

Disability Inclusion: Accessibility of Library and Information Services to People with Visual Impairment in Public Libraries in Harare: Zimbabwe. The Missing Link:

Emmanuel Munemo¹, Kudzai Chiwanza²

¹ Department of Disability Studies and Special Needs Education-

Zimbabwe Open University

²Department of Library and Information Science and Records Management-

Zimbabwe Open University

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2024.803074>

Received: 13 February 2024; Revised: 28 February 2024; Accepted: 04 March 2024;
Published: 06 April 2024

ABSTRACT

The major thrust of the research study was mainly driven by the need to determine the accessibility and effectiveness of library and information services to students with visual impairment in Harare. Provision of library and information services to students and other people with visual impairment is a right enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the rights of people with disabilities (UNCRPD,2006). The study was informed by the interpretivism research philosophy which in part entails listening, observations and recording. The qualitative research approach was used by way of interviews, observations, documentary analysis and focus groups. In line with the approach, the study relied on the phenomenological research design. The population included former and current university students with visual impairment in Harare. The sample therefore covered thirty former and current Higher education students in Harare. The study established that the physical accessibility of public libraries to students with visual impairment leaves a lot to be desired and therefore needs concerted effort to address. Secondly the study also found out that the expertise of library staff in assisting students with visual impairment also needs to be revisited with a view to improving service provision to the constituency of students with visual impairment. It was also revealed that in the libraries themselves, there was limited access to library reading and study materials. In some cases, these materials were non-existent. The use of third parties to assist students with visual impairment was also found to be shortchanging students since this depended on several competing interests on the part of the person being assisted and the one assisting. The study also established that while sighted users could use electronic ways to access library services, this did not apply to users with visual impairment. The study recommended that the institution needed a library policy for users with visual impairment. There was need for advocacy to improve accessibility. There was also a need for an accessibility audit or needs analysis. Library resources also needed to be increased in both quality and quantity.

Key terms: accessibility, visual impairment, catalogue, non-slip services

INTRODUCTION

Visual impairment interferes extensively, with functioning levels of individuals affected, particularly when it comes to exploring the environment. One of the areas that facilitates exploring the environment for people

with visual impairment, is access to information either in the traditional forms or electronically. For people with visual impairment, accessing library and information services, is a right enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the rights of people with disabilities (UNCRPD, 2006). The Library and Information Services (LIS) Transformation Charter, (2000) 6th Draft alludes to the fact that access to information is indeed a human right and that the role of Library and information services is vital in the free flow of information and exchange of ideas necessary for debates and research for the benefit of society. A cursory analysis of the situation on the ground regarding accessibility in the provision of library and information services in public libraries in Harare, the capital city of Zimbabwe, appears to be a pipe dream that is largely elusive, contrary to the provisions of both the UNCRPD and the Transformation Charter. It was therefore the intention of this study to establish the true state of the situation regarding this issue.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Random visits to public libraries in Harare appear to point at the fact that there was not much activity on the availability of library and information services targeted at individuals with visual impairment. At some of the libraries, there was no evidence of library books in the form of Braille or enlarged print. In addition, audio materials in the form of talking books, compact discs, or cassettes were also not in the library shelves. Video materials for use by those with residual vision were also conspicuous by their absence. This scenario may not quite be surprising as Kurgat, (1978) and Cheunwatten (1993) also alluded to the fact that persons with disabilities tended to be despised, marginalized, and discriminated against, and this led to a limited range of services being availed to them.

Library staff appeared not knowledgeable about the specialized library and information needs or services meant for people with visual impairment. No specialized working areas were set aside for the storage of specialized assistive gadgets. According to Junaid, (2017) libraries as providers of information, should be at the forefront of removing barriers hindering access to information.

Accessibility is a multifaceted term that does not only stop with just the formats through which books or other library materials are availed in the library. It also entails how library users get into the actual library, technological devices in the library, user friendly software for use by those with visual impairment and a host of other needs. These critical resources were nonexistent. Several of the library entrances were not user friendly since doors were not wide enough. Voice recognition software was not availed. Neither basic resources used by people with visual impairment such as screen magnification facilities like magnifiers nor screen readers were observed. Public convenience amenities were also not user friendly.

