

Gender Equality and Women Empowerment in Ghana, the Role of Academic Libraries

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Abstract: Issues on gender inequality and women empowerment is not a new phenomenon. Governments and other organizations over decades have consistently laid down processes and means to regularize situations surrounding gender. Amidst the initiatives, developmental information is seen as a stop-gap measure to end gender issues. This paper examined the role of academic libraries in promoting gender equality and women empowerment. The study reviewed existing literature, concepts from theoretical framework and interviews from librarians. The outcome of the study revealed that the rich and diverse information resources and professional service provisions of libraries position them to provide the right information resources and as well inform, educate and train women to realize their potentials. The study indicated that libraries are development agents and catalyst to women empowerment. However, inadequate knowledge to access the right information hinders the progress of women. The study further revealed that financial and low investments were the major setback for academic libraries to play its integral role to sphere head the course of gender equality and empower women. It was recommended that government officials, stakeholders, traditional leaders, and decision-makers should be apt and recognize the value of libraries in women development and partner librarians to explore creative ways to close the gender inequality gap. The study proposed a conceptual framework as a new paradigm shift for academic libraries to promote gender equality and women empowerment.

Keywords: Academic libraries, Developmental information, Gender inequality, librarians, Women empowerment.

I. INTRODUCTION

Civilization and modernization are bases to address the existing vicious circle of traditions and long-standing discrimination against women in areas of education, health, employment and access to information which have sincerely relegated them

under positions of subordination, discrimination, stigmatization, deprivation, harassments and other traumatic experiences that thwart their potentials to socio-economic development.

Gender equalization is a means to an end to discrimination on the basis of gender, race, religion and ethnicity, as enshrined in national laws of the United Nations (UN). The International Federation of Library Association and Institutions Reports (IFLA, 2017) recognizes women as centre to wellbeing of every society, and so any measure of violence or deprivation against them would have damaging effects on communities and societies. The existence of equal opportunities among men and women are the baseline for development which are greater goals of the world.

The United Nations (UN) global development agenda requires proper integration of policy interventions to successfully address complex development issues that balance social, economic, and environmental development. This enables member countries to understand the interconnectedness of policies designed to realize economic transformation and improve the lives of all citizenry. Issues on gender have attracted and continue to dominate the agenda of global fora and conferences to generally educate, inform, train and develop the need of fair rights to all aspects of life to every human being. Globally, countries have seamlessly enacted laws and other legislation to protect the fundamental right of women and empower them to bridge the inequality gap (Chant, 2016; Ellsberg, Arango, Morton, Gennari, Kiplesund, Contreras & Watts, 2015).

The canker of gender inequality has been tackled from diverse angles. In African, governments have demonstrated their commitment to continue, expand and accelerate efforts to promote gender equality at all levels. Several declarations and charters, and gender-friendly legislation were enacted to champion the course to gender equality. For example, the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa, and the Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality in Africa in 2003 and 2004 (Kabeer, 2016; Razavi, 2016).

So far for Ghana, positive strides have been made by successive and present governments and organisations towards gender equity and women empowerment. Progressively, Ghana has initiated programmes, policies, directives and strategies to realize the vision. The Affirmative Action law which was passed recently is geared towards balancing the number of women in the forefront of policies and political activities, the government policy on free senior high which started in 2017 have witnessed tremendous increase in enrolments in education into senior high schools. In this regard, the media and other gender advocacy groups continue to champion the course of gender equality (Malapit & Quisumbing; Manuh & Anyidoho, 2015).

Notwithstanding the significant efforts and strides in promoting gender equality, available studies show incidences of maternal mortality, poverty, domestic violence, sexual harassment and child marriages, including many issues on women and children that are still not been tackled in Ghana (Jones *et al.*, 2009). Unless collective efforts are made to amicably resolve issues on women, the realization of sustainable development could be overdue for most developing countries.

