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Accessibility of Library Facilities by Wheelchair Users: The Case of Libraries in Lagos State, Nigeria.

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Accessibility of Library Facilities by Wheelchair Users: The Case of Libraries in Lagos State, Nigeria.

Abstract

Elimination of all barriers is a critical determinant to accessibility and utilization of library resources. The study investigated library facilities in selected libraries in Lagos State, Nigeria to determine their relative accessibility by wheelchair library users. It employed personal observation in which requisite facilities were digitally photographed and this approach was complemented by secondary data. The study found inter alia that all the respondent libraries had no ramps or functional elevators, hence not accessible by wheelchair users; other facilities such as catalogues, circulation desks, shelves, toilets were also designed in a manner that excludes the wheelchair users from access. The paper recommended that regulatory authorities should make provision of facilities for the disabled a compulsory parameter for accreditation. It also called for a national legislation forbidding such discrimination as well as encouraged strategic renovation of library buildings to accommodate persons with disability.

KEY WORDS: Library facilities, wheelchair library users, library catalogue, library building, library shelves, library circulation desk.

Introduction

The library as a reservoir of knowledge exists principally to cater for all its clientele without discrimination or restrictions of any form. Contrary to global standards and best practices, it has been noted that the physically handicapped in Nigeria do not benefit maximally from various library facilities and resources (Momodu, 2013). Disability could be occasioned by speech defects, visual impairment, orthopedic cases, autism and other bodily malfunctioning or incapacitation. Disability places some restrictions on individuals and prevents them from access to the avalanche of library resources. It behooves the libraries to mitigate these seemingly barriers to guarantee equality of access to information in order to enhance the performance of the handicapped.

Noting the centrality of information to the individual's fulfillment and existence, Mazinge and Stilwell (2006) maintained that every person have right to information irrespective of class, colour, social status and disability. As a result, consideration for the disabled persons should start right from the time of planning for library buildings, to the acquisition of resources and provision of services. However, observations have shown that the orthopedic impaired users who are confined to the wheelchairs are more marginalized relative to other disadvantaged patrons in the provision of library resources and services in Nigeria. These persons experience frustration not only in academic libraries, but also in other kinds of libraries. The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (1994, p.1) emphasized 'that libraries must not discriminate on the basis of age, race, sex, religion, nationality, language or social condition'. Libraries should not neglect physically challenged persons but should create an enabling environment for every user to have access to library resources. Similarly, the American Library Association (2001) also opined that every library should provide necessary services that would facilitate easy access to library resources for the sick as well as mentally and physically challenged users.

Objectives of the Study

The general objective of the study was to ascertain if wheelchair library clients have challenges in accessing and using the resources and facilities available in the selected libraries under study.

Specifically, the study was out to:

1. find out if the wheelchair patrons have any challenges accessing the library buildings of the respective libraries under study.
2. ascertain the problems encountered by wheelchair patrons while using the circulation desk.
3. find out the challenges hindering the wheelchair users from accessing the catalogues in the libraries under study.
4. investigate the problems encountered by wheelchair users in accessing and using the shelves in the libraries under study.
5. ascertain if there were special toilets designed for wheelchair users in the libraries under study.

Research Questions

1. Are the library buildings accessible by wheelchair users?
2. Are the heights of the circulation desks of the libraries under study accessible by wheelchair users?
3. What challenges hinder wheelchair users' access to the library catalogues?
4. What are the problems associated with the use of library shelves by wheelchair patrons?
5. What problems hinder the use of toilet by wheelchair patrons?

Literature Review

The main objective of any library is users' satisfaction. There are diverse users of libraries, among whom are those on wheelchair. This group of patrons uses wheelchairs for mobility as a result of physical challenge, injury or sickness. The purpose of establishing any library is to ensure equity of access and democratization of accumulated knowledge to all categories of societal classes leading to balanced redistribution of information among library clienteles. Though a reasonable number of persons are physically challenged, there is no readily available comprehensive statistical data on the

number of disabled persons around the world (Committee on Education of Handicapped Children, 1972; Schauder, 1980; Wright, 1983; Advisory Council on the Disabled, 1988; Marshall, 1991; Krishnan, 1996; Leong and Higgins 2014). Wheelchair library users need information in every aspect of their life; they also seek for information in libraries and information centres (Adesina 2003).

Momodu (2013) stressed that library patrons on wheelchairs should be able to access the library and its resources; he further stated that special accessible entrances, adjustable computer workstations, shelves, circulation desks and toilets should be provided for patrons on wheelchairs.

