



Providing information to women in Croatia: improvements inspired by feminist groups' initiatives

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Abstract:

Librarianship as mainly a female profession in the international context has developed quite an interest in evaluating the information needs of women and their promotion through libraries, professional and non-governmental organizations. In the American Library Association there are two sections that deal with women's issues: *The Committee for the Status of Women in Librarianship* and *The Feminist Task Force* which is part of the *Social Responsibilities Round Table* (SRRT). Round Tables are organized as units within the American Library Association (ALA). It works to make ALA more democratic and to establish progressive priorities not only for the Association, but also for the entire profession. In Croatian librarianship we do not have a similar tradition related to women's issues but, after 20 years of the recent women's movement, we can say that the impact of the feminists groups in the field of development and modernization providing information for women in Croatia has been very fruitful. Today there are an array of institutions (governmental and nongovernmental) with organized libraries and special information centres for women. The rising of official interest in women's issues - aside from the professional association of librarians in Croatia - is largely dependent of the increase of critical mass interest in women's topics within the whole society. Our intention with this presentation is doing a contribution in that direction.

Key words: Women's Issues * Responsible librarianship

1. Introduction

Librarianship as mainly a female profession in the international context has developed quite an interest in evaluating the information needs of women and their promotion through

libraries, professional and non-governmental organizations. At the same time, we can mention only a few published scientific papers in which librarianship is discussed from a gender perspective. The above mentioned problem of valorisation of female contributions in librarianship development was the topic of the scientific conference “*Gendering Library History*” that was held in the United Kingdom in 1999. By reviewing different documents and scientific papers throughout history, most of the participants of the conference came to the conclusion that the female role in librarianship development was neither carefully investigated nor properly valorised. All presentations were published in a collection of papers published in 2000 with support from Liverpool University¹. The conference was held anent to 150 years of the first *Public Libraries Act* and represents a valuable contribution to women’s issues in librarianship.

The American Library Association (ALA), through the work of two sections that deal with women’s issues: *The Feminist Task Force*² and *The Committee for the Status of Women in Librarianship*³ (COSWL), puts special effort in promoting a responsible approach to women and their role in the librarianship profession as well as in society. The above mentioned sections were established in the mid-seventies and are still very active, especially in the field of implementation of projects of gender equality and economic empowerment of women.

Together with the UN Commission for the Statuts of Women they organise conferences on women's issues topics⁴. The Feminist Task Force today acts as a section of *The Social Responsibilities Round Table*⁵ (SRRT) and is a part of a wider professional community which since 1969 aims to raise awareness of social and socio-political issues with special emphasis to human and economic rights, not only in the American Library Association but in the entire profession as well.

¹ *Gendering Library History* / edited by Evelyn Kerslake, Nickianne Moody. Liverpool : Media Critical and Creative Arts Liverpool John Moores University : Association for Research and popular Fiction, 2000, str. 1-4.

² The Feminist Task Force. Dostupno na dresi: <http://libr.org/ftf/> (14.03.2012.)

³ Committee for the Status of Women in Librarianship. Avaliable at: <http://www.ala.org/groups/committees/ala/ala-coswl> (14.03.2012.)

⁴ „Gender Equality to End Poverty“. International Women's Day: Honoring rural Women's Contributions. Avaliable at: <http://feministtaskforce.org/> (14.03.2012.)

⁵ Social Responsibilities Round Table (SRRT) of the American Library Association. Avaliable at: <http://libr.org/srrt/about.php> (27.03.2012.)

American professionals active in the work of SRRT believe that all librarians should be able to recognise existing global social problems and work on their solutions throughout their professional work and private contributions.

This round table is part of ALA, organized in a number of sections that deal with different questions of social responsibility. The Feminist Task Force is one of the most active units dealing with different topics; this year marks the 10th anniversary of *Amelie Bloomer List* project: the top list of books regarding a feminist perspective. The list is published yearly on their website and aims at a younger audience⁶. Since 1970 the Feminist Task Force section publishes official gazettes titled *Women in Libraries: The Newsletter of the American Library Association SRRT Feminist Task Force*⁷.

