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IN THE PROVISION OF INFORMATION RESOURCES AND  
SERVICES FOR GENDER EQUALITY IN NIGERIA**

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# **THE ROLE OF LIBRARIES AND INFORMATION CENTERS IN THE PROVISION OF INFORMATION RESOURCES AND SERVICES FOR GENDER EQUALITY IN NIGERIA**

By

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## *Abstract*

**Purpose:** The purpose of the paper is to identify the contemporary challenges confronting Nigerian libraries and information centres in this aspect of human endeavour and the diverse ways in which libraries, information centres and other organisations promote gender activities and equality are identified.

**Methodology:** The paper is a position paper that recommends the best resources and services that libraries and information centres should provide to promote gender equality. Sources of data for this work comprise of primary, secondary data such as reports and books and personal observation by the researcher

**Finding:** The result found out that gender equality acknowledges that irrespective of gender, everyone gets equal opportunity to live a fulfilled life. Women and girls have the right and are entitled to full and equal opportunities, which cover all aspects of human endeavor. Like their male counterparts, they are entitled to be free from all forms of discrimination. However, Nigerian women, like many women in Africa, are deprived socially, economically and politically in relation to their male counterparts. The paper is an opinion paper.

**Unique contribution to theory and practice:** The libraries need to create enabling environments for discussing issues that concern women and girls, and provision of resources and services that promote their peculiar and specific interests and rights, such as combating discriminatory practices and stereotypes.

**Keywords:** *Role, Libraries and Information Centers, Provision, Information Resources, Services, Gender Equality, Nigeria*

## INTRODUCTION

Women and girls in Nigeria face daily gender- based challenges that include poverty, unemployment, under education, sexual assault, human trafficking, domestic violence, female genital mutilation, and Vesico Virginal Fistula (VVF), among others. Most of these violations, according to Adebowale (2020), are largely unreported for fear of stigmatization, shame and impunity'. Many women are ignorant about their basic rights, which make it impossible to be aware of their rights

Gender refers to the socially constructed roles, behaviours and attributes assigned to women, men, girls and boys (DCAF, 2017). Gender does not imply that women and men are the same, but that their interests, needs and priorities should be valued equally and accorded equal treatment. Gender roles are socially learnt, differ among cultures and change over time; gender inequality causes many women to experience significant disadvantages.

Libraries and information centers have critical roles in creating and supporting environment that enable everyone, including girls and women in their communities to achieve optimal use of information and services provided. They are centres where people acquire the needed knowledge to reduce ignorance. The knowledge that women and girls can acquire from libraries can make them well informed and aware of their rights, which in turn empower them to contribute meaningfully to national development. In his study, Atuase (2018) revealed that the rich and diverse information resources and professional services provision offered by libraries position them to provide the right information resources as well as educating and training women to realize their potentials.

It is essential to consider women and girls' needs when developing a policy on library and information services delivery, acknowledging the different strategies necessary for them. By empowering women and girls with equal access to relevant and useful information resources and services, libraries and information centres can assist tremendously in addressing gender related issues and promote gender equality.

### **Concept of Gender Equality**

Gender is socially learnt roles, behaviors, and activities and attributes that any given society considers appropriate for men and women. Gender defines masculinity and femininity. The society decides that a person must behave in certain ways and carry out certain tasks; this process of assignation creates gender. Gender equality is primarily a human right. It refers to equal valuing of the roles of women and men. It does not imply that women and men are the same, but that their interests, needs and priorities should be valued equally and accorded equal treatment. It works to overcome the barriers of stereotypes and prejudices so that both sexes are able to equally contribute to and benefit from economic, social, cultural and political developments within a society (DCAF, 2017)

According to NILS (2015), gender equality ensures that equal opportunities and access exist for men and women. The phrase gender equality does not refer to the men or women being equal but that their access to and fulfillment of their rights, access to opportunities and participation are independent of their sex or the opportunities and participation are independent of their sex or the socially ascribed interpretation (gender) of their being as man or woman.

