8</sup>.

Table 2- Nature of CSA Disaggregated by Perpetrators GOI Survey 2007

Identity of the Perpetrator	Fondling	Forcing children to exhibit private parts	Forcibly Kissing	Person Exhibiting Private Parts to Children	Exposing children to dirty pictures	Sexual assault (Penetration)
Brother or sister	6.7	4.8	5.6	5.5	3.3	0
Cousin	11.1	9.5	11.5	9.2	9.1	10
Friend or class fellow	38.5	44.4	34.9	40.7	66.1	29
Uncle or neighbour	24.9	23	31.5	24.4	13.1	31
Employer	4.8	5.2	5.2	4	2.8	9
Any other	14	13.1	11.3	16.3	5.5	21
<b>Totals</b>	1805	1568	2621	2116	3734	681

<sup>8</sup> Source: <http://ncrb.gov.in/>.

Table 2 indicates that the majority of perpetrators are male, including classmates, uncles or neighbours and typically are well acquainted with the child. The fact that children are most at risk from their friends or classmates establishes the case for extensive preventive efforts to be made in schools not just with employees of schools as parents' pressure groups have demanded, but also with older children in their relationships with younger children.

In an earlier paper we argued that CSA tends to co-occur with high incidence along with physical and emotional abuse<sup>9</sup>. It is significant that nearly 65% of school going children in the GOI survey reported corporal punishment.<sup>10</sup> Even though the Right to Education Act prohibits physical punishment and mental harassment of children, media reports<sup>11</sup> and our own observations (as well as those of our students) suggest that beating, caning and making students stand for long periods of time continue to be common forms of punishments in school. In addition, verbal and emotional abuse are routine forms of 'discipline' used by teachers (including humiliation, comparison between children in terms of behaviour and learning achievements and negative personal remarks). Given that these forms of punishment are also common amongst parents, we find that children's physical autonomy and right to psychological safety is continuously violated at home and in school (see the GOI survey for more details on emotional abuse and neglect perpetrated by parents). In such an environment it is difficult for children to

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<sup>9</sup> Ghosh, S. and Belliappa, J. [forthcoming] 'A Comprehensive Approach to Addressing Child Abuse in India' *Acontrario* <http://acontrarioicl.com/>

<sup>10</sup> It should be noted that this survey was conducted before the introduction of Right to Education (RTE) Act Section 17 (1) of which prohibits corporal punishment in schools.

<sup>11</sup> For Examples see

- *The Shillong Times* 'Allegations of violation of Section 17 of RTE Act' 11/10/2012 <http://www.theshillongtimes.com/2012/10/11/allegations-of-violation-of-section-17-of-rte-act/#ykTct8XvusrFQ5YO.99>
- *First Post* 'School kids land in hospital after teacher makes them stand shirtless in the sun' 19/3/2015 <http://www.firstpost.com/india/school-kids-land-in-hospital-after-teacher-makes-them-stand-shirtless-in-the-sun-2161099.html>
- <http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-national/tp-karnataka/govt-ignoring-corporal-punishment/article5192119.ece>
- [http://www.newindianexpress.com/states/andhra\\_pradesh/Children-Parents-Reluctant-to-Complain-Against-Corporal-Punishment/2014/01/27/article2022098.ece1](http://www.newindianexpress.com/states/andhra_pradesh/Children-Parents-Reluctant-to-Complain-Against-Corporal-Punishment/2014/01/27/article2022098.ece1)
- <http://www.newindianexpress.com/cities/hyderabad/2014/12/02/Students-Safety-at-Schools-and-Colleges-in-Question/article2551239.ece>
- <http://www.newindianexpress.com/states/odisha/Student-Hurt-by-Teacher/2014/12/09/article2562466.ece>

recognize sexually abusive adult behaviour as a violation. As Sujatha Rao (2015) argues, sexual abuse becomes just one form of abuse in a culture which is systematically abusive to children in schools<sup>12</sup>. Neglect, emotional and physical abuse of children may foster an environment that normalizes sexual abuse by creating opportunities and inhibiting reporting. Children may not feel psychologically equipped to report abuse if the environment is insensitive to their autonomy and wellbeing; they may fear being disbelieved or punished for reporting abuse (HRW, 2013). In some cases children may even accept such abuse as appropriate punishment for misdemeanours or as a 'normal' expression of adult affection<sup>13</sup>. Additionally in the absence of sexuality education, children may not have the vocabulary to articulate feelings of being abused through specific adult behaviours.

