

Women Empowerment : A Model Approach for Public Libraries in West Bengal

Debabrata Manna*

Deputy University Librarian, University of Calcutta
dmanna@caluniv.ac.in

Tanmay De Sarkar

Assistant University Librarian, University of Calcutta
tdesarkar@caluniv.ac.in

Abstract: The purpose of the present study is to explore the possibilities of public libraries to enhance women's empowerment and to investigate how these libraries could support the SHG group in implementing government schemes for self-employment. Researchers, while visiting different public libraries across West Bengal, studied library resources and the services offered therein. Based on their personal experiences, they conceptualized the present strength of the public libraries in West Bengal and proposed how services and resources could be more streamlined to offer facilities for women empowerment. The study also suggests how the resources, services, and facilities could be organized to develop the understanding of women of an improved society where women would get a fair share of their dignity and complete protection from all sorts of violence and discrimination, along with a full acquaintance of their rights to contribute to sustainable development which is also reflected in the vision of the West Bengal Commission for Women. The study also add values to the special services for women a library could offer to get access to judicial assistance to seek redressal against rights violations. The reference desk with supportive information may uphold women's interests and provide them with adequate resources to fight for their cause. Finally, a library model approach towards the library service provision is designed to showcase how to delimit gender inequality and enhance inclusiveness for women to mobilize themselves and for the promotion of women empowerment.

Introduction

Our society has long been plagued by the onslaught of gender discrimination. Considering the present condition of the women, in general, in our society as a whole the terms marginalization, oppression, and agony seem so assimilated that the women has been left out of the flow of development. In regard to their deprived positions, a lot of schemes have been undertaken by both the Central and State Governments to improve the social, educational, and economic conditions of women. The schemes apart, the libraries, and especially the public libraries, play a vital role in the empowerment of women. Basically, schemes alone shall not be fruitful if the existence of these schemes and their way of implementation are not promoted to the audience exhaustively. Therefore, it becomes necessary that public libraries properly communicate and nurture information literacy behavior among the target population.

Women Empowerment

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, empowerment is defined as “the act or action of empowering someone or something: the granting of the power, right, or authority to perform various acts or duties” (<https://www.merriam-webster.com>). Empowering women to grant them the power of rights has become an important part of policy decisions in Economics and Social Sciences. Human development is impossible without women's empowerment (Andriani, et. al., 2022). Pal, et. al., (2021) while discussing women's rights, argued that the phenomenon of women empowerment has the ability to enhance the capacity of human resources available for economic sustenance. Guyalo, et al., (2022) examined “the effect of women's access to income-earning jobs on their empowerment”. They noticed that women's empowerment involving large-scale commercial firms fails to any impact on their subsistence. The study strengthens the government's endeavors toward initiating “gender sensitization programs” for women's empowerment. Gender inequality starts from the family level where male members, unlike their female counterparts, have a proactive role to play in decision

making. “Women's empowerment is conditioned upon their control of financial resources and activities outside their households' tasks, such as entrepreneurial activities” (Andriani, et. al., 2022). The observation has found justification in Rodriguez's 2022 research work. While analyzing the role of Mahatmas Gandhi Employment Guarantee Act 2005, he observed that when a woman takes district magistrate, “the demand for credit and savings increases and violence against women decreases.”

Government Initiatives for Women Empowerment

Government schemes are indispensable when it comes to providing all-around support to the women of society and to improve their understanding of their social rights and privileges. The Department of Women Development and Social Welfare, the Government of West Bengal and the Central Government, have undertaken the following noteworthy schemes to provide financial as well as advisory support to this marginalized section of society :

