



## Equality Content, Values and Human Rights in Socio-Humanistic Education

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**ABSTRACT:** This unconventional text, authored by five persons—all active members of the World Center for Women's Studies—was inspired by a series of questions posed by Izabela Skórzyńska on the theme of "Equality Content, Values, and Human Rights in Socio-Humanistic Education." The questions were as follows:

- /1/ What place and role do equality content and values play in public discourse in your country and/or cultural circle?
- /2/ What place and role do equality content and values play in your scientific research?
- /3/ What problems are key to implementing equality education in your countries and/or cultural circles?
- /4/ How do you assess the presence of equality content, values, and human rights in academic and general education in your countries and/or cultural circles?
- /5/ What would you like to contribute personally to the topic addressed in the survey?

The responses reflect profound insights, essential for understanding the significance of equality education across the diverse cultures of Sri Lanka, India, Italy, and Poland. This text not only contributes to self-discovery and mutual understanding of the unique characteristics



of equality education—from schools and universities to social life in the distinct societies of Asia and Europe—but also attempts to capture the essence of this education. It explores the challenges it encounters, highlights areas where we, as societies and academic educators, succeed, identifies where we fall short, and examines why this topic holds personal importance for us.

KEYWORDS: Equality Content, Values and Human Rights, Socio-Humanistic Education.

## Introduction

Equality policy, understood as equality before the law, equal opportunities and life chances, and equal access to participation in social life, while guaranteed by law in many parts of the world, still presents the challenge of effectively translating theory into practice and ideology into ethics<sup>1</sup>. Human rights that guarantee equality, viewed through the metaphor of the human community as a natural community, serve as the ethical foundation of human morality, grounded in tradition, law, and custom. This morality, in turn, is closely tied to individual reflection and critical consideration of one's social practices in relation to others.

Equality practices, therefore, embody the ethics of equality, which can function as an ideology but may also represent the most mature expression of social sensitivity—where the common good becomes a matter of choice and responsibility rather than coercion. Coercion, in contrast, often conceals harmful practices of domination and exclusion under the threat of legal sanctions.<sup>2</sup>

If modern socio-humanistic education, as evidenced by case studies from Italy, Sri Lanka, India, and Poland, serves as a response to human rights, it often manifests as an informed ethics that struggles against a deficit in embodied morality. While this education is rich in social content—including legal, humanistic, and philosophical aspects—it often functions merely as a better or worse-constructed repository of knowledge about equality rather than equality in action. This underscores the issue of formal education as a detached simulation, frequently removed from social reality.

As a result, schools and academia become artificial spaces for practicing human rights—a form of instruction on what they are and what equality means. However, as humanity, we should not merely live for these rights; we should live by them. The essential minimum—familiarity with human

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<sup>1</sup> A. Perotti, *The impact of the Council of Europe's recommendations on intercultural education in European school systems*, "European Journal of Intercultural Studies" 5(1)/1994, pp. 3-8, quoted by: M. Łuźniak-Piecha, *Przewodnik po równości*, Warszawa 2022, p. 7.

<sup>2</sup> J. Tischner, 1985, *Polska jest Ojczyzną. W kręgu filozofii pracy*, Éditions du Dialogue, Paris, p. 17, quoted by: B. Gołębiowski, *Naród polski narodem chłopskim*, "Kultura i Społeczeństwo" 2018/1, p. 116.

rights, as provided by education at various levels—is merely a starting point for practicing morality. This practice entails the reflective and critical shaping of social relationships in the spirit of equality.

Meanwhile, schools and academia, at least in democratic societies, have taken a step further by increasingly scrutinizing themselves as institutions and communities that practice, to varying degrees, the principles of equality they teach. This is encapsulated by the concept of the equality laboratory. Schools and academies genuinely oriented toward human rights thus function as laboratories. However, it is important to remember that a laboratory is a space and time carved out of the everyday reality of social life—too idealized to be entirely real, yet invaluable as an institution supporting learners in translating theory (human rights) into life practice (equal treatment).

The third step toward embedding human rights in social practices is an engaged school and academia—vibrant, creative, critical, and effectively present in social life and everyday realities, actively improving its quality. These institutions become a vital institutional link in democracy, sharing responsibility for the future of the human community—whether local, regional, national, or global—while safeguarding its right to a dignified life<sup>3</sup>.

*Izabela Skórzyńska*

## **Human Rights in the Legal System and Education Sri Lanka's Perspective**

### **Introduction**

Equality content and human rights values are vital to socio-humanistic education, fostering inclusive, equitable societies. In Sri Lanka, these principles play a crucial role in addressing historical injustices, promoting social cohesion, and protecting fundamental rights under the 1978 Constitution. Public discourse frequently highlights equality in the context of post-conflict reconciliation, gender justice, and combating ethnic discrimination. However, despite constitutional and policy frameworks, significant gaps persist in embedding these values into the social fabric and education systems.