In addition when we consider CSA alongside other indicators of gender (in)equities, such as a skewed sex ratio of 933 women per 1000 men, large gaps in literacy rates at 65.5% for women and 82.14%, adverse sex ratio of 917 girls for children under 6 years, strongly indicative of sex selective abortions and active as well as tacit neglect of female babies in India, a grim picture emerges<sup>14</sup>. Globally India ranks particularly poorly in terms of female health and survival, falling nearly to the bottom ranking 141<sup>st</sup> out of 142 countries (2014).<sup>15</sup> In education, twice as many girls as boys drop out prior to completing primary schooling (DISE 2014)<sup>16</sup> and in employment, nationally 23% of women were in the labour force compared to 56% of men (NSSO 2013)<sup>17</sup>. These statistics indicate that women are still denied access to basic opportunities which allow us to conclude with some confidence that CSA in India is closely interlinked with the deep-rooted and overlapping patriarchies of our schools, homes and communities which encourage gender-based violence, aggressive masculinities and a culture of silence around sexual crimes.

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<sup>12</sup> Rao, Sujatha. "Responses to Rape in Schools." *Economic and Political Weekly* 50.3 (2015)

<sup>13</sup> Many organizations including RAHI ([www.rahifoundation.org](http://www.rahifoundation.org)) that support recovery of adult survivors of CSA have adopted the Finkelhor model (Finkelhor, David, and Sharon Araji 1986 *Explanations of Pedophilia: A Four Factor Model*. *The Journal of Sex Research* 22(2): 145–161.) This model explains sexual offending using a staged approach – examining motivations of perpetrators, ways in which they overcome their inhibitions, mechanisms for accessing children and finally overcoming victim resistance using manipulation, coercion, violence or a combination of these.

<sup>14</sup> Census 2011: [census.gov.in](http://census.gov.in)

<sup>15</sup> Global Gender Gap Report 2014:

[http://www3.weforum.org/docs/GGGR14/GGGR\\_CompleteReport\\_2014.pdf](http://www3.weforum.org/docs/GGGR14/GGGR_CompleteReport_2014.pdf)

<sup>16</sup> District Information System for Education (DISE): <http://www.dise.in>. 2.3% of boys compared to 4% of girls

<sup>17</sup> Source: <http://pib.nic.in/newsite/erelease.aspx?relid=96641> (National Sample Survey Organization, NSSO 68<sup>th</sup> Round)

## LEGISLATIVE PROVISIONS AGAINST CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

India has ratified the definition of a child as an individual under the age of 18 years, as per the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Children (UNCRC, 1990) which upholds a child's right to be protected from abuse and exploitation. Although the Right to Education Act (RTE) 2009 prohibits physical and mental harassment of children in school, Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act (2012), POCSO is the primary law that would apply with regard to CSA. Prior to POCSO sexual offences against children were tried under laws governing adults (such as Section 376 for rape) and there were no special measures addressing the additional vulnerability of a child victim of sexual abuse. Thus POCSO is a significant legislation introduced as a result of intense lobbying by child rights' activists especially in the light of the GOI survey<sup>18</sup>.

POCSO uses different taxonomies such as assault, penetrative assault, aggravated assault and aggravated penetrative assault besides harassment (exposing a child to word, gesture or images with a sexual intent, or forcing a child to expose himself/herself and exposure of children to pornography) and use of children for pornography to define CSA. It is noteworthy that POCSO mandates compulsory reporting of CSA, and failure to do so by adults invites a 6 month jail sentence<sup>19</sup>. A range of stringent punitive measures are provided under POCSO considering the severity of the crime, both physical and psycho-sexual impacts, including long-term mental health impacts on children and the perpetrator's relationship to the child, ranging from a year of imprisonment for attempted offences (Section 18) with/without a fine, to a term of 7 years, extendable to a life term and a fine in case of penetrative sexual assault (Section 4).

POCSO is notable in that a number of provisions within POCSO recognise the autonomy of children and prescribes measures to make the investigative process and trial as non-threatening as possible, including the involvement of Special Courts for trying CSA cases and obligates the National and State Commissions for Protection of Child Rights to monitor and implement the law. Since it is barely three years past the enactment of this legislation, its implementation is yet to be verified. Nevertheless

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<sup>18</sup> <http://www.ndtv.com/article/india/parliament-passes-bill-to-protect-children-from-sexual-abuse-214437>

<sup>19</sup> National Commission for Protection of Child Rights: <http://ncpcr.gov.in>

POCSO is a step in the right direction since it has a considered approach to CSA including a nuanced approach to the types and intensities of sexual violations. It is important that teacher training and school level policies take account of the POCSO act and also alert teachers and school heads to their legal responsibility to report abuse. However, like all laws POCSO applies only after a crime is reported; prevention requires interventions which are not necessarily only legal in nature.