## **Rights of Women and Girls**

Many international organizations have recognized women and girls as central to well-being of every society. In recognition of this, the last decade has witnessed increased efforts by government and other organizations at international, regional and national levels to incorporate gender perspective in their functions and development plans in order to promote gender equality and empower women. For instance, the declaration of 1978 by the United Nations as the International Year of Women and the Beijing Declaration of 1991 are positive steps towards the emancipation of women globally. These international concerns and programmes of action show the importance of women to national development. In fact, one of the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) set by the world leaders to be achieved by the year 2015 is Goal 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls (UNDP, 2014).

According to UN Women (1995), every human being has the right to participate in decisions that define her or his life. This right is the foundation of the ideal of equal participation in decision-making among women and men. This right argues that since women know their situation best, they should participate equally with men to have their perspectives effectively incorporated at all levels of decision-making, from private to public spheres of their lives, from local to global level.

The UN Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995 identified women's empowerment as the key condition for democratic governance. It is also one of critical areas of concern in its Beijing Platform of Action (BPA). For this concern, the platform recommends two strategies: First, "Take measures to ensure women's equal access to and full participation in power structures and decision-making" and second, "increase women's capacity to participate in decision-making and leadership." Both strategies are proposed to be addressed by "governments, national bodies, the private sectors, political parties, trade unions, employers' organizations, research and academic institutions, sub-regional and regional bodies, and non-governmental and international organizations (Miranda, 2005)

The main strategy recommended by the Beijing Platform of Action that was endorsed by the UN member states in the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women has to be consistently linked to the goals of gender equality and equity embodied in the convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (Miranda, 2005)

IFLA (2017) stated that certain groups of people tend to be consistently marginalized; these people include persons with disabilities, out-of-school youth (children at risk of living and working on the streets), girls and women (especially in traditional patriarchal societies), ethnic minorities and refugees. It further pointed out that, because efforts have not understood the key principles of need, access, experience and use, they have failed to provide the intended outcomes. It further cautioned that the presence of a library, either real or virtual, does not necessarily mean that it will benefit the marginalized and reduce inequalities if people do not know how to access a library. In addition, they cannot benefit from its contents, if they cannot read the text, they are unable to learn from it; if there is nothing relevant to their needs, and they will not be empowered

No wonder, UNESCO has, for a long time, played a strong role in advocating that more support should be given to the creation of knowledge societies in which all citizens are able to access and use the information that they require to live fulfilled lives (Mensell and Whn 1998; UNESCO, 2005). Knowledge societies, according to UNESCO, means societies in which people have the capabilities not just to acquire information but also to transform it into knowledge and understanding which empowers them to enhance their livelihood. A report by Lederer (2020) in THE TIME online, UN Secretary General, Antonio Guterres warned that

inequality for women is growing and it “should shame us all in the 21<sup>st</sup> century because it is not only acceptable, it is stupid” and that gender inequality is “one overwhelming injustice across the globe- an abuse that is crying out for attention.. He further pointed out that violence against women is “at epidemic levels, with more than one in three women experiencing violence in their lifetimes, and legal protections against rape and domestic violence is being diluted or rolled back.” He asserted that “gender equality is a question of power- power that has been jealously guarded by millennia; we must urgently transform and redistribute power, if we want to safeguard our future and our planet.”

### **Legal and Human Rights of Women and Girls in Nigeria**

International Women’s Day (IWD) is a focal point in the movement for women’s right. The theme for this year’s IWD 2020 is ‘I am Generation Equality: Realizing Women Right’. The occasion also coincided with the 25 years post Beijing Platform for action adopted in 1995. Addressing journalists, as part of the activities to mark this year’s celebration, the Director General, Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD) called on Nigerian Government to address the systematic barriers plaguing women’s right in the country, which, according to her, will ensure the desired progress of achieving Goal 5 of the Sustainable Development Goals that seeks to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls. She therefore stressed that the right approach must be adopted to empower women and achieve Sustainable Development Goal 5 (Adebowale, 2020).

