



Libraries and the Cultural Rights of Women

Lessons from the Women, Information and Libraries Special Interest Group Satellite Conference, 16 August 2017, Bratislava, Slovakia

Introduction

Migration and large movements of people are not a new phenomenon. Over the centuries people moved for many reasons. Some seek employment to secure a better life for themselves and their families. Others are forced to move to escape crimes, wars, persecution and instability. Between 2001 and 2015 the number of international migrants and refugees have increased dramatically worldwide. 244 million migrants were recorded in 2015, an increase of 41% from the last available data in 2000. Of the 244 million individuals who migrated across borders about half are women¹.

The condition of a migrant woman and refugee is a difficult one as they experience hardships and violence at a higher rate than their male counterparts. The reasons behind this disparity can stem from cultural norms, separation from family members, and responsibilities toward children or other family members to name a few. During mass movements due to war, economic insecurity, and persecution, women risk their lives, have a higher chance of being raped, robbed and face starvation.

In this situation, the fulfilment of cultural rights – notably the right to participate in cultural life – as well as the right of access to information migrant women, and others in extremely vulnerable situations, remain essential. To explore how libraries can help provide this important service to women in transition, the Women Information and Libraries Special Interest Group of IFLA explored what information professionals do to help refugees.

The group convened at the University Library in Bratislava on 16 August 2017, with papers presented ranging from needs assessments in Uganda and Nigeria to an analysis of what Greek information professionals are already doing to help. They covered the creation of memory archives in Rwanda and India, which functioned as repositories of information about the atrocities women endured in past forced migrations. These remain an essential tool in preventing women's sufferings drifting into obscurity. A paper was also devoted to the assessment of female presence on Wikipedia with the expectation to redress the gender (in)balance in online Wikipedia autobiographies. A further paper focused on practices adopted in libraries and archives specifically for digital content, with a focus on preservation ethics. A synopsis of the papers that were presented is below.

¹ UN (2016), *In Safety and Dignity: Addressing Large Movements of Refugees and Migrants – Report of the Secretary General to the General Assembly*, http://refugeesmigrants.un.org/sites/default/files/in_safety_and_dignity_-_addressing_large_movements_of_refugees_and_migrants.pdf (accessed 14 October 2017)

Greece-Uganda-Nigeria

Uganda, Greece, and Nigeria have experienced large movements of people. For Nigeria, the movement remained contained within its borders as the result of the Boko Haram insurgency but for Uganda and Greece their international borders were crossed by millions escaping war and conflicts. In 2017 Uganda experienced the fastest growing refugee crisis in the world with about 1.2 million refugees from Sudan, Somalia, Burundi and the Democratic Republic of Congo. In the past two years, 1.3 million people have travelled through Greece from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq.

Women have formed a large share of these numbers, and have faced journeys fraught with risks. In Greece and Uganda, many women reported abuses both during their journey and their stay at the refugee camps. In Nigeria abuses in camps that should shelter women are, allegedly, very common.

For all the women in Nigeria, Greece and Uganda, a pressing problem was the inability to access information. Women needed to receive information regarding their country of origin, often in turmoil, and to know the well-being of the relatives left behind. They needed health information, a pressing issue for women in Uganda, and they needed also to know the processes for asylum requests. General services and information regarding activities are hard to find in Uganda and Nigeria. In general, there is a dearth of dedicated safe spaces for these women in transition. Governments officials do what they can but they are unprepared to resolve such a massive request for services.

The role of libraries in these contexts is very diverse. In Greece², several programs are available to refugees: the ECHO Refugee mobile library, REACT, Future Library and Library on Gender and Equality are all offering free internet access to refugees. They also lend books and games to refugees and their families. The author suggests that a closer coordination with local and international actors could improve the designation of sites and services available to the refugee women specifically. Also, a closer communication between the National Library of Greece and other libraries, universities and IT centres would increase the availability of services to refugees.

In Uganda³, while the importance of access to information is clear, alongside the role of libraries in this, low investment combined with a lack of knowledge has limited the role libraries can play in informing the refugees communities and the authors hoped for that opportunity to be explored. Women refugees were unaware of the libraries being such an important hub for information. Refugee's women in Uganda were surveyed and a ranking of their needs established to be used as a springboard for future activities. The paper makes concrete suggestions for how libraries could realise their potential.

Similarly, in Nigeria⁴, women and girls escaping their captors need to be reintegrated in society and libraries could play an important role in this transition. Drawing on existing experience of working with

² ARAHOVA, Antonia (2017) *Greek Libraries Supporting Women in Conflict Situations: Current and New Roles*, <http://library.ifla.org/1781/>

³ NEKESA AKULLO, Winny and ODONG, Patrick (2017) *Information needs and information seeking behaviour of women refugees in Uganda; Public Libraries' Role*, <http://library.ifla.org/1783/>

⁴ OYELUDE, Adetoun A. and OSUIGWEE, Nkem (2017) *Gender dynamics in the Boko Haram insurgency in Northern Nigeria: a review of internally displaced persons*, <http://library.ifla.org/1807/>

children who had been living on the streets, the authors suggest an increase in mobile library services to relieve tensions in camps and increase the self-awareness of the girls. Librarians in collaboration with social workers could help the girls process their experiences and provide a safe, alternative way of learning and improving their lives.

India-Rwanda

Migrations are not a recent phenomenon. India experienced major movement of people in 1947 when 10 to 18 million people moved due to partition. In Rwanda the internal displacement of individuals escaping mass killing during the genocide in 1994, resulted in a scattered pattern of displaced individuals. The two events, set quite apart historically, have a common thread: the lived experience of girls and women during the migration are not documented and the atrocities they suffered remain unknown. In both instances, the aim of the authors is to record the experiences girls and women endured as an alternative to the silence that cultural norms often impose on women's sufferings.

A memory archive is a very pressing matter for the refugee women who survived the Partition in 1947⁵, both because most of them never had a chance to tell their story but also because time is passing rapidly. There are different organizations that have gathered material online and have created spaces of memory. Among others the Museum of Peace, set up by an information and media studies NGO and the 1947 Partition Archive are good examples of efforts aimed at not forgetting the event by creating a library. The authors, however, embarked in a more ambitious project when they started to conduct interviews among the survivors. The women were pleased and eager to share their experience. Why have you come so late? They asked. Their voices, the authors hope, should find their place in libraries for future generations to reflect and remember.

Mapping the girl child experience of the Rwandan genocide⁶ started with a minimal effort in 1998. The Library of the University of South Florida in collaboration with IBUKA, a local non-profit organization, collected and digitized stories from girl's survivors with the hope to disseminate them so that people could know what these children had experienced. Both organizations hope that the interviews could be used as catalysts to deter future genocide. Collecting testimonies from the entire country, however, remains a challenge. A systematic effort to preserve papers and audio records had occurred only in the Gitarama province. The documents have been all digitized, translated in English, and transcribed for easy full text search.

Wikipedia

Libraries can support the rights of women to information in many ways. A tool like Wikipedia⁷ offers an open space where anyone can edit and contribute. It is collaborative and the content generated reflects a collective way of creating information. Ideally, Wikipedia should be a gender balanced

⁵ KAUR, Trishanjit and SINGH, Nirmal and KAUR, Simran (2017) *Collection and Preservation of Painful Memories of Refugee Women Survived during Partition: An Overview*, <http://library.ifla.org/1803/>

⁶ OLAKA, Musa Wakhungu (2017) *The Girl Child and Genocide: Mapping Lived Experiences of Girls from Gitarama Prefecture who Survived the 1994 Rwandan Genocide*, <http://library.ifla.org/1808/>

⁷ ALEMANY, Dolores (2017) *Making women's history matter: Female presence in and through Wikipedia*, <http://library.ifla.org/1782/>

environment, but however, female presence is still limited. The systemic bias, the author suggests, coincides with the current Internet culture where the main editor is usually “young, male, English Speaking, educated, technologically savvy, and wealthy enough to spare time to edit”. This risks unfairly limiting the ‘presence’ of historical women in the collective memory, and depriving women and girls today of models and inspiration.

To explore the gender gap the author focused on 30 historical women from the Second Republic in Spain (1931-1939). Historically these women were twice silenced, both as women and supporters of the doomed republican cause. The biographies of these women are extraordinary: some were executed, many imprisoned but all suffered greatly and faced death because of their ideas and decisions. Their profiles were studied and data gathered on the languages employed in their descriptions and the number and date of their edits. The results were interesting as English and Spanish versions differed greatly and some versions lacked photos and relevant descriptions in details. In some cases, the details were so scarce that their experiences of, and actions during the tumult of the Second Republic are barely mentioned at all. Librarians worldwide are addressing this unbalance through edit-a-thons that are very effective initiatives to narrow the gender gap in Wikipedia by empowering female editorship and their overall visibility on the site.

Ethics in Libraries and Archives

The library and archive professions have been pursuing ethics and neutrality in collection development for centuries⁸. Many of them recognize that the process of appraisal and preservation are intrinsically ethical, and, as a result, the power librarians and archivists held is quite relevant. The advent of digital content has amplified the necessity of maintaining such an ethical stance given the ubiquitous nature of the Internet. Digital collections can be accessed from anywhere and this online presence can potentially threaten the privacy and well-being of the individuals and communities included in any digital project. Whether is an indigenous community – as in the case of a New Zealand tribal leader - or a lesbian group – as in the case of the *On Our Backs* magazine – the publishing of material that could endanger at risk communities is fraught with ethical considerations. Best practice is to consult with the community and receive consent to make available the content online. Cultural sensitivity remains paramount to balance access rights with the respect for the communities and the subject matter presented.

Conclusions

Women are central to the well-being of a society – any form of violence or deprivation against a woman has effects that extends beyond the life of that woman and, inevitably, trickles down into her community and society at large. As such, it is important to find ways of ensuring their access to information, as well as to protect their cultural rights, now and in the future.

Refugee and migrant women are a particularly vulnerable group and we need to protect them and guarantee their rights when in transition. Large scale policy and advocacy strategies are important and

⁸ CAIZZI, Carolyn (2017), *Ethical Considerations Revisited*, <http://library.ifla.org/1780/1/S15-2017-caizzi-en.pdf>

necessary, but bottom up services that could address day-to-day problems linked to a lack of information and the violation of cultural rights are also vital.

Libraries can play a very important role, as examples from Greece and Nigeria demonstrate. The opportunity to receive information and services for the well-being of women and their family members at difficult times are central to the empowerment of that person. Libraries can help as gateways to information and librarians as information specialists can craft programs to deliver meaningful access to information in women in crisis. Projects have been created to support that access in many countries and the work should be continued and enhanced.

Similarly, libraries can play a key role in supporting the preservation of women's memories, in a society that too often listens primarily to men. Their expertise in archiving, as well as in giving access to material in a sensitive way, makes them important partners. They can also interact with third-party platforms such as Wikipedia, helping those whose voices may not be heard engage and contribute on an equal footing with others.