Members of ALA were also especially responsible for promoting women's issues within the *International Federation of Library Associations* (IFLA). The beginning of no formal assembling regarding women's issues within IFLA goes back to the 1980s. The first formal meeting of the *Women's Interests Group* was held in 1990 in Stockholm. Later on the group acted under the name *Women's Issues Round Table*. The Section for Women's Issues was founded in 2003. After two mandates the Section was disbanded.

Nowadays there is an IFLA special interest group, '*Women, Information and Libraries Special Interest Group*', sponsored by IFLA's Management of Library Associations Section, which aims at women library users as well as librarians who provide services for the benefit of women. Its mission is to promote and support libraries and librarians in the development of information services for women's welfare and overall social benefit, with special emphasis on education and gender equality⁸.

⁶ Feminist Task Force celebrates 2011 Amelia Bloomer list. // ALA News. Available at: <http://americanlibrariesmagazine.org/news/ala/feminist-task-force-celebrates-2011-amelia-bloomer-list> (15.03.2012.)

⁷ Women in libraries: The Newsletter of the American Library Association SRRT Feminist Task Force. Available at: <http://ftfinfo.wikispaces.com/Women+in+Libraries> (14.03.2011.)

⁸ See: Women Information and Libraries Special Interest Group. Available at: <http://www.ifla.org/en/about-the-women-information-and-libraries-special-interest-group>. (12.03.2012.)

2. Women Issues and Responsible Librarianship

The term *responsible librarianship* reflects the personal and professional engagement of librarians who, as every other citizen, have a legal right and duty to participate in the social development of their community. Social justice and freedom of thinking are one of the basic values of our profession and they demand our responsible and active approach.

Human rights, women's rights, free access to information, combating poverty, social exclusion and all kind of discrimination, together with similar issues, are some of the questions that interest librarians throughout the world. Active participation in establishing a rightful society is considered to be a basic part of our professional duty since we serve our society throughout our responsible work in the librarian's field, making responsible librarianship our mission. Today, in international circles it is common to use the term *progressive librarianship* beside the term *responsible librarianship*. This term is mostly connected to the work and program of an independent librarian association: *The Progressive Librarians Guild (PLG)*, founded in New York in the 1990s⁹. The members of PLG don't accept the term neutral in librarianship and they strongly oppose to commercialization of information stating the information is a public not private good and should be used for serving all citizens.

In the last 20 years certain changes had taken place within Croatian librarianship. Through its work and overall activities regarding the role of librarians in the development of modern society, the Croatian librarian society had set an example and new routes in Croatian librarianship. In 1998 the Croatian librarian society established the *Committee for Free Research and Free Access to Information* at their conference in Zadar, similar to IFLA's committee. It was the first competent expert body open to all that support freedom of thinking, protection of human rights, and ethical as well as professional codex in all social sensitive topics.

Despite the abovementioned trends in Croatian librarianship, until today there has not been a systematical evaluation or research on the information needs of women. We can mention only a few isolated cases of a few librarians. At 66th IFLA Conference held in Jerusalem (2000), member of Croatian librarian society Edita Bačić was included in the work of the *Round Table on Women's Issues* for the first time. She participated at the same conference with a

⁹ See: Progressive Libarains Guild. Avaliable at: <http://libr.org/plg/statement.php> (25.04.2012.)

poster presentation on the topic of information needs of women in Croatia¹⁰. At the 67th IFLA conference held in Boston she delivered a lecture on the potential partnership of librarian associations and the NGO sector in Croatia¹¹. After that she acted as Information Coordinator of the IFLA body¹² for a short period of time. On a few occasions she spoke at public lectures held by Croatian librarian society of her engagement together with others participants of IFLA conferences. Participating at the 11th Round table for free access to information, Croatian librarians got the possibility to discuss women's issue from a professional point for the first time.