The concerns above were not in isolation, as evidenced by Oliver, (1990) who indicated that access to libraries should be achieved by the construction of ramps, alongside stairs, installation of automatic doors, provision of information in Braille, large print, assistive technology eg Closed Circuit Television CCTV services, Braille embossers and screen magnification facilities.

One of the findings on a study on challenges at public libraries by the National Council of Library and Information Services (NCLIS) (2009) revealed that access was difficult and that participation of people with visual impairment in library and information services was minimal.

People with visual impairment need to be provided with a range of ways to enable them to meet their information needs as is done or provided for to those with normal sight. Williamson, Schauder, and Bow (2000). In Zimbabwe, it appears there is still a long way in efforts to fulfill such noble goals by public libraries and stakeholders who assist in providing the resources that make this a reality. Zimbabwe has a lot to learn from other countries such as India for example where a lot of measures have been put in place e.g., the enactment of a Copyright Act that makes it mandatory to change reading material to alternative formats

that people with visual impairment can also access, among other issues. According to Ayiah, (2007) the provision of information services in developed countries is considered or regarded as a social service.

The need to make libraries accessible to all was well articulated by several authorities. Individuals with visual impairment should have access to a range of inclusive and diverse books and other information resources in accessible formats that allow them to engage with reading both for pleasure and for daily living. <file://accessiblelibrariesreadingsight.html>. Collections in most libraries are in standard print format and individuals with visual impairment can't read such information. The absence of information in appropriate formats is a recipe for exclusion. Moore, (2000) indicated that while in an information intensive society, there was need to access a wide range of information, inability to access that range of information was largely seen as one of the defining characteristics of social exclusion.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The problem that needs to be resolved is to what extent public libraries have been able to include the library and information needs of library users with visual impairment? According to the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) guidelines for development of the Public Library Service (2001) the development of collections should be based on the principle of access for all and includes access to formats appropriate to specific client groups such as Braille and talking books for the blind. This is very important especially when looked at, at the backdrop of a situation where people with visual impairment benefit from materials that are not necessarily in the form of books only, but other non-book materials that make it possible for them to accomplish both their academic and non-academic programmes and activities including reading for pleasure.

The challenges faced by library users with visual impairment basically revolve around six areas namely, getting into the library, working in the library, resources in the library, expertise of library staff, accessibility of materials outside the library as well as amenities at the library or around the library area.

The researchers set out to interrogate the true state of the existing situation on the ground with a view to coming up with remedies to address the outstanding areas.

Research Questions

1. To what extent have public libraries in Harare been able to meet user satisfaction levels for people with visual impairment based on the range and quality of library and information services availed?
2. What is the nature of library and information challenges that public libraries have experienced in Harare regarding library users with visual impairment?
3. How have library and information service provision challenges experienced by library users with visual impairment been addressed in public libraries in Harare?

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

The Constitutions of many countries guarantee that the acquisition of knowledge, information and education is an inescapable right. Public libraries are in the center of ensuring that the environment is effectively enabled to gain or acquire this knowledge. There may be many barriers to realize this very noble intention, not only for sighted people, but more notably for library users with visual impairment. Machel, (1996) highlighted that “The ideal library service is one where each individual, regardless of the degree of visual impairment has access to the materials and information at the time they are required, in a format that can be used, in the quantities that are needed, and where the needs of the user are understood by staff.”

Provision of Library and Information Services to Library Users with Visual Impairment

The World Health Organization estimates that 15 % of the population has disabilities. www.who.int/disabilities/worldreport/2011/factsheetpdf. From these statistics we have a constituency that cannot be taken for granted. This constituency has a right to accessing library and information services from public libraries. Of particular interest in this group of special population are those with visual impairment. Lack of sight imposes several limitations to library users with visual impairment. Most of the things that people with sight take for granted, are not that obvious or common to those with visual impairment. Exposure to the environment makes it much easier for those with visual impairment to learn about the environment much faster and easily, compared to those without sight. Concern for this study largely arose from or revolves around the position regarding how these people are being included in the provision of library and information services in the country.