- Kanyashree Prakalpa: A Government of West Bengal Scheme launched on 01.10.2013 to provide financial support to all school-going teenage girls and also dissuade them from getting entangled in early marriages.
- Lakshmir Bhandar: Another State Government initiative to provide financial support in the form of an assured monthly income to those women not employed in any Government or Government Sponsored / Aided / Undertakings.
- Rupashree Prakalpa: Launched on 01.04.2018 by the State Government to provide one-time financial aid to families during the time of their adult daughters' marriages.
- SABLA: A Central Government scheme to promote awareness about nutrition, health, and hygiene in order to improve adolescent, reproductive and sexual health.
- Swadhar Greha: Another Central Government Scheme executed through NGOs to protect women under difficult circumstances including the destitute, the deserted, the victims of sexual abuse, and victims of trafficking and natural calamities.
- Ujjwala: A Centrally Sponsored Scheme through NGOs to prevent trafficking and organize rescue and rehabilitation work.
- Social Security Scheme: A State Government initiative to provide financial support through widow pension.
- Swablaban: A State Government Scheme executed through NGOs to rescue and rehabilitate, victims of trafficking and different forms of sexual abuse.
- STEP: A Government of India initiative to provide vocational training to women to enhance their workforce participation rate.

Literature Review

The very objective of public libraries is to support the development of information literacy skills and contribute to societal development. Since women constitute a major segment of society, women's empowerment remains a cause of concern for public libraries. The fact is evident from the study by Shrestha and Krolak (2015) conducted on Nepal's Rural Education and Development (READ) Centres. They observed that to satisfy the need-based community requirements, public libraries focus on “social empowerment, economic development, and lifelong learning.”

A major role of the public library is to promote several government schemes for the general public at large. Since the role of NGOs in implementing some of the schemes is very significant, it is pertinent to explore their experience in the execution of government schemes. Thus, in a slightly different context, but in the same field, Kilby (2010) observed the issues and challenges NGOs face while implementing these schemes. However, the supportive role of public libraries in spreading awareness of the essence of different schemes for women's empowerment facilitates manifold the endeavors of NGOs in community building with a special focus on gender inequality. Akhter et. al.'s 2021 study advocates for the definitive role played by public libraries in implementing the Kanyashree Prakalpa of the Government of West Bengal for the empowerment of women in different sectors like education, entrepreneurship, agriculture, industry, health care, etc.

The need to put more emphasis on gender equality shall pave the way for women's empowerment. Gender-specific focus harms the academic sector as well. Therefore, Bellotti, et. al., (2022) rightly argued that "despite longstanding discussions and consequent improvements of gender representation in academia, the number of women working in academic research, their performance, and their recognition still indicate the persistence of gender inequalities". A lot of research has been conducted to identify areas where gender inequality is still predominant and authors have explored task-specific segments and suggested ways of improvement (Badruzzama, 2020; Bjork-James and Barla, 2022; Mashhadi and Karami, 2022). A progressive society deserves healthy physical and mental conditions for women as precursors for women's empowerment. In their study on a segment of Libyan women, Wittgens, et. al. (2022) observed that anxiety and related mental disorders come in the way of women's empowerment. However, libraries lack sufficient data for addressing such problems, which impedes the movement of women's empowerment.

Consequently, maintaining health and hygiene, particularly for women in rural areas necessitates improved awareness about what to follow to maintain proper health condition. Public libraries have a vital role in spreading awareness through documents and organizing outreach programs.

Objective

The above literature survey leaves ample scope to investigate the role of public libraries to support the movement to minimize gender distinction and to make women aware of their rights and privileges. Therefore, the present study was undertaken to address the following objectives :

1. To explore the possibilities of public libraries to promote women's empowerment.
2. To support the SHG group in implementing government schemes for self-employment.

Methodology

Researchers, while visiting different public libraries across West Bengal, visualized library resources and the services offered. Based on their personal experiences, they conceptualized the present strength of the public libraries in West Bengal and proposed how the services and resources could be more streamlined to offer facilities for women empowerment.

Role of Public Library in Women's Empowerment

Meanwhile, the Women's Corner (facility) of a public library needs to focus on resources and services that ensure the protection of the rights of women in every possible respect. Library resources and services offered via women's corners are to be designed such that these can pave the way for developing a conducive socio-economic environment, propelling gender mainstreaming, making

women aware of their rights and privileges, providing them with legal support and ensuring protection in every possible way.