3. Women activism in Croatia

At the beginning of 19th century the position of women in society was determined by their role in family life, while public participation was reserved exclusively for men. The position of women in Croatia wasn't much different from international trends, beside the fact that it was delayed compared to Europe and Western world trends. In modern, developed countries a significant shift regarding women's issues started in the middle of the 19th century and, in Croatia, at its end. At the beginning of the 20th century the shift from agrarian to industrialised society took place and, with it, slowly came a shift from patriarchy to civil society. A gradual integration of women into the high education system was taking place at the same time. The first *Viša djevojačka škola High school for girls* opened in 1869 in Zagreb, and later in other cities. By the end of the 60s Vladimir Mažuranić and other intellectuals whose work was connected to the journal *Vienac* supported women in their aspiration for equality and organised different lectures for women about modern trends in social studies and science. The beginning of the 70s marked a new phase on the women's movement in Croatia. It started mostly thought the work of Marije Fabković and Marije Jambrišak, two teachers who actively participated in the reform of women education¹³. The possibility of high education of women started at the end of the 19th century (in 1895 women were allowed to listen to certain lectures

¹⁰ Bačić, Edita: Multicultural Exchange and partnership among feminists NGO's as a fundamental Motivation for Creating women's network in Croatian librarianship. 66th IFLA General Conference, Jerusalem, 2000. Conference Programme and Proceedings. Available at: <http://archive.ifla.org/IV/ifla66/66cp.htm> (27.03.2012.)

¹¹ Bačić, Edita: Partnership with NGO's as a Great Opportunity for Librarians for Promotions of Women's Informations Needs in Croatia. 67th IFLA General conference, Boston, 2001. Available at: <http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/detail?vid=4&hid=10&sid=cb1332a9-8405-4bd7-8345-20f0a2610094%40sessionmgr12&bdata=Jmxhbm9aHmc2l0ZT1laG9zdC1saXZl#db=lxh&AN=43883413> (23.04.2012.)

¹² IFLA Directory: 2002-2003. The Hague : IFLA, 2002. str. 143.

¹³ Ograjšek, Ida: Zastupljenost ženskog pitanja u hrvatskim glasilima na kraju 19. stoljeća. // radovi. Zavod za hrvatsku povijest, 34-36(2004), str. 89-100.

at Zagreb University) and in 1904 the first woman was awarded a PhD at Zagreb University. During the 20s the women's movement got stronger in the whole Yugoslavia. In 1927, through a newly established regional office in Belgrade, the women of Croatia became members of the international organisation *International Federation of University Women*. Since then the women's movement in the world, as well in Croatia, has gone through different phases.

In the 90s certain women associations in the world were bringing new approaches into their programmes. They implemented new methods of women empowerment regarding mostly services for women, opening information and documentation centres, cooperation with similar citizen initiatives, academic and other educational institutions through which they raised public awareness regarding abovementioned issues. Classical feminism changed its methods and motivation; activists cooperated with other representatives of the civil sector, multiplying their experience and creating a new strategy of women's activism. At the end of the 90s women's activism in the world was still partly based on the feminist tradition of the 60s and 70s,¹⁴ meaning activism through non formal but a widespread and influent net of women associations.

The women movement today is more directed toward the scientific sphere, and women studies centres have opened throughout the world. NGOs that work in the field of protection of women's human rights are opening libraries and reading centres, publishing books and magazines in Croatia and in the world. They are raising awareness of the information needs of women and providing special services that can fulfilled that need. A special place regarding the mentioned above is dedicated to the Centre for Women Studies in Zagreb¹⁵ whose library, although at its beginning was formed as university library, has opened to a wider audience. The reading room and library of the Centre for Women Studies are a essential part of women's study work, founded to fulfil the needs of its students and associates in the educational and research fields.

Throughout the years the library has developed into a specialised library open to a wide audience of users with its 3800 books, 78 periodicals (8,000 titles regularly provided by their own means) from the field of women and gender studies and feminist theory (in English,

¹⁴ Feminism / edited by Sandra Kemp, Judith Squiers. – Oxford : Oxford University Press, 1997. Str. 3-16.

¹⁵ Centar za ženske studije Zagreb. Available at: <http://www.zenstud.hr/index.php> (25.04.2012.)

