Health related services for women through public libraries in West Bengal, India
By

Ratna Bandyopadhyay
 (University of Calcutta, Calcutta, India)

and

Sarbani Goswami
(School of Women's Studies, Jadavpur University, Calcutta, India)

Abstract

In this paper we focus on the role of public libraries in enhancing the concept of empowerment and providing health related services for women. The state of West Bengal in India has a well developed public library system. Training has been imparted to librarians and others on how to conduct field surveys and analyze data on women's information needs. An information network on women and their health-related issues is being formed. Public libraries, relevant Government departments, NGOs, women's organizations and women's study centres are involved in awareness and extension programmes on women's health. In this paper we examine the specific role of public libraries in West Bengal in these programmes and services, their impact and propose certain recommendations for the public libraries to become an agent of change.

Background

Background - I

- In 1971, Govt. of India constituted the Committee on Status of Women in India
- In 1974, 'Towards Equality : Report on the Status of Women in India' was published
- Establishment of Women's Studies Centres in the Indian Universities
- In April 1981, 1st National Conference of Women's Studies was held in Bombay

In India, as well as in West Bengal, the idea of a separate agenda for "Women's Health" was a paradigm shift in the field of public health and thereafter several major developments changed the women's health scenario in India.

In 1971, the Government of India constituted the Committee on the Status of Women in India following the UN General Assembly resolution on the "Declaration on Elimination of Discrimination against Women". The founding text of women's movement in India entitled 'Towards Equality: Report on the Status of Women in India' [9] was published in 1974. It was the first ever comprehensive codification of the historical as well as contemporary status of the country's women. The Report reflects the marginalization of women in the society, exploitation in the economy, denial of access to power, exclusion in decision making and most importantly brutalization within and outside the household. The most astounding finding of the committee was the poor demographic trend of the declining sex ratio, the growing disparity in the life expectancy and death rates in men and women, and access to women literacy, education and livelihood - indicators of the regression from the norms developed during the freedom struggle.

The next important event was the establishment of the Women's Studies Centres in the Indian Universities. In April 1981 the first National Conference of Women's Studies was held in Bombay. Professor Vina Mazumdar pointed out that "in the Indian context what was needed was incorporation of the women's question and its implications in various disciplines" [6]. The conference also spelled out the specific terms and objectives of Women's Studies. Later these objectives were incorporated in the Guidelines for Developing Women's Studies Centres in Indian Universities.

With the publication of the Status Committee Report, the Women's movement was sparked off in the eighties and it is being continued in various aspects. The women's

studies centres established in the late eighties have provided a space for awareness among both men and women in general.

During the late eighties and the beginning of the nineties in India, as well as in West Bengal, through the initiative of the Women Librarians an information network on women and development was set up with all the women's studies centres in the country and government agencies.

National Population Policy 2000 has clearly mentioned in its action plan: 'implement at village level one stop integrated and coordinated service delivery package for basic health care, family planning, maternal and child health related services provided by the community and for the community.'[4]

National Policy for Women's Empowerment 2001 has mentioned as its goals and objectives 'equal access to women to health care, quality education at all levels, career and vocational guidance, employment, equal remuneration, occupational health and safety, social security.'[5] This policy has also mentioned the provision for support service for women.

West Bengal has always been the source of pioneering activities. It was in this state that the first journal named Bamabodhini was published in 1863, later this journal was edited by women. It was this state which went against the practice of widow burning. West Bengal was the first state in India to launch a library movement and fought for women's education and pioneered activities of resistance towards misdeeds. All these activities generated information for not only creating a knowledge base for future activities but also sensitizing human beings irrespective of caste, class, gender and professions.

Given this historical background we would like to situate the activity of the Public Libraries in West Bengal acting as agents for empowering /sensitizing women to their health needs. Here we would also like to point out the role of Women's Studies Centres,

the NGO's working on women issues and West Bengal State Commission for Women as provider of information in association with the District Health Services.

Public library system in West Bengal

West Bengal has one of the most developed public library systems in India There are more than 2800 libraries and community library cum information centres (CLICs). These libraries form a four tier structure. State Central Library is at the top of the four tier structure. In the second tier there are 7 district/ special status government libraries and 19 government sponsored libraries [2]. Government libraries are fully financed and managed by the government of West Bengal. These government libraries cannot take membership charges and cannot collect donations. Government sponsored libraries are financed by the government of West Bengal and managed by the management committee according to the Public Library Management Rules, 1981.

