THE ROLE OF PUBLIC LIBRARIES IN PROMOTING GENDER EQUALITY THROUGH WOMEN-CENTERED INFORMATION SERVICES: A STUDY OF THE KANO STATE PUBLIC LIBRARY BOARD

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Abstract
Access to reliable information is crucial to women's literacy, empowerment, and development. However, structural, cultural, and technological barriers often limit women's effective use of library services. Public libraries are expected to address these challenges through women-centered initiatives, yet the effectiveness of such services in settings such as the Kano State Public Library Board (KSLB) remains inconsistent. This study examined women-centered services, patterns of library use, and barriers to access using a convergent mixed-methods design. Data were collected from 150 registered women users across selected libraries through questionnaires, while interviews were conducted with 10 librarians. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, whereas qualitative data were subjected to thematic analysis. The findings revealed a disconnect between available services and women's needs. Literacy and health-related programmes were the most commonly provided and utilized services, whereas digital skills development and economic empowerment initiatives were less developed. Women's participation in library services was generally low and was constrained by cultural norms, domestic responsibilities, limited ICT skills, inadequate infrastructure, transportation challenges, and restricted mobility. Institutional challenges, including inadequate funding, weak outreach, limited staffing, and the absence of gender-sensitive monitoring systems, further reduced the effectiveness of service delivery. The study concludes that existing library services do not fully reflect women's lived realities and information needs, thereby limiting their capacity to promote meaningful literacy, digital inclusion, and socio-economic empowerment. The study recommends the strengthening of gender-sensitive monitoring systems, expansion of ICT infrastructure and digital literacy programmes, improved outreach services, flexible service delivery, and collaboration with relevant government agencies and non-governmental organisations to make public library services more accessible and responsive to women's needs.

Keywords: Women-centered services, library use, gender equality, Kano State, public libraries

Introduction

Gender equality remains a major priority within global development frameworks, particularly in relation to equitable access to information, which is widely recognized as essential for women's empowerment and social inclusion (UNESCO, 2023). In this regard, public libraries are increasingly recognised as inclusive institutions that can reduce information inequality through user-focused and targeted services. Their role has expanded beyond the traditional provision of information resources to active participation in community development, particularly through women-centered information services designed to promote gender equality and women's empowerment (Ali, Ihekwoaba, & Onoh, 2022).

Public libraries play an important role in providing adult and functional literacy

programmes that strengthen women's reading, writing, and lifelong learning abilities. These services are often supported through reading promotion activities and other educational initiatives (Izah, 2023). Libraries also provide health information services covering maternal and reproductive health, nutrition, childcare, and disease prevention through workshops, exhibitions, and curated information materials (Adekoya, Zwalman, Jimoh, Olatunji, & Enamudu, 2024). Furthermore, the inclusion of information and communication technology (ICT) training enhances women's access to digital information and participation in knowledge-based activities. Libraries may provide basic computer literacy, internet-use skills, and other digital competencies, including women-focused training sessions designed to encourage participation (IFLA, 2022).

Similarly, entrepreneurship and economic empowerment programmes offered by public libraries can provide women with business information, financial literacy, and skills required for small-scale enterprises (Mondal, 2025).

Despite the increasing attention given to women-centered information services, existing studies indicate that women in many developing societies continue to experience structural, cultural, and economic barriers that limit their ability to access, understand, and effectively use information (Singh & Bajpai, 2025). The effectiveness of women-focused programmes is often undermined by irregular participation, socio-cultural restrictions, and programme structures that fail to accommodate women's domestic responsibilities adequately (Izah, 2024). These challenges are further compounded by low literacy levels, limited digital skills, restricted mobility, and deeply rooted gender norms that influence women's participation in educational and public spaces (United Nations, 2020).

Many public libraries in developing countries still adopt generalised approaches to service delivery that do not sufficiently address gender-specific needs. Women are often treated as part of the general user population rather than as a distinct group requiring targeted interventions. This may affect programme design, resource allocation, and service prioritisation (Izah, 2023). In addition, gender-responsive planning remains underdeveloped in many library systems, resulting in services that do not adequately reflect women's lived experiences and information needs.