In criminal law and justice research, equality serves as a critical lens for addressing systemic inequities. Gender disparities, ethnic biases in law enforcement, and barriers to justice emphasize the need for equality-

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<sup>3</sup> *Uniwersytet zaangażowany. Przewodnik Krytyki Politycznej*, Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, Warszawa 2010, p. 10.

oriented reforms. Cases like *Nilanthi Perera v. Officer-in-Charge, Kandy Police Station* (2023) illustrate judicial efforts to uphold equality while exposing challenges within enforcement mechanisms.

Implementing equality in education faces hurdles, including entrenched cultural norms, resource inequalities, and fragmented curricula. While policies like the Education Sector Development Framework and Programme (ESDFP) address these issues, practical integration remains uneven.

The 17 State Universities in Sri Lanka offer specialized human rights courses (even the private universities do the same), but general education often lacks cohesive integration. Strengthening socio-humanistic education through curriculum reform, inclusive pedagogy, and teacher training is essential for fostering a culture of equality and justice. This article explores these issues and offers recommendations for embedding equality and human rights in Sri Lanka's educational framework.

### **The Role of Equality Content and Values in Public Discourse in Sri Lanka**

Equality and human rights occupy a central position in Sri Lanka's public discourse, particularly following the country's independence in 1948 and the conclusion of the non-international armed conflict in the year 2009. This focus has shaped discussions on gender equality, ethnic reconciliation, and socio-economic rights, which frequently dominate the spheres of public, legal, and policy debates. However, translating these discussions into actionable outcomes remains challenging due to entrenched socio-political divides and inadequate public awareness of human rights principles.

One significant example of equality discourse is the legal and social movement for GENDER EQUALITY. The push for legislative reforms addressing spousal rape and domestic violence highlights efforts to challenge patriarchal norms. Despite resistance, activists and scholars emphasize the need for equality-based interpretations of existing laws, including the Prevention of Domestic Violence Act No. 34 of 2005.

In the context of ethnic reconciliation, the Supreme Court's decision in *Nilanthi Perera v. Officer-in-Charge, Kandy Police Station* (SCFR 106/2023) illustrates the judiciary's role in promoting equality. The Court held that the discriminatory actions of law enforcement officers violated Article 12 of the Constitution, which guarantees equality before the law and freedom from discrimination. This case underscores the enduring relevance of equality values in addressing ethnic biases within state institutions. Furthermore, the Office for National Unity and the Reconciliation Act No. 1 of 2024, enacted by the State of Sri Lanka, ensure national unity for positive peace among the different communities in the country.

Scholars discuss the integration of human rights into public policies and reconciliation strategies. They critique the limited penetration of equality principles into grassroots and institutional levels, highlighting the need for broader public education and engagement.

The Fundamental Rights Chapter of the 1978 Constitution, alongside policies like the National Action Plan for the Protection and Promotion of Human Rights (2017-2021), reflects Sri Lanka's commitment to equality. Nevertheless, their effective implementation is hindered by cultural resistance and fragmented political will, necessitating sustained efforts to mainstream these values in public discourse.

### **Challenges in Implementing Equality Education in Sri Lanka**

Implementing equality education in Sri Lanka presents significant challenges, deeply rooted in cultural, institutional, and structural factors. Cultural resistance remains one of the most formidable obstacles, as traditional patriarchal and hierarchical values often conflict with the principles of equality. This resistance is particularly evident in rural communities, where entrenched gender norms and socio-religious beliefs hinder the acceptance of concepts like gender equity and minority rights. Such cultural barriers limit the effectiveness of educational initiatives aimed at fostering inclusivity.

Resource disparities exacerbate these challenges, particularly in underprivileged rural and marginalized schools. The lack of qualified educators, inadequate training programs, and insufficient materials tailored to human rights education impede the effective dissemination of equality content. Schools in urban areas are comparatively better equipped, further deepening the divide between rural and urban students in accessing quality education on equality principles.

Another critical issue lies in the fragmented curriculum, where human rights and equality content are sporadically integrated into various subjects without a cohesive approach. This disjointed structure limits students' ability to understand the interconnectedness of these principles with broader socio-political and economic frameworks. Scholars emphasize the importance of adopting a holistic and interdisciplinary approach to overcome these curriculum-related shortcomings.

Additionally, policy gaps hinder the implementation of equality education. While frameworks such as the Education Sector Development Framework and Programme (ESDFP) include provisions for promoting inclusivity, weak enforcement mechanisms and inadequate monitoring reduce their impact. Addressing these challenges requires political commitment, robust policy enforcement, and a transformation of cultural norms to create a conducive environment for equality education across all sectors of society.

