Working Paper 12

Women, Social Exclusion and the Public Library

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Abstract

This paper gives a gender perspective on social exclusion and public libraries. It begins by giving examples of discrimination against women. Recent debates around feminism and post-feminism are discussed. The paper then reviews evidence of women's use and non-use of public libraries, and refers to the distinct nature of their information needs, with examples of currently unmet needs being given. The experience of women as public library workers is then discussed, in terms of both their contribution to librarianship, including the idea of the library as a feminised space, and evidence of the under-representation of women at senior levels. Finally, recent work on women and ICTs is discussed and it is suggested that more use could be made of public libraries as a 'safe space,' addressing current concerns about women's access to ICTs. Overall, it is concluded that gender (and other) injustices should be related to wider global issues. A number of recommendations are made (May 2000).

Introduction

Why write about women in terms of social exclusion? Women are not a minority, and, for many, the struggles of the Women's Movement and of individual women have brought some rewards, particularly in terms of work. However, at the same time, it is clear that some women are socially excluded, and, in this Paper, we set out to look at some key areas of exclusion and ways in which the public library can help in tackling this.

In writing this Paper, we have taken a particular starting point: we agree that being a woman in the UK in 2000 does not necessarily mean that she is going to be automatically disadvantaged, particularly economically, but that there are particular categories of women (such as lone parents, working mothers, Black and ethnic minority women, lesbians, disabled women) who are much more likely to be. We also recognise that gender plays a powerful part in shaping all our experiences:

> "Prioritising the issue of gender is the result of experience: it has become increasingly clear that poverty and social exclusion affect men and women differently, and interventions that do not reflect this difference have in many cases reinforced structural inequalities for women." [May, 1997, p1]

and that, as in most societies, women in the UK are oppressed by sexism:

> "Women's oppression is rooted both in the structures of our society, which are patriarchal, and in the sons of patriarchy: capitalism and white supremacy. Patriarchy includes not only

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male rule but also heterosexual imperialism and sexism; patriarchy led to the development of white supremacy and capitalism." [Bunch, 1981, p194]

It is for these reasons that we are concentrating on women in this Paper.

Discrimination against women

As we noted in the Introduction, not all women are excluded, but they are, as a group, more likely to be excluded than men.

According to the Scottish Poverty Information Unit [SPIU, 1998], women are amongst the groups that are most vulnerable to poverty and exclusion because they "in the main, still retain responsibility for home and family." Moreover, 90% of lone parents are women with an estimated 75% being dependent on Income Support.

> "Important differences exist for example between mothers and those without children, between black and white women, between women living in different parts of the United Kingdom, between women of different ages and social classes." [Women's Unit, 1998]

> "Not all women are excluded, but they are, as a group, more likely to be excluded than men. According to the Scottish Poverty Information Unit, women are amongst the groups that are most vulnerable to poverty and exclusion because they 'in the main still retain responsibility for home and family.' Moreover, 90% of lone parents are women, with an estimated 75% being dependent on Income Support." [SPIU, 1998]

Pay inequality

Despite the advancement of some, pay inequality still hits women hard:

> "Throughout the economy the average weekly wage of women in full-time work is £309.60 - 72 percent of the male median of £427.10." [Clement, 1999]

Recent research commissioned by the Government's Women's Unit has found that:

> "Contrary to popular belief the prime cause of the gender income gap is not earnings lost by time off having children ... Being a mother can add dramatically to the loss, the analysis shows, but the reasons for what is termed the 'female forfeit' are women being concentrated in lower paid sectors of the job market, and the discrimination in pay against those doing the same work as men - 25 years after the equal pay act." [Ward, 1999]

Evidence of the effects of this "gender income gap" on women library workers is included later in this Paper, in the section, "Women as public library workers".

In addition, through housework and caring for children and dependent adults:

> "One of the other major areas where women experience inequality is in the provision of unpaid work ..." [Bagilhole, 1997, p18]

Workplace discrimination

Discrimination is still rife in the workplace. For example, a recent progress report on an ESRC-funded project investigating equality in the Royal Mail sorting offices indicates that there is a:

> "traditional workplace culture which has historically excluded and segregated women. The researchers have identified a new workplace culture [introducing the Automated Processing Centres] which potentially threatens the same." [*Professional Manager*, 1999]

the Football Association has recently "damaged its reputation":

> "The FA paid £10,000 to football coach Vanessa Hardwick rather than abide by an employment tribunal recommendation. The association had already paid Hardwick £16,000 after being found guilty of sexual discrimination - she was not awarded an advanced FA coaching licence while seemingly less able men were. The FA further damaged its reputation by giving her the second payment rather than the licence as recommended by the tribunal. At the hearing, the FA claimed that women's 'menstrual problems' left them too emotional to make good football coaches." [*Human Resources*, 1999]

and, writing on sexism in the workplace, Cheryl Buggy says:

