



Libraries Delivering Gender Equality

How Libraries Feature in National Reports on the Beijing Declaration

2020 is a landmark year for global efforts towards gender equality and women's empowerment. It marks the 25th anniversary of the *Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action* – an ambitious roadmap for the empowerment of girls and women to which state governments and the international society have committed.

The *Declaration and Platform* were developed during the Fourth United Nations World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995. The Conference brought together an unprecedented group of stakeholders – thousands of government representatives and non-government activists – to draft a plan of action that tackles 12 critical areas for women's empowerment, from poverty to education, from media to the environment and beyond.

In the years following the introduction of the *Beijing Declaration and Platform*, there has been a concerted effort to monitor progress in its implementation, to support and steer further action. The 25th anniversary of the Declaration and Platform in 2020 sees a large-scale review process among all participating nations – *Beijing+25*. This review process has particular weight as we move into the Decade of Delivery on Sustainable Development Goals and prepare to accelerate action in order to deliver on the promise of SDG 5 – Gender Equality – in the next 10 years.

As part of the review process, each participating country has submitted [a national report](#), detailing its implementation progress, achievements, challenges and actions. These reports offer a unique opportunity to see how each country works to achieve gender equality, what actors are involved and how each of them contributes.

Beijing+25 national reviews: what roles do libraries play?

As a [2020 IFLA briefing](#) explains, the *Platform* contains a significant number of objectives and proposed actions where libraries can contribute. From reducing female illiteracy to promoting lifelong education, from guaranteeing access to health and legal information to raising awareness and combating negative stereotypes, many targets outlined by the Platform align with the work and goals of libraries.

As the national reports discuss the actions taken to implement the *Declaration and Platform*, this review process offers a valuable opportunity to see how libraries are involved in delivering on the commitments in these key areas.

To gain more insight on the role of libraries, we have compared how different national reports include and reference libraries and librarians – and what roles they play in each country's path towards realising gender equality. We performed a keyword search for 'library' and 'libraries' in all available documents – and, having compiled the full set of reports containing at least one such reference, we have compared how libraries feature in these reports.

By outlining the different areas of action where libraries are involved, the types of libraries and the scope of their activities, we hope to show the broad spectrum of what libraries can do to help achieve gender equality.

We hope this outline inspires further action by governments and libraries around the world and strengthens the case for libraries' involvement in national plans to achieve gender equality as we head into the Decade of Delivery. To achieve this, we encourage libraries to use the examples given here in your advocacy to decision-makers and funders.



Part 1: Libraries in the Beijing+25 national reviews - scope and scale

A keyword search for ‘library’ and ‘libraries’ shows that more than 35 national reports contain at least one reference to libraries. From Australia and the Bahamas to the United Kingdom and Uzbekistan, different libraries – public, school, academic, national or special – have played a role in delivering on the *Platform’s* commitments.

In some reports, references to libraries and/or library services were part of the broader situational analysis; other documents detailed specific measures taken by libraries (or with the help of libraries) that fall within the *Platform’s* framework. In others yet, libraries are mentioned in the plans for future actions towards gender equality and the implementation of the *Platform*.

Libraries and the Current State of Implementation

The national reports contain a diagnosis of where things stand today, with some including recognition of the contribution of libraries to each country’s achievements to date. There is also consideration of challenges, and the broader key factors that currently impact the critical areas outlined in the Beijing Platform for Action.

- The Kazakhstan and Kuwait reports, for example, mention that library services in the countries are available to all people equally regardless of gender – this is a part of ensuring equal access to education and learning opportunities (especially in schools).
- In Lebanon, the growing number of women in appointed leadership positions in the National Library, the General Organisation of Museums and the National Institute of Music is highlighted as one of the main examples of progress made towards having more women in positions of power in public institutions.

On the other hand, some reports also showed that challenges encountered by libraries (or a lack of library services) can be an important impediment to the empowerment of women and girls.

- For example, the Liberian report notes the lack of school libraries as one of the challenges to ensuring more access to quality education and learning opportunities.
- The Seychelles national report mentions that the closure of the National Library in Victoria negatively impacts people’s access to information. The report assesses that this issue impacts the public at large – and especially those who have fewer opportunities to go online, as well as students and scholars.

These references provide a useful example of how, in any assessment of how well a given country is delivering on key social goals such as gender equality, it is worth considering what libraries are contributing, or where weaknesses in library service provision may be holding back progress.

The interventions: key areas of library involvement

Many reports do include references to specific measures taken by and through libraries. The reports outline various initiatives where libraries are involved as initiators, co-organisers, implementation partners or assistants. Across the different reports, several thematic clusters have emerged – these are the implementation areas where libraries are more likely to be involved.