### **Assessing Equality Content and Values in Education**

Equality and human rights education in Sri Lanka, though integrated into civics and social studies curricula, remains fragmented and inconsistent across academic and general education systems. A thorough assessment reveals significant gaps in both areas, undermining efforts to foster a culture of equality and justice.

In academic education, universities provide courses in human rights law, social sciences, and related disciplines. However, these offerings are often elective, limiting their reach to a subset of students. While these courses provide valuable insights into the principles of equality and human rights, their optional nature restricts widespread exposure to these critical values. The Sri Lanka Qualifications Framework (SLQF), which serves as the national standard for higher education, has the potential to mandate the inclusion of equality and human rights content as core components across disciplines. Such a mandate would ensure that all students, regardless of their field of study, are exposed to these principles, thereby embedding equality education into broader academic framework.

In general education, secondary school curricula incorporate lessons on civic duties and constitutional rights. Subjects like civics and history provide an overview of fundamental rights under the 1978 Constitution, including Article 12 on equality. However, these references often remain theoretical, with minimal emphasis on practical application. Students are rarely engaged in critical discussions or activities that enable them to internalize these principles or apply them in real-world scenarios. This gap is particularly pronounced in rural schools, where limited resources and outdated pedagogical methods further hinder the effective teaching of equality content.

To address these shortcomings, a more cohesive approach is essential, integrating equality education into core academic and general education curricula while emphasizing practical applications. This will help bridge the existing gaps and promote a deeper understanding of equality and human rights across all educational levels.

### **Recommendations for Enhancing Equality Content and Values in Education**

To strengthen socio-humanistic education in Sri Lanka, several key recommendations are proposed to ensure the comprehensive integration of equality content and values across all educational levels.

Curriculum overhaul is essential to embedding human rights and equality education at the core of the national curriculum. By making human rights education a mandatory subject from primary through tertiary levels, students can be systematically exposed to the principles of equality.

This ensures that future generations are equipped with the knowledge to challenge inequality and promote justice.

Teacher training is equally crucial, as educators play a central role in shaping students' understanding of equality values. Professional development programs should focus on equipping teachers with the necessary skills to effectively teach these values, using both theoretical and practical approaches. Training should emphasize sensitivity to gender, ethnic, and disability issues, ensuring teachers are prepared to address these topics in diverse classroom settings.

Community engagement is vital for reinforcing classroom learning and fostering practical applications of equality principles. Community-based programs that involve students, parents, and local leaders can create real-life contexts where equality education can be practiced and discussed. These initiatives will help bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and everyday realities.

Inclusive pedagogy should be prioritized by using teaching materials that reflect the experiences and perspectives of marginalized groups, including women, ethnic minorities, and differently-abled individuals. This fosters a more inclusive educational environment that values diversity and promotes social cohesion.

Finally, establishing monitoring mechanisms is necessary to track the effectiveness of these initiatives. Clear indicators should be developed to assess the integration of equality education and its impact on students' attitudes and behaviors, ensuring continuous improvement in the implementation process.

*Muthukuda Arachchige Dona Shiroma Jeeva Shirajanie Niriella*

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## **India's National Education Policy 2020 (NEP)–2020**

India is one of the oldest civilizations in the world with a kaleidoscopic variety and rich cultural heritage. Currently, India stands tall as the 5<sup>th</sup> largest economy in the world, and it has achieved all-around socio-political-economic progress since its independence. The country, known for its unique culture, which exhibits unity in diversity, has the Right to Equality enshrined in the Constitution of India. The Indian Constitution aspires to social, economic, and political equality for the people of India. The Right to Equality, which is a fundamental right of the people, provides for equal treatment of everyone before the law, prevents discrimination on various grounds, and treats everybody as equals in matters of education, public employment, and discourse.

Today at the intersection of Indian people's social, economic, intellectual, aesthetic, cultural, and spiritual life, education needs to be holistic and fundamental in nature. It does not mean only obtaining various certificates, diplomas, degrees, and publications, but also preparing students for life truly human in nature, that is full of an independent, interdependent, self-sufficient, fearless, mutually cooperating, and highly cultured existence with a deep sense of social commitment and urge for public welfare.

In India, pluralism exists in all walks of life, exhibiting acceptance of diverse beliefs, cultures, gender perspectives, and values. And this too exists in the arena of research across disciplines. At present, India is one of the fastest-growing research hubs in the world. India has gained remarkable visibility internationally in research and is number 3 in terms of the number of publications in SCI journals. India's research output between 2017 and 2022 increased by about 54%, according to the research insights database SciVal. This is more than double the global average for research growth, which stands at 22% between 2017 and 2022, and far greater than that of its more academically established Western counterparts.