#### IMPLICATIONS FOR SCHOOLING AND TEACHER PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

With this background we now consider how CSA can be addressed within schools in India. We argue that schools need to be viewed as having both short-term and long-term impacts on preventing and mitigating CSA. In the short term, schools can create a more caring and sensitive environment that may diminish the incidence of CSA and increase the chances of reporting it. In earlier sections, we have already highlighted the need to consider CSA alongside other forms of abuse perpetrated on children and have advocated for the creation of a more non-threatening environment in schools, which recognizes the personhood of children that should take the form of respecting their physical boundaries and their right to study in an environment where they are not subjected to any form of physical or emotional punishment, amongst other behaviours. When adults routinely respect children's right to bodily integrity the chances that children are able to recognize sexual abuse and articulate it are enhanced.

In the long-term, we need to consider the ways in which both formal (written) curriculum and the hidden curriculum (which includes unintended lessons that are embedded in interactions between teachers and students, school processes and allocations of roles and responsibilities to boys and girls), can reinforce gender equity and undermine hegemonic forms of masculinity and femininity. An instance of embedding gender equity in the written curriculum would be the inclusion of a chapter such as 'Women, Caste and Reform' in the class 8 textbook or 'Growing Up as Boys and Girls in the Class 7 textbook of social science published by the NCERT (National Council of Educational Research and Training)<sup>20</sup>. An example of gender equity in the hidden curriculum would be encouraging girls to participate in sports that are usually associated with boys (football and boxing) and encouraging boys to

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<sup>20</sup> Source: [ncert.nic.in](http://ncert.nic.in)



undertake cooking and similar ‘feminine’ subjects, a practice that the first author has noted in her previous research and practice in some Bangalore based schools.

Sexuality education is an important component of a curriculum aimed at gender equity. Nirantar’s 2008 report, *Sexuality Education for Young People* proposes that we recognize children’s right to information about sexuality which requires compulsory age-appropriate sexuality education as part of children’s schooling for reasons of child’s safety and wellbeing, rather than for instrumental purposes of population control and disease prevention (the agendas that drove sex education in the 1980s and 90s).<sup>21</sup> Contrary to popular anxieties, research indicates that imparting sexuality education does not increase sexual activity, but enables the development of a strong sense of self and equitable relationships.<sup>22</sup>

Both Nirantar (2008) and the highly progressive Justice Verma Committee Report on Amendments to Criminal Law (2013) recommends that we move away from sex education focussed primarily on biology towards sexuality education, which addresses the social, psychological and cultural aspects of sexuality and enables students to understand gender discrimination<sup>23</sup>. Viewing sexuality education in this manner, allows us to construct sexuality education curricula that enable children to understand their bodies, develop a healthy body image, overcome feelings of shame, be physically healthy, make safe choices, recognize abuse and violence and treat others with respect both in the present and the future.

Recognizing the cultural and social aspects of sexuality means understanding that we live in a highly inequitable society, in which women’s health, education and physical safety are seriously undermined. It also means acknowledging the existence of a highly aggressive form of masculinity as hegemonic within Indian culture.<sup>24</sup> As argued in the introduction, schools have an important role in interrogating extant inequitable and oppressive gender norms and in social transformation. Previous research indicates that schools often reproduce gender hierarchies in both the

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<sup>21</sup> Nirantar “Sexuality Education for Young People” (2008)  
<http://www.eklavya.in/pdfs/annual%20report%2007-08/Appendix%2015%20Sexuality%20Education%20for%20the%20Youth.pdf>

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> The Justice Verma Committee came into existence after the brutal rape and murder of a physiotherapy student in Delhi in Dec 2012 .Source: <http://www.prsindia.org/parliamenttrack/report-summaries/justice-verma-committee-report-summary-2628/>

<sup>24</sup> Verma, J.S. *et.al.* (2013) Amendments to Criminal Law

written and the hidden curriculum<sup>25</sup>. Therefore, engaging schools in actively promoting gender equity as the NCF's (2006) position paper on Gender Issues in Schooling recommends, would require not only curricular reform and pedagogical strategies but also education and sensitization of teachers<sup>26</sup>.