Certainly, there must be some ways through which information on the environment is availed to such people whose exposure to the environment is interfered with by virtue of either low vision or the lack of vision. Ayiah, (2007) indicates that The IFLA /UNESCO Public Libraries Manifesto (1994), concurs that public libraries were the local gateway to knowledge, and provided a basic condition for life learning, independent decision making and cultural development of individuals and social groups. Realization of library and information services at the level indicated above appears to be an elusive goal for public libraries in Harare. This has tended to negatively affect reading needs and preferences of library users with visual impairment in Zimbabwe. Commitment to accommodate and provide for the needs of people with visual impairment on the part of Authorities and other stakeholders is required as a matter of urgency. And, yet Ayiah, (2007) alludes to the fact that local libraries should be the primary service point to access information by both the sighted and those with visual impairment.

According to www.makingpubliclibrariesaccessiblepwdcentreforinternetandsociety.html the library and information need of people with disabilities are presented in 3 stages / areas, namely:

1. Accessibility in terms of getting in the library

- All areas of the library should be accessible.
- Mobility aids/assistive devices should be able to pass through.
- Security checkpoint.
- Wide entrance door.
- Well-lit elevators if any.
- Reachable elevator.

2. Accessibility in terms of Inside the library

- All parts/areas to be accessible.
- Catalogues to be available.
- Service desks at entrance.
- Shelves to be reachable.
- Tables and workstations adapted for people with visual impairments.
- Chairs with steady arm rests.
- Visible/audible fire alarms.
- Suitable sound insulations to minimize sound in reading areas.

3. Accessibility in terms of Outside the library.

- Accessible entrance gate, door
- Parking space to be available.
- Well-lit areas, paths from main gate
- Smooth, non-slip surface

Source: www.makingpubliclibrariesaccessiblepwdcentreforinternetandsociety.html

In addition, libraries should have at least one public convenience area that is well equipped for library users with visual impairment which should be equipped with clear signs, adequately wide doors as well as alarm buttons that are reachable for those with visual impairment and could have additional disabilities that may require the use of wheelchairs. The concerns raised in the 3 areas highlighted above were also clearly buttressed by another source: <http://socialjustice.nic.in/glinecpwd.php>, in which the critical need for structural modifications to libraries for entry for example in respect of parking, paths, entrances, automatic doors, handrails, ramps, elevators, tables, public convenience areas and alarms in toilets were also given high priority.

Challenges Experienced by Library Users with Visual Impairment.

Library users with visual impairment appear to have been abandoned or discriminated against when they want to use public libraries. The discrimination comes from several angles. One source of these challenges appears to be the actual resources to be used by those with visual impairment. These needed to be identified using professional strategies such as making use of professional needs assessment strategies. Junaid, (2017) supported the need for a needs assessment by indicating that an assessment of the needs of library users with visual impairment was a first step in that it played a pivotal role in influencing the design, layout of buildings, signs, stock levels, development plan for alternative formats, adaptive equipment, and an informed reader development plan. Another source of the challenges seems to be the expertise of assisting such library users, and this one emanated from the Librarians that man the libraries themselves.

Another dimension to the challenges bedeviling provision of effective services in this area also appears to be the lack of aggressive advocacy strategies aimed at correcting the outstanding issues. Ayiah, (2007) alluded to the fact that participation of people with visual impairment in societal activities depends on availability of relevant, reliable, accurate and timely information. This position is critical to the constituency of those with visual impairment especially against an understanding that while public libraries are meant to bridge the gap between library users with visual impairment and those with sight. community and individual enlightenment are based on access to information. Many of the Library users with visual impairment cannot read normal print. Even many of those with low vision cannot read print let alone those who are blind. Lack of information results in exclusion and yet most of the public library collections were in standard print format. (Ibid).

The acquisition, organization, and dissemination of information and materials should not in any way discriminate or disadvantage library users with visual impairment (Ayiah, 2007). The critical role of information in empowering people with visual impairment is buttressed by the sentiments that came out of The G8 summit in Japan which recognized that information and information technology are potent forces in shaping the 21st Century and recognizes the importance of information and technology in “bridging the divide.”