This situation is evident in Northern Nigeria, particularly in Kano State, where female literacy levels remain relatively low and socio-cultural norms may limit women's access to public spaces and participation in library activities (Izah, 2024). These conditions also influence women's information-seeking behaviour and patterns of library use. Within this socio-cultural and institutional environment, the Kano State Public Library Board (KSLB) occupies a strategic position in promoting gender equality through information service provision.

The effectiveness of KSLB in this regard depends on its ability to design and implement women-centered programmes that are accessible, contextually relevant, and responsive to local needs. Although the library provides services relating to literacy, ICT training, health information, and entrepreneurship, the extent to which these services are intentionally gender-responsive remains insufficiently examined. Therefore, a critical assessment of women-centered information services provided by the Kano State Public Library Board is necessary to determine their contribution to gender equality, identify existing gaps, and generate evidence that can guide policy development and improve library service delivery.

Statement of the Problem

Public libraries are recognized as important community institutions that can promote gender equality through women-centered information services, digital inclusion, literacy programmes, and outreach initiatives. However, in many developing societies, including Nigeria, women remain underrepresented among library users due to socio-cultural expectations, low literacy levels, restricted mobility, and inadequate awareness of available library services (Izah, 2024). Existing evidence suggests that even where library services are available, women's participation may remain relatively low, indicating that such services may not be sufficiently designed to address their specific information needs (Abdullahi, 2024).

Women-centered information services, including literacy programmes, health information outreach, ICT training, and entrepreneurship initiatives, may also be inadequately developed, inconsistently implemented, or insufficiently structured to effectively support women's information and developmental needs.

Furthermore, the assessment of gender-related outcomes in library services remains inadequate. According to Izah (2021), many public libraries lack well-defined systems for monitoring and evaluating the effects of their services on women. This makes it difficult to assess impact or implement evidence-based improvements. In the case of the Kano State Public Library Board, this challenge is further compounded by the limited availability of empirical studies specifically examining its role in promoting gender equality through women-centered information services.

Existing literature tends to provide a generalized view of public library services, with limited attention to local contexts and gender-focused interventions. This lack of context-specific evidence restricts a clear understanding of how effectively the Kano State Public Library Board addresses the information needs of women. If these challenges persist, they may contribute to the continued marginalization of women in accessing information, low utilization of library services, widening disparities in literacy and digital inclusion, and reduced opportunities for women's socio-economic development. Therefore, there is a need for a focused empirical investigation into the role and effectiveness of the Kano State Public Library Board in promoting gender equality through women-centered information services.

Objectives of the Study

The specific objectives of the study were to:

1. identify the women-centered information services provided by the Kano State Public Library Board;
2. examine women's use of public library services;
3. assess how the Kano State Public Library Board monitors gender equality outcomes; and
4. Examine the barriers limiting women's access to public library services.

Literature Review

Women-Centred Information Services in Public Libraries

Public libraries are important institutions for promoting equitable access to information and literacy. Beyond traditional book lending, their roles increasingly include health education, ICT training, and entrepreneurship support targeted at women (Adeyanju, Ogunniyi, Adeleke, & Yashim, 2025). These authors emphasized literacy and educational services as among the most established forms of women-centered library provision, noting that foundational literacy remains central to women's empowerment in developing societies.

However, recent evidence indicates a gradual shift toward more development-oriented services. Mondal (2025) highlighted economic empowerment services, including entrepreneurship information and vocational support, suggesting that libraries are increasingly expanding beyond literacy to support livelihood development. This is consistent with the findings of Abdullahi (2024), which indicated a transition from purely educational services to broader development-oriented interventions.

Similarly, Adekoya et al. (2024) reported that libraries increasingly provide maternal health, nutrition, and reproductive health information, indicating that health information services constitute an important dimension of women-centered library programmes. Okoro, Wagwu, and Wilson (2025) also identified income generation and health services as important forms of women-centered library provision, suggesting two complementary pathways of empowerment: health and livelihood development.