Germaine, French and Croatian language). Beside abovementioned the library offers newspapers, brochures, videotapes, slides, promo material and different gazettes of women associations from Croatia, SE Europe and world as well as papers of Women studies students. The library contains documentation on the history of feminism in Croatia. Special value is placed to database developed throughout research projects at the Centre.

The Republic of Croatia has adopted and signed the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (adopted on 8th of October 1991st) by which is obliged to implement all principles of the Convention. The Republic of Croatia is also obliged to provide regular report on legal, juridical, administrative and other measures that ensure practical implementation of the Convention. Last year, marking the 30 years of the international implementation of this Convention, with the support of the Government Office for Gender Equality of the Republic of Croatia, an international conference was held in Zagreb. The topic was the development of women human rights in the last 30 years. Beside presentations of interesting research, one of the aims of the Conference was to raise awareness of Croatian and international public on the division between desired standards set by the Convention and their practical violation¹⁶.

Official reports of the Republic of Croatia on the implementation of the above mentioned UN Convention were also mentioned at the Conference with the conclusion: ‘‘Despite the fact that most provisions of the Convention are implemented or in the process of implementation in the Republic of Croatia there are still certain critical areas which demand further actions’’¹⁷. The problem of the division between desired standards set by the Convention and their practical implementation was determined in 2009. In that year the Government Office for gender equality carried out an analysis of gender equality in the Republic of Croatia. It was the first scientific research on gender equality in Croatia and it preceded the design of National policy for gender equality 2009.

¹⁶ See: Annales Pilar 2010. Međunarodna konferencija Ljudska prava žena. Available at: http://www.pilar.hr/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=150&Itemid=14 (20.04.2012.)

¹⁷ Štimac Radin, Helena: Izvještavanje Republike Hrvatske o primjeni Konvencije UN-a o uklanjanju svih oblika diskriminacije žena. Ljudska prava žena : razvoj na međunarodnoj i nacionalnoj razini 30 godina nakon usvajanja Konvencije UN-a o uklanjanju svih oblika diskriminacije žena, Zagreb : Institut društvenih znanosti Ivo Pilar, 2011, str. 17 – 24.

The question of whether people in Croatia are aware that gender discrimination is legally punishable is just one of the questions asked in the above mentioned research titled ‘‘Perception, experiences and principles on gender discrimination in Republic of Croatia.’’

The results of the research are: ‘‘Basically every third citizen considers to be aware of the abovementioned fact but most of them don’t know whether gender discrimination is forbidden or legally punishable and fourth of them think that it is not punishable. Men are generally more aware that gender discrimination is punishable and that there is a law which bans gender discrimination’’¹⁸.

Equality principles and prohibition of discrimination are basic principles of every ethical and civilised society, but the fact remains that discrimination of women is still seen in many parts of the world, even in developed modern societies. We believe that our professional community needs to put more effort in combating gender discrimination and on the protection of women human rights.

5. Conclusion

Since the seventies there is a growing interest for women’s issues and gender equality in different international librarians’ associations. The special place is dedicated to the American Library Association which influenced the formation of special interest groups of librarians regarding this topic within IFLA. From the 90s certain Croatian NGOs are raising public awareness on this issue, opening informative and documentation centres and throughout their cooperation with libraries. Despite abovementioned professional trends, which are essential part of international practice, there had not been systematically research on information needs of women, only a few personal interest of certain librarians. For the first time in Boston (2001) one of the members of Croatian librarian society was included (by her own initiative) in the work of *Women's Issues Round Table* and shortly she acts as Information Coordinator of this IFLA body. We recommend Croatian library association to look upon international librarian practice regarding this issue and to support libraries in creating special services for women and promote gender equality.

¹⁸ Ajduković, Dean: Svijest o rodnoj (ne)ravnopravnosti i diskriminaciji. Rodna ravnopravnost i diskriminacija u Hrvatskoj: Istraživanje „Percepcija, iskustva i stavovi o rodnoj diskriminaciji u RH“. Zagreb : Ured za ravnopravnost spolova, 2011, str. 77 – 92.