Resources and Facilities

- Public libraries in their efforts to support the move towards eradicating gender discrimination from society and to foster the strengthening of women's empowerment are required to offer the following resources and facilities:
- Books on women's studies, education, primary health care, and legal matters dealing with women.
- Journals and reports published by different state commissions for women, National Commission for Women, publications on women released by government departments and non-government organizations.
- Selected documents on or about centers of different universities imparting education solely on women's studies.
- Reports on women's studies brought out by international organizations like UNICEF, WHO, ILO, and others.
- Newsletters, pamphlets, hand-outs, posters, and other publications published by different commissions and agencies working for women's empowerment and removing gender discrimination.

Services

To support the movement of women's empowerment, public libraries are required to provide awareness services to make women acquainted with available resources and facilities.

Current awareness service: As soon as new documents are released, public libraries must have the provision to display the same either physically or through the medium of the Internet to reach out to the target audience in a speedy and interesting way.

Services for the Self Help Group

In order to empower women to become aware of their own rights and privileges, the State Government has created self help groups which undertake task-specific initiatives involving a section of women and encouraging them to pursue self-employment. Members of the SHG groups require constant support from the library in order to execute their programs. All the relevant schemes, reports, and documents needed to carry out the functions necessary for self-employment are supposed to be available at public libraries. Therefore, while giving due importance to the SHG, public libraries need to streamline a segment of their resources and facilities for the purposive use of women requiring self-employment.

Since the main purpose of the SHGs is to enable women in self-employment to form a co-operative, its success has been predominantly seen in agriculture, fisheries, farming, and in small-scale industrial sectors. For example, an SHG co-operative could bring down the market price of agricultural produce considerably, since it has the provision of the direct purchase of a product from the field where it was grown, and supplying it to the vendor who will eventually negotiate with the consumer, removing the involvement of a series of middlemen. Consequently, the product-supply workflow will become

dynamic only when the information about the nearest field with the product, along with the nearest marketplace where maximum demand for the product persists, is made available. Interestingly, while supplying the fishery produce directly to the market, it was felt that various fish parts are in high demand at restaurants, or elsewhere for several other purposes. As a result, it is also necessary to have information on which fish parts are in high demand and in which areas. Consequently, a part of SHG may be involved in the fish processing sector so that they could get a magnified income margin.

Moreover, information regarding financial assistance with convenient terms and conditions to support the co-operative venture, as well as information pertaining to the easiest and cost-friendly mode of conveyance are very vital in running the scheme. Taking into full consideration the SHG life-cycle, public libraries are required to provide relevant information with periodic updates wherever necessary for successful implementation of the government schemes.

Services to support the movement against gender discrimination

The root of gender discrimination stems from the family itself (Wang and Zhang, 2022). However, family-level discrimination may be minimized subject to the availability of the provision of proper education for the female members (Nguyen and Le, 2022). Gender discrimination still persists at various levels in society at large. Violence against women, depriving women of their legal property inheritance rights, considering women not suitable for various posts, and barring women from participating in the core religious arena are some of the examples of gender discrimination prevalent in our society. Libraries play a very vital role in supporting the movement against gender discrimination. Resources and services of the library are required for designing and displaying in a manner that would help enable women to know about their legal rights and articulate their demands for the legal share of their rights along with their proper recognition in society.