Women and girls' rights are human rights. They cover every aspect of life; they are entitled to full and equal enjoyment of all their human rights and to be free from all forms of discrimination. In ensuring that equal opportunity for women and girls exists, the legal institutions in Nigeria, government and non-governmental organizations, have also established initiatives and put in place measures to help girls and women in the promotion and protection of human rights. Some of the measures are listed below:

- The National Policy on Women of 2000 launched specific guidelines for promoting gender equality in all sectors of the economy. The policy is being revised into a National Gender Policy in order to reflect the new shift towards gender and development.
- Microcredit provided by community banks and a National Poverty Eradication Programme which is accessible to about 27 percent of women.
- Establishment of the Female Functional Literacy for Health and Poverty Alleviation Project (FFLH) to provide literacy and health education to rural women and income-generation health education, functional literacy and income-generating activities for women in the rural areas. This project by the Federal Ministry of Women Affairs and Youth Development (FMWAYD), the Federal Ministry of Health (FMOH) and the World Health Organization (WHO) have been replicated in 22 states of the Federation.
- Provision of loans at low interest rates and waivers of collateral for women seeking credit facilities. 27 percent of women have benefited.
- Establishment of skills acquisition centers throughout the states of the Federation.

Pilot projects on modern bee farming in 10 states by FMWAYD in collaboration with the International First Aid Society (IFAS).

- Establishment of Women Development Centers in all the local government areas for training in skills acquisition, mass literacy and adult education programmes targeted at rural women.
- Provision of extension services in rural communities by federal and state ministries to improve agricultural yields and increase technical proficiency.

- The government has set aside US\$3 846 154 specifically for women involved in agricultural production and processing. In addition, the National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP) and the National Directorate of Employment (NDE) programmes at the federal, state and local levels have special provisions for women in terms of employment and poverty reduction.
- The Offices of the Public Defender (OPD) in Ekiti and Lagos offer free legal services to underprivileged women whose rights are threatened or have been infringed.
- The National Centre for Women Development, in collaboration with the Federal Ministry of Women Affairs, commenced a project in 2003 aimed at compiling discriminatory and customary laws. – on the status of women in various areas, such as property rights, including land tenure; access to credit; education; participation in politics; marriage; succession; and maintenance and custody of children, among others.

Similarly, various sections of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria stated

the rights for women as follows:

Prohibit discrimination on the basis of sex and ensure that men and women have equal access to the courts in matters of contracts, torts and all civil matters; equality of rights, obligations and opportunities before the law; the right to land, housing and property which declares that “the State shall direct its policy towards ensuring that suitable and adequate shelter are provided for all citizens” ; the right to acquire property and guarantees every citizen the right to acquire and own immovable property anywhere in the country; women shall have equal rights as men with respect to employment opportunities, choice of professions, promotion and remuneration; Nigerian men can have their non-Nigerian wives acquire citizenship through registration, but the same is not the case for non-Nigerian husbands married to Nigerian; a married woman, but not a married man, who avails herself of this Subsection as being of full age. This implies that a girl married at age 12 shall be treated as an adult

Similarly, in various sections of the acts, the system of marriage laws, which includes customary, Islamic and statutory marriage, has resulted in a plurality of legal provisions and precedents regarding property rights and inheritance in the event of divorce and death under: Married Women’s Property Act of 1882; Marriage Act of 1990, Chapter 218 Laws of the Federation of Nigeria; Matrimonial Causes Act of 1970

### **Statistics on Gender-Based Issues**

Statistics from the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS, 2016) stated that about half of the population of Nigeria is women with right to vote and hold offices in almost all states of the Federation. Forty nine percent (49.4 %) are female (Country Meters, 2020). However, the NBS (2016) opined that women continued to be under represented at the national, state and local government levels. Among high-ranking government administrators with decision- making powers, women were equally under-represented. The NBS (2016) further reported that physical and sexual violence against women affects mostly females between the ages of 20-24 years. In the absence of new data, available data stated that between 2008 and 2013, 89.9 percent on the average of women and girls in the ages of 15-19 years experienced genital cutting at the ages of under 5 years.

