The Role Of Libraries In Empowering Women Education Through Open Access

George Tesilimi Banji

University Library, University of Health and Allied Sciences. Ho, Ghana

Abstract: The paper discusses the role of libraries in the realisation of gender equality as well as empowering women in education which is one of the main focuses of the Sustainable Development Goals. The paper also discovered that the activities of IFLA and UNESCO have helped tremendously in making libraries to plan towards enhancing gender equality and empowering women in education through open access. It is the view of the writer that libraries in Ghana and beyond are still helping in realising the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and most importantly, gender equality and empowering women in education. The paper further suggest various actions that libraries can take to empower women in accessing educational resources and information by repositioning themselves to take advantage of the emerging technologies.

Keywords: Libraries; IFLA; Women empowerment; Sustainable Development Goals; Open Access; Gender equality.

I. INTRODUCTION

The United Nations Millennium Development Goals are eight which the 191 UN member states have agreed to achieve by the year 2015. The United Nations Millennium Declaration signed in September 2000 commits world leaders to combat poverty, hunger, disease, illiteracy, environmental degradation, and most importantly discrimination against women. The MDGs are derived from this Declaration, and all have specific targets and indicators. The Eight Millennium Development Goals are:

- ✓ to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger;
- ✓ to achieve universal primary education;
- ✓ to promote gender equality and empower women;
- ✓ to reduce child mortality;
- ✓ to improve maternal health;
- ✓ to combat HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases;
- ✓ to ensure environmental sustainability; and
- ✓ to develop a global partnership for development.

The MDGs are inter-dependent; and have influenced health in various stages of life. For instance, better health enables children to learn and adults to earn a better living. Also, gender equality is essential to the achievement of better health. Reducing poverty, hunger and environmental degradation all depends on the better health of the individual.

It is an indisputable fact that libraries play catalytic role in the contemporary development initiatives through the support they provide to education, democracy, and socio-economic development in countries around the world. It is often argued that for democratic processes to make sense, those who govern, must be aware of the needs of those that are governed, whatever or wherever they are.

It is against this background that one of the international organisations of libraries known as IFLA (International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions) came into existence to articulate the awareness of information relating to democracy, human rights and rule of law. The world's intellectual outputs would be useless or even constitute a nuisance, if libraries were not there to gather, analyse, classify, catalogue and provide access to them. The hundreds of bibliographic records, published and unpublished materials can be used and re-used to satisfy commercial, educational, cultural, recreational and national developmental needs. According to Azubuike (2003), libraries enhance the value of human intellectual outputs by increasing access to them through professional processing, storage and dissemination.

Similarly, the leading international body representing the interest of library and information provision service providers is the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA). It is also the global voice of the library and information profession founded in Edinburgh, Scotland, on 30 September 1927 at an international conference, and have celebrated their 75th birthday at the conference in Glasgow, Scotland in 2002. IFLA's objective is "to promote international understanding, cooperation, discussion, research, and development in all fields of library activity, including bibliography, information services, and the education of library personnel, and to provide a body through which librarianship can be represented in matters of international interest."

Subsequently, this paper presents IFLA's role in helping libraries to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. In addition, the paper discusses measures taken by libraries in Ghana and Africa as a whole to realise the Sustainable Development goals of promoting gender equality and empower women education.

II. HOW LIBRARIES EMPOWER WOMEN EDUCATION THROUGH OPEN ACCESS

Libraries and institutions in Ghana have powerful influence when it comes to promoting gender equality and empowering women. One major role of libraries in national development that is often taken for granted is the role of social inclusion. Libraries serve the needs of disadvantaged populations such as the poor, the elderly, the physically challenged, the unemployed and those with learning disabilities. These are the groups least likely to have the means to acquire the necessary information sources.

The UN millennium summit that was held in New York in 2000 had a set of millennium development goals (MDG's) that were to be achieved by 2015. These goals are to: eradicate poverty; combat HIV/AIDS; reduce child mortality; promote gender equality; and achieve universal primary and secondary education. Among these goals, two of them directly impact on the lives of girls and women. Achieving universal primary education and ensuring that all boys and girls complete a full course of primary schooling, promote gender equality and empowering women are the goals that directly affect women (United Nations, 2002). The paper therefore highlights how libraries and institutions can help realise the goal of facilitating gender equality and also empowering women in sharing educational resources.

It is an indisputable fact that education has been the most important backbone of every society. However, in Africa there has been very little emphasis put on the education of the girl child and women in general. This has caused a huge knowledge gap between the literate and illiterate women in most African societies. Nevertheless, libraries and information providers have designed a system known as "open access" in order to bridge the "knowledge divide" that is caused by the less value placed on the education of Africa Women. Through this open access, many women have achieved their objectives in education. Thus, with open access the obstruction to women to research and learning has been reduced.

Open access repositories (or archives) are digital collections that make their contents freely available over the internet. The digital repository collects the research output of the members of a university's research community and support the archiving and long-term preservation of the institution's intellectual output (Swan and Chan, 2009). I believe most of us can recall the good old days of the public library system in Ghana. But for the free access to that system, some members of the community might not have had access to any reading materials outside the class textbooks. Open Access seeks to return scholarly publishing to its original purpose: to spread knowledge and allow that knowledge to be built upon. Price barriers should not prevent students or anyone, be it a man or woman from getting access to research they need.