Subramaniam, Oxley and Kodama (2013) posited that students with disabilities should have unhindered access to the library facilities and equipment so that they can make maximum use of information resources in libraries. They further stressed that the library's physical environment should support access to users on wheelchairs. There should also be spaces between shelves, provision of variant height circulation desks and catalogues. Availability of Push-button doors, and multi-height circulation counters will help access to the library resources by wheelchair users.

Nelson (2005) averred that all parts of the library including the entrance, toilet, elevators, circulation desks, shelves, should be accessible to physically challenged persons. He further noted that persons on wheelchair should be able to move freely and reach all parts of the library, including the conveniences; at least one toilet should be specifically constructed for disabled persons.

Libraries in developed countries have overcome this challenge. For example, at the University of Bradford library in the United Kingdom, users on wheelchairs are able to gain access to the different parts of the buildings by ramp. The circulation desks are built in such a way that they are convenient for use by wheelchair users. The Library's catalogue and self-service facilities are placed at both standing and sitting heights so that physically challenged users can easily access them (University of Bradford library 2016). Another example is the Tiverton library Devon in the United Kingdom; the library building and facilities are accessible by wheelchair users. Similarly, libraries in United States of America have provisions for unhindered access by wheelchair users. Leong and Higgins (2014) investigated 'public library services for wheelchair-bound young people in Singapore'. They discovered that accessibility features were present in the library they investigated for wheelchair users.

This is not the case for libraries in Nigeria. Momodu (2013) observed that Nigerian libraries do not make necessary provisions for access to persons with disability including wheelchair users. This study examines current trends in this regard.

Methodology

This study covered four different kinds of libraries accessed by various classes of users in Lagos State, Nigeria. They include National Library of Nigeria Lagos, Lagos State Public Library, University of Lagos Library and Yaba College of Technology Library. The study utilized personal observation and captured pictorial data on digital camera and extrapolated same to buttress secondary data on the subject. The findings are discussed below.

Discussion of findings

Issues on information provision to wheelchair users in Nigerian Libraries

In Nigeria, the present state of library and information provision to people on wheelchair is pathetic (Momodu, 2013). Even though they are supposed to be among the users of library resources and services, the facilities and resources in Nigerian libraries for this group are found to be highly unsatisfactory. They are not considered as part of the clientele of the library.

- **Accessibility of Library Buildings by Wheelchair users**

Most library buildings in Nigerian academic, public, school, and national libraries are not accessible on wheelchairs. This study revealed that in all the libraries investigated, the buildings are not accessible by wheelchair users. This category of library users are not considered in the design of Nigerian library buildings. The finding is in tanderin with Majinge and Stilwell (2014, p.47), who found that the ‘layout of library buildings in academic libraries does not allow people with visual impairments and in wheelchairs easy access to the information resources housed in the libraries’. They noted that in all the universities investigated, ‘there are no functioning lifts and ramps which enable people with visual impairments and in wheelchairs to reach upper floors where information resources or services

are located.’ Bagandanshwa (1998) also noted that in many instances, the design of library buildings are not suitable for the easy movement of persons on wheelchairs. Onatola (2007) also stressed that in Nigerian universities, students and staff who use wheelchairs are either physically carried in order for them to gain access to important facilities like libraries and



lecture rooms, or they are restricted to the ground floor. Howe (2011) investigated provision of libraries to disabled people including wheelchair users and found that access to library buildings pose serious challenge to this group of patrons. Hamzat and Dada (2005) also carried out a study on ‘wheelchair accessibility of public buildings in Ibadan, Nigeria’; they discovered that all the libraries that were

investigated are not accessible by wheelchair. They concluded that these categories of library users would not have access to the numerous services available to others. A pictorial view of

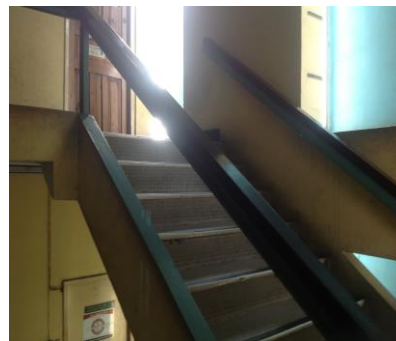
the facilities attests to the claims.