Accordingly, developmental information remains fundamental for vision orientation and good decision making to normalize the imbalances among gender in societies. As the UN indicated in the introduction of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the information and knowledge gap were the bother to attain gender equity (Bentley, 2012; Women, U. N. 2015). This explains that information is an invaluable and indispensable tool for all forms of development. The development of society and its individuals can only be attained through quality information which is a stop-gap measure.

Nevertheless, inadequate access to developmental and required information could hinder women from overcoming barriers at homes, workplaces, communities, and the ability to identify and solves other challenges that might confront them. This has support from Ekuban (2014) who affirms that women and girls in developing countries are confined to traditional roles, which deny them access to technologies and technology training as men and boys. Also, Koomson (2012) discloses that the existence of a glass ceiling within organization is a reflection of inequality against women. Ironically, a woman has to listen to the final decision of a man as her fate. These barriers can be broken to demonstrate that women can do better when given equal chance with men.

Hafkin (2017) emphasis that access to information brings socio-economic and political benefits to girls and women at all levels. The proactive and distinctive roles of academic libraries towards human resource and national development position them as better crusaders to the course of gender equality issues. Libraries contain body of knowledge on diverse fields

that provide people the notion of social inclusion and sense of development (Tise, 2009). This emphasis that academic libraries are not only the power houses for authentic information that support teaching, learning and research processes in higher learning institutions, but offer access to research output, provide accessibility to developmental information resources, research, teach, train and support people to access and use information. Wagacha (2007) indicates libraries empower women to know their civil rights and realize their potentials.

However, in promoting gender equality and empowering women into the high level of social status, role of academic libraries have not been sufficiently explored.

II. PROBLEM STATEMENT

Many research works show that factors fueling the gender inequality gap include poverty, illiteracy, inadequate skill development and other cultural values (Makama, 2013; Wells, Marphatia, Cole & McCoy, 2012). Continuous marginalization of women means a loss to development to the world. For women empowerment is a vicious cycle, the transformation of a woman diffuses in the entire family and to the society at large. It is expected that institutions of free information and knowledge, repositories of literature and equity, play important role to increase literacy and education to promote the wellbeing of women and girls. Unfortunately, not much has been achieved by these libraries in this regard.

However, researchers have overly concentrated on education, political interventions, and economic independence and abolishment of outmoded norms and other socio-cultural practices as means to promote gender equality, neglecting the fact that information as a factor of production is key for development in this dispensation. Academic libraries in Ghana are the hub for intellectual and academic works (Akussah, Asante & Adu-Sarkodee, 2015). Without any effective utilization of such research works to advance the course of gender equality, libraries might not fully realize its goals. This calls for a study to examine and delve into contributions of academic libraries towards gender equality and women empowerment.

III. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This paper seeks to:

1. Explore how libraries promote important services for women development.
2. Examine information and gender equality.
3. Develop an integrative paradigm approach for libraries towards gender equality and women empowerment.

IV. LITERATURE REVIEW

Libraries are major partakers for all forms of development. Thus, value of libraries towards sustainable development reinforces and orients them to develop pragmatic means in their services.

In Africa, libraries as part of their roles provide access to information, conduct research, teach literacy skills, and provide information on health and family planning, support for small businesses, farm owners, and students. According to Strand (2017) these initiatives by the academic libraries have given women the opportunity to be self-sufficient in the care of their families. This observation confirms (Morrell, Jewkes & Lindegger, 2012) who study indicated that academic libraries in South Africa and Zimbabwe have demonstrated the value for women development in their communities by providing technological resources for information accessibility.

In Ghana, libraries contribute to bridge the inequality gap in communities through information service delivery and skills training programmes and partner with NGOs and other gender advocacy institutions to promote development.

Even though libraries have vigorously joined the campaign for gender equalization, most communities in Africa are still engrossed with traditional practices against women. Anyidoho, *et al.* (2016) concludes in their report that women continue to lag behind men in educational attainment, income and employment status.

