



**UN OHCHR Working Group on Discrimination against Women and Girls:
Call for submissions on women's and girls' sexual and reproductive
health and rights in situations of crisis**

Response from the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions

The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions would like to thank the Working Group for the opportunity to contribute to this call for submissions. We appreciate the Working Group's decision to focus on the topic of women and girls' sexual and reproductive health (SRH) and rights in crisis situations in the upcoming report. We also deeply welcome the survey's acknowledgement of the importance of access to information in ensuring women and girls' SRHR.

IFLA is the global organisation for libraries and library associations. We work with libraries worldwide to share good practices, develop standards, raise awareness and inspire action. This in turn serves to support and encourage access to SRH information through libraries, among other areas. Drawing on the library sector experiences, we would like to highlight relevant initiatives and good practices in ensuring access to SRH information – and would therefore like to focus on questions 4A and 4F in this contribution.

Core library services and access to SRHR information

Offering access to health and healthcare information falls within libraries' broader mission to ensure equitable access to information and knowledge. As open facilities and community hubs, they can be well-positioned to help deliver interventions that support the health and wellbeing of their communities. The 2018 "Libraries Deliver" report,¹ for instance, highlights that improving health and wellbeing outcomes and reducing related inequalities is one of the seven key roles of UK libraries. When focusing on SRH information and strategies specifically, libraries can also help – a 2012 UNESCO overview of sexuality education policies and strategies in Asia and the Pacific (including a strong focus on SRH issues), for example, mentions three policies which set out to engage libraries or librarians.²

This can in part be delivered through core library services – access to quality electronic and print materials, information services, as well as by offering public internet access. 2015 Pew Research Center data shows that in the US, 73% of survey participants over the age of 16 said libraries help people find necessary health information.³ The same survey indicated that 42% of people accessing public internet at a library have done so to look for health-related information.

This can, of course, include SRH information. For example, in a survey administered as part of a Pennsylvania-based study by Whiteman et al (2018),⁴ a share of surveyed libraries reported interacting with patrons about contraception and sexual and gender identity matters in the past month (23 and 18%, respectively).

As such, core library services (access to relevant print and electronic courses, information services, public internet access) can help people access crucial SRH information.

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/libraries-deliver-ambition-for-public-libraries-in-england-2016-to-2021/libraries-deliver-ambition-for-public-libraries-in-england-2016-to-2021>

² <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000215091>

³ https://www.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/9/2015/09/2015-09-15_libraries_FINAL.pdf

⁴ https://www.cdc.gov/pcd/issues/2018/17_0392.htm

Targeted programs and initiatives

Libraries can be well-suited to deliver targeted interventions to raise knowledge and awareness around key SHR topics among women and girls. This can be especially important in more challenging circumstances or where women and girls have fewer resources or rights.

For example, the READ Information and Resource Centre's Capacity-building Initiative in Nepal responded to community needs of women – some of whom lacked formal education, had low levels of literacy, or had fewer other marketable skills.⁵ To help empower women and girls, this initiative offered them a programme of seminars and workshops on various topics – including health and women's rights.⁶ More broadly, the READ (Rural Education and Development) Global initiative, established in 1991 in Nepal, set up a network of rural libraries in Nepal, Bhutan and India - these provide women with a safe environment, access to crucial information, and support. Among others, these centers offer access to information resources on reproductive health, sanitation, and hygiene.⁷

In Ghana, the Laterbiokorshie library worked to address the rising cases of teenage pregnancies (frequently prompting stigmatisation and/or discontinued school education) through a reproductive health education project.⁸ The library worked in cooperation with the MEP for the local constituency, the Directorate of Public Health and Ghana Education Services, Planned Parenthood of Ghana and the Mamprobi Polyclinic to deliver a series of scheduled talks. Through a large-scale campaign, the library and its partners have already reached 2000 school children, addressing such topics as sexual and reproductive health and sexual violence, abortion, hormonal changes, and more.