Area 1: EDUCATION, SKILLS DEVELOPMENT AND TRAINING

Libraries were frequently mentioned in the context of improving women and girls’ access to quality education and learning opportunities. In many cases, interventions mentioned in this area involved school or academic libraries:



- For example, the report from Mauritania mentions establishing school libraries as part of the measures taken to upgrade schools and broaden girls' access to education and training. Similarly, Indonesia lists a government intervention to equip vocational educational institutions with libraries and laboratories as part of the efforts to achieve the same objective, while the Tanzanian report mentions that equipping several schools with libraries has been a part of the measures to increase girls' access to and success in education.
- National and regional universities in Kyrgyzstan have set up libraries that contain literature on relevant gender topics.
- Meanwhile, Cambodia introduced a measure to send library packages to several secondary schools with the aim of improving the quality of education (as part of a larger project to help equip more girls with a basic level of education).
- The report from Cameroon mentions setting up a server to access the National Digital Library as a measure to deliver quality distance education.

Within the broader context of education, libraries were also mentioned in the specific sub-area of *literacy*. [As the World Bank sources show](#), the gender literacy gap is declining but not eradicated – which means that more literacy efforts are needed to reach parity.

- In Palau, libraries are among the venues where dedicated organisations promote read-aloud programmes.
- In Ghana, the Library Authority has introduced a mobile library program for children to promote reading.

Summary: investments in libraries and library services can be an important part of a set of measures to improve the quality of education for girls and women - especially in schools, universities and vocational training institutions. Interventions often involve setting up either library services or targeted programmes with the help of existing library facilities.

Area 2: DIGITAL INCLUSION

The Platform also suggests actions to promote access to communication technologies for women – particularly for free expression and to enable access to decision-making. In the years that have followed, women's digital inclusion has grown to be a highly important area of gender equality discourse – especially since the global digital gap in internet access and use persists to this day. In the reviewed national plans, libraries are also mentioned as facilitators for women's digital inclusion:

- In Estonia, a project aiming to create a sustainable network of digital literacy centers in local libraries saw over 1000 librarians trained to help their communities develop such skills. They were trained to be able to cover a broad range of topics – from basic technology use to social media use and cybersecurity – and so help otherwise vulnerable and marginalised groups make the most of the internet.
- The report from the UK highlights the work of libraries to ensure digital inclusion by providing both public internet access and digital skills training and support.
- In Uzbekistan, a government initiative to increase affordable access to the Internet saw public WiFi installed in select types of public areas – including libraries – again benefitting those less likely to be able to use home connections.

Summary: libraries can help bridge the gender digital gap by offering both public internet access and digital skills training and support for women and girls in their communities.



Area 3: MEDIA LITERACY AND NEGATIVE GENDER STEREOTYPES

One of the critical areas outlined by the Platform is the relationship between women and media. One of the important points raised in this area is the possible impacts of the way women are portrayed in media, and women's ability to participate in media creation. Promoting media literacy can help achieve both – and libraries can take on this role.

- In the Netherlands, many libraries are part of the *Mediawijzer* network, which aims to boost media literacy among children and youth – including safe media use and awareness of the risk of the creation and spreading of stereotypes and misinformation.
- In Latvia, librarians receive support from the Ministry of Culture to help their communities – particularly youth – develop media literacy skills.

More broadly, libraries can promote access to books and media that promote gender equality, helping raise awareness and address negative gender stereotypes:

- In South Korea, the government plans to introduce the “Gender-equal Children’s Books and Art and Culture” project. As part of the project, school libraries and bookstores would set aside a dedicated zone for books promoting gender equality, as selected by the government.

Summary: libraries can help their communities develop media literacy skills, thereby combatting negative stereotypes and supporting engagement by all in media creation. This can also be done in partnership with government authorities or other organisations and institutions. In addition, libraries can help ensure access to books and media that promote gender equality and address negative stereotypes.

Area 4: SOCIAL INCLUSION

An important theme running through the entire Platform for Action is the need to address the needs and promote the rights of women and girls facing multiple forms of discrimination. Some national measures to this end have also engaged libraries:

- In Benin, there is a library accessible for people with disabilities at the Cotonou Court of Appeal. The report lists the library among the public establishments that offer education and training opportunities for people with disabilities, including of course women with disabilities who may face particular challenges otherwise.
- The Reykjavik City Library in Iceland has partnered with a dedicated civil society organisation to host a multicultural Women’s Story Circle. The goal of the project is to promote intercultural understanding and help foster integration – especially for women of foreign descent.
- Relevant state bodies in Slovenia cooperate with libraries and cultural institutions to deliver educational activities for migrant women, particularly asylum-seekers.

In addition, libraries and library services can be part of a strategy to ensure women’s access to social services. Such measures can help mainstream a gender perspective on participation in social, public and economic life – and therefore contribute to several intervention areas outlined in the Platform.

- The government of South Korea introduced a project establishing childcare services in safe public facilities for families in need of such services. Libraries are among the public facilities where this programme can be implemented.
- In Georgia, a measure to expand and better accommodate women’s access to municipal services, ‘women’s rooms’ have been established in 13 municipality buildings in two regions. These rooms are equipped with computers, a library, internet access and



children's corners; and can also serve as meeting points for women, who find it harder than men to find public gathering places.

Summary: libraries can help support women and girls facing multiple forms of discrimination by providing access to learning opportunities and promoting their social inclusion. More broadly, libraries and library services can help promote women's access to social services and their participation in social and public life.