Model approach to women empowerment

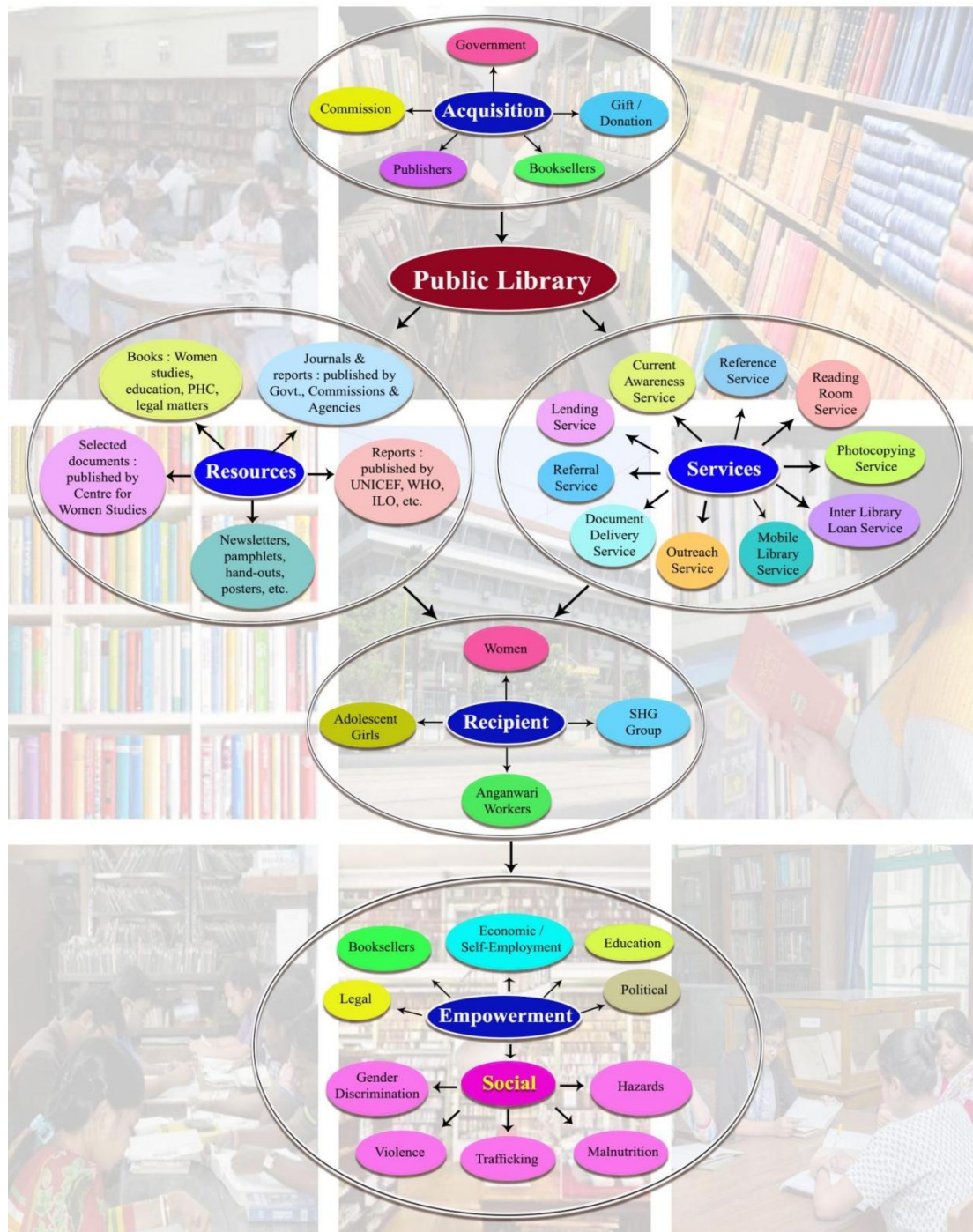


Fig. 1 : A public library model approach to women empowerment

In the model illustrated above, a segment of public library resources and services are designed for the target users, i.e., women in general, adolescent girls, SHG and Anganwadi workers. Through their women's corners and outreach activities, public libraries make the target users aware of their rights and privileges, so as to empower them in social, educational, economic, political, and legal spheres. SHG is bolstered with necessary information and documents in their move towards self-employment. This model approach diagrammatically showcases the efforts made by a public library toward women's empowerment.