Besides, India's research output was the fourth highest worldwide with 1.3 million academic papers published between 2017 and 2022, while China stood first with 4.5 million academic papers, followed by the United States with academic publications numbering 4.4 million, and the United Kingdom stood third with 1.4 million academic publications. At its current growth rate, India is all set to surpass the United Kingdom for research output in the near future.

Indian value systems, governance models, and civilization legacies are not only respected but recognized all over the world. And in this journey of progression, the contribution is of both men and women. A significant example is the successful landing of Chandrayaan-3 on the moon, in which,



besides male scientists, the involvement of women scientists who undertook shouldering the responsibilities with precision is significant. The women scientists' unwavering dedication is a testament to their seriousness, enthusiasm, and commitment to their country, which gave them a conducive educational and research environment to pursue their goals and enabled them to shine. India's Prime Minister, Mr. Narendra Modi, has named Chandrayaan-3's landing spot on the moon 'Shiv Shakti'—a name derived from the concept of feminine energy in Hindu mythology, and a tribute to the women scientists who worked on the mission. The Prime Minister stated: "The women scientists of this mission have played a crucial role in ensuring its success. Without their contribution, this achievement was just not possible. They will inspire generations to come." In addition, according to World Bank data, women make up nearly 43 percent of total STEM graduates in India, one of the highest in the world, which underscores an encouraging research environment for women in the country.

The rich heritage of ancient and eternal Indian knowledge and thought has been a guiding light for the educational scenario of India. The pursuit of knowledge, wisdom and truth has always been considered in Indian thought and philosophy as the highest human goal. The aim of education in ancient India was not just the acquisition of knowledge as preparation for life in this world, or life beyond schooling, but for the complete realization and liberation of the self. World-class institutions of ancient India, such as Takshashila, Nalanda, Vikramshila, Vallabhi, set the highest standards of multidisciplinary teaching and research, and hosted scholars and students from diverse backgrounds from across the world. The Indian education system has produced great scholars such as Charaka, Susruta, Aryabhata, Varahamihira, Bhaskaracharya, Brahmagupta, Chanakya, Chakrapani Datta, Madhava, Panini, Patanjali, Nagarjuna, Gautama, Pingala, Sankardev, Maitreyi, Gargi, Sri Sarada Devi, Bhairavi Brahmani, Ubhaya Bharati and Thiruvalluvar, among numerous others, who made decisive contributions to world knowledge in diverse fields such as mathematics, astronomy, metallurgy, medical science and surgery, civil engineering, architecture, shipbuilding and navigation, yoga, fine arts, chess, and many more disciplines and research areas. Indian culture and philosophy have had a strong influence on the world. The country strongly opines that these rich legacies to world heritage must not only be nurtured and preserved for posterity but also researched, enhanced, and put to new uses through the education system. These elements must be incorporated taking into account the local and global needs of the country, and with respect for and deference to its rich diversity and culture.

Instilling the knowledge of India and its varied social, cultural, and technological needs, its inimitable artistic, language, and knowledge tradi-

tions, and its strong ethics in India's young people is considered critical for the purposes of national pride, self-confidence, self-knowledge, cooperation, and integration.

In terms of economic growth, India has progressed with GDP growth to \$3.89 trillion in nominal terms and \$16.02 trillion in PP terms with an annual growth rate of 7 percent in 2024. From 1947 to 2010 it took 63 years to reach a GDP of \$1 trillion, and just in seven years in 2017 it was \$2 trillion, and then in 2020, the GDP rose to \$3 trillion. India is moving on to become the third-largest economy globally by 2031 with an expected GDP of around \$12 trillion, which is expected to be \$30 trillion in the 100<sup>th</sup> year of independence, that is in 2047. In the development and growth of India, education has seen a significant rise. The country's literacy rate is 74.04 percent: 82.14 percent for males and 65.46 percent for females in 2024, whereas in 1951 it was just 18 percent.

In recent years, especially during the COVID-19 time, when educational institutions were closed indefinitely to curtail the spread of the virus, students in India, especially in the remotest corners of the country, were provided access to digital tools that helped them continue their education from home. And today the thrust of imparting education is in blended form, making students technology savvy to keep pace with the changing technologies in the digital world.

The overwhelming progress made toward education since independence is not without challenges. On the one hand, there are highly successful institutions such as the Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs), and Indian Institutes of Management (IIMs), but there are still a plethora of issues that need immediate attention. These are lower enrolment rates in upper primary and secondary/higher education and high drop-out rates in elementary and secondary education, especially among socially and economically deprived children. Other areas of concern are the accessibility to quality education for children with special needs, unsatisfactory level of learning, inconsistent teaching quality, more focus on grades than experiential learning, student-teacher ratio, and inadequate vocational education and training facilities.