In relation to digital inclusion, Singh and Bajpai (2025) reported that digital literacy programmes exist in libraries but remain uneven because of infrastructural and capacity limitations. This finding aligns with Idhalama, Makori, and Oredo (2021), who found that libraries provide basic computer literacy, internet-use skills, and digital training, sometimes through women-focused sessions intended to encourage participation. Digital literacy can significantly improve women's access to information and library services when effectively implemented. However, compared with literacy and health programmes, ICT services remain less integrated and are often implemented as standalone interventions.

Regarding service delivery models, Mondal (2025) found that women-only spaces and outreach programmes can improve access in restrictive socio-cultural environments. The study emphasized that without targeted and gender-sensitive programming, libraries may struggle to achieve meaningful gender equality outcomes. Similarly, Saad et al. (2024) showed that fixed-location services may exclude marginalized women, thereby reinforcing the importance of flexible and adaptive service delivery strategies.

The literature indicates a progression from traditional literacy-based services toward more integrated health, digital, and economic empowerment programmes. However, while literacy and health services remain relatively dominant, digital and economic empowerment services are unevenly developed and depend largely on infrastructure, institutional capacity, and socio-cultural conditions.

Women's Use of Public Library Services

Research indicates that women's use of library services is shaped by social context, everyday practices, and conditions of access rather than service availability alone. Recent studies emphasize that women engage with information as part of their daily lives, often combining formal information sources, such as libraries, with informal networks. Isa (2023) highlighted the embedded nature of information use, suggesting that libraries constitute only one component of a broader information environment.

However, Suleiman (2023) focused on how users evaluate information, arguing that women often prioritize relevance and trust. This suggests that even where access exists, women may bypass library services if they are not perceived as immediately useful or relevant to their daily needs.

In Nigeria, attention has increasingly shifted from patterns of information use to barriers to access. Ogunbodede, Wiche, and Uchendu (2022) reported that women's engagement with

information services is constrained by limited digital literacy, inadequate infrastructure, and low awareness of available services. In contrast to contexts where women can navigate multiple information sources with relative ease, many Nigerian women face more restricted choices.

A study conducted by Abdullahi (2024) in Kano State reported that cultural norms, religious expectations, and gender roles can restrict women's mobility and participation in public spaces, including libraries. Unlike studies that assume users can freely select among multiple information sources, the Northern Nigerian context may limit such choices from the outset. This suggests that improvements in service design alone may have limited impact unless broader social and cultural barriers are also addressed.

Generally, women's use of library services is highly context-dependent. While studies conducted in other contexts emphasize behaviour, preference, and service relevance, Nigerian and Northern Nigerian studies highlight structural and socio-cultural conditions that can restrict access and utilization.

Monitoring Gender Equality Outcomes in Public Libraries

Monitoring gender equality outcomes is essential for assessing women's participation in public libraries and the benefits they derive from library services. In Nigeria, Abdullahi (2024) reported that libraries often rely on general usage statistics that are not disaggregated by gender. This limits the evaluation of women-focused programmes and weakens the development of targeted interventions, allowing inequalities to remain insufficiently visible (Izah, 2024).

Ramadhan, Setiawati, Hasanah, and Centia (2025) found that gender-disaggregated monitoring enables libraries to identify access gaps and respond more effectively to women's needs. Their findings provide evidence that structured monitoring systems can improve institutional responsiveness to gender-related issues.

Similarly, Wang and Si (2024) reported that combining digital tools with gender-sensitive indicators can produce more reliable evidence of women's participation and strengthen institutional planning. Such approaches extend the value of monitoring beyond service delivery to broader policy and planning processes.

However, Ogunbodede et al. (2022) cautioned that increased participation does not necessarily indicate genuine equality. Women may continue to experience structural barriers that limit the benefits they derive from library services despite increased visibility in usage statistics. Overall, the literature contrasts weak monitoring systems, which produce limited evidence regarding gender outcomes, with structured and gender-sensitive systems that support more effective planning and service improvement.

Barriers Limiting Women's Access to Public Library Services

Women's access to public libraries is an important aspect of information equality. However, their participation is often constrained by a combination of socio-cultural, economic, technological, and institutional factors. In many developing contexts, women face restrictions arising from cultural expectations, domestic responsibilities, and limited mobility, all of which may reduce their ability to access library services independently.