> "Historically, the world of work has been structured in such a way that men tend to thrive. Such a structure gives credence to understanding and plying by the 'team' rules - rules that have of course been established by men for men." [Buggy, 1999]

Women and violence

A recent Government report states that one woman in four experiences domestic violence at some time in her life. Fear of crime also has a disproportionate effect on women's lives:

> "70% of young women aged 16-29 are worried about rape and half of all women feel unsafe when walking home at night." [Women's Unit, 1999]

Women and the penal system

The way in which society treats some women is also discriminatory:

> "Because women are the primary carers in society and a large number of women in prison are single parents, the children of female inmates experience far more disruption in their lives than the more numerous children of male prisoners who, on the whole, stay with their mothers during their father's sentence ... because of the nature of the offence or because they are not advised of the possibility, women were frequently not expecting a sentence ... Most female offenders do not present a danger to the public". [Woodrow, 1998]

Yet, as a recent book [Carlen, 1998] has pointed out, the new "get tough" approach to crime is more punitive towards women, with twice as many women than men sentenced to imprisonment for a first offence.

Women and poverty

Poverty particularly affects women:

> "The major cause of poverty is low income, through unemployment, reliance on benefits, or low pay and insecure employment. A substantial body of research exists to show that women's and men's experience of these factors is different, and women's is worse." [May, 1997]

and as Jane Millar observes:

> "'Female-headed households', such as lone mothers and single women pensioners, are only the most visible tip of the iceberg of women's poverty. If we could see more clearly then we would certainly find many more women living in, or on the margins, of poverty. Some of these women are to be found in the statistics as members of poor families: married women, for example, living with husbands who are unemployed or economically inactive ... Another group of poor women are those who do have jobs but with earnings that are not enough to support them. These are the women who make up the vast majority of low-paid workers. Dex *et al* [1994] ... calculate that about four million women in Britain are low paid, equivalent to about a third of the female workforce ... In some ways, however, the most invisible of poor women are also, paradoxically, the most visible - women who are homeless and living on the streets ... The visible tip of women's poverty - the lone mothers and elderly sole women - is thus only one element of the true total. A more complete picture would also include women in 'no-earner' families, low-paid women, non-employed women completely dependent on others, and homeless women. A more complete picture would also probably tell us that some types of women face far higher risks of poverty than others (class, race, disability and region all play a part) and that women's chances of escaping poverty over time are often limited" [Millar, 1997]

Women and welfare services

Women are key users and suppliers of welfare services, but, as Barbara Bagilhole [1997] points out:

> "they were not in decision-making positions which frame and shape the services. Rather, these services were managed principally by men. Therefore, women could have little effect on services for women ..." (p173)

Lone parents

There is much focus currently on lone parents, and on ways in which the number of teenage pregnancies can be reduced. Lone parents are particularly at risk of poverty and social exclusion:

> "Lone parents are increasingly concentrated at the bottom of income distribution … Lone mothers are significantly worse off than lone fathers since they are much more reliant on state benefits (over 70 per cent of lone mothers are receiving income support) and are experiencing falling employment rates, especially full-time employment … Many lone mothers are excluded from employment by lack of child care and negative attitudes towards working mothers, and few lone mothers receive regular maintenance … A gender analysis shows that lone mothers are more vulnerable to poverty for the same reasons as married and cohabiting

women: women's unequal access to the labour market, to equal levels of pay within it, and because they take on the responsibility for care of the family." [May, 1997, p21]

Black women and discrimination

Some women are particularly discriminated against:

> "'The first time I realised I was Black was when I came to England. In Jamaica being Black wasn't an issue'." Marlene Bogle [Mason-John and Khambatta, 1993, p33]

> "Young black women bear all the hallmarks of a fundamentally inegalitarian society. They do well at school, contribute to society, are good, efficient workers yet, as a group, they consistently fail to secure the economic status and occupational prestige they deserve" [Mirza, 1992, p189]

The particular forms of discrimination which Black women face have been well described by many women writers: as just a few, representative examples, bell hooks examines many of the broad defining issues in her work [see for example: hooks, 1982; hooks, 1992]; Valerie Amos and Prathiba Parmar look at imperialism and feminism [1984]; Heidi Safia Mirza examines stereotypes of Black women [1992, pp146-165]; and Juliet Cook and Shantu Watt look at "Racism, women and poverty" [1992]. These issues also feature in the fiction writing by Black women such as Toni Cade Bambara, Paule Marshall, Toni Morrison, Gloria Naylor, and Alice Walker.

