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Library Services to the Disabled in the Public Libraries of Iran (A Case of East Azerbaijan Province)

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the status of East Azerbaijan Public Libraries' services to the users with disabilities. The population of the study consisted of 80 managers and supervisors of public libraries in East Azerbaijan province, Iran. A researcher-made questionnaire, inspired by the American Library Association checklist and the library access checklist (by IFLA) has been used for data gathering. Findings revealed that most of the public libraries in East Azerbaijan province (56.9%) lack sufficient budget for serving the disabled. There is no established policy to provide services to the users with disabilities in libraries. Most of library buildings (51.6%) haven't favourable conditions for serving the disabled. Based on the managers' comments, most of the libraries lack the information resources and facilities for the disabled. Generally, the results of this research show that information services for the disables are poor in East Azerbaijan public libraries. It is important to provide special facilities such as free transportation for greater access to library resources and services and to design the map of the library building in Braille to use all parts of the library, and to employ specialized and trained staff to provide services to people with disabilities.

Key words: Library Services, Public Libraries, Disability

1. Introduction

The public library is a social institution that emerges from the heart of the community and provides its services to the community (McCabe, 2001). Among the different types of libraries, public libraries are unique in their objectives, patrons served, collection development and the range of services (Ghazizadeh et al., 2019). Public libraries play an important role in people's lives as a source of information and a place for knowledge creation. This illustrates the importance of public libraries as information, educational, cultural and social institution.

People with disabilities should have the same access to up-to-date information as other members of society. Governments should provide the necessary conditions for the protection of the rights of persons with disabilities and to provide them with the necessary protection. All institutions and public companies are required to design, produce and construct public buildings and passageways and utilities in such a way as to enable access and enjoyment. Therefore, public access to the public library is essential. This is also reflected in the library mission statements and literature of professional libraries, including guidelines developed by professional library organizations around the world. The term 'special needs' in the context of library services relates to the needs of people who cannot make use of conventional libraries and library materials and services (Abdelrahman, 2016). Libraries have a long history of providing services to people with disabilities and are even more advanced than many social and governmental organizations (Jaeger et al., 2015). Therefore, public libraries should strive to meet their information needs by providing accessible resources as well as specialized equipment.

For effectiveness, public libraries must actively ensure access to information and services in support of their missions. Hence, the role of library in ensuring inclusive access to information and services is crucial (Ezeani et al., 2017). UNESCO (2009) stated that inclusive education is concerned with all learners with focus on those who have traditionally been excluded from educational opportunities – such as learners with special needs and disability and children from ethnic minorities. However, in many countries around the world, access for people with disabilities to access libraries is still poor. In order to create equal opportunities for all library users, one should look at this class with a protectionist perspective. Issues such as the physical condition of the library building as well as its services and applications should be taken into account (Irvall & Nielsen, 2005). Therefore, this study aims to investigated the status of serving the disabled in the public libraries of East Azerbaijan province from the perspective of managers and supervisors of these libraries.

There have been numerous studies to date on the provision of library services to people with disabilities. For example, Liu et al. (2019) examined 129 public library websites in terms of services to people with disabilities. The results showed that most

library websites have programming deficiencies that restrict access to the website for people with disabilities. In total, only 7 of the library websites had acceptable situation on their home page. In a study entitled 'Building inclusive communities: teens with disabilities in libraries', Grassi (2018) recommends specific strategies for teen librarians to be better equipped for providing inclusive customer service to teens with disabilities in libraries. These strategies are as follows: speak directly to the teen, consider communication and language, develop a rapport, respect their privacy, respect and encourage independence, think person-centered, invite their input, invite them to programs, be their advocate and give them permission to be teens. Sedighi and Zarei (2017) examined the status of services by digital libraries for blind and visually impaired. The results showed that the Canadian National Institute for the Blind (CNIB) Library and the FNB Netherlands (FNB) had the highest and the Online Braille Library in India had the least resources for the blind and visually impaired. Braille, e-books, bold books, and digital books also seem to have the most presentations.