Abdullahi (2024) reported that purdah and family restrictions can limit women's mobility in Northern Nigeria, while domestic responsibilities reduce the time available for library use. Similar barriers have been reported in Southern Nigeria, although greater emphasis has been placed on time management than on

physical mobility (Olayemi & Olayemi, 2024). These differences demonstrate how socio-cultural conditions influence access differently across contexts.

Digital exclusion further compounds these limitations. Women may lack access to devices, reliable internet connectivity, and the digital skills required to benefit from ICT-based services (Suleiman, 2023). Ramadhan et al. (2025) showed that combining digital infrastructure with targeted training significantly improved women's engagement, indicating that the provision of technology alone does not guarantee equitable access.

Economic and institutional barriers, including transportation costs, inadequate funding, and unreliable infrastructure, further reduce participation, particularly in rural areas (Ali et al., 2022). Evidence from Nigeria also suggests that outreach services and financial support can help reduce similar constraints (Saad et al., 2024). Collectively, these findings highlight the need for integrated and multidimensional strategies to improve women's access to public library services.

Methodology

The study adopted a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative techniques to investigate women-centered information services provided by the Kano State Public Library Board (KSLB). Specifically, a convergent mixed-methods design was employed to allow the simultaneous collection and analysis of quantitative and qualitative data.

The study was conducted within the Kano State Public Library Board, which comprised 26 divisional libraries and a headquarters. Of the 26 divisional libraries, 22 were functional, while four were non-operational. Only 10 functional libraries had registered female users, with a total of 150 registered women. Each functional library was managed by a librarian. Nine librarians from the selected libraries, in addition to one librarian from the headquarters, were included in the study, making a total of 10 librarians. Therefore, the total study population consisted of 160 respondents, comprising 150 registered female library users and 10 librarians.

Given the relatively small and accessible population, a total enumeration approach was adopted. Consequently, all 150 registered female users and the 10 selected librarians were included in the study. Quantitative data were collected through structured questionnaires administered to the 150 female users with the assistance of the respective library heads. The questionnaire focused on women-centered library services, patterns of use, and challenges experienced by women. Qualitative data were collected through telephone interviews with the 10 librarians to obtain institutional perspectives regarding service delivery, planning, implementation, and challenges.

The research instruments were validated by experts in the field. The questionnaire achieved a reliability coefficient of 0.885, indicating a high level of internal consistency. The trustworthiness of the qualitative component was enhanced through dependability measures, including the use of an audit trail. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, while qualitative responses were analysed thematically.

Results Presentation and Interpretation

This section presents and interprets the findings of the study.

Response Rate

Table 1: Response Rate of Respondents

Questionnaire	Frequency	Percentage
Administered	150	100%
Returned and usable	145	96.7%
Not returned	5	3.3%
Total	**150**	**100%**

Table 1 shows that 150 copies of the questionnaire were administered to the respondents, out of which 145 copies, representing 96.7%, were duly completed, returned, and found usable for analysis. Five copies, representing 3.3%, were not returned. The high response rate indicates a strong level of respondents' cooperation and provides sufficient data for meaningful analysis.

Women-Centred Services

Table 2: Women-Centered Services

Women-Centered Services	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Literacy and reading programmes	50	34.5
Health and family welfare information	40	27.6
Economic empowerment and vocational training	30	20.7
Digital inclusion programmes and ICT access	25	17.2
Total	**145**	**100.0**

Table 2 shows that literacy and reading programmes constituted the most commonly identified women-centered services, accounting for 34.5% of responses. This was followed by health and family welfare information services (27.6%), economic empowerment and vocational training (20.7%), and digital inclusion programmes (17.2%). The findings indicate that public library services in Kano State place greater emphasis on traditional literacy and health-related support than on digital inclusion and economic empowerment.

Librarians' Perceptions of Additional Women-Centred Service Provision

The librarians were asked to express their views regarding additional services that should be introduced or strengthened to support women. Their responses confirmed the services identified by the women but also highlighted important gaps in service delivery.