In 2015, more females were trafficked in the period 2015-2020 with the proportion of female trafficked for prostitution as high as 70.8 persons were in the ages between 18-27 years. Pointing out the high number on human trafficking in Nigeria, on February 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2020, a report by Channel Television (2020) lamented that over 20,000 women and girls are sex slaves abroad

Despite progress in opening new doors of opportunities to empower women and girls, they continue to be under represented in major decision- making. According to Okoye, 2020, states such as Borno and Yobe are still lagging behind in participation in governance; he also stated that Nigeria has the lowest proportion of female lawmakers in Africa. Increased women participation in decision making especially those that affect women and children are key to tackling major global challenges. According to UN Women (2005), women are likely than men to be unemployed, entrepreneurs, achieving the highest leadership positions and harassment. Other challenges that are gender-based include violence in its various forms, such as domestic violence, violence against minors, early marriages, child abuse, sexual harassment, health issues, female genital mutilations, etc.

From the above-mentioned statistics, it is evident that gender-based issues pertaining to women and girls are prevalent and continue to hinder the attainment of the desirable equality in women's life in Nigeria.

### **Role of Libraries in Achieving Gender Equality**

Access to information enables people to make informed decisions that can improve their lives. Libraries are seen as vital community hubs, bringing people together and giving them access to the services and support they need to live better lives (LGA, 2017). More than ever, it is now essential for librarians to play a pivotal role and work as agents of change by driving a campaign to address gender-related issues, especially those that affect women and girls.

Libraries are trusted places, free to enter and open to all. According to LGA (2017), "Libraries change lives for the better. Libraries do not only provide access to books and other literature but also help people to help themselves and improve their opportunities, bring people together, and provide practical support and guidance. As a locally accountable service, they are well-placed to respond to local needs and issues to live better lives." The joint LGA/DCMC (2017) leadership for libraries identified the following seven outcomes that libraries contribute to in their communities:

1. Cultural and creative enrichment
2. Increase reading and literacy
3. Improved digital access and literacy
4. Helping everyone achieve their potentials
5. Healthier and happier lives
6. Greater prosperity
7. Stronger, more resilient communities.

In the same vein, American Democratic Project (ADP, 2011) opined that, in order to ensure an informed citizenry and encourage citizenship, the under listed library, programmes are essential:

- Libraries ensure civic literacy- libraries help users to identify, evaluate and utilize information for critical thinking and necessary to make choices essential to one's livelihood.
- Provide real and virtual spaces where people can gather to solve pressing problems.
- Libraries can play critical role in kindling civic spirit by providing not only information but also expanded opportunities for dialogue and deliberation as a practice ground for democracy.
- Provide safe spaces or commons, where people can discuss issues and practice deliberative democracy. Others provide safe spaces, or commons, where students can discuss issues in a non- confrontational, non-partisan, and deliberative manner.

Libraries provide access to a greater breadth and depth of services and support and operating as a gateway to physical and digital information from public health to adult learning, school readiness to employment, and a broad range of business and cultural services to their communities. Libraries are places where democracy, freedom and equality are not only respected but also celebrated. Through their activities, libraries offer significant reach into communities and a cost-effective way of ensuring that local people are connected to the services they need and when they need them regardless of age, race, tribe, gender or socio-economic status.

Some libraries offer services that support gender equality by providing safe meeting spaces, programmes for women and girls on rights and health, and ICT and literacy programmes support to women to build their entrepreneurial skills. Typical example of a library that provides such practical support and services that meet the specific needs of their local women and girls is that of the National Library of Uganda. Christopher (2017) explained that the National Library has an ICT training programme designed for female farmers, providing access in local languages to weather forecasts, crop prices, and support to set up online markets. This programme increases the economic well-being of women through technology skill. The Library has a programme known as NPAL READ's (Rural Education and Development), an information and resource centre capacity-building initiative that helps women and girls to gain insights and take control of their own lives. The empowerment programme includes seminars and workshops on women's rights, gender equality, health, violence against women and other issues. The Library encourages women to sign up for the women's group, which meets once in a month in a separate section of the Library where it's members feel free to speak their minds. Practical courses include literacy and numeracy, English language, ICT, entrepreneurship skills and hands-on classes in making goods for sale. READ Centers across the country also offer training programmes in life skills, health, digital literacy and technology.