The Black lesbians interviewed for *Lesbians talk: making Black waves* [Mason-John and Khambatta, 1993] place the discrimination they have faced within its contexts, and identify the racism they encounter as: racism by omission, by exclusion and tokenism, by invisibility, by ignorance and fear, and by guilt:

> "There have been Black people in Britain for at least 500 years and for all that time there have been Black lesbians too. But isolation, racism and homophobia have made us invisible ... We were required to break our identities into acceptable fragments: we were Black in Black groups, women in the women's movement and lesbians on the lesbian scene." [Mason-John and Khambatta, 1993, p11]

Women and the Government's social exclusion agenda

Statements made in the current debates around exclusion can act to label and stigmatise some women. Martin Dutch [1999] identifies the current Government's sense of moral purpose, as reflected for example in the Social Exclusion Unit's report on teenage mothers. Here it is proposed that the solution for young mothers who cannot live with parents or a partner:

> "must be supervised semi-independent housing with support, not a tenancy on their own" [Dutch, 1999, p7]

Similarly, paid work as a means of promoting inclusion has an impact on lone parents in particular. Dave Muddiman [1999] describes how some policy-makers have argued that excluded groups have responsibilities as well as rights, and:

"As Levitas [1996] makes clear in her critique of social exclusion, one effect of such 'Durkheimian' ideas might well be to label and 'exclude' all of these - like some single parents for example - who are unprepared to take low paid work, when in reality they already perform a legitimate and indispensable social function." [Muddiman, 1999, p4]

Feminism, postfeminism and the women's movement

Having identified some of the critical issues facing women today, we thought that it would be valuable to briefly comment on the political background in terms of women's politics. Obviously, this is a vast and complex area, and we cannot give it all the coverage it needs, but this section is intended to identify some of the key points from our perspectives.

A major debate, at least as far as the media are concerned, is whether feminism is dead. Spurred on by the writings and utterings of, for example, Fay Weldon, Maggie Gee and Ros Coward (who, in general terms, feel that feminism must change to give men a chance), many of the daily newspapers regularly run headlines proclaiming the end of feminism:

"Few things can be more delightful, in the eyes of the right-wing press, than an erstwhile feminist who has now decided that the time for liberation is over, and the time for backlash has begun." [Walter, 1999]

Yet it is surely not that feminism is "dead", but that, possibly, a different stage has been reached - crucially revolving around women's relationship to men, and the growing recognition that:

"an issue making its way up the policy agenda is that of male exclusion." [May, 1997, p22]
Natasha Walter, for example, argues strongly that:

"We do need a new kind of feminism that sees the possibility for rapprochement between the sexes" [Walter, 1999]

but this argument is refuted by radical feminists who, having outlined some of the major effects of discrimination and patriarchy, say:

"Perhaps it becomes clear why all issues are feminist issues - and why bandaid reforms, or equality with men in a male-defined society, or "empowering" women to have "self-esteem" while leaving intact a status quo with a perforated ozone layer - all are pseudo-solutions that a radical feminist finds unacceptable ... [Morgan, 1996, p8][1]

Interestingly, this collection of pieces on radical feminism does not include any Cuban voices: whilst there are debates about the role of feminism in a male-headed state, nevertheless there has been some considerable progress for Cuban women under socialism

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[1] from a fascinating collection of writings, described in the blurb as "premised on an understanding of the interlocking power of racism, classism and (hetero) sexism as manifest under patriarchy" [Bell and Klein, 1996]

[see, for example, Stone, 1981; Lumsden, 1996].

At the same time, a reappraisal of feminism (along with all other aspects of society) is being carried out by feminists influenced by the psychoanalytic and postmodern agenda [see for example, Phoca and Wright, 1999], who argue that "difference" is the crucial factor - rather than looking at the shared oppression of women by men, these feminists are looking at the differences between women, for example through class, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation and age. As Chris Weedon says [1999]:

> "In poststructuralist forms of feminism, differences are discursively produced ... The idea that differences are produced within discourse does not, however, mean that they do not take material forms which have material effects ... The effect of poststructuralist theory is to see difference as material, as produced, but as ungrounded in any fixed nature. Some postmodern feminism has taken this idea further to see gender as a question of performance." (p24)

Whichever way the pack is cut, women are still getting a raw deal. A recent survey, *The whole woman*, [Greer, 2000, reported in Norton, 2000] says that

> "One in six women think they have a harder life than their mothers did, with those in their thirties and forties saying they are getting the toughest deal ... Most women believe that feminism has a long way to go to improve their lives ... Four out of ten said women were only allowed equal opportunities at work if they did not demand special consideration because of responsibilities for the care of children or the elderly and were prepared to put their jobs first ... Most [women surveyed] thought men had not moved on enough to have equal relationships and did not have the capacity to be self-reliant."