Kaeding et al. (2017) examined the factors affecting access to public libraries for children with disabilities and their families. A comprehensive study of 18 public librarians focused on access to public libraries for children with disabilities. Librarians from the United States and Canada participated in both one-on-one interviews and questionnaires. Based on the research findings, a comprehensive model for public libraries was proposed. Stilwell and Majinge (2013) showed that library services to the visual and motor disabilities were not comprehensive. Koulikourdi (2008) indicated that library services to people with disabilities in Greece are not in good manner. Leong and Higgins (2000) in a study titled "Public Library Services for Young People on Wheelchairs in Singapore", described the architectural and physical problems of the library building as a major cause of disability access to library services. There are other studies with an emphasis on providing library services for users with disabilities (Chaputula, 2017; Phukubje & Ngoepe, 2017; Prendergast, 2016).

In the last decade, libraries have started to evaluate their services so that they can meet the needs of users with disabilities. However, equal access to use libraries is not yet possible or even expected for people with disabilities in many countries (Demirelli & Tuna, 2017). Libraries are organizations which provide services without discrimination to various users including users with disabilities but this issues are generally neglected in current library and information science research (Stilwell & Majinge, 2013). A review of the above studies demonstrates the importance of addressing the issue of accessibility of library services for persons with disabilities; however, this issue has not been properly addressed in Iran. Therefore, the present study attempts to investigate the status of East Azerbaijan Public Libraries' services to

the disabled from the perspective of library managers and officials. The results of this study can be useful for the public libraries of the country, especially the general department of public libraries of East Azerbaijan province.

In view of the above purpose, the present study aims to answer the following questions:

1. How much is the budget for East Azerbaijan Public Libraries to provide services to the users with disabilities?

2. What facilities do the library buildings have for the users with disabilities?

3. What services are provided in East Azerbaijan Public Libraries to people with disabilities in terms of information resources available?

4. What is the status of providing library equipment in East Azerbaijan for the disabled?

5. What is the status of providing information services to people with disabilities in East Azerbaijan Public Libraries?

2. Research Methodology

This study is an applied one and is a descriptive survey. The population of the study consisted of 80 managers and supervisors of public libraries in East Azerbaijan province, Iran. The data collection tool was a researcher-made questionnaire containing 46 closed-ended questions and 1 open-ended question. The questionnaire was compiled based on the American Library Association's checklist of facilities and equipment, as well as the Accessibility Libraries for 2005 IFLA Disability Services and Resources section. The content validity of the questionnaire was assessed using the comments of experts in library and information science. Reliability was also achieved by distributing Cronbach's alpha coefficient to 15 respondents before distributing the questionnaire among the statistical population, which was 0.79 indicating high reliability of the questionnaire.

3. Results

Demographic data showed that out of all respondents (80), 50 (62.5%) were female and 30 (37.5%) were male. 75% of respondents have a master's degree and 25% have a bachelor's degree. 87.5% of the respondents have a degree in Library and Information Science and 12.5% have degrees in other fields.

Question 1: How much is the budget for East Azerbaijan Public Libraries to provide services to the users with disabilities?

According to the responses of 56.9% of the managers/supervisors of public libraries in East Azerbaijan province, these libraries do not have sufficient funds to provide services to persons with disabilities. In their view, there is no established policy for providing services to the users with any kind of disability. The results of Table 1 indicate that in East Azerbaijan public libraries, the budget situation for providing services to persons with disabilities is very undesirable.

Table 1. Frequency distribution of libraries' budgets to provide services to people with disabilities

Libraries' budgets to provide services to people with disabilities	Very much		Much		Low		Very low		None		Mean
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	
Policy provide services to disabilities	6	7.5	6	7.5	10	12.5	24	30.0	34	42.5	2.08
Advisory disabled Membership	4	5.0	4	5.0	8	10.0	4	5.0	60	75.0	1.60
Planning for Disability Services	5	6.3	3	3.8	14	17.5	10	12.5	48	60.0	1.84
Special facilities for the disabled	5	6.3	5	6.3	12	15.0	18	22.5	40	50.0	1.96
Total	20		18		44		56		182		
%	6.25		5.60		13.75		17.50		56.9		

Question 2: What facilities do the library buildings have for the users with disabilities?