Conclusion

The phrase 'women's empowerment' has impregnated every walk of life among a range of specialists: sociologists, economists, policymakers, and the like. Even conferences in the United Nations has argued in multiple instances that women's empowerment is indeed a pillar of development (Ghosh, 2015). The potential operational areas where women's empowerment is highly required are economic, socio-cultural, educational, legal, political, administrative, and health & hygiene-related. Sound knowledge of their rights and privileges, together with self-esteem and their desire to of resources are key factors that help them develop courage and determination to exercise their duties and overcome barriers. The role of libraries is pervasive in developing collective awareness, and in inculcating the trend of community mobilization for their rights and supporting their representation in local bodies. The current study neatly furnishes the library's role in women's empowerment. The resources, facilities and services specifically meant for women, make them aware of women's rights, provide them with access to resources and usher in the way to use the judicial system to seek redressal against the violation of their rights. The reference desk with supportive information will uphold women's interests and provide them with adequate resources to fight for their cause. The model approach enclosed in the paper will improve library service provision designed to delimit gender inequality and enhance inclusivity among women so as to enable them to mobilize themselves for the promotion of women's empowerment.

References

1. Akhter, Y., Deb, P., & Biswas, J. (2021). Role of Public Libraries with special reference to Women Empowerment through Kanyashree Prakalpa in West Bengal of India. *Library Philosophy and Practice*, 1-21.
2. Andriani, L., Lal, S., & Kalam, A. A. (2022). Entrepreneurial activities and women empowerment in rural India between microfinance and social capital. *Strategic Change*, 31(2), 227-237.
3. Badruzzama, H. (2020). Gender, Gender Equality and Women Empowerment. *Our Heritage*, 68, pp. 53-65.
4. Bellotti, E., Czerniawska, D., Everett, M. G., & Guadalupi, L. (2022). Gender inequalities in research funding: Unequal network configurations, or unequal network returns?. *Social Networks*, 70, 138-151.
5. Bjork-James, S., & Barla, J. (2022). A Climate of Misogyny: Gender, Politics of Ignorance, and Climate Change Denial—An Interview with Katharine Hayhoe. *Australian Feminist Studies*, 1-8.
6. Ghosh, S. (2015). Beneficiary to agent : women, empowerment and related questions. In Majumder, D., Sarkar, P., Bandyopadhyay, U. and Sengupta, L. (Eds.). *Women Empowerment in India : Challenges Ahead*. Naba Ballygunge Mahavidyalaya, Kolkata.
7. Guyalo, A. K., Alemu, E. A., & Degaga, D. T. (2022). Employment effect of large-scale agricultural investment on women empowerment in Gambella Region, Ethiopia. *International Journal of Social Economics*.
8. Kilby, P. (2010). *NGOs in India: The challenges of women's empowerment and accountability* (p. 148). Taylor & Francis.
9. Mashhadi, A., & Karami, M. (2022). Ecological Violence against Women: A Legal Reflection on the Impact of the Environment Degradation on the Increase of Violence against Women. *Biannual Journal of Family Law and Jurisprudence*.
10. Nguyen, M., & Le, K. (2022). Maternal education and son preference. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 89, 102552.

11. Pal, M., Gupta, H., & Joshi, Y. C. (2021). Social and economic empowerment of women through financial inclusion: empirical evidence from India. *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: An International Journal*.
12. Rodriguez, Z. (2022). The power of employment: Effects of India's employment guarantee on women empowerment. *World Development*, 152, 105803.
13. Shrestha, S., & Krolak, L. (2015). The potential of community libraries in supporting literate environments and sustaining literacy skills. *International Review of Education*, 61(3), 399-418.
14. Wang, Y., & Zhang, Y. (2022). "As Good as a Boy" But Still a Girl: Gender Equity Within the Context of China's One-Child Policy. *SAGE Open*, 12(1), 21582440221082097.
15. Wittgens, C., Fischer, M. M., Buspavanich, P., Theobald, S., Schweizer, K., & Trautmann, S. (2022). Mental health in people with minority sexual orientations: A meta-analysis of population-based studies. *Acta Psychiatrica Scandinavica*, 145(4), 357-372.