Controversially, the report concludes that women have "settled for a fake equality instead of true liberation" [Norton, 2000].

Women and the public library: users and non-users

As Geraldine B King states:

> "In many library use situations, most usually in academic and corporate libraries, there is little useful purpose in looking at women as a category of library user. *But women are the majority of public library users*. Subjects which are traditionally associated with women ... are the kind of practical lifestyle information that makes up much of public library reference." [1995, p180] (emphasis ours).

King then goes on to identify two critical issues which women library users as a group and use of "women's subjects" in libraries have in common:

> "While the users and topics make up the majority of information requests in public libraries, they are seldom covered in the professional literature of librarianship. They are not considered to be important enough or scholarly enough to be the subject of user needs research ... The second critical issue is that women's information needs and the resources to meet those needs are little covered in the education of librarians." (p180)[2]

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[2] In a rare example of a study within librarianship of the political and social differences between Black and white women - looking at the

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She concludes pithily:

> "Library information service has always tended to rush to provide the answer before finding out the question ... Studying and analyzing the everyday information needs of women ... has been little done." (p189)

In a fascinating study of the community information needs of urban Black women in South Africa, Felicite A Fairer-Wessels [1990] looks at models of provision, and makes some valuable - and still highly pertinent - comments:

> "In this research ... we are concerned with a particular area of need, namely, the urban black woman as a disadvantaged group, and we propose to radically change traditional library services to accommodate her needs ... The image of the library/[community information service] needs adapting in the following respects:
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> > - 'community-oriented' image
> > For libraries to be accepted they need to adapt from a traditional Western library model to a model relevant to disadvantaged black urban communities ... a community information service cannot merely be installed and thus imposed on the urban blacks from 'the top down', they will have to be consulted at length to allow for a relevant community information service to develop 'out of' the local black community ...
> > - 'new librarian' image
> > The librarians need to adopt a 'new' attitude towards the community they serve. They must be sensitive and attuned to community needs; they must develop interpersonal communication skills to be able to relate to the local community members on a 'personal' level ..." (pp365-6)

This is then followed by a list of recommendations for the improvement of services and stock to meet these needs.

We could also learn from another project, the Gender Programme run by the Zimbabwean non-governmental organisation, the Rural Libraries and Development Programme. They had established community libraries and provided information identified by the rural communities themselves, and, in 1993, they introduced the Gender and Development Unit to encourage access to information by women - this led to the establishment of the Gender and Development Programme 1995-7:

> "Women are using the libraries to seek more knowledge on information pertaining to their lives, adult literacy classes have been initiated mostly by women to improve their literacy skills ... Gender has been incorporated in all Rural Libraries and Development Programme activities and training courses and all libraries affiliated to the organisation must take gender issues on board." [Read, 1999, p85]

In her slightly dated but still highly relevant discussion of genre fiction, Rebecca O'Rourke [1993] explores some of the issues surrounding women's reading, and the reading of

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different perspectives of Black and white approaches to mother/daughter relationships - Hilary S Crew draws on work by Gloria I Joseph [1986] to explore feminist theories in relationship to African-American literature [Crew, 1994].

romances. As she says:

> "In a recent exploration of the reading habits of Cleveland library users an important first premise I had to recognise was that readers of genre fiction do not identify themselves in quite that way. People often talked about themselves of readers of everything and anything, or anything well written ... People who claimed to read anything and everything revealed, when prompted, a gendered preference for genre. Men wouldn't read romance, women wouldn't read war or western stories ..." (pp10-11)

Despite some women being completely open about their reading tastes:

> "'Romance is definitely my favourite. Sometimes I think it's all just the same old story and then I might not read anything for a while but I always come back to romance. It's something I haven't got - money, travel, all that. I know it isn't real, but you don't think of that as you're reading it.' (Woman, Cleveland Libraries)" (p10)

she identifies that:

> "The only group of readers who consistently apologised for their choice of books were women readers of romance. It is significant that a powerful sense of shame has been internalised by these women. It is also significant that, like a lot of socially de-valued female behaviour, women who did not read romance were quick and anxious to make that clear to me. Where have women picked up the message that their choice of reading needs to be apologised for?" (p11)

She goes on to say that:

> "Genres are gendered not just in what is written and read, but in the ways men and women will talk about their reading to women and men. Men did not admit to me their dependency on books to counter loneliness, nor did they often talk to me in detail about the appeal of westerns or war stories, although they had done so to a male colleague surveying library users ...
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> Few people will say they read a particular book or author because they thought it would be good for them ... Interestingly, far more people than I'd expected said they wanted something believable or true to life. The escapism of genre fiction lies less in its content, I would argue, than in the actual, social act of reading ... Perhaps women read romance less for the wish fulfilment of its imaginary sexual encounters than for its part in holding real unwanted sexual demands at bay ..." (pp12-13)

Bearing in mind these findings, Rebecca O'Rourke concludes her paper with some strong advice for us:

> "... people think they know what goes on when people read genre fiction. The evidence would suggest that they do not ... there is an assumption [by educationalists, the Arts Council and librarians] that it is straightforward to decide between good and bad books, good and bad readings. I would suggest that the issue is much more complex than it looks at first glance ..." (p17).