According to the responses of 51.6% of the managers/supervisors of public libraries in East Azerbaijan province, libraries are not in a good position to provide services to people with disabilities. So that among the library facilities, the guide to using the library building in a rational form (cassette tape, audio CD) for the visually impaired and visually impaired to access the desired section with a mean of 1.75, with the lowest mean is not desirable. The findings in Table 2 indicate that the condition of the East Azerbaijan Public Libraries building to provide services to people with disabilities is undesirable. The needs of this stratum have been ignored in public library buildings. Disabled people often have trouble accessing these buildings due to the unfavorable condition of their amenities and need assistance.

Table 2. Frequency distribution of East Azerbaijan public libraries building to provide disability services

Library building to provide services to people with disabilities	Very much		Much		Low		Very low		None		Mean
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	
There are specific places for disabled users to use resources in the library	5	6.3	5	6.3	12	15.0	18	22.5	40	50.0	1.96
Accessibility signs or special signs installed at the traffic site for disabled users	4	5.0	5	6.3	10	12.5	10	12.5	51	63.8	1.76
Braille library building map for the blind to access	4	5.0	6	7.5	9	11.3	15	18.8	46	57.5	1.84
A guide to how to use the library building for the visually impaired and the visually impaired to access the section	5	6.3	5	6.3	8	10.0	9	11.3	53	66.3	1.75
Ways to get out of the building, by installing braille signs	4	5.0	6	7.5	10	12.5	20	25.0	40	50.0	1.93
Parking, creating a special space for people with physical disabilities (wheelchairs)	6	7.5	5	6.3	10	12.5	19	23.8	40	50.0	1.97
Structural facilities such as slopes, elevators, etc. at the library entrance	4	5.0	4	5.0	15	18.8	17	21.3	40	50.0	1.94
Entrance door suitable for people with disabilities	5	6.3	4	5.0	13	16.3	20	25.0	38	47.5	1.98
Quality of flooring in terms of strength, non-slippery and level with floor surfaces	6	7.5	5	6.3	12	15.0	25	31.3	32	40.0	2.10
Width of corridors for wheelchairs	5	6.3	5	6.3	9	11.3	29	36.3	32	40.0	2.03
Space for the use of the blind and readers	5	6.3	5	6.3	8	10.0	20	25.0	42	52.5	1.89
Total	53		55		116		202		454		
%	6.07		6.25		13.18		22.90		51.60		

Question 3: What services are provided in East Azerbaijan public libraries to people with disabilities in terms of information resources available?

According to the results of Table 3, 46.95% of managers/supervisors believe that these libraries do not have the resources needed for the disabled. Among the types of resources needed for people with disabilities, special resources include easy-to-read books, comic books, large print books, audio-visual resources with a mean of 1.76, that is considered the lowest resource availability in libraries. The findings indicate that the situation of the types of special resources for the disabled in East Azerbaijan public libraries is very poor and the resources available in libraries are not sufficient to meet the needs of users with disability.

Table 3. Information resources available to provide services to the users with disability

Resources available in public libraries	Very much		Much		Low		Very low		None		Mean
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	
Public reference resources such as cultures, encyclopedias, large-format prints, braille, illustrations, audio and electronic CDs for the blind and visually impaired	5	6.3	4	5.0	10	12.5	20	25.0	41	51.3	1.90
There are various ways to use library resources	6	7.5	6	7.5	20	25.0	24	30.0	24	30.0	2.33
Provide a list of books to access books in various forms including bold, braille, rational	7	8.8	6	7.5	25	31.3	22	27.5	20	25.0	2.48
Special resources include braille, rational, braille, rational bold	4	5.0	5	6.3	21	26.3	18	22.5	32	40.0	2.14
Special resources include subtitle film and translation film in sign language and ...	4	5.0	4	5.0	10	12.5	16	20.0	46	57.5	1.80
Special resources include easy read books, picture books, large print books, audio and visual resources, educational help CDs, etc. for the disabled	4	5.0	6	7.5	10	12.5	16	20.0	44	55.0	1.76
Providing special resources for people with disabilities	4	5.0	5	6.3	10	12.5	10	12.5	51	63.8	1.76
Resources for the training of mentally handicapped Visual-auditory resources and books on the subject of mental disabilities for mentally disabled educators	5	6.3	6	7.5	10	12.5	10	12.5	49	61.3	1.85
Provision of resources for the education of the mentally handicapped Visual and hearing resources and books for parents of the mentally disabled	5	6.3	4	5.0	10	12.0	30	37.5	31	38.8	2.03
Total	44		46		126		166		338		
%	6.12		6.40		17.5		23.03		46.95		