In the third tier there are 4 Subdivisional/Town government libraries, 229 subdivisional/town government sponsored libraries and 7 government aided libraries. These government aided libraries are run by NGOs and they get some financial help annually from government. In the fourth tier there are 2213 primary unit/ rural government sponsored libraries and 341 community libraries cum information centres (CLIC). These CLICs have been set up in those gram panchayats (i.e. the local self-government unit at rural areas) where there is no government or government sponsored library). These libraries play a very important role in providing support to satisfy the basic needs of the society.

Current special services

Current special services provided by public libraries
- Career guidance
- Organising awareness programmes
- Programmes to support women in the community

Besides providing traditional services, the libraries give services for children to promote their reading habits, career guidance services, are providing support to neo literates and the visually challenged, and providing community information services. These libraries are also organizing and providing space for various awareness, training and extension programmes to support women in the community.

Awareness/Support Services provided by public libraries
- Current information on vital issues (including health and family welfare).
- Organizing lectures, discussions, training programmes to support health services for women and child.
- TV / radio programmes on women's health , child development, family welfare, etc. are made available to the public

Public libraries are also organizing different current awareness programmes to make the people in the community especially the women informed about the recent government policies, occupational information, and current information on vital issues. These current awareness programmes include discussions, workshops, video shows etc.

In many of the public libraries and information centres television sets are available. Both government and private channels are providing programmes on education, health and family welfare, self-development and self-employment on a regular basis. These

programmes are made available to the community through TV sets kept in the public libraries.

Local condition

Present situation in West Bengal

- Total population about 80 million
- Women population – 38.7 million
- Total literacy rate 69%
- Women literacy rate 60%
- Below Poverty Line (BPL) 27%
- Rural population 57.7 million
- BPL in rural areas 32%

The population of West Bengal is about 80 million and rural population is 57.7 million. Women population is about 38.7 million. The literacy rate of West Bengal is 69% and the literacy rate of women is about 60%. In West Bengal the percentage of people below poverty line (BPL) is about 27% and this percentage in the rural areas is about 32%.[3] In most of the rural areas the public libraries are the only libraries providing services to the community.

Public Libraries in Rural Areas

- In rural areas basic administrative unit is gram panchayat
- Total no. 3362
- Avg area 25.4 sq kms
- Avg population 17,177
- 1722 out of 3362 have public libraries
- 341 have CLICs

[2]

In West Bengal the basic administrative unit in rural areas is called gram panchayat. There are 3362 gram panchayats in West Bengal, out of which only 1722 have rural government sponsored public libraries. The government has the aim to provide at least one public library in each gram panchayat. The Government has developed 341 CLICS in another 341 gram panchayats [2]. The objective is to disseminate relevant information through libraries for community development.

Various Non Government Organizations (NGO) and District Health Services are working to sensitize women about their own health as well their child's health, e.g. Nistha, Sanlaap, Institute of Social Work, etc. Nistha is working in the district of South 24 Parganas in West Bengal and focusing on Women and child health. Sanlaap is a Kolkata, West Bengal based NGO working on the rehabilitation of trafficked women's health. Institute of Social Work, another NGO, is working in the urban slum and in rural sector.

Lynn Westbrook in her article, The Search for Women's Information: A Research perspective, pointed out that "the activities which produce women's information are those which primarily serve, examine and/or enhance the lives of women".[12] Therefore Libraries to become gender friendly and agents of social change should develop themselves into a community information system, should be aware of women's knowledge structure and develop patterns in women's communication system which will be able to improve their information storage and retrieval.

Training

Different training programmes and workshops have been organized to make the community aware of the imporatance of women's health and related information. In 1987, Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR) in collaboration with Centre for Women's Development Studies (CWDS) organized a training programme for identification of gender information, processing and development of network on women and health development. In 1998, Jadavpur University School of Women's Studies

organized two workshops to sensitize the librarians on gender issues. In 2002, Jadavpur University (JU) School of Women's Studies in collaboration with CWDS, New Delhi and SNDT University, Mumbai organized an International Workshop to train librarians and NGO representatives to identify the information need of women, process health related issues and disseminate these to the community At present JU School of Women's Studies in collaboration with JU Department of Mobile Computers is planning to develop National Information Centres to know the need of women and to develop community information services.