Gender equality is the existence of equal rights to all persons irrespective of their sexual characteristics they need meritorious opportunities to develop their talents (Sen & Grown, 2013). The prospects for achieving the SDGs directly and indirectly depend on enhancing gender equality. Empirical evidence suggests that developing countries with less gender inequalities tend to have high poverty rates (Karamessini & Rubery, 2013). This means libraries need to offer more secured environments in which women and girls can obtain needed information to take charge of their lives and influence their societies.

Moreover, academic libraries provide information in a variety of formats; electronic, print, oral, and audiovisual; and services and resources that are free from cost and other barriers. Martin and Barnard (2013) affirm in their study that academic libraries provide information in diverse formats to their heterogeneous users. Libraries need in tune with technologies to make information accessible, understandable and useful to everyone.

In this time and age, information is a tool for development and it's readily available with ease to access and use. Asiimwe and Kinengyere (2011) concluded that libraries and information are vital for women inmates because it keeps them abreast with time, build capacity through literacy skills and other training programmes and boost their confidence to meet the challenges of the world after their prison lives.

Similarly, IFLA (2017) reports that women refugees had inadequate knowledge about libraries as the important hubs for information to enrich their knowledge. Undoubtedly, information limitations could hinder many development opportunities. Library services are purposed to bring remedies to any information gap.

Women are diversified in nature and character in their roles as mothers, wives, housekeepers, home managers, breadwinners, caretakers, professionals and development agents. Thus, they need information to develop their general wellbeing. For example, provision of information resources pertaining to agriculture and literacy to women would improve production and better lives of people (Mchombu, 2012; Ukwoma & Njoku, 2013). Libraries provide timely information to especially women and healthcare providers on general health and sanitation to develop healthy life living (Mnubi-Mchombu & Mchombu, 2011). These could largely improve the living standards of people and increase lifespan for better development. Also, access to quality information by women in small business or entrepreneurs would boost businesses for better livelihoods. Thus, community participation the library and information is imperative to bridge the gender inequality gap (Atuahene, & Owusu-Ansah; Sehoole, & Knight, 2013).

Furthermore, another way libraries could promote gender equality is to archive memories of important people, events or happenings that women could relate to and learn lessons from them to improve themselves (IFLA, 2017). The report further identified that libraries were constrained with low investment and limited access to knowledge to effectively carry out their roles in communities. Information is key for socio-economic development, thus libraries need to be resourced in order to function effectively.

The paper developed a framework that conceptualized key information from the theoretical underpinnings to solve gender issues. It assembled key information that libraries can provide to boost capacity and contribute to enhancing gender parity in the society.