Lighting and Other Physical Adaptations

The issue of lighting has another area that has proved to be problematic for people with visual impairment

when they try to make use of public libraries. In worst case scenarios there will be no lighting at all during the evening or at night or even during the day. In others lighting may be there but inadequate. Visual impairment is not homogeneous. Individuals with visual impairment have different lighting needs and these must be adhered to. Assessment to determine these needs must be done before the service can be provided.

In this vein McCormark, (2017) recommended the following strategies to help the situation:

- Keeping lights on in dimly lit areas
- Checking and replacing light bulbs
- Signage on doors should be clear in either Braille, enlarged print depending on the visual acuity of the people.
- Fitting blinds to library windows
- Repairing broken windows to reduce glare.
- Highlighting stare edges, handrails, and doorways with contrasting colour such as yellow or white
- Reducing all major hazards or obstacles in the environment
- Keeping background sounds to a minimum and concretizing activities as much as possible.

Training Expertise on Part of Library Staff

Accessibility of any library environment influences the comfort, concentration, and wellbeing of library users with visual impairment. In any discipline, the issue of training on the part of staff members to enable them to handle challenges that can emanate from different people who will need to make use of specific services is of ultimate importance. Intensive services are a priority in ensuring that the consequences of visual impairment are effectively dealt with. These services entail among others, basic skills, discreet knowledge, thorough knowledge and an understanding of visual impairment and its attendant problems. (Ayiah, 2007). The role of training plays a critical role when it comes to using specialized software such as Kurzweil 1000 and Jaws.

Screen Magnification Software.

This software makes it easy for library users with visual impairment to access several educational services independently. Firstly, screen magnification software for example magnifiers what is on the computer screen. The American Foundation for the Blind, (2017) indicates that screen magnification software particularly assists library users with visual impairment in the following ways in the following ways.

- Changing the colour and type of the background
- Increasing the size of the image on the screen from 2x to 16 x
- Selecting enlarged or different colour cursors and arrows
- Having computer speak in addition to enlarging what is on the screen.

On the other hand, screen magnification has its challenges for users with visual impairment. The first one is that the larger the image becomes on the screen, the less of the material on the computer fits on the screen (Willings, 2018) This challenge makes it difficult for the person using it to keep track of all the vital information he/she needs. In addition, the image can also appear jumpy, and this results in distraction to some of the users especially those with low vision.

Screen Reading Software

The major advantage of screen reading software lies in that it enables the person using it to hear the text that is displayed on the computer monitor. These programmes use a sound card in the computer to produce the speech that can be heard through speakers or headphones. The programmes make use of controls screen reading technology which works through the key board commands that tell the programme what information

to read aloud on the screen as well as to control how it is read. (American Foundation for the Blind, 2017). In a library situation, the person with a visual impairment is supposed to be helped to use a headphone to listen to a screen reading programme. The challenge, however, could be on how such programmes will manage pictures, videos, and other graphics (Willings,2018)

Electronic Note Takers (ENT)

Electronic note takers are a combination of a computer and a mainstream PDA. PDAs can have a Braille keyboard or standard computer keyboard. They can also come with a refreshable Braille display to enable reading and listening to the text that the cursor is passing over (Willings,2018).

Refreshable Braille Displays

of the text as it is on the computer screen. The displays consist of plastic pins that are raised and lowered to form the corresponding Braille characters as the cursor moves across the print on the screen. (American Foundation for the Blind, 2017). Of importance is the fact that refreshable Braille displays should be used together with screen reading software. For all these four strategies to work effectively, there is need to have library staff trained to assist the intended beneficiaries.