In much of the literature concerning the use of public libraries by women, there is an

emphasis on the safety of public libraries as a place for women to go:

> "The library space is regarded as a sanctuary, a place where one may sit, read, browse, sleep and remain unharassed; nobody is judged and therefore nobody is found wanting. It is often one of the few places in a busy city centre where people, particularly women, of all ages go alone and spend time without worry." [Greenhalgh, Worpole, Landry, 1995, p52]

> "Discussions with women who worked in Birmingham city centre showed that along with the museum and art gallery, the public library is a place that is easy and 'comfortable' to visit alone ... The case studies in Hounslow and Birmingham showed the library to be an important social and study place for Asian teenagers for whom the city centre represented a safe and respectable environment." [Greenhalgh, Worpole, Landry, 1995, pp92-3]

and

> "The library is an approved space in Asian family terms. It is acceptable (even desirable) for young girls, who often come from more tightly controlled backgrounds than their white counterparts, to go off to the library for the day." [Greenhalgh, Worpole, Landry, 1995, p95]

although this contrasts with the reality for some women who found the public library a place where sexual harassment was common, and where some libraries have responded by establishing women-only tables[3].

In reality, there has been little focus within UK librarianship on the library and information needs of women and their use (or non-use) of public libraries. For example, the *Review of the public library service ...* [1995] says only:

> "Our surveys reveal that only two-fifths of adult men use public libraries regularly, compared with three-fifths of adult women. However, the men who visit public libraries go there more frequently than women. Thus, public librarians are likely to see almost as many men in their libraries as women." (p122)

However, a little later, the *Review*, perhaps unwittingly, indicates some of the problems that women (and other socially excluded people) may face when trying to use a public library:

> "There was general agreement amongst chief executives, politicians and chief librarians that some of the contentious issues of the 1980s involving, in particular, sexism and racism were not now matters of high debate in terms of library stock holdings." (p128)

and they go on to quote from two "high-level interviews":

> "'*Playboy* and *Penthouse* - there's something a bit demeaning about their view of women, and the stereotyping of women around that. And therefore probably, as a woman, I would quite like to keep that away from as many people as possible until they have actually formed some views from their own parents or other people first, so that the idea of them being very readily

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[3] in Lambeth, we introduced women-only tables into the Reference Library to assist in combating the levels of sexual harassment that women were experiencing. Despite hostility and opposition from some male users, the majority of female users were pleased that this service had been offered. (JV)

available in a public place, I think, almost suggests that publicly we are reinforcing those stereotypes, that we think that's fine. So it's that sort of issue rather than what's actually in them, I suppose.'" (p128)

"' There were a number of issues that were running around five or ten years ago when unfortunately a number of librarians apparently seemed to abandon their first principles and pander to their own social consciences and try to inflict it on everyone else, and tried to ban all sorts of things. I think we've grown up and grown away from that now. I think the race issue and the sex issue, I think the sex issue is going to settle down and people are going to be more mature. There's still male chauvinism and there's militant feminism. Racism is still going to be an issue. And I would hope, again, maturity would prevail and a certain type of book would just cease to be written.'" (p128)

A recent survey of information-seeking behaviour [Marcella and Baxter, 1999], however, throws up some significantly different findings:

"In 1995, 49% of the UK population were males, 51% were females ... Interestingly, in the [part of the sample drawn from] the public libraries, the percentage of male respondents was 48.9%, compared to 50.3% female; this suggests a far smaller difference in library use by gender than that traditionally expected." [p162]

and this study also sheds some light on how gender is a factor affecting information needs. Asked about past information needs:

"With regard to gender, there were significant differences between the sexes. For example, 42.1% of the female respondents had indicated a past need for educational information, compared with 31.7% of male respondents – a difference of 10.4 points. There had also been a significant female preference for family/personal information (+9.5 points) and health care information (+8.9). Male respondents, meanwhile, manifested greater need for technology and communications (+7.0) and political information (+6.2)." [p168]

and on past reasons for wanting citizenship information:

"With regard to gender, three notable differences arose: there was a female preference for seeking information for family reasons (+9.0) and for health reasons (+6.4), but a male preference for business reasons (+7.2)." [p169]

It is clear from this that gender is a key factor in determining information needs, and there is an urgent need for more research into women's unmet information needs and how public libraries could respond to these. A number of recent pieces of work emphasises the lack of information - for example, talking about the New Deal for Lone Parents, Liz Sewell, Chief Executive of Gingerbread, says:

"Many lone parents have had little contact with the labour market, and lack information about in-work benefits [this] means that often lone parents have misconceptions about their position." [Sewell, 1999]

and a recent research project [Showumni, 1999] found that only 2% of Black lone parents found out about Gingerbread at a library, compared to 48% from a friend and 14% from

health visitors and health centres.