Question 4: What is the status of providing library equipment in East Azerbaijan for the disabled?

According to the results of Table 4, 39.5% of the respondents believe that public libraries do not have the necessary equipment for the disabled and about 50% believe that the level of equipment available is low.

Table 4. Public libraries' equipment available to provide services to the users with disability

Provincial Public Library Equipment	Very much		Much		Low		Very low		None		Mean
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	
Special services for disabled people such as desks and chairs, computers, shelves, public telephone, sound recorder, toilets, hearing aids, headphones, elevators and coolers with elevation and magnifying glass, CD , 21-inch LCD TV	5	6.3	5	6.3	18	22.5	29	36.3	23	28.8	2.25
Tools include handheld magnifying glass, braille keyboard, highlights, special software and more.	5	6.3	7	8.8	19	23.8	27	33.8	22	27.5	2.32
Featured equipment including video CD player, video cassette player, headphones, computer, microphone, hearing aid	6	7.5	6	7.5	19	23.8	10	12.5	39	48.8	2.13
Exceptionally disabled mobility equipment including wheelchair, comfort chair, ultra-small handicapped disabled keyboard.	7	8.8	4	5.0	19	23.8	8	10.0	42	52.5	2.08
Total	23		22		75		74		126		
%	7.2		6.88		23.40		23.12		39.40		

Question 5: What is the status of providing information services to people with disabilities in East Azerbaijan Public Libraries?

The results in Table 5 indicate that 43.2% of respondents believe that libraries do not provide special services for people with disabilities. The component "Providing special services in different sections of the library for the disabled " with a mean of 2.38%. is the most significant service offered in the libraries under study. On the other extreme, the component "Appropriate staffing plan to meet the information needs of people with disabilities" with an average of 1.76% is the lowest services provided to persons with disabilities. The findings of the study indicate that the situation of providing services to people with disabilities in East Azerbaijan public libraries is inadequate, indicating poor status of information services for the disabled and neglecting them.

Table 5. Public libraries' information services to the users with disability

Providing public library information services	Very much		Much		Low		Very low		None		Mean
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	
Existence of highly trained and experienced staff	6	7.5	5	6.3	19	23.8	9	11.3	41	51.3	2.08
Run the program on special days for the disabled	4	5.0	5	6.3	8	10.0	28	35.0	35	43.8	1.94
Holding a seminar or conference on disability	4	5.0	4	5.0	4	5.0	30	37.5	38	47.5	1.82
Appropriate staffing plan to meet the information needs of people with disabilities	4	5.0	4	5.0	4	5.0	25	31.3	43	53.8	1.76
There is a telephone reference for people with disabilities who have difficulty accessing the library physically	5	6.3	4	5.0	4	5.0	29	36.3	38	47.5	1.86
Linking the library to the websites or databases of organizations related to services for people with disabilities	5	6.3	4	5.0	8	10.0	28	35.0	35	43.8	1.95
Conducting library education courses for people with disabilities	6	7.5	4	5.0	8	10.0	30	37.5	32	40.0	2.03
Provision of reproductive services to persons with disabilities	6	7.5	4	5.0	9	11.3	10	12.5	51	63.8	1.80
Providing special services in different sections of the library for the disabled	6	7.5	6	7.5	20	25.0	28	35.0	20	25.0	2.38
Providing information through brochures, meetings, bulletin boards Library, Disability Publications, Library Website, Social Networking	5	6.3	6	7.5	10	12.5	26	32.5	33	41.3	2.05
There is a volunteer reading program for the blind in the library	5	6.3	6	7.5	21	26.3	22	27.5	26	32.5	2.28
Library for the visually impaired and visually impaired	5	6.3	5	6.3	25	31.3	25	31.3	20	25.0	2.38
There is special software for the blind and visually impaired	4	5.0	5	6.3	10	12.5	18	22.5	43	53.8	1.86
Submission of special software for the blind and visually impaired by the institution	5	6.3	5	6.3	10	12.5	28	35.0	32	40.0	2.04
Lending audio-visual resources in the library to people with disabilities	5	6.3	5	6.3	11	13.8	10	12.5	49	61.3	1.84
Possibility of using interlibrary loan system if resources are not available for people with disabilities	6	7.5	5	6.3	11	13.8	28	35.0	30	37.5	2.11
Providing resources needed for disabled people out of the house, by mail or by a library staff	5	6.3	5	6.3	16	20.0	26	32.5	28	35.0	2.16
Requesting resources including braille resources, digital resources, email services, chat reference services, text messaging services and more	4	5.0	5	6.3	20	25.0	23	2.8	28	35.0	2.18
Total	90		87		218		423		622		
%	6.25		6.04		15.14		29.37		43.2		

