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Gender inclusivity and equity in academic libraries

Insights from around the globe

In order to draw attention to and learn about gender inclusivity and equity in the academic library workplace in a fluid non-binary gendered society, academic librarians and researchers from major world regions were invited to respond to the question: What are the three most significant issues that are impeding and the three most significant issues that are enhancing gender inclusivity/equity in your region? The regions included are Africa, Asia and Oceania, Europe, Latin American and the Caribbean, the Middle East, and North America.

We chose to focus on gender as the understanding of the concept is evolving and gender has classified people in such a way to limit or deny opportunities and equal treatment. Gender has been used to reference three dimensions that include the *physical* (characteristics of the human body), *identity* (the internal sense of self, which has traditionally been categorized as binary [e.g., feminine, masculine] and now as nonbinary or ungendered), and *sociocultural* (how one presents oneself socially or culturally, conformity to gendered roles and expectations).

Many matters exist related to gender and academic and research libraries that in particular regions may already be settled, in others are being addressed, while in others are overlooked or ignored. Each of the following regional contributions are unique in approach and provide insights relevant to the region and offer opportunity for comparison.

Gender inclusivity/equity in academic libraries in Africa: A conspectus view—Buhle Mbambo-Thata, African Library & Information Associations & Institutions

A quick review of library association membership in Africa shows more women than men. In the last ten years there has been a steady increase of women directors of university libraries in Africa. This was not always the case, as traditionally women have been in the majority in the academic library workforce while men held leadership positions.

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In southern Africa, the trend has been that more men are in academic positions in library schools and women are in practice. Generally, in Africa there were more men with PhDs; however, we have seen over the years an increase in women PhD holders and their entering in the professorial rank.

There are three issues that prevent women advancing in academic libraries:

1. historical educational imbalances, where men held higher qualification, an advantage for upward mobility;

2. remnants of patriarchy, where men are the "heir apparent" in promotion; and

3. family responsibility that held women back in their careers.

Possible ways of bridging these three imbalances:

1. educational programming that intentionally focuses on leadership capacity building among LIS women and increasing women's opportunities in research leading to a PhD,

2. creating continuing education programs in soft skills that give women confidence to step forward, and

3. being deliberate about redressing ills of the past relating to gender bias.

Pursuance of the social justice mandate, and redressing ills of past discriminatory practices will help redress race and gender-based disparity in academic libraries in Africa. Academic libraries and their institutions would be required to plan, and to monitor progress, of such redress plans.

Gender inclusivity/equity in academic libraries in Asia and Oceania: The Australian experience—Jia Tina Du, University of South Australia

Asia and Oceania, a region rich in culture and geography, and diverse economically and politically, may best be appreciated by understanding country specifics. Broadly speaking, across the region, gender inclusivity/equity in academic libraries is advancing at the pace of academic library develop-ment, suggesting that traditional library and gendered roles persist in some countries, while they are progressing in others. In the case of Australia, the significant issues that are impeding gender inclusivity/equity in academic libraries in Australia include:

1. *Earnings differences*. In the longer term, the Council of Australian Governments has a gender equity agenda and will be working to eradicate the difference in earnings between men and women.

2. *Female-dominated professions*. Gender and age were reported in the notes from the Darwin ALIA Future of the LIS Profession Workshop, indicating a lack of men and young people in the profession. We need to work with school career officers and see school kids working in libraries.[1]

The significant approaches to address the above hindrances include:

1. *Innovative programs*. These include programs focusing on developing competencies of staff and setting up funding to facilitate career development.

2. *Active, committed, and visible leadership*. Many universities in Australia have launched initiatives led by university leaders to demonstrate their support for gender equality in the workforce, for example the University of Newcastle Gender Equality Leadership Pledge and the University of South Australia Women's Development Program series.

Gender inclusivity and equity in academic libraries in Europe: A German perspective—Ulrike Lang, State and University Library Hamburg

The European states have a very diverse history and culture, but together they offer certain guarantees as stated in the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, Art. 21, No 1: "Any discrimination based on any ground such as sex, race, colour, ethnic or social origin, genetic features, language, religion or belief, political or any other opinion, membership of a national minority, property, birth, disability, age or sexual orientation shall

be prohibited."[2] The resolution on "Gender Mainstreaming in the European Parliament" passed in January 2019, specifically promotes gender equality. In practice, Germany, as a selective European state, has the following observable factors that advance gender inclusivity and equity in academic libraries:

1. Government policies like a gender equality law or regulations that institute work-life-learn balance for everybody and prohibit discrimination of any kind and in any situation.