Volunteering or Third-Party Reading and Transcription Services

Library users with visual impairment sometimes find themselves in difficult situations where they must enlist the services of volunteers to help them read through learning material. Every citizen has a right to information that he /she should be able to access independently. In support of this position, the Ranganathan law indicated that books were there to serve the needs of individual users, regardless of disability, social class, sex, age, ethnic group, religion, or any other factor. Ranganathan (1872-1972), in Ayiah, (2007). Exposing library users with visual impairment to volunteers has its challenges. Relying on the goodwill of volunteers interferes with access to information (Ayiah,2007). In the same vein, Wright &Davie, (1996) also had reservations on the use of volunteers when they indicated that the motivation for volunteer reader services could be out of sympathy. Library users with visual impairment do not necessarily require or need sympathy, but independence in the way they access library services. Library services need to be highly reliable and efficient at any given time (Ayiah, 2007). Not all volunteers may be trained to do the work they will be doing in assisting library users with visual impairment and this has a negative impact on the quality of the service offered and this eventually shortchanges the person with a visual impairment. Volunteer services largely depend on the commitment of the person who is assisting as well as whether that volunteer has the time to do so against the time when the person who needs assistance also needs the help. These competing needs may interfere a lot with the way the assistance is offered.

Some library users with visual impairment may have very limited options at their disposal and because of this, they will be forced to accept the free volunteer service, not because they like it or enjoy it, but only because they don't have any other viable option. Volunteer transcribers and readers without professional training have been known to affect the quality of service and the product as well. (Bruhn, 1989). Bruhn further goes on to demonstrate the challenge of voluntary services in library services for people with visual impairment by giving the example of a volunteer in the United States of America, (USA) where a volunteer was a psychopath, whose real motive was to get an opportunity to have personal advantage of access to the people who wanted help, then eventually get the opportunity to abuse them.

Possible Measures to Address Challenges Experienced.

The Okinawa Chart on Global Information Society, (2000) indicated that “ A key component of our strategy must be continued drive toward universal and affordable access- we continue to pay particular attention to

the needs and constraints of the socially under privileged people with disabilities and older persons and actively pursue measures to facilitate their access and use” Provision of effective library services to people with visual impairment facilitates the creation of opportunities for empowerment through learning, education services and indeed other forms of literacy support. Ultimately it is these services that have the potential to shape and inform new ideas that are central to a creative and innovative society. It is with this in mind that physical barriers to accessing public libraries and attitudes to be changed and improved for the better need to be removed. The LIS Transformation (Charter, 2009).

Everyone visiting a public library should do so without any hindrance. To start with, the physical environment of the library itself, should be accessible. Reading and seeking information should at all costs be a pleasure to the users. Visual impairment is not homogenous. Library users with varying levels or types of visual impairment should be able to take part in a wide range of reading and cultural experiences, including book based and digital activities. [accessiblelibrariesreadingsight.html](#). If well supported, understood, and implemented, effective provision of library and information services to library users with visual impairment can go a long way in facilitating and improving community and individual independence, health, and wellbeing.

Copyright issues also play another important role in the provision of library and information services to people with visual impairment. Generally, it has also been proven that copyright amendments that give libraries the option to convert their collections into other accessible formats free of charge for people with disabilities, together with technological developments, such as the more cost effective screen reading software has probably created extremely valuable options to enable libraries to be user-friendly and more accessible to people with visual impairment and even those with dyslexia. [www.makingpubliclibrariesaccessiblepwdcentreforinternetandsociety.html](#)

In India for example, they have a Copyright Act, that allows for changing formats at free cost and without the need for authority from publishers. (Ibid) They also have a provision for training library staff and digitizing all existing books over seven years and the new ones over 60 days. The formats required are Braille, large print, audio recordings, electronic formats, and digital talking books.

Volunteer or third-party transcription and reading services can only be resorted to as a stop gap measure. In no way should this measure be used as a final solution to the challenges of reading and transcription experienced by library users with visual impairment. Libraries and Library authorities need to do put in place resource mobilization strategies that can effectively and permanently deal with this challenge so as not to disenfranchise people with visual impairment who need to use public libraries to empower themselves or do other library activities to improve their communities.