One reason for the level of UK teenage birth rates is said to be 'ignorance':

> "Young people lack accurate knowledge about contraception, STIs, what to expect in relationships and what it means to be a parent ... They do not know how easy it is to get pregnant and how hard it is to be a parent." [Social Exclusion Unit, 1999, p7]

and

> "...as parents, we are failing to teach our sons about sex and relationships. Only four per cent of the teenage boys surveyed by the project got most of their sex education from dad; another 11 per cent relied on mum. That's 15 percent of sons who talk effectively to their parents about sex. The rest have to get information where they can: 22 per cent rely on friends, 40 per cent on teachers, while the rest pick up what they can from TV, girlfriends, magazines and videos." [Katz, 1998]

Women as public library workers

Although there have, in the past, been studies of women as public library workers in the UK [eg Burrington, 1987; Collins, 1992], generally more recognition seems to have been paid to the contribution of women workers to librarianship (and the issues they face) in the US - for example, an article on sexual harassment in libraries [Watstein, 1993]; a celebration of the career of an African American librarian [Kemp, 1994]; the whole of a recent issue of *Library Trends* [1996] was devoted to "Imagination and scholarship: the contributions of women to American youth services and literature"; and a postmodern exploration of the stereotype of the female librarian has been published [Radford and Radford, 1997].

As part of her Comedia paper, *The public library as a place*, Liz Greenhalgh [1993] discusses "The library and librarians: feminised places, feminised roles", and makes some important points (and investigates old stereotypes):

> "The organisational culture of libraries and librarianship as a profession promotes certain values and characteristics of the service: neutrality, facilitation, mediation, appeasement; nurturing, tending and providing in a non-authoritarian way, and a sense of service. These characteristics are played out in the behaviour of librarians. The rank and file of the library profession and library assistants is made up of women. It is a sex-typed profession: 75% of public librarians are women (over 90% of library assistants are women) and many of these characteristics of the library profession are linked to femininity. But like teaching and social work the upper echelons of the profession are male dominated.
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> ... In discussion groups, the librarian's role has been described as demeaning because it is a service role: 'they have to get the books you ask for'. Librarians have to do what the public tells them; it's their job, and it is a job associated (for some) with servility. There maybe [sic] a contrast here with the culture of service in the US, where serving is not always considered demeaning ...
>
> Is there something within the organisational and professional culture of the library that

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perpetuates aspects of this stereotype, or is it outdated and unjustified? ... Does the (enforced) adherence to sex roles prevent women from developing professional autonomy? Is it that librarians contribute to the policing of public behaviour by enforcing codes of quietness and appropriate behaviour in the library?" (pp10-11)

Liz Greenhalgh then goes on to suggest that certain skills required for library work are seen:

"for better or worse as predominantly feminine. These include the skills of welcoming people, of making them feel at home, of extending hospitality, of working long hours on relatively low salaries and gaining job satisfaction without extensive career ambitions." (p11)

and that there is a tension between women librarians who see the library almost as a second home and the view that libraries should be run as a professional public service.

"It is the tension in the library between the feminised hospitality and the professional public service that not only characterises the service in many localities but also ensures that it functions well." (p11)

She suggests that "aspects of the interior design and decoration of community libraries that contribute to a sense of libraries as a feminine space ..." (p12) and that libraries are amongst the least threatening public spaces. She concludes:

"There are lessons to learn about the development of a public service culture within libraries; issues about how to engage with the public and how to reproduce the successful library ambience, its interior layout and design." (p12)

These themes are continued and developed in *Libraries in a world of cultural change* [Greenhalgh, Worpole, Landry, 1995] which states:

"The prevalence of domestic style interiors, especially within smaller public libraries, points to the predominance of women amongst library staff and the way in which female staff have helped to create a sense of hospitality, or as Gulten Wagner[4] describes, women in public librarianship support the library's role as a nurturing institution of the state. The prevalence of women amongst library staff and the effect this has on public perceptions of the service has barely been addressed by the library profession, in which most senior positions are held by men. Gulten Wagner argues that the gendered nature of the institution is part of the reason why the library service has been ignored. She goes on to suggest that the traditional role of the library as a nurturing institution comes into conflict with its role as a signifier of the information age, a role that has a more masculine image." (p64)