The participants emphasized the need for more flexible and outreach-based approaches, including mobile and home-based services for women with limited mobility. One librarian explained that *"many women cannot come to the library regularly, so services need to go closer to them."*

The librarians also emphasized the importance of women-led community programmes and supportive service environments to ensure cultural acceptability and encourage participation. One participant stated that *"creating supportive spaces like childcare and women-only training will encourage more participation."* The findings indicate a need for adaptive and context-sensitive services that align more closely with women's daily responsibilities and lived experiences.

Frequency of Women's Use of Public Library Services

Table 3: Frequency of Women's Use of Public Library Services

Frequency of Use	Number of Women	Percentage (%)
Weekly	15	10.7
Monthly	24	17.1
Occasionally	48	30.7
Rarely	58	41.5
Total	**145**	**100.0**

Table 3 indicates that the largest proportion of women (41.5%) rarely used public library services, while 30.7% used the services occasionally. Only 17.1% visited monthly, and 10.7% used the library on a weekly basis. These findings suggest that the overall level of women's engagement with public library services was relatively low.

Factors Influencing Women's Use of Library Services

The librarians were asked to identify, based on their experience, factors influencing women's use of library services. Their responses indicated that women's library use is shaped by accessibility, time constraints, and socio-cultural factors, which often result in irregular attendance. One librarian explained that *"many women cannot come to the library regularly, so their usage is often occasional rather than consistent."* Another participant observed that *"when programmes are brought closer to the community, more women are able to participate."*

The librarians further noted that women were more likely to use services that addressed immediate and practical needs. One participant stated that *"women tend to come when they see clear benefits for their daily lives."* These findings indicate that women's library use is largely need-based and may increase when services are accessible, relevant, convenient, and delivered closer to their communities.

Monitoring Gender Equality Outcomes

The study also examined how the Kano State Public Library Board monitors gender equality outcomes in its services. The participants reported that there was no formal system for monitoring gender equality outcomes because usage records were not systematically disaggregated by gender.

This limitation makes it difficult to determine the extent to which library services benefit women or address gender-related inequalities. One librarian explained that *"without structured monitoring, it is difficult to know whether the services truly benefit women or address existing inequalities."* Another participant added that *"we do not have a proper system to separate or track usage by gender, so assessing impact on women is a challenge."* These responses indicate that the absence of systematic gender-based data limits the effective evaluation and improvement of women-centered services within the Kano State Public Library Board.

Barriers Limiting Women's Access to Library Services

Table 4: Barriers to Women's Use of Library Services

Barriers	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Family and cultural restrictions	55	37.9
Poor digital literacy	40	27.6
Limited ICT resources and connectivity	30	20.7
Cost of transportation to the library	20	13.8
Total	**145**	**100.0**

Table 4 shows that family and cultural restrictions constituted the major barrier to women's use of library services, accounting for 37.9% of responses. This was followed by poor digital literacy (27.6%) and limited ICT resources and connectivity (20.7%). The cost of transportation to the library was also identified as a barrier by 13.8% of the respondents. The findings suggest that women's access to library services is constrained by a combination of socio-cultural, technological, and economic factors.

Challenges in Providing Effective Library Services for Women

The librarians were also asked to identify the challenges encountered in providing effective library services for women. The participants identified several institutional challenges that further limited women's participation.

One librarian explained that *"lack of awareness of available services is a major problem,"* indicating that many women were unaware of the programmes and services offered by the library. Another participant noted that weak outreach affected participation, stating that *"when information about programmes does not reach the community, women are less likely to participate."*

Limited staffing and high user demand were also identified as challenges. One librarian explained that *"with few staff, it is difficult to give women adequate support."* These institutional challenges contribute to low awareness, reduced participation, and the underutilization of library services by women.

Discussion of Findings

With regard to women-centered information services, the findings revealed that the Kano State Public Library Board largely focuses on traditional services, particularly literacy and health-related support. While this demonstrates a commitment to addressing women's basic educational and welfare needs, it also suggests that the expansion of services has not fully kept pace with women's changing information and developmental needs.

Compared with other contexts where libraries increasingly emphasize digital skills and income-generating opportunities (Okoro et al., 2025), the Kano State Public Library Board appears to be relatively slower in integrating ICT-based and livelihood-oriented services. This suggests a gap in adapting library services to emerging priorities associated with digital inclusion and economic empowerment.