Amartya Sen's statement that it is imperative to have a sound social infrastructure in the education sector is true, since no nation has grown out of "poverty" to "prosperity" without taking care of the basic needs of its people. To achieve sustainable growth in India, there is an urgent need for an integrated and intersectional approach to education that gives equal importance to the economic, social, cultural, and civic dimensions of learning to prepare students to inquire into anything, speak freely, and stand up for their rights. And this is what the country got in its new education policy: National Education Policy (NEP)–2020, a "rethinking education" policy that

emphasizes the need to go beyond a utilitarian vision and reform the human capital approach to promote humanism as propagated by Mahatma Gandhi. “Work done with integrity and intelligence is ultimately the only proper medium through which human beings can be truly educated.”

In the present time, when wars, conflicts, racism, gender disparity, silencing of marginal voices, etc., have been destroying the framework of the world’s progress, Humanistic Education (HE) is being looked upon as the savior to create a peaceful world. HE is an approach that emphasizes personal growth, self-actualization, and the development of one’s full potential. Rather than taking a strictly academic approach, HE prioritizes emotional well-being, creativity, and critical thinking alongside academic knowledge.

Built on the foundation of HE, the National Education Policy envisions an education system rooted in Indian ethos that contributes directly to transforming India, that is Bharat, sustainably into an equitable and vibrant knowledge society, by providing high-quality education to all, thereby making India a global knowledge superpower. The highlight of NEP-2020 is that it envisages that the curriculum and pedagogy of institutions must develop among the students a deep sense of respect towards the Fundamental Duties and Constitutional values, ethics, traditional systems, bonding with one’s country, and a conscious awareness of one’s roles and responsibilities in a changing world. The vision of the Policy is to instill among the learners a deep-rooted pride in being Indian, not only in thought but also in spirit, intellect, and deeds, as well as to develop knowledge, skills, values, and dispositions that support responsible commitment to human rights, sustainable development and living, and global well-being, thereby reflecting a truly global citizen.

NEP-2020 emphasizes personal growth, self-actualization, and the development of one’s full potential rather than taking a strictly academic approach. It prioritizes emotional well-being, creativity, and critical thinking alongside academic, and researches a true humanistic approach essential for addressing complex global challenges.

NEP-2020 aims to create a new system that is aligned with the aspirational goals of 21<sup>st</sup> century education, including SDG4, while building upon India’s traditions and value systems. NEP-2020 lays particular emphasis on the development of the creative potential of each student. It is based on the principle that education must develop not only cognitive capacities—both the “foundational capacities” of literacy and numeracy and “higher-order” cognitive capacities, such as critical thinking and problem-solving—but also social, ethical, and emotional capacities and dispositions.

Thus, NEP-2020 integrates humanistic education through a combination of interdisciplinary courses, collaborative projects, and experiential learning opportunities. Beyond the classroom, initiatives such as internships or

community engagement further encourage the application of soft skills in real-world contexts to prepare graduates to be flexible, forward-thinking, and socially responsible professionals with not only intellectual skills, but also emotional intelligence, empathy, and moral reasoning. The opportunities to engage in internships, joint research projects, and real-world problem-solving expose students not only to cutting-edge innovations but also to the human-centered challenges posed by technologies.

*Anupama Vohra & Jasbir Singh*

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### ***One Thing is ‘Teaching Theory’ and Another Problem is ‘Ethical Practicing.’ Italy’s Perspective***

In the last few months, the context encircling former Italian Minister of culture, Gennaro Sangiuliano, has gradually come to a somewhat scandalous point for a seemingly romantic adventure with a woman, Maria Rosaria Boccia, an entrepreneur whom he had decided to consider for an advisory role in the Ministry, but then took a step backward, making Boccia react vigorously. The question concerning an access to sensitive documents or public funds regarding Italy’s role in the G7 summit on culture has led to ongoing legal and political repercussions for the two protagonists. The question is still unresolved.

After the Minister’s resignation, Alessandro Giuli, a journalist focused on cultural identity, heritage and traditional values with ties to conservative media and intellectual circles, is the newly appointed Minister of Culture. He occasionally reveals conservative positions on political matters. As President of the MAXXI Foundation in his previous role, his interest was promoting contemporary Italian art and history, as the Zaha Hadid Museum that replaced former military barracks would encourage every new governmental agent to do.

Although he did not specifically emphasize “EQUALITY CONTENT AND VALUES IN PUBLIC DISCOURSE” in the traditional sense in his early tenure, after the Sangiuliano crisis he made a point of announcing HIS INTENTION TO CORRECT THE DECREE APPOINTING THE CINEMA COMMISSION UNDER THE PREVIOUS MINISTRY BECAUSE OF THE LACK OF GENDER BALANCE. AS PART

OF THESE CHANGES, HE ADDED SIX NEW WOMEN TO THE COMMISSION, THUS CORRECTING THE EXISTING IMBALANCE AND PROMOTING GREATER FEMALE REPRESENTATION IN THE MINISTRY'S CULTURAL APPOINTMENTS. A political choice, some people say.