METHODOLOGY

The study used interpretivism as the preferred Research Philosophy. Interpretivism entails listening, seeing, and recording how participants see things and how they do things (Maynard, 1989). Interpretivism was selected because as a philosophy, it is concerned with searching meaning, as exhibited by human actions. It focuses on participants’ perspectives of the situation on the ground. For purposes of this research, knowledge and insight was sought from the people with disabilities in the affected areas, the authorities, and other stakeholders. Interpretivism allows the researcher to hear, record, and compare the participants’ feelings, perceptions, and experiences regarding provision of library and information services to library users with visual impairment.

A qualitative research approach was used in line with the research philosophy. The research tools used included interviews, observations, document analysis and focus group discussions. These tools were

selected because the researchers sought to establish how best provision of library and information services could be understood and managed through interpretations of participants in the affected areas.

Finally, the research employed the phenomenological research design and methodology to achieve the objectives of the study. This design was chosen because it “describes particular phenomenon or appearance of things as lived experiences” (Struebert & Carpenter, 1999:43). It also follows that ‘true meaning of phenomenon be explored through the experience of them as described by the individual (Jasper 1994:309). In this case, participants’ views and feelings about disaster reduction and management were explored through gathering information from library users with disabilities who themselves bear the brunt of using public libraries. In this regard, the researchers visited the public libraries to gather first-hand information on what really takes place in these libraries and the effectiveness of service provision and management strategies that were put in place.

Data Analysis: Thematic analysis procedures were used. These involved coding and closely examining the data to identify appropriate broad themes and patterns (McCombs, 2021).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The study came up with some pertinent findings. It is important to take a closer look at these findings. This section will be looked at from a perspective of physical access into the library, access in the library and access in terms of outside the library.

Physical Accessibility to Public Libraries

The study established that several of the public libraries were not easily accessible for people with visual impairment. This could be accounted for by some explanations or reasons. Firstly, this could be because when the buildings were initially designed, there was no consideration that people with visual impairment could one day want to make use of the libraries. Entrances were not wide enough for free access by a person with a visual impairment. The entrances were also not labelled for ease of access. At one of the libraries in the Central business district the elevators were not functional. This forced individuals with visual impairment to make use of the stairs. Use of stairs, especially in an environment that one is not quite familiar with has its challenges in terms of mobility and orientation. There would therefore be need for assistance and no one maybe willing to assist. This may not be surprising considering that sometime back people with disabilities, including those with visual impairment, were not taken seriously for purposes of planning and decision making. Back then discrimination was and is still rife not withstanding whether it is being done intentionally or not. The assumption was that only sighted people were going to use the public libraries. Another dimension could be that society only saw people with visual impairment as dependent people who would not have any need to use a public library for that matter. Because of such erroneous beliefs, accessibility issues for individuals with visual impairment were not taken seriously. This was worsened by the common exclusion of people with disabilities. Negative attitudes can also be used to justify the physical inaccessibility of public libraries to library users with visual impairment. Generally, negative attitudes make society fail to pay attention to the needs of people with visual impairment to a very large extent. Society sees no reason at all in making libraries accessible by all stakeholders. This finding was not in tandem with [accessiblelibrariesreadingsight.html](#) which indicated that everyone visiting a public library should do so without any hindrance and that the physical environment of the library itself, should be accessible. Contrary, to this finding, McCormark, (2017 recommended several strategies that go a long way in guaranteeing easy accessibility to the library by-library users with visual impairment. These included wide entrance doors, reachable elevators as well as entrances where mobility aids such as white canes or laser canes and wheelchairs can easily fit. Oliver, (1990) also indicated that access to libraries should be achieved by the construction of ramps, alongside stairs and installation of automatic doors.

Accessibility in the Library

The study found out that accessibility in the library itself was problematic. Firstly, the librarians were not so sure how they could help a person with a visual impairment who wanted to use their library services. This can be explained by several factors. Firstly, the librarians may not have been trained to handle such clients in the library and this could present real challenges on their part. The need for such kind of training is critical and it would be incumbent on library officials to make sure that they are trained on how best they can offer this service. This can also be justified by the fact that, since training is an investment that requires funding, the funding for such training may not be available. Funding is a budgetary provision that needs to be planned for well in advance. In some organizations, budgetary provisions may need to be looked at 6 months in advance, and where this has not been done in time it may not be easy to smuggle or fast track such a critical need at short notice. This is a process that requires to be taken care of well in advance, and maybe this could be a challenge that public libraries may be battling with. The other issue could really have to do with the question of attitudes. Library authorities may have negative attitudes about the whole thing and may not therefore take such issues seriously. Contrary to this finding, the critical role played by ensuring accessibility for all who need to use the library and information services in the library was highlighted through another source namely. www.makingpubliclibrariesaccessiblepwdcentreforinternetandsociety.html

Availability of Library Materials/Resources in Appropriate Formats.