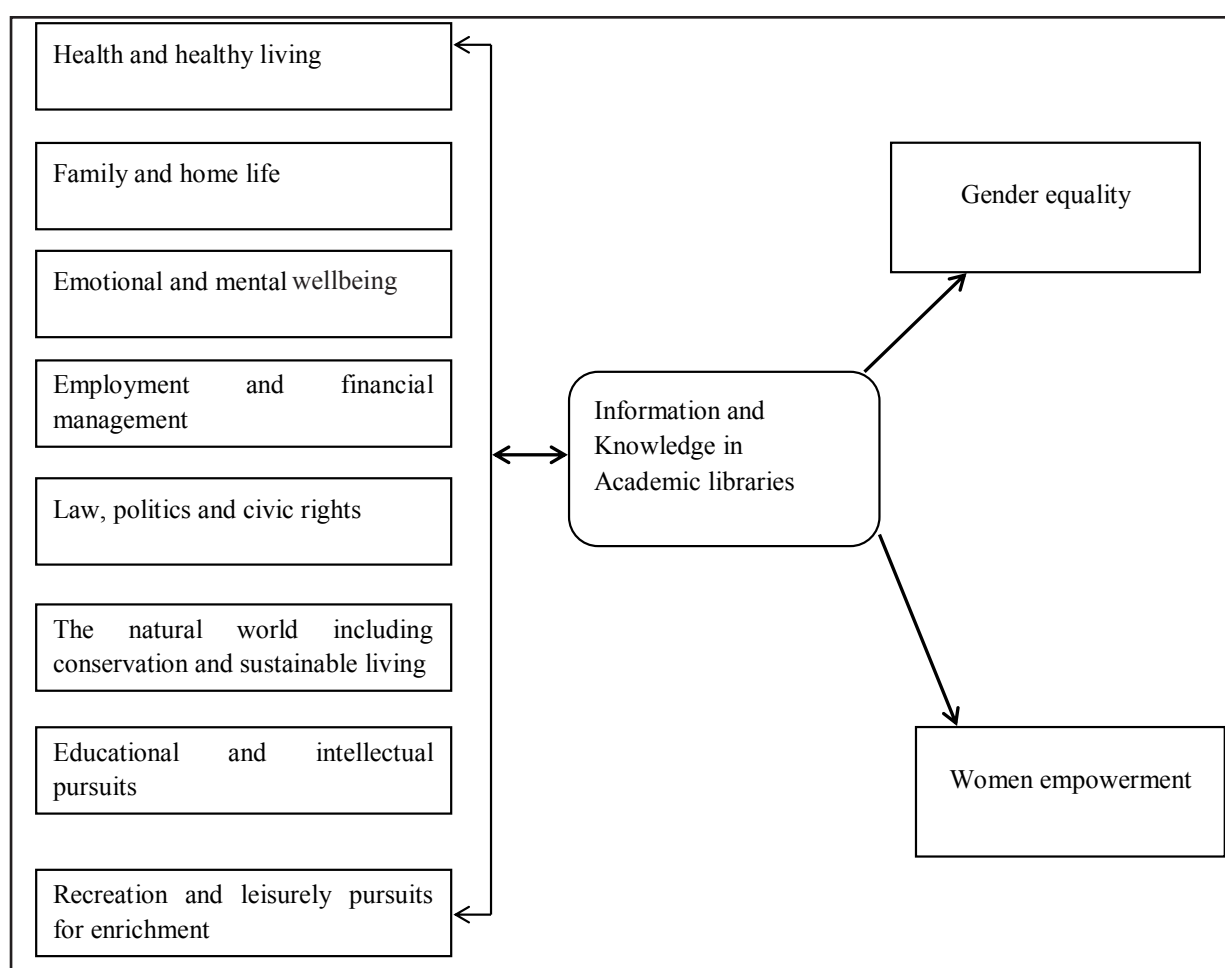


Fig. 1

V. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR LIBRARIES IN PROMOTING GENDER EQUALITY AND WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

Academic libraries with its rich and in-depth knowledge resource could best coordinate to attain gender equality and women empowerment at all levels. From the framework, lack of information could contribute immensely to gender disparity gap of which women are always disadvantaged.

Hence, enlightenment of women in areas of education, health and human rights as well as economic and social trajectories would bridge the inequality gap.

Undeniably, information is key factor to attain gender equity in societies. Libraries as information providers can mediate with government, institutions, agencies and organizations to gather and channel information to and from right sources to promote the course of women.

The library needs to develop and engage people to require the right information to improve their lives. These mandate

libraries to play proactive roles in order to identify and deal with immediate needs of communities.

It requires libraries to have actual knowledge with regards to general needs on health, food, shelter, employment, sanitation, education and civil rights of women and girls in communities within which they operate. In this step, library professionals must seek to understand the development needs of women and girls to enable them provide information to respond to them accordingly. This particular step involves a critical examination into how best libraries can actually promote the interest of women with relevant and meaningful information resources services and spaces to operate. In fact, one important motive of this step is to encourage libraries to adopt traditional and emerging trends in information services to redefine their mandate.

Another issue is the paradigm shift for libraries as proposed in this paper to redefine their roles towards youth development. This means libraries must repackage library services to engage the youth on skill training programmes, sports, games and other healthy competitions through debates, quizzes and clean up exercises.

Lastly, the theory explored and determined strategies to end inequalities and foster women development. Information professionals must explore existing literature on women development to shed light on relevant ways to creatively expand traditional means to improve lives of women. Other strategies included target to invest in current areas of library services, increase marketing efforts, explore alternatives for digital libraries, and initiate outreach programmes and design initiatives to empower women and girls.