So much for "PUBLIC DISCOURSE." As to my personal "cultural circle," I was lately invited to dinner in an exclusive Roman club by a male friend who acted in the past as a high officer of the Italian Chamber of Deputies. When the conversation between the eight guests became focused on the Anglo-Saxon habit of creating men-only clubs, I ventured to ask if anyone in the men-only Italian club that was hosting us had suggested that ladies should be allowed to enlist as members, too. The reply by my host was an unequivocal aversion to contemplate the possibility that such thing should ever take place.

Accepting women (wives) only in a family role but not as full members obviously highlights a gender disparity dating to the past. While such clubs may promote the preservation of tradition, THE EXCLUSION OF WOMEN IS OPPOSED TO EQUAL ACCESS TO OPPORTUNITIES AND CONTINUES SUPPORTING GENDER HIERARCHIES THAT ARE OUTDATED BY FACTS SUCH AS HIGHER CAREERS ONCE ONLY AVAILABLE TO MEN THAT ARE NOWADAYS ALSO COVERED BY WOMEN. Challenging these structures means to accept and promote inclusion and inclusiveness. As a matter of fact, such "tokenism" may appear to provide inclusion, but INSTEAD IT ACTUALLY EMPHASIZES THE SECONDARY ROLE OF WOMEN IN SUCH CONTEXTS BECAUSE IT OFFERS WOMEN LIMITED PARTICIPATION WITHOUT THE POWER OF VOTING OR AUTONOMY WITHIN THE CLUB. In spite of having had a high enough role played in society, the person from my personal cultural circle reveals his myopic attitude which, most probably, has to do with the idea that "tradition should be preserved" (as it is preserved in the architectural shape of the Chamber of Deputies itself!).

### **Equality content and value in my scientific research**

My scientific research has had several developments in the fifty years I devoted to academic studies. Let us talk about gender studies in my research journey. I can delineate a journey within literature, theater, and film, tracing the evolving portrayal of gender, sexuality, and female identity in four works that highlight critical points in feminist thought and queer theory.

The first masterpiece is Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* (1962) that revolves around the turbulent relationship of University Professor George and University President's daughter Martha. The play interrogates gender roles and power dynamics within heterosexual marriages and the societal expectations on women in domestic spaces. A traditional submissive wife is not cut out on Martha's personality. It rather represents an earlier moment of feminist enquiry when patriarchal norms were prominent and

challenging them was iconized into the figure of Woolf, a feminist icon with intellectual autonomy and roles.

Later, the addition of homosexual love came with the inquiry into two adolescent girls in *Lost and Delirious* (a film adapted in 2001 by Léa Poole and Judith Thompson from the 1990 novel *The Other Half of Love*) exploring lesbian love. The representation of sexuality is more nuanced and situates itself as a broader feminist movement at the boundary of women's desire within a heteronormative framework.

Sofia Coppola's *The Virgin Suicides* (1999), based on Jeffrey Eugenides's novel, shows a haunting portrayal of female adolescence and repression. The film explores the effects of patriarchal control over young women's bodies and identities as well as the revenge of a woman who excites the male gaze of the neighboring boys to arouse a visual meditation on those themes among spectators.

With Cheryl Dunye's *Stranger Inside* (2001), the intersectional approach to gender studies is confirmed by sexual identity as much as by race, class, and institutional structures. The filmmaker is black and tells the story of a black woman who navigates the U.S.A. prison system, while the issues of identity, motherhood, and survival in a patriarchally-sick context are analyzed.

The film reflects the third wave of feminism that moved beyond a predominant white-class perspective to explore violence and vulnerabilities of queer women of color.

Each work presented reflects its own cultural moment and is stamped along my academic career as steps to chart the development of feminist and queer theory and explore the intersections of gender with areas of identity and power structures.

### **What problems are usually key to implement equality content and values and human rights in academic education?**

Ensuring that human rights and equality are systematically integrated into various subjects presents an important problem. Whereas it is relatively easy to address this challenge if you are a humanist or involved in social studies, it is a big problem for people devoted to scientific studies, like physics, engineering, mathematics, and so on. Things are changing in my country with the help of international meetings for research: in other words, when you meet internationally, such important ethic fields, after some time, are, in the end, shared by all.

Cultural resistance is another problem that can hinder the implementation of progressive ideas. Traditional views may conflict with teachings on gender equality, human rights, or racial justice. There may be resistance from parents, relatives, friends and even administrators.



Discrimination about equality and human rights happens sometimes. The problem is that one thing is “teaching theory” and another problem is “ethical practicing.”