In Zambia, a Washington D.C.-based nonprofit organisation Lubuto Library Partners works with local partners to set up sustainable library services, especially for children and youth – with a particular focus on low-income youth, out of school or rural residents. One of their programs sought to address the rising incidence of HIV among adolescent girls and young women – having received a grant, they developed a two-component programme of (a) scholarships to keep girls in school and (b) mentoring programs for library patrons focusing on SRH and gender equality for girls-only, boys-only and mixed groups, as well as SRH and gender equality-promoting resources and a program focusing on family literacy.⁹

Access to key SRH information and resources can also be ensured through innovative approaches – in Burundi, Libraries Without Borders installed “idea cubes” – portable digital library kits - in Community Youth Centers. Focusing on quality sexual and reproductive health information, especially for young girls, they also trained local partners to deliver workshops based on this content and resources.¹⁰

Library-based interventions can help raise awareness and knowledge about SRHR among girls and women, especially those in more vulnerable demographics.

Consultation and service delivery

Through a partnership with health service providers, Lubuto Library Partners were also able to set up HIV testing sessions at public libraries. Their experience suggested, inter alia, that trusted non-traditional testing sites like libraries⁹ can be beneficial; since libraries can help engage more

⁵ <https://www.eifl.net/eifl-in-action/empowering-women-and-girls-innovation-award>

⁶ <https://www.ifla.org/files/assets/hq/topics/libraries-development/documents/access-and-opportunity-for-all.pdf>

⁷ <https://da2i.ifla.org/wp-content/uploads/da2i-2017-full-report.pdf>

⁸ <https://librarymap.ifla.org/stories/Ghana/ACCESS-TO-SEXUAL-AND-REPRODUCTIVE-HEALTH-EDUCATION-IN-THE-LIBRARY-TO-CURB-TEENAGE-PREGNANCY/130>; <http://library.ifla.org/2316/1/s01-2018-osuigwe-en.pdf>

⁹ <http://library.ifla.org/1695/>

¹⁰ <https://1wb2020us.bibliosansfrontieres.org/our-tools-and-programs/>

vulnerable groups like adolescent mothers or young people with disabilities, who might otherwise not be reached by other initiatives.¹¹

This, and some of the other examples above, show how libraries can work in partnerships to help reach more target groups and offer consultations - or even service delivery – through the library. In the UK, for example, Coventry’s Central Library saw a sexual health service stall set up once a week through a partnership with Coventry and Warwickshire partnership NHS trust, helping them reach more people.¹²

In the US, Planned Parenthood worked with the Queens Library to train librarians to answer questions about sexual and reproductive health – with a focus on helping teens with their queries.¹³

Crisis situations and vulnerable groups

As the examples above show, library-based interventions to improve access to SRH information and knowledge are often targeted at more vulnerable population groups, or address existing challenges. As such, these can complement efforts focused on responses to immediate crises such as natural disasters or military conflicts by addressing more long-standing, structural challenges (i.e. prevalence of teenage pregnancies or HIV transmissions among girls and young women) or improving the individual experiences of women and girls.

Aside from targeted interventions, traditional library services which improve access to SRH information could also be particularly valuable to potentially more vulnerable or marginalised social groups – e.g. those lacking a reliable internet connection or access device, those with lower incomes, and so on. For example, the 2015 Pew research mentioned above shows that women, people with a Hispanic background, people over 65 and people with annual household incomes below \$30,000 are especially likely to say that libraries help “a lot” with seeking health-related information.¹⁴

Library services and library-based interventions that improve access to SRH information can be especially important for women and girls belonging to more vulnerable or marginalised groups.

¹¹ <http://programme.aids2018.org/Abstract/Abstract/8632>

¹² <https://www.theguardian.com/healthcare-network/2016/mar/23/libraries-offer-sexual-health-services-cancer-support>

¹³ <https://www.ippf.org/blogs/taking-sex-education-teens-queens>

¹⁴ <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2015/09/15/who-uses-libraries-and-what-they-do-at-their-libraries/>