In 1996, the results of a major research study, *Women and senior management*, [Poland, Curran and Owens, 1996] were published. This study concludes that:

"In common with many other occupational areas in which women predominate there appears to be marked and persistent differences in the access of men and women to fully developed careers in LIS [the Library and Information sector]. However, these differences cannot be simply attributed to the attitudes and characteristics of individuals, as these are combined in

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[4] [Wagner, 1992]

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complex ways with structural and organisational factors which serve to marginalise particular types of work and workplaces within LIS working life." (p x)

To come to this conclusion, they identified some grim facts about working life in LIS:

"· 9% women and 20% men were in posts earning £27,000 and over

· 7% women and 16% men were in posts with management responsibilities for 50 or more staff

· 17% of women with children who had not worked part-time earned £27,000 or over, as compared with 4% of women with children who had worked part-time

· 7% of women and 1% of men had to stop working as a result of partner's job

· 35% of women and 0% of men had to stop working as a result of childcare responsibilities

· 24% women and 3% men chose hours fitting with domestic responsibilities as their main criterion in planning their future career ..." (taken from pp vi-ix)

As Gill Burrington [1997] says:

"Women outnumber men in library work in all English-speaking countries, as well as throughout Europe and the rest of the world where females are economically active, but men outnumber women in senior library positions. Women's status and role in librarianship is inevitably linked to the social and economic status of women in their society ... In the last two decades of the twentieth century there have been more women heads of library services ... They are sometimes held up as proof that women can achieve high-status posts, with the implicit suggestion that those who do not reach the same level are themselves responsible for their lack of success. But it is by being and by being seen to be decision-makers that these women make their most important contribution to advancing the status of women in libraries, as the more of them there are, the more it is seen as normal for women to occupy the key posts in the profession"

The reality for many women library workers (especially black and ethnic minority women) is of low-paid, low-status jobs. The spread of staffing in "Midcentre City" library service (as found by Roach and Morrison [1998]) is all too common:

"For full-time ethnic minority staff (mostly women), there is a clustering around scales 3-4; for part-time staff this is at scales 1-2 (again mostly women)." p79

A recent development by some local authorities is the establishment of call centres, and, whilst these may offer women opportunities for employment, they are not without their dangers: according to recent research for the European Commission, reported in *The Guardian* [Brown, 1999]:

"Continuously receiving telephone calls through a headset on an automatic system saps women's motivation and eventually forces them to quit ... Turnover of staff was enormous. Most left after a year. Some had a few months off before taking a job with another call centre until burnout occurred again. There were few opportunities for promotion, because the number of supervisors was small."

In the 1970s and early 1980s, women library workers formed the Women in Libraries group which achieved some success in putting women's issues on the library agenda [see for example, Jespersen *et al*, 1982; Allen, 1984], and in running some targeted training [see, for example, Martin, 1987], but, sadly (as far as we are concerned), this group was one of the casualties of 1980s politics.

Women and ICTs

Public libraries are pinning many of their hopes for renewal and future funding on the introduction of ICTs. However:

> "Organisations researching the use of ICTs in local communities emphasise that ICTs cannot be seen as a *'quick technological fix'* for women's poverty and disadvantage. Women's disadvantage in the complex arena of ICTs is reflected in access, take up, design, employment, content, visibility and so on." [Women Connect, 1999, p8] (emphasis theirs)

Despite the importance that ICTs can and should have for women (and some of these points are clearly identified in the report), there are problems in terms of women's access to ICTs. Women Connect organised a seminar to discuss women's access to ICTs (as part of their input to the information-gathering for PAT 15[5]), and participants identified the following:

> "The key barriers women experience are:
> - poverty – can't afford it; much to do as a carer
> - safety – can't go out at night
> - cultural – can't go out at all; need all women environments
> - image of ICTs – macho, irrelevant to women's lives and concerns
> - lack of basic skills and confidence necessary to access learning
> - citizenship – lack of access and dissociation from democratic processes." [Women Connect, 1999, p2]

Given this, and reflecting on Liz Greenhalgh's idea of the library as a feminised space, then perhaps the public library could be developed to overcome many of the access problems which women currently face. However, if they are to do so, then libraries must act quickly - the Women Connect report also contains some comments on current public library provision:

> "Women need to learn at their own pace, in an environment where they do not feel judged or compared unfavourably to others; some women felt 'overlooked' in public spaces such as libraries and found this off putting" [p16]

> "I have found that Stevenage library … allows free access to the internet for children under 16 years of age for one hour per week – proof of age required. Adults can use their internet access for the following charges: 10 mins - £1.00, half an hour - £3.00, one hour - £5.00. Again, money is an issue here – it may sound a reasonable expense but the time needed to spend on the computer for research can mean that the charge mounts up … Shared access to technology is vital – women living in small rural communities have additional costs with travel to gain shared access. Libraries are often situated in larger towns – my experience of