The study established that in the public libraries there were no books provided that fit all client groups in the user-friendly formats of Braille, enlarged print, audio recorded material and digital talking books. The reasons behind this scenario could be many. Firstly, this could be because library resources for people with visual impairment were generally very expensive. The costs were too prohibitive. Because of this Library authorities may not see the need or urgency in investing on the resources of library users with visual impairment. It may take the understanding of authorities who really appreciate what needs to be done and an appreciation that investing in the needs of library users with visual impairment is worth the costs involved. Another dimension could be that people with visual impairment themselves need to do more in terms of advocacy so that their issues and needs are understood in the correct context. In contrast to this finding, Moore, (2000) indicated that while in an information intensive society, there was need to access a wide range of information, inability to access that range of information was largely seen as one of the defining characteristics of social exclusion. There are other studies that did not agree with this finding and argued that individuals with visual impairment should have access to a range of inclusive and diverse books and other information resources in accessible formats that allow them to engage with reading for both pleasure and for daily living. (Machel, (1996) as well as <file://accessiblelibrariesreadingsight.html>) Oliver, (1990) also advocated for the provision of information in Braille, large print, assistive technology such as Closed-Circuit Television CCTV services, Braille embossers and screen magnification facilities.

Use of Electronic Ways of Accessing Library and Information Services

The study found out that while electronic ways of accessing information in the libraries was available for sighted users, the same could not be said for library users with visual impairment. This finding could have been prompted by several factors. Firstly, the librarians may not have the expertise to do so and may therefore need training for this type of service to be availed to those who need it. This entails availing adequate funding for the training needs to be properly met. Secondly, libraries may not have the relevant software to use for the benefit of library user who require this service. It requires expertise in the area or discipline to be able to identify and purchase or acquire the appropriate software to be used. The availability of funding to sponsor all the electronic gadgets that may need to be used could be another dimension contributing to the status quo. Limited funding levels or the unwillingness of Library authorities to fund for

needs of library users with visual impairment. Contrary to this finding, Willings (2018) and the American Foundation of the Blind (2017) advocated for the provision of services through electronic ways or means. Oliver, (1990) also highlighted the utilization of electronic services through assistive technology e.g. Closed-Circuit Television (CCTV) services, Braille embossers and screen magnification facilities need to be made full use of to benefit individuals with visual impairment in the public libraries.

Assistance to Access Library Services by Third Parties

Another critical finding was that most library users with visual impairment resorted to the use of third parties to access library services. This arrangement had its challenges especially to the people with visual impairment. Third party assistance has always had its fair share of challenges wherever it has been used. Third parties normally come in to help with reading for those with visual impairment, recording study materials and books, looking for study materials as well as assisting with teaching and learning notes. This finding could have been prompted by the fact that library staff could not help them because they did not have the expertise to help such clients. In addition, they may not even have the resources to assist them.

Another dimension could be that Library personnel may not appreciate the urgency of attending to the needs of library users with visual impairment mainly because people with visual impairment have not been regarded seriously concerning their library and information services' needs. Society appears not to see the importance of including people with visual impairment who wish to use libraries for educational purposes. Another reason that can account for this finding could be that in the absence of a user -friendly library policy, librarians did not see any obligation to help library users with visual impairment with any services. Wright and Davie, (1996) and Ayiah, (2007) also expressed reservations about the effectiveness of assistance rendered to library users with visual impairment by other people. Also in agreement with this finding was the fact that use of third parties should only be used as a stop gap measure and not a final solution to the challenges faced by library