Hence, the framework provides academic libraries the opportunity to combine community participation and library services to balance the unequal social hierarchies. Each of these steps are streamlined to promote gender equality and women empowerment.

VI. METHODOLOGY

Methodologically, the paper relied solely on qualitative approach and explored literature from secondary data such as relevant books, journals articles and databases. Some form of primary data were gathered where interviews were conducted to capture the views of top librarians in the country. Rigorous comparative analysis of literature exploration and interviews contributed to the study outcome. The views of high positioned librarians that comprised deputy librarians, senior librarians and assistant librarians from four (4) academic libraries in Ghana, were gathered through unstructured interviews, coded and presented through deductive analysis.

VII. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the study were based on interview reports from librarians and reviews from related literature.

In response to developmental needs and demands, as well as changing technologies, academic libraries have diversified its services to those needs. The study revealed that academic libraries manage unprecedented quantities of knowledge and information resources in diverse format and disseminate for access and use. This is in line with research work of Akussah, Asante and Adu-Sarkodee (2015) who affirmed that academic libraries are hub for intellectual and academic works. Thus, provision of research outputs and data statistics on developmental information of educational institutions and organizations by academic libraries is timely.

An interview response of a respondent from the University of Education, Winneba stated:

"We have several research works in the direction of empowering women pile up in the library. These work contain valuable information which when pragmatically implemented would boost the confidence of the women."

Academic libraries are moving beyond their zone to respond to growing developmental needs of national and international levels. They are increasingly essential part of the broad information infrastructure supporting the research and education and development in communities. This observation confirms (Morrell, Jewkes & Lindegger, 2012) who study indicated that academic libraries have demonstrated value for women development in their communities by providing technological resources for information accessibility. On the contrary, IFLA (2017) revealed that some women were unaware that libraries were important hubs for information to enrich their knowledge.

Another librarian from the University of Cape Coast suggested that:

"The library could segregate information into blocks of the regional location. So that information related to a particular region could easily be directed the place to help women. In fact, when women are empowered, they can match their male counterpart in spheres of life."

Another respondent from the University of Ghana said:

"Academic libraries are contributing immensely to the regional and global concern to bridge the gender gap. Libraries provide diverse professional services, rich information resources, thus we as professionals are not relenting to ensure that our services reach the society so people could benefit from the right information."

It further emerged from the findings that libraries could not efficiently succeed on its roles toward gender equity. IFLA (2017) identified financial and low investments as the major constraints that limited the proper preservations of indigenous knowledge and other information resources in communities for access and development. Libraries need to seek for sponsorship packages local and international donor agencies and individual to enable them execute their programmes.

The findings also revealed that the exploration of information needs of library users were important since its set the grounds for collection development processes and other services to meet such needs. This enables libraries to provide better services to conform to those needs.

VIII. CONCLUSION

Academic libraries are major part players to sustainable development. Hence, limited access to adequate information and resources hamper development and reduced the pace for gender parity. The conclusion of the study is drawn on the basis that the vast and rich knowledge of libraries place them as development agents to the needs of women. However, academic libraries are yet to fully utilize its professional expertise and diverse resources to achieve its socio-economic expectations. Also, the functional roles of libraries to address and develop

women were unknown to women and hindered them to the right the information.

IX. RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations were based on the study outcomes, academic libraries need to be proactive and focus on outreach programmes to communities, identify their immediate needs and respond swiftly. Also, libraries should make developmental information more accessible to people, and preserve invaluable indigenous knowledge from elders and use such knowledge for the advancement of other women in the society.

Moreover, the study recommended that libraries should offer comfortable and well-lit rooms that women can showcase their handiwork or schoolwork to better their lives. Likewise, libraries need to recognize and celebrate hardworking and distinguished women in society to encourage them and to inspire others to emulate them.

Academic libraries should partner with policy makers, stakeholders, traditional leaders, gender advocacy groups and decision-makers to provide information, education and training through conferences, seminars, workshops, meetings, festivals and other events.

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