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[5] one of the Policy Action Teams set up by the Government to implement their social inclusion policies.

mobile libraries was that they only dealt with the issue of books, a most valuable resource but that there was no small computer system for use on board (mind you, that was some time ago when I used it and things may have changed)." (comments by a Women's Resource Centre worker) [p24]

"The local library offers free internet access in term time only – and have closed both the internet access and their homework room (funded by the local council) for the summer holidays … Unlike the library or other access points, women of all ages who come in [to the Ashfield Women's Centre] are using it for personal development; the school girls have said they prefer to come to the W[omen's] C[entre] as it [is] a safe space, free from male prowlers." (from a case study on women's internet access and usage at Ashfield Women's Centre) [p27]

Conclusion

Let's leave the final words to Nawal el Sa'adawi [1999]:

"'Power' is the *real* key word of the twentieth century and the next century and the next, so long as we are governed by the capitalist patriarchal system. Injustices based on race, gender, class, nationality, religion, etc., can all be justified in the name of the God, the state, the free market, the husband or the father ..." (p79)

"In the USA and other Western Christian societies there has been a history of explicit and implicit laws which prohibit equality between men and women or between people of colour and white people ... Some Western circles maintain that women's oppression is linked to Islam alone. But this contention is only their way of reinforcing their own superiority, and in my region is part of the international political game." (p81)

Recommendations

1. further research into the library needs of women (and particularly their information needs) to produce a report parallel to that by Patrick Roach and Marlene Morrison [1998]

2. public library authorities should produce and implement long-term strategies for tackling social exclusion, to involve: targeting priority needs; secure, sustainable funding; advocacy and innovation; monitoring and evaluation

3. investigate the potential value of introducing equalities standards into libraries (parallel to those produced by OFSTED)

4. ensure that, if supplier selection is introduced, specifications are written to include the supply of non-mainstream titles as required

5. ensure that the widest possible range of materials is made available, related to the needs of local communities, including for example promoting the writings of black

authors, investigating the supply of stock which may not be easily available

6. develop partnerships with other agencies, such as social services departments, education, health, and become involved in initiatives such as Education Action Zones, Early Years initiatives, Health Action Zones, "Sure Start", Single Regeneration Budget

7. training, both in areas of service delivery and stock awareness, including the development of staff training to combat sexism

8. further research into the current extent of community contact by public libraries, with recommendations for good practice

9. develop ways of supporting socially excluded women in their own analysis of their requirements

10. develop meaningful partnerships between public libraries and socially excluded women's groups (eg based on common objectives, shared resources)

11. the development of materials selection policies to cover the requirements of socially excluded women
12. research into comparisons of provision with other sectors, such as museums, the arts

13. public libraries need to review urgently their introduction of ICTs to ensure that, as far as possible, they assist in overcoming the barriers that women face

14. the Library Association and local government organisations to press for the (re)introduction of equal opportunity policies into all local authorities, and to ensure that the needs of socially excluded women are included

15. where they are applicable to the needs of lesbians, bisexual women and transgendered people, to press for the implementation of the recommendations in Working Paper no. 5, *Lesbians, bisexuals, gay men and transgendered people* [Vincent, 1999]

16. taking the "Issues for Action" from the *Women and senior management* report [Poland, Curran and Owens, 1996]:

> "**Employment issues**
>
> · support the development of child care initiatives that enable parents to continue in their careers as librarians
>
> · encourage more flexible working conditions such as job sharing; term time working; flexitime and other ways of working which facilitate career development alongside caring responsibilities without adversely affecting services

· pay especial attention to the conditions of employment of part-time workers whose access to training is likely to be especially under pressure

· strengthen means of dealing with sexual harassment for both sexes

Continuing Professional Development

· more flexible courses for continuing professional development such as distance learning

· encourage the development of means for improving access to training that will facilitate movement between sectors and specialisms and into management

· explore means of valuing and accrediting a wider range of career patterns and of 'transferable experience' between sectors

· encourage regular career appraisal and counselling to ensure individual career support

Networking

· foster a greater variety of means for professional networking and mentoring

· work to break down organizational isolation and marginalisation of particular LIS posts and specialisms. Support conditions for staff working in 'one person libraries', often schools, or decentralised departments where there may be difficulties in covering absences for training and in fostering appreciation of specific LIS professional development needs

Other Issues

· provide focused support for older applicants

· determine whether, if women are having children later they are encountering more age-related biases and problems in returning from later career breaks

· diversify means for career networking" (pp xi-xii)

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