Entrance to Yaba College of Technology Library un-accessible by wheelchair



Reading areas in Unilag Library not accessible by Wheelchair users



Access to reading areas in National Library of Nigeria, Lagos not accessible by wheelchair users

- **Library circulation desk**

Library circulation desk is a crucial part of readers' services in any library. It is where the library clientele make enquiries, and also, charge and discharge materials required for use. This study found that in all the libraries investigated, the circulation desks are designed for only patrons who have no disability. The implication of this is that the library users on wheelchairs are not considered for services but regarded as beneficiaries of charity of institutional benevolence.



**Height of circulation desk in Yaba College of Technology and University Lagos
Libraries not accessible by wheelchair users**

- **Library Catalogue**

The findings of the research showed that the library catalogues in the libraries studied are constructed without consideration to the wheelchair clients. They are designed to be used only in standing position. The implication of this is that the wheelchair users on their sitting positions are denied access to this valuable information retrieval mechanism in the library. The library catalogue is the key or index to the library holdings. Whether it is the manual catalogue cabinet or the Online Public Access Catalogue (the computerized form of the catalogue), they are all indexes to the library collections. The catalogue is the first point of call to access the library information resources. Library catalogues serve as the link between the physical materials and their locations on the shelves. They give information to the users on the titles available in the library, their call numbers and information on whether the materials are on loan or in the library. Catalogues can be manual, divided into author, title and subject as seen in libraries which carry out their process manually. The online public access catalogue is used in automated libraries.



Library Card Catalogue un-accessible by wheelchair users because of the height

- **Library shelves**

The library print resources are arranged on the shelves alphabetically according to their call numbers. The height of the shelves will determine whether the wheelchair users will have

access to the information resources or not. Shelves that are high cannot be used by wheelchair users. The findings revealed that all the libraries investigated are constructed without consideration for wheelchair library users. This implies that this category of users will either depend on the help of other users or staff to assist them in searching for relevant resources or they are denied access.



The Height of the Library books shelves not accessible by wheelchair users.

- **Library toilets**

The type of toilets available in the library will determine whether wheelchair users will be able to use them or not. The normal toilets are not useable by persons on wheelchair. They need adjustable toilets. This research discovered that none of the libraries investigated has adjustable toilets for persons with disability. Their conveniences are not taken into consideration in all these libraries.



Toilets facilities in the Libraries under study not accessible by wheelchair users

This finding corroborated earlier studies that lamented total disregard and neglect for person with disability (Momodu, 2013, Ekwelem, 2013, Lawal-Solarin 2012, Odufuwa, 2007, Hamzat and Dada 2005).

Suggestions on ways to improve the existing arrangement for wheelchair library users in Nigeria

Many libraries in developing countries are faced with financial challenge, it may not be possible for them to pull down the library and rebuild it so as to meet the requirement for wheelchair users. Therefore, the library management should consider the available resources and think of reconstructing some facilities for wheelchair users to have access to library facilities. Some of the ways to improve the existing situation are listed below:

- Part of the entrance doors to the library should be reconstructed to automatic door for wheelchair users to gain access to the library.
- The library management should carve out a section in the ground floor. This section should be equipped with all the facilities and resources that are available to other library users.
- Some special shelves should be constructed to house information materials for wheelchair users.

- Some of the already existing toilets should be reconstructed to adjustable toilets for wheelchair users.
- Catalogue cabinets for wheelchair users should be constructed in such a way that they can be consulted on their sitting position.
- Special circulation desks for wheelchair users should be constructed so as to render services to them as the need arises.

Conclusion

Accessibility of information is a right of all individuals. The wheelchair users ought to have information at their disposal at all times. Inability to access available facilities constitutes a bottleneck to their accessibility to information required to sort out their daily needs and for advancement and better life. This places the wheelchair users at a disadvantage when compared with other users. It therefore behooves management of different institutions and heads of libraries to ensure that wheelchair patrons are included in the plan of libraries right from the building plan to the acquisition of facilities, resources and services so as to have a balanced library provisions to all patrons.

Recommendations

- Regulatory authorities should include the provision of facilities for the disabled as part of requirements for accreditation of institutions and programmes.
- Library facilities need to be redesigned so as to enable those on wheelchair access to the library building and resources Ramps should be provided at the entrances for easy access. This calls for strategic structural renovation in most libraries to reflect exclusivity.
- The National Assembly should enact laws that engender un-hindered access to information to all citizens irrespective of tribe, religion, sex, age, disability. Provisions should be made for punishment of offending persons and organizations.
- The disabled in the society should form a pressure group towards influencing government decision to enforce their access and use of library and information for development.

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