In addition to training in sexuality education and recognizing signs of CSA, teacher professional development needs to take a three pronged approach to gender equity education: First, teachers need to be trained to question the normalization of gender inequities through teaching strategies and the written curriculum. Most disciplines including science, social science, language, literature and mathematics have historically been taught in ways that privilege the male elite learner but can be reimagined in ways that include female students<sup>27</sup>. As the examples of NCERT textbooks discussed above suggests, curricular reform has already been initiated. Teachers now need to be sensitized to how emerging gender equitable curriculum can be implemented effectively in the classroom. This requires teachers to be trained to use more participatory pedagogical strategies and foster critical thinking by encouraging students to engage in 'reading against the grain'<sup>28</sup> question taken for granted knowledge claims and value personal experience and insight alongside textual knowledge.

Secondly, training opportunities need to be designed to enable teachers to reflect on their own cultural biases which impact the hidden curriculum of the school. Given that teachers are not immune to the cultural influences of the wider community, they often carry patriarchal attitudes into the classroom. A study located in primary schools finds gender biases being reflected in tasks assigned, types of behaviours encouraged or inhibited and the manner in which girls and boys engage with each other (Bhattacharjee 1999).<sup>29</sup> Teacher educators need to create non-

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<sup>25</sup> Bhattacharjee, Nandini. 1999. "Through the looking glass: gender socialization in primary school." Pp. 336-355 in *Culture, socialisation and human development: theory, research and applications in India*, edited by T.S. Saraswathi. New Delhi: Sage Publications; Position Paper of National Focus Group on Gender Issues in Education, 2006.

<sup>26</sup> National Focus Group Position Paper on Gender Issues in Education, NCERT 2006. [http://www.ncert.nic.in/rightside/links/pdf/focus\\_group/gender\\_issues\\_in\\_education.pdf](http://www.ncert.nic.in/rightside/links/pdf/focus_group/gender_issues_in_education.pdf)

<sup>27</sup> For instance a history teacher should be primed to find ways in which women's histories that have been marginalized can be included in the curriculum, a science teacher can engage students in a discussion of why a large number of inventions and discoveries of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century tend to be attributed only to men. A language teacher can engage student in a discussion of the gendered nature of words such as 'mankind' or 'sportsmanship'.

<sup>28</sup> Position Paper of National Focus Group on Gender Issues in Education, 2006:x

<sup>29</sup> See footnote 24.

threatening sensitization programmes that enable teachers to identify these (largely unconscious) biases and experiment with new, gender equitable behaviours.

Addressing long-cherished and deep rooted cultural attitudes and social norms is not an easy task and require in-depth and long-term engagement. The process might be slow and meet with limited success in the initial stages but is likely to gain momentum over time.

Finally, we need to create opportunities for teachers to examine their own socialization and reflect on the influence of gender on their own personal and professional lives. Hegemonic masculinities and femininities constrain the social lives of both men and women. Just as women's access to opportunities are severely circumscribed by their gender, the confining roles of men as providers and the consequent expectations placed on them to achieve financial and professional success can create high levels of stress and may set most men up for failure. Further, the privileging of this form of masculinity contributes to male aggression and violence. As teachers become more self-reflexive about gender hierarchies and oppressions in their own lives, it is likely that they will begin to find ways to engage critically with students on gender issues both within and outside the classroom.

## CONCLUSION

In this paper we have argued that the high incidence of child sexual abuse (as indicated by previous research) tends to occur concurrently with high levels of physical and emotional abuse in India. We currently have progressive laws that address different forms of abuse, which children could face both within and outside schools. However legislation can only address individual crimes and is not effective without a concomitant change in culture. On the other hand education is an important site for cultural change. Educational interventions which address CSA must acknowledge the links between different types of abuse and view CSA as one of the many forms of gendered oppression and violence. Drawing from progressive policies and judicial reports we can construct a liberal sexuality curricula that recognize children's right to information about their bodies and sexualities and promote equitable relationships between the sexes. If this is done alongside the creation of a psychologically safe environment in schools, incidents of CSA are more likely to be mitigated and reported.

The role of teachers is central to this process. On the one hand teachers need to be sensitized to recognize CSA, to impart sexuality education and to engage students to think about gender inequities and oppressions in wider society. On the other, they need to be educated to be self-reflexive about their own gender biases which are reflected in their behaviour and pedagogy. This self-reflexivity needs to be extended to their own socialization and their own social positions to empower them to truly adopt gender equitable values. Achieving this goal is arguably challenging and time-consuming but also likely to yield rich dividends in terms of lasting social change.