Budapest Open Access Initiative (2002) defines open access as the literature that should be freely accessible online and is that which scholars give to the world without expectation of payment. Similarly, Bethseda (2015) sees open access as a situation where the authors and copyright holder(s) grant(s) to all users a free, irrevocable, worldwide, perpetual right of access, and a license to copy, use, distribute, transmit and display the work publicly and to make and distribute derivative works, in any digital medium for any responsible purpose, subject to proper attribution of authorship as well as the right to make small numbers of printed copies for their personal use. In addition, Suber (2010) defines open-access as that literature which is digital, online, free of charge, and free of most copyright and licensing restrictions". He further contends that open access contents are not restricted only to peer-reviewed research articles; they may be in different formats ranging from texts (prints) to software. Other formats include audio, video, and multi-media. This implies that although the open access movement focuses on peer-reviewed research articles and their preprints, it can also apply to non-scholarly content like music, movies, and novels, even if these are not the focus of most open access activists. More so, open access can be divided into two broad categories. These are open access journals/databases and open access repositories. Open access repositories have four types, which include subject-based repository; research repository; national repository system; and institutional repository.

Although libraries and information providers are trying to use open access to bridge the gap that exists between women and men with respect to education, there is still a long way to go when it comes to Ghana and Africa as a whole where the level of illiteracy is quite higher than that of developed countries (Deventer and Pienaar, 2008). This simply means that bridging the gender disparities cuts across all spheres of life no matter which field one belongs, be it education, information communication technology, economic social and political spheres. By this, (UNESCO, 2015) recognises that there is a need for information in developing countries especially Africa and henceforth making its publications open to the least fortunate. In an attempt to adhere to the request of UNESCO, University libraries in Ghana have also adopted the open access policy and making their publications freely available for everyone to access so as to have an equal industrialisation among all countries. The brisk growth of information technology might help overcome the constraints that until now have impeded the growth of knowledge

societies such as geographical distance as the inherent to the means of communication (Binde and Matsuura, 2005).

III. FACTORS TO STRENGTHEN THE PROMOTION OF ACCESS TO EDUCATION AND INFORMATION RESOURCES

The possibilities and privileges offered by these journals and repositories therefore are powerful resource and tool to solve the disturbing gap in the education of the African woman. African libraries must therefore be well equipped to be able to host via internet these free resources to enable equal access by all. In order to sustain the idea of open access in libraries, the following must be considered:

- ✓ Libraries in Ghana and beyond must strengthen their internet systems to be able to open up information electronically to students no matter their gender and location since much vital information for education, career, civic life, safety and the like are increasingly provided via the internet, especially on the web.
- ✓ Secondly, computers and computer networks play an increasingly important role in continued learning and career advancement. Therefore education in Africa should integrate technology in a meaningful way to better prepare students for lifelong learning. Without such offerings, the existing digital divide may disfavour children and women of lower socio-economic status.
- ✓ Institutions in Ghana and Africa as a whole should strengthen policies on girl child or women education. This will promote equal right to education regardless your gender background.
- ✓ Classrooms should be made more gender equitable, and increase expectations for girls' independence. Success will result in an environment that empowers girls for the benefit of themselves, their families, and the society.
- ✓ Lastly, gender inequities that hinder women's fulfilment of their right to education and meaningful participation in Africa's social and economic advancement must be discouraged.

IV. CONCLUSION

Many reasons exist for why formal education for females is unavailable to so many, including cultural reasons. Some also believe that a women's education will get in the way of her duties as a wife and a mother. In some places in Africa where women marry at the age 12 or 13, education is considered a hindrance to a young woman's development. Additionally, women's education is sometimes corrupted by sexual violence. Sexual violence against girls and female students affects many African education systems. This therefore means that the foremost factor limiting female education is poverty which subsequently emanated in the inability of women to get access to information in education. While most of the Millennium Development Goals face a deadline of 2015, the gender parity target was set to be achieved a full ten years earlier – an acknowledgement that equal access to education and information (open access) is the foundation for all other development goals.

Conclusively, open access journals and repositories as a result of its open and free nature have enormous promise for the African women to realize their potentials despite all odds, especially the several worrisome restrictions they have suffered and endured in an effort to have the information and knowledge they deserve.

REFERENCES

[1] Bethesda Statement on Open Access Publishing. (n.d.) Retrieved on November 15, 2016, from http://legacy.earlham.edu/~peters/fos/bethesda.htm
[2] Budapest Open Access Initiative (2002). *Read the Budapest Open Access Initiative*. (n.d.) Retrieved November 15, 2015, from http://www.budapestopenaccessinitiative.org/read
[3] IFLA Governing Board (2011). *IFLA Statement on Open Access - Clarifying IFLA'S position and strategy*. Retrieved from: http://www.ifla.org/files/hq/news/ document/ifla-statement-on -pen access.pdf
[4] Deventer, M. V. & Pienaar (2008). South African Repositories: Bridging Knowledge Divides. *Ariadne*, (55), 1–17.
[5] United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (2015). *Introduction to Access*: Open Access for Library Schools Module 1, 183.
[6] Suber, P. (2012). *Open access*. http://doi.org/10.4271/ 2004-01-2697
[7] UNESCO | Open Access Publications. (n.d.). Retrieved November 23, 2015, from http://en.unesco.org/open-access/
[8] United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural organization. (2015). Introduction to Open Access : Open Access for Library Schools Module 1,