Area 5: ADDRESSING VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS

Several reports have also indicated libraries' involvement in awareness-raising campaigns to prevent and address violence against women and girls.

- In Belgium, the Brussels-Capital region ran an awareness campaign "Report Violence". The campaign prepared on posters and brochures to encourage victims of gender-based violence to file a report, and witnesses to support and reassure the victims. Libraries were among the key venues where the brochure had been distributed.
- In Lithuania, a project funded by the European Union and the national government distributed around 70 thousand bookmarks in libraries and bookstores across the country. The bookmarks contained key information on violence against women; and the project specifically targeted women in smaller towns who are less likely to receive such information online or through TV media channels.

Summary: libraries can draw on their ability to reach community members to raise awareness around violence against women and girls. They can challenge stigmas and perceptions surrounding gender-based violence and offer key information on available remedies.



Part II: Different Approaches to Library Engagement

Library activities in the areas outlined above show a variety of ways in which libraries have contributed to wider efforts to achieve the goals of the Beijing Agenda – and differences in the extent of their involvement.

In practice, this means that libraries in different situations and with different levels of capacity can find ideas for engagement that would suit them and their circumstances, and advocate to governments for inclusion in wider planning.

Based on the intensity of library efforts an intervention might demand, the following classification can be made:

Library-Led Interventions and Initiatives. Some reports pointed to libraries' everyday work as a contribution to women's empowerment in the critical areas outlined by the Platform. Consider the example mentioned in the UK report: libraries' everyday work contributes to digital inclusion by offering public internet access, support and skills training. In light of the existing gender gap in internet access and use, the availability of such services can be of particular relevance for women and girls in a given community.

The same goes for more labour-intensive projects, such as the digital literacy initiative described in the Estonian report: as part of the e-Community project, librarians were to be trained and equipped with training materials in order to turn local libraries into digital skills training centres for the citizens.

Elsewhere, libraries and library agencies have launched their own initiatives to support gender equality and women's empowerment. Consider, for example, the launch of Ghana Library Authority's Mobile Library project: this standalone initiative can help deliver on the Platform's critical area of quality education and training.

Overall, it follows that investment in effective and innovative library services can help achieve national commitments under the Beijing Agenda.

Libraries as Partners and Platforms. Libraries can also support other stakeholders' projects or initiatives, depending on their capacity and the time and resources upon which they can call. This could, for example, entail offering physical space to host an event - in the Bahamas, Harry C. Moore Library of the University of the Bahamas was the location for the 2018 International Women's Day Forum. The Forum was held by the Department of Gender and Family Affairs and focused on "Challenges and Opportunities in Achieving Gender Equality and Empowerment of Rural Women and Girls".

Libraries can also rely on their ability to reach their community members to distribute informational materials and support awareness campaigns – as was the case, for example, with informational brochures and leaflets regarding violence against women. Governments and others should be ready to make use of libraries' unique potential as spaces and as places for sharing information.

Library Services Supporting Wider Projects. The reports also hint at further ways for libraries to be involved in the Platform's implementation, for example in supporting efforts to assess and describe gender diversity in political representation (the House of Commons Library in the UK). Similarly, the Research and Library Services of the Fiji Parliament carries out gender analysis of budget allocations. These examples show how the roles government and parliamentary libraries can take on.



Several national reports also give hints as to where library-related services can contribute to the implementation of the Platform:

- for example, an ‘e-library repository’ for educational materials in schools and public learning institutions (Guyana);
- raising awareness by maintaining a dedicated centre and library of the Commission for Citizenship and Gender Equality in Portugal;
- a ‘library in a box’ initiative in Ghana, where public schools receive boxes with books to promote reading and literacy; or
- a government initiative to increase disaster preparedness in schools in Nepal which includes, inter alia, establishing a ‘school disaster library’.

Based on the library roles and areas of intervention outlined above, we suggest a draft checklist to see how libraries are involved in their country’s approach to implementing the *Platform* – and whether the current approach is making good use of the resources and competencies of libraries.

We hope that this draft checklist can help libraries get an initial assessment of the situation in your country and inspire further action as we head into the decade of delivery!

Library Engagement in Women’s Empowerment: a checklist

A. Diagnostics

- Can people of all genders access library services equally?
- Does everyone in the country have good access to high-quality library services (and if not, what impact could this have on women and girls’ empowerment)?
- Are libraries able to analyse and work to remove any gender barriers that might prevent women and girls’ equitable access to libraries?

B. Strategy

- Are libraries and library services included in the national action plan and/or strategy for gender equality (if this exists)?

C. Interventions

- Are libraries and library services involved in government-supported interventions to empower women and girls in any of the following areas:
 - o Education, skills development and training
 - o Digital inclusion
 - o Media literacy
 - o Social inclusion
 - o Addressing violence against women and girls
 - o Women in power and decision-making
 - o Other?
- Are libraries and library services sufficiently equipped and supported to take on a role in a given project in this capacity?

If the answer to any of these questions is ‘no’, you should feel free to point to the examples cited in this paper in looking to advocate to decision-makers or funders about the value of supporting stronger library engagement!