The relatively low and irregular pattern of library use reported in the study further demonstrates that the availability of women-centered information services does not automatically result in active participation. Women appear more likely to participate when services are convenient, immediately useful,

and compatible with their daily responsibilities. This finding reflects previous evidence showing that women's access to information services is often influenced by domestic responsibilities and social expectations (Olayemi & Olayemi, 2024).

Compared with more flexible and community-oriented library service models, the Kano context appears relatively dependent on fixed service structures, which may limit sustained participation. The findings therefore suggest that improving women's engagement requires more adaptable service delivery approaches.

Another critical issue identified by the study is the absence of gender-disaggregated data. This makes it difficult to measure women's participation, assess the benefits derived from library services, and improve programmes based on empirical evidence. In contrast, more structured library systems increasingly rely on gender-sensitive monitoring to guide planning and improve outcomes (Ramadhan et al., 2025). The absence of such mechanisms weakens accountability and limits opportunities for systematic service improvement. Without reliable gender-related data, efforts to improve women-centered information services may remain fragmented and less effective. The study also identified several barriers limiting women's access to library services. These findings demonstrate that women's participation is influenced not only by the availability of services but also by the interaction of socio-cultural norms, infrastructural limitations, digital skills, and economic conditions.

The challenges identified are similar to those reported in other developing contexts but may be more pronounced where limited resources intersect with restrictive cultural expectations. Therefore, improving women's access requires more than simply expanding the range of available services. It requires targeted interventions that make services easier to access, understand, and use within women's everyday social contexts.

Institutional constraints within libraries further affect service delivery. Limited visibility of programmes, weak outreach, and staffing pressures reduce the extent to which services reach intended beneficiaries. In contrast, more effective systems often rely on sustained community engagement and active promotion to encourage participation (Olayemi & Olayemi, 2024). The findings generally, indicate that although public libraries in Kano State play an important role in addressing women's basic information and developmental needs, they have not yet fully embraced flexible, technology-driven, and data-informed approaches to service delivery. Addressing these gaps will require the adoption of service models that are more responsive to women's realities while aligning with broader trends in inclusive and empowerment-oriented library practice.

Conclusion

The study concludes that public libraries under the Kano State Public Library Board provide important women-centered services, particularly in the areas of literacy, health information, economic empowerment, and digital inclusion. However, women's engagement with these services remains relatively low and is constrained by cultural, social, technological, economic, and infrastructural barriers.

The study further established that the absence of systematic and gender-responsive monitoring limits the ability of the library system to assess the impact of its services on women and to make evidence-based improvements. Institutional challenges, including inadequate outreach, limited staffing, and insufficient ICT infrastructure, also affect the effectiveness of service delivery.

Addressing these challenges through flexible programming, improved digital literacy, community-based outreach, enhanced ICT facilities, and systematic gender-sensitive evaluation can improve women's participation and empowerment. Strengthened policy support and partnerships with government agencies, community organisations, and non-governmental organisations are also essential for sustaining and expanding women-centered library services and reinforcing the role of public libraries in promoting gender equality.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made. The Kano State Public Library Board should:

1. Integrate ICT and entrepreneurship training into existing literacy and health information programmes to provide women with a broader range of developmental and economic opportunities.
2. Adopt flexible and community-based service delivery approaches**,** including outreach programmes, mobile library services, and flexible schedules that accommodate women's domestic responsibilities and mobility constraints.
3. Establish a gender-sensitive monitoring and evaluation system that collects and utilizes gender-disaggregated data to assess women's participation, identify service gaps, and guide continuous improvement.
4. Improve ICT infrastructure and digital access by providing adequate digital resources, reliable internet connectivity, and practical digital literacy training for women.
5. Introduce women-friendly service arrangements, including women-only training sessions and other culturally appropriate programmes where necessary to encourage greater participation.
6. Strengthen public awareness and outreach activities to ensure that women in different communities are adequately informed about available library programmes and services.
7. Develop partnerships with government agencies, non-governmental organisations, and community-based organisations to mobilize resources, expand outreach, and support sustainable women-centered information services.

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