2. Employers, institutions, and associations required to implement structures that support work-life-learn balance, such as telecommuting, job sharing, possibility of sabbaticals, resource planning that combines institutional and home requirements, staff family rooms at the library, where children may have a high-quality stay in unexpected circumstances, and equipment and instruments are provided to promote employees' health care, etc.

3. Human resources management regardless of gender and position at the library, for example, career progression by job sharing or job shadowing, and leadership programs.

4. Adequate financial support to implement these structures for employers as well as for employees.

5. The establishment of regulations that guarantee equal pay, use of gender-neutral language, and human resources management for all genders.

Latin American and Caribbean gender inclusivity and equity progress— Jesús Lau, Universidad Veracruzana

Gender inclusivity and equity progress is uneven in Latin America and the Caribbean, a subject that is difficult to address because there seems to be no literature nor statistics in relation to academic libraries, therefore the statements discussed here are personal opinions based on library conference travel. The most significant factors that enhance gender inclusivity/equity in academic libraries in the region are Western influence in social values and greater social media communication that have permeated into enactment of nondiscriminatory laws and human rights policies, as well as in the creation of gender equity institutions.

On the impeding side is the passivity of academic libraries that lend to downplaying national inclusivity laws or social gender gains into plural and open gender human resources policies.[3] At the national level, gender inclusivity progress seems to be correlated to the size and socioeconomic development that exists in the region. Countries such as Brazil, the largest in the region, have more plural de facto gender equity at academic libraries, while Mexico, the next largest by population, has the most liberal laws that even marriage and child adoption are allowed. Mexico has even organized a library conference on the subject, and three universities offer neutral toilets although not necessarily located at their libraries.[4] The midsized nations also seem to be in the middle ground of inclusivity, such as Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Peru, and Venezuela. The smaller countries from Central America and the Caribbean are less open to gender inclusivity, with some exceptions, such as Costa Rica and Puerto Rico.

Inclusivity and equity in academic libraries in the Middle East: A librarian's soliloquy—Amal W. Mostafa, Faculty of Arts Cairo University

Knowing that gender equality is the fifth UN Sustainable Development Goal confirms its major importance and necessity among nations. Traditionally, gender has been used to organize and understand the world. This has had an effect, positively and negatively, on people's jobs, positions, salaries, and even their lifestyles throughout different workplaces, including libraries. Gender equity and inclusivity are of concern to communities worldwide, including academic libraries in the Middle East, which not only have experienced the issues above, but where the glass ceiling has had a deep impact. This has resulted in the loss of opportunities rather than benefiting from skills, potentials,

and engagement with those who have been excluded from leadership positions in the academic library workplace.

Currently, the academic library community in the Middle East witnesses a momentum of strategic plans, policies, decisions, and projects that enhance and support the goal of gender equity/inclusivity. For example, women are acquiring leadership positions, such as dean of library affairs, vice dean of library affairs, university librarian, chief librarian, and head of sections. Also women are getting recognized for outstanding participation and achievements in initiatives, e.g., the "International Network of Emerging Library Innovators—Middle East & North Africa INELI-MENA." Last but not least, women are leading and moderating many training sessions and workshops inside academia.

In a nutshell, due to the significant impacts in the profession, gender equity and inclusivity shouldn't be an option in academic libraries, but one of the main pillars of action. Therefore, leaders and decision makers in academic libraries should prioritize this goal in their visions and missions.

Deconstructing "boxes and walls" in a fluid nonbinary gendered society: Gender inclusivity and equity in North American academic libraries—Bharat Mehra, University of Alabama

Ambiguities across rigid "male-female" dichotomies are intrinsic to the human experience. Hegemonic meanings of "heterosexual" perpetuated globally by limiting concepts, categories, and vocabularies have problematized "nonconforming" feelings, thoughts, and actions in a closed "blackbox," pigeon-holing the richness of human psyche, expression, and behavior. As boxes and walls across languages and cultures, they throttle gender diversity, human expression, human dignity, and need to be deconstructed.

Historically, a fluid nonbinary gendered society has been unacceptable in North America and worldwide. Fuzzy attributes of gender variance challenge patriarchy, heterosexism, male privilege, toxic masculinity, regimented gender roles, misogyny, and abuse of women, children, and individuals nonconforming within oppressing cultural dictums.