In an effort to empower women and girls, City Library, Abuja collaborated with African Library and Information Associations (Aflia) to organize training and workshop for women. They did that by celebrating Pan African Women's Day, which is observed each year on the 31<sup>st</sup> of July to commensurate the first Pan African Women's conference held in 1962. The target participants that year were women street sweepers of Abuja Environment Board (AEPB). The theme was "Pamper the African Woman". The various activities organized were practical training on tying "gele"; makeup session; tips on hygiene; cooking session by men to pamper the African Women; tips on savings through cooperative society; and pregnant women reading aloud to her unborn child (City Library Report)

In the same vein, the City Library, Abuja, in collaboration with Soroptimist International, Asokoro branch, Abuja, which is a women, based organization aimed at promoting the lives of women in Nigeria. The participants were women and "almajiris". The theme for the program was "Literacy and Multilingualism. The program was a reading session conducted in English, Pidgin, Hausa, Igbo and Gbagi languages. Books donated by Soroptimist International were distributed to the participants

Similarly, the writer's personal interaction with staff of the National Library of Nigeria, Abuja, also revealed the efforts being made to empower women and girls include: inviting resource persons or specialists to educate women on issues that are only peculiar to women, such as health, literacy programmes, organizing skill acquisition training on how to make soaps, simple pastries such as making "puf-puf", tying head wears known as "gele", among things.

## **Methodology**

The paper is a position paper that recommends the best resources and services that libraries and information centers should provide to promote gender equality. Sources of data for this work comprise of primary, secondary data such as reports and books and personal observation by the researcher

## **Challenges**

Despite efforts and achievements made by some libraries, especially the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) libraries, there are still challenges facing the many libraries in Nigeria, which are predominantly in rural areas. These include:

1. Many librarians still believe in the traditional roles of libraries as reading places, hence nonchalant attitudes towards reaching out and focusing on other innovative ways that can support and encourage women and girls to improve their lives
2. Lack of funds and encouragement to support librarians in organizing activities for women
3. Lack of recognition on the part of government to know the importance of libraries to economics, social, educational development of the community

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

According to Country Meters (2020), females constitute almost half of the Nigerian population, that is, 49.4 percent. Considering the fact that gender equality is in the spotlight as a global priority, the way forward to the realization of gender equality and empowerment of women and girls in Nigeria, is for libraries and information centers, especially public libraries is to redouble their efforts by focusing on issues that specifically respond to their specific needs. These will enable them advance their status and live a fulfilling and productive live without any inhibition on ground of gender

In light of the above, the following are recommendations for libraries and information centers in Nigeria to imbibe the efforts of other libraries and build support for women's right to improve on gender sensitivity, they are:

1. To ensure that policies, programmes, resources and services relevant to the actual lives, needs and activities of women and girls are not only provided but also sustained.
2. Support the development and distribution of book list with books that challenge the gender stereotypes and/or promote gender equality and respect for relationships between males and females, stock copies of these books across library service and promote through displays and other communications
3. Implement story time sessions for a range of ages, which use books, which challenge gender stereotypes and/or promote gender equality and respect relationships between women and men and/or boys and girls.
4. Marketing of library services to increase women's membership in libraries by adopting strategies to strengthen women's awareness and engagement in the activities organized for them by libraries
5. Collaborate with agencies such as Non - governmental Organisations (NGO) to organize and deliver seminars, workshops, using library space on women and girl's legal rights, encourage the inclusion of women in politics, maternal and child health programs, violence against women, sex trafficking, participating in politics, importance of women's education, diseases that affect mostly women, empowering them with

various small scale activities, among other issues and things, in English and Nigerian local languages

6. Organise practical classes to include literacy, English Language, ICT, entrepreneurship skills, hand on lessons on cooking; baking, making goods for sales, etc.
7. Coordinate annual International Women’s Day (IDW) activities that will focus on innovative ways that support female political party candidates, this will encourage and support women to succeed in taking leadership positions and roles in politics.

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