### **Assessing equality content, values and human rights in your country or cultural circle**

Insiders put it like this: curriculum updating, better teacher training, inclusive institutional policies, and active community engagement. It is not easy, however, to assess the impact of equality and human rights education, because you will never know for sure how these values are understood and internalized by students. So: how to track progress? It should be possible to ensure that equality content is updated and offered by the teacher in a critical way, keeping into account social change.

After all, there is an abysmal distance between the time of parents and teachers and the time of today’s adolescents. The time of yesterday, with its slow passage between puberty and adult’s emancipation, did not develop as happens in today’s time, a hurriedly time, often darkened in its speedy development. Time informs all gestures: from the way of dressing, to the way of making up one’s face, to that of speaking, of handling one’s cellular phone, of facing sex, of leaving home, of being free. Are we sure that teaching is effective? The answer probably is: teaching is not always effective there and then, but time and maturity will reawaken the ideas that students could not accept right away, but will accept in the future.

*Maria Anita Stefanelli*

## **Human Rights—Women’s Rights: Education to Be Done. Poland’s Perspective**

### **Introduction**

Poles inherit a distinctive identity shaped by two contrasting traditions. On one hand, this identity is rooted in a conservative national-Christian tradition forged during the 19th and 20th centuries through experiences of partitions and occupations. On the other hand, it incorporates a leftist tradition of social equality, which was effectively discredited during the communist era of the People’s Republic of Poland. The national-Christian tradition served as a weapon in the ideological battle against the perceived leftist tradition for nearly half a century (1944–1989) and continues to resonate among the older generation. In the 21st century, right-wing populists have revived and amplified this tradition in election campaigns, using anti-equality



slogans targeting migrants, women, and LGBTQ+ individuals, groups, and relationships.

Despite these challenges, Poland, as a democratic state, is obligated to uphold human rights, guaranteed by the following international and national legal instruments: The European Convention for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment; The Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms; The EU Charter of Fundamental Rights; The Constitution of the Republic of Poland; The Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment; The International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights; The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights; The Universal Declaration of Human Rights; The Istanbul Protocol.

Shaped by a tumultuous history, Poles carry a deeply ingrained “gene” of freedom and solidarity. This legacy manifests in diverse ways: as expressions of care and calls for justice for the marginalized, but also, at times, as fear, distrust, or hostility toward those with differing values and needs. This tension raises a critical question: how can this conflict be resolved?

## **Conditions for Changing Social Attitudes Toward Human Rights and Equality**

### **PROFESSIONALISM IN PUBLIC FUNCTIONARIES**

A key condition for shifting attitudes is the professionalism of public officials responsible for legal education, including school and university teachers, educators, social workers, lawyers, police officers, municipal guards, doctors, journalists, and activists. While Polish workers must undergo training in occupational health and safety or first aid, no such requirement exists for knowledge of human rights or equality issues.

### **EFFECTIVE ENFORCEMENT AND PROTECTION OF HUMAN RIGHTS**

Success in observing and protecting human rights depends on the actions of all bodies responsible for upholding the rule of law. This requires not only adopting international instruments but ensuring their practical implementation.

### **EDUCATION AND SOCIAL COMPETENCE**

Schools and universities play a pivotal role in imparting knowledge and competencies regarding human rights. However, while human rights topics are present in educational programs, they are rarely prioritized, systematically promoted, or practiced. Education often remains theoretical, failing to foster lived experiences of equality.

### **SOCIAL PARTICIPATION IN BUILDING DEMOCRACY**

Beyond knowledge, a democratic society requires active participation in countering inequalities. Citizens must engage in shaping a society that reflects shared values of equality and fairness.

### SHARED RESPONSIBILITY

Both citizens and the state must share responsibility for understanding, observing, and promoting human rights. This necessitates mutual trust and cooperation that transcends ideological and worldview differences.

### A STRONG THIRD SECTOR

Non-governmental organizations play an essential role in promoting human rights, supporting victims, and providing education on local, regional, and national levels. These organizations must be well-funded, competent, and sustainable to effect meaningful change.<sup>4</sup>

While all these conditions are present in Poland, none fully meets the challenges of the modern world. An example of this is the social perception of inequality in Poland. According to a 2018 report by the Central Statistical Office, there is a strong societal belief in the existence of discrimination, defined as unfavorable treatment based on differences.

In 2018, residents of Poland most commonly witnessed discrimination against homeless individuals—one in six people aged 16 or older directly encountered such a phenomenon. Approximately one in ten witnessed unfavorable treatment of homosexual, bisexual, or transgender individuals, people of a different skin color, or persons with disabilities. Furthermore, one in eleven residents observed discriminatory behavior toward individuals in poor financial situations.<sup>5</sup>

In the cited report, 10% of respondents identified discrimination based on gender, which pertains to women. In the case of discrimination against men, this figure was only 2%.<sup>6</sup>

### **Women's History and Memory: My Perspective**

As a professor of history at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, I am responsible for training future history teachers. I also collaborate with an interdisciplinary team of researchers and educators from various institutions across Poland. This team focuses on gender and women's history in public education, combining insights from history, pedagogy, sociology, and related subfields.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> These and Other Conditions Discussed in Detail: L. Koba, "Świadomość praw człowieka w Polsce," *Themis Polska Nova* 2012/1 (2), pp. 166-185.