4. Discussion and Conclusion

In the world today, information is the driving force for educational and economic development. It is all important that library provides services and resources that will enable the disables have access to its collection in the appropriate format that will suit them and meet their information needs. Provision of library and information services to the disabled is very important to every society (Uzohue & Yaya, 2016). There are wide gaps between the access and uses of library resources in developed countries and underdeveloped countries (Ngcongolo and Oyelana, 2017). For the disabled people from developing countries, library service is a critical channel, which may be the only source of information (Zaid, 2017).

The present study showed that public libraries of East Azerbaijan province do not have proper services and resources to provide services to people with disabilities. Very few of the libraries surveyed are in relatively good condition in terms of budget, buildings and equipment. Also, the information resources available to people with disabilities and the resources available in libraries are not sufficient, up-to-date and responsive to their information needs. It is therefore advisable to provide all kinds of information sources such as Braille, talking books, and electronic devices for the visually impaired, special computers for the disabled, and both easy-to-read/large-scale books for the mentally handicapped. The tools and technologies used in libraries are also inadequate, unavailable and limited. However, users or some librarians do not have the skills to work with these tools, and some users are unaware of these tools. Therefore, introduction and use of these tools in libraries is essential. Moreover, the budget situation for providing services to people with disabilities is undesirable. According to the results, 56.9% of the libraries managers do not have sufficient funds to provide services to people with disabilities. Furthermore, libraries are not in a good position to provide services to the disabled.

Other research results showed that the status of different types of disability resources in East Azerbaijan public libraries is poor. According to the results, 45.96% of the managers and administrators of the libraries surveyed believe that these libraries do not have the resources needed for the disabled. Special equipment for the disabled in East Azerbaijan public libraries is undesirable. The results of this research about the provision of information services indicate that the situation of information services in East Azerbaijan public libraries is also poor. According to the results, 43.2% of librarians and administrators in the surveyed libraries do not provide information services to people with disabilities.

The results of this study are in line with the results of previous studies by Liu et al. (2019), Stilwell and Majinge (2013), Koulikourdi (2008), and Leong and Higgins (2000). It seems that serious attention is needed to pay to the demands of the disabled in public libraries. According to the results of this study, some suggestions are made to improve the service status of persons with disabilities. Given the cultural/social role

of public libraries in the society, they play an important role in addressing the information needs of different sections of society. Therefore, users with disability, as a part of the society, should have equitable access to the library and its services. In order to provide optimal services by public libraries, it is advisable to develop a policy at the level of public libraries in the country to provide services to persons with disability and to provide adequate resources and services to the group in planning the annual budget of libraries.

It is important to provide special facilities such as free transportation for greater access to library resources and services and to map the library building to Braille to use all parts of the library and to employ specialized and trained staff to provide services to people with disabilities. Libraries can provide training for people with disabilities in the library and help volunteers read regular print books for the visually impaired, as well as sharing appropriate resources for the group and providing interlibrary loan for them and providing bibliography and talking and braille catalogs.

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