Academic libraries serve as a beacon of ideas, knowledge, curiosity, inquiry, scholarship, and advocacy in young minds to confront narrow boxes and walls of hate, power, privilege, and control. They are impeded in this vision by:

1. deep roots of heteronormative patriarchal chauvinism,

2. ongoing threats of political and legal disempowerment, and

3. hateful rhetoric, human rights denial, hate crimes, discrimination, violence, and prejudice towards the nonconforming.

Academic libraries enhance gender inclusivity/equity by:

1. mobilizing social justice movements that break down "normative" boxes and walls;

2. speaking up and speaking out against hate at social, cultural, and political levels; and

3. advocating for nonconforming beyond their neutral roles of past passive bystanders.

Authentic, accurate, authoritative, and responsive information offerings support needs of nonconfirming individuals. They also help confront sexist bigotry and imbalanced gender differentials. Academic libraries can serve as strong allies on this road to reinterpret emerging humanism in the 21st century.

Conclusion

While it was challenging to find authors to write on gender inclusivity and equity in academic and research libraries from a regional perspective, the authors also found the topic challenging to address due to the diversity of a region they were asked to cover, and the lack of available statistics and published literature. Notwithstanding, enhancing and impeding factors were identified. Areas that were not mentioned but exist and require attention are:

- appearance expectations and discrimination in the workplace or professional settings—the extent to which characteristics such as physical looks, style/fashion, physical attributes (weight, height, eye color, etc.), religious dress, and grooming are promoted or curtailed, and may result in discrimination or incur favor.
- gendered roles and expectations (e.g., women who are not provided the opportunity to speak at conferences, who are expected to take minutes at meetings and organize the refreshments, etc.),
- labor mobility—assumptions or biased attitudes exist regarding women with families, or single women and their interest in or capacity for international or local job mobility,
- inaccessibility to education by girls in many parts of the world, and
- intersectionality which recognizes the interconnected nature of social categorizations such as gender, race, class, and age, and reveals the overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage, is essential in working collectively towards a shared vision of social transformation. For example, by standing together with women and girls in their daily struggles, we can eradicate patriarchal, sexist, and misogynist systems that limit gender inclusivity and equity.

We've raised our voices, now it is time to raise yours. Research/identify your local issues/challenges, your solutions, and join the global conversation and contribute to enhancing gender inclusivity and equity.

Notes

1. Australian Library and Information Association, "Future of the Library and Information Science Profession Report 2017," https://www.alia.org.au/futureoftheprofession (accessed July 22, 2019).

2. European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights and Council of Europe, "Handbook on European non-discrimination law – 2018 edition," https://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2018/handbook-european-law-non-discrimination (accessed July 31, 2019).

3. Raymond Pun, Kenya S. Flash, Dennis Nangle, and Jonathan Hernandez Perez, "Libraries and Gender Neutral/Inclusive Bathrooms: Case Studies on Promoting Information, Inclusivity and Access in Open Spaces," paper presented at IFLA WLIC 2017, Wrocław, Poland Libraries, Solidarity. Society. in Session 113—Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer (LGBTQ) Users, http://library.ifla.org/1670/1/113-pun-en.pdf (accessed July 22, 2019).

4. Jonathan Hernández Pérez and Máximo Román Domínguez López, telephone interview (Colegio Nacional de Bibliotecarios, National Librarians Association), Mexico City, July 21, 2019. ✍

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library workforce. In order to truly advance the goal of more open and equitable systems, we need the community to take up the research areas identified in the report and work towards impactful and effective solutions.

The landscape may be daunting and unwieldy, but we hope that the structure of the report will help those working in academic libraries identify where they can engage and move forward.

Notes

1. *Open and Equitable Scholarly Communications: Creating a More Inclusive Future,* prepared by Nancy Maron and Rebecca Kennison with Paul Bracke, Nathan Hall, Isaac Gilman, Kara Malenfant, Charlotte Roh, and Yasmeen Shorish (Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, 2019), https://doi.org/10.5860/acrl.1.

2. Ibid.

3. Heather Joseph. "Securing community-controlled infrastructure: SPARC's plan of action," *C&RL News* 79(8), 426-429, https://doi.org/10.5860/crln.79.8.426.

4. www.ala.org/acrl/awards/researchawards/scholcommgrants. ✍