<sup>5</sup> *Statistical Analyses, Quality of life and social capital in Poland, Results of the Social Cohesion Survey 2018*, Statistics Poland, Warsaw 2020, p. 224.

<sup>6</sup> *Statistical Analyses*, p. 217.

<sup>7</sup> I am quoting here excerpts from a joint text: I. Skórzyńska, E. Głowacka-Sobiech, I. Chmura-Rutkowska, A. Kowalczyk, A. Jankowiak-Maik, "Kobiety w historii. Historia w nowej podstawie programowej," *Wiadomości Historyczne* 2024/1, p. 21.

Between 2010 and 2015, I co-authored a project titled “Unworthy of History: On the Absence and Stereotypical Depictions of Women in History in Polish Secondary School Textbooks,” alongside Iwona Chmura-Rutkowska and Edyta Głowacka-Sobiech.<sup>8</sup> In 2016, we expanded this work through the project “Gender in Textbooks,” involving multiple researchers across Poland.<sup>9</sup>

The primary goal of these studies was to reconstruct and critically analyze the narrative presented in Polish history textbooks following the 2008 curriculum reform. We investigated the portrayal of gender roles, focusing on women’s representation in the history of Poland, Europe, and the world. Our analysis revealed deeply embedded stereotypes and significant gender imbalances.

Women were underrepresented, often portrayed as victims or anonymous collective figures, while male figures dominated the narrative (comprising, on average, 90% of named individuals). Women appeared predominantly in mythological or fictional contexts, particularly in ancient history, and their presence diminished in later historical periods.

The aim of these analyses was to uncover deeper, hidden meanings within the school’s historical narrative, particularly how femininity and masculinity are constructed in history programs and textbooks. This was achieved by considering both the cultural context in which the texts operate and the authors’ assumptions about their target audience. The proposed analysis of reform documents and history textbooks was complemented by a historical examination of textbook content and a didactic analysis. These approaches enabled an assessment of the active, creative, and critical participation of teachers and students in engaging with the textbooks, based on an evaluation of the methodological solutions they propose.

The analysis focused on both the main text and the didactic framework of the textbooks, which included sections such as source blocks, task-oriented activities, visual materials, and other methodological solutions proposed by the authors. The results of the study were striking. It became evident that, in the case of both women and men, Polish history textbooks favored collective subjects, including anthropomorphized institutions, communities, civilizations, and cultures. Furthermore, the quantitative representation of women and men (by name) was grossly disproportionate, with women being significantly underrepresented. The textbooks predominantly featured male figures, while women were either underrepresented or incidental. In relation

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<sup>8</sup>I. Chmura-Rutkowska, E. Głowacka-Sobiech, I. Skórzyńska, “*Niegodne historii?*” *Onieobecnosci i stereotypowych wizerunkach kobiet w świetle podręcznikowej narracji historycznej w gimnazjum*, Oficyna Wydawnicza IMPULS, Kraków 2015.

<sup>9</sup>*Gender w podręcznikach. Projekt badawczy. Raport*, vol. 1–3, [eds.] I. Chmura-Rutkowska, M. Duda, M. Mazurek, A. Sołtysiak-Łuczak, Warszawa 2016.

to women, the names of goddesses, as well as mythical, legendary, and fictional characters, were more common, especially in textbooks for the first grade, which focused on ancient history. As the historical periods progressed, the presence of goddesses diminished, replaced by a small, proportionally limited gallery of real historical women.

The situation was somewhat different when considering women as collective heroines. In this context, their representation was significantly richer, but entirely anonymous, often reduced to the role of victims of social inequalities, wars, or revolutions. In every textbook, regardless of the historical period described, male heroes accounted for, on average, around 90% of all named figures.<sup>10</sup>

In 2024, as part of the initiative to restructure Polish education, including changes to the curriculum, we began efforts to promote our research and recommendations. We actively participated in a meeting at the Ministry of National Education, which is driving these changes.

The history of women and their role in school history education is just one, albeit significant, example of the work still needed in my country to promote and practice human rights, including equality. However, the path from history textbooks to the implementation of social equality practices is a long one, requiring critical pedagogy and participatory approaches to education. This is where my role as an academic teacher becomes crucial.

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<sup>10</sup> I. Skórzyńska, E. Głowacka-Sobiech, I. Chmura-Rutkowska, A. Kowalczyk, A. Jankowiak-Maik, *op. cit.*, pp. 25-26.

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