Local Attempt

- 'Nabanna' : networking rural women and knowledge. This attempt was made by Baduria municipality, North 24 Parganas, West Bengal, India. This was in the context of empowerment of women.

Another local attempt worth mentioning is the "Nabanna" project which was carried out by Baduria municipality in North 24 Parganas, WB to give women hands-on training on computers.

Impact

Impact

- Training programme participants have disseminated knowledge to peers/lower levels
- Public library usage study
- Increasing numbers are attending awareness and TV / radio programmes
- Participation in government schemes for women is increasing

- Training programme participants have disseminated knowledge to peers/lower levels
- Increasing numbers are attending awareness and TV / radio programmes
- Participation in government schemes for women is increasing

Study of Public Library usage at Joynagar and Bishnupur block:
Joynagar is a suburban town in the district of South 24 Parganas in West Bengal. The district has 42 towns and 2166 villages. Bishnupur block is considered as a rural area in the district of South 24 Parganas. It was found that:

Joynagar
85% of the women (including girl children) did not use the public library.
15% of the women (including girl children) used the public library
10% of the women are regular users mainly to read popular novels and magazines. Most of these women knew about the public library when they were in school and they had studied at least up to standard 8 (In West Bengal the schools follow a 10+2 system.)

All the women who use the public library and were asked about its service said that they are happy with the service. Some of them said that the public library should provide more information on higher education, empowerment of women and developmental opportunities.

Bishnupur block:
85% of the women (including girl children) are not aware of the public library system
15% of the women (including girl children) are aware of the public library system but most of them do not know about the structure or functioning of the public library.
The major factors that prevent women from using the public library in both Joynagar and Bishnupur are that they are not aware of its existence, not literate, busy with their household chores, the library is situated at a great distance, or they are the only earning member in the family.

When some women who were not aware of the public library system were told about it, they said that such services with emphasis on community information would empower them to establish gender equality and live with dignity. Nargis Bibi of Bishnupur expressed herself by saying "it will help to break the shackles of tradition and fight against patriarchy and poverty".

Librarians who are have attended the training programmes on women's health and related issues are trying to provide improved information services to women after assessing their information needs. Jadavpur University School of Women's Studies has conducted surveys on women information needs in different parts of West Bengal. Teachers and students of the Departments of Library and Information Science of Jadavpur University and Calcutta University are undertaking research projects pertaining to women's issues.

Women's groups and agencies have become strong in bringing about substantial change in the status of women in society. Women are also participating in Panchayats and Local Governments.

The impact of previous programmes has been positive and needs to be increased. To this end in this paper we would like to propose some general objectives followed by specific recommendations.

Objectives

Public Libraries, specifically rural libraries, should be made information based
Public Libraries should also act as a community information system
Public Libraries should be able to process information need of women specifically on issues related to health.

Should have clear knowledge about the policies and programmes on issues relating to women
Should have clear idea about the right based issues. Issues relating to women's holistic health not just only reproductive or maternal health.

Should work closely with the Women's Studies Resource Centres and also NGO's working in this area.

Should work with the Panchayat and Local Government systems.

Should work closely with the West Bengal state Women's Commission

For health issues Rural Public Libraries should also work closely with the District Health Services. The structure of the District Health services is given below.

	State General Hospital ▼
	District Hospitals ▼
	Sub- Division Hospitals ▼
	Block Primary Health Centres ▼
Village Level	Primary Health Centres ▼
	Sub Health Centres ▼
	Door to Door Services (2 days in a week) ▼
	Anganwadi Centres

Recommendations

11

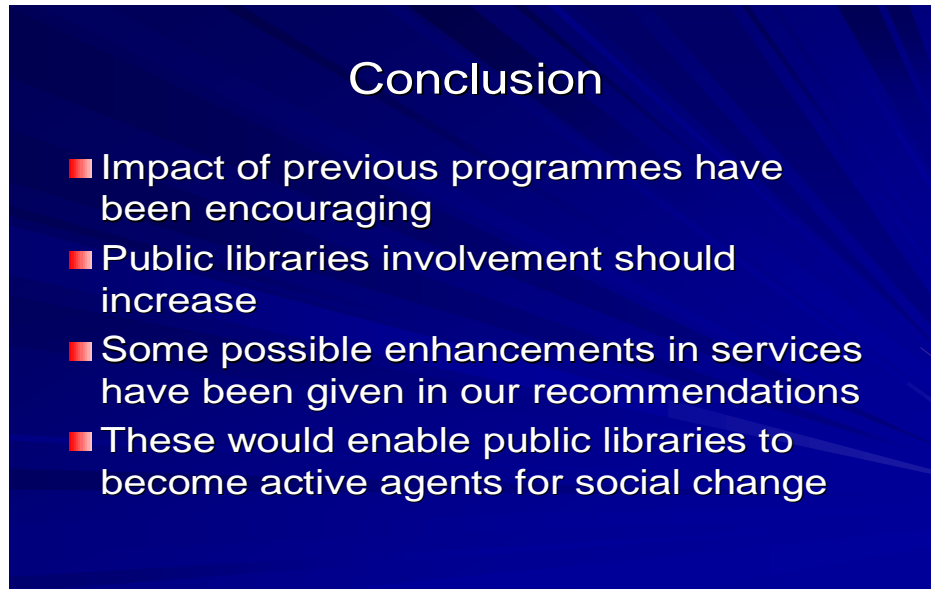Based on the objectives we propose the following specific recommendations:
- Training to all public librarians on women policies and programmes
- Public libraries to organise extension and support programmes in collaboration with District Health Services
- Focus on rural public libraries and Village Level Health Centres

Conclusion

- Impact of previous programmes have been encouraging
- Public libraries involvement should increase
- Some possible enhancements in services have been given in our recommendations
- These would enable public libraries to become active agents for social change

We may conclude that women's information primarily serve examine and enhance the lives of women. Therefore the information professionals in public libraries should be sensitised on women's issues. Capacity building of the Information professionals working in rural information/community centres of the public library system should be made to handle women's information as a product designed primarily for and by women. The packaging of such information should be made user friendly keeping in mind the condition of women in rural areas. Unless women are provided with right information through professionally trained information professionals the idea of empowerment of women will remain an unrealised dream.

References
1. Bagchi, Jasodhara, ed. The Changing Status of Women in West Bengal, 1970 – 2000, Sage, New Delhi, 2004.
2. Bandyopadhyay, Ratna & Majumder, K.P. Some directions for digitized services with audio visual content for the public libraries of West Bengal, India.(Paper presented in World Library and Information Congress: 72nd IFLA General Conference and Council 20-24 Aug 2006, Seoul, Korea)

3. Census of India. www.censusindia.net. www.censusindia.net
4. India. Department of Family Welfare. National population policy 2000.
5. India. Ministry of Human Resource Development. Department of Women and Child Development. National policy for women's empowerment 2001.
6. Mazumdar, Vina. Emergence of the women's question in India and the role of women's studies, Occasional Paper No. 7, Centre for Women's Development Studies , New Delhi, 1985.
7. Parekh, Harsha and Sen, Bharati Developing electronic libraries: a handbook.(course material for training workshop held in collaboration with School of Women's Studies, Jadavpur University, CWDS, New Delhiand SNDT university, Mumbai.
8. Sen, Gita, Germain, Adrienne and Chen, Lincoln C.ed. Population policies reconsidered: health, empowerment, rights. Boston, Harvard School of Public Health, 1994.
9. Towards Equality: Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India, Government of India Ministry of Education and Social Welfare, Department of Social Welfare New Delhi, 1974
10. Vyas, Anju . Empowering women through information and knowledge. A report on the international conference on Empowering Women through Information and Knowledge : from oral Traditions to ICT held in 2003 at Pune.
11. West Bengal. District primary education and Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan. Annual report 2005-06
12. Westerbrook, Lynn . The search for women's information : a research perspective. Asian Journal of Women's Studies, Vol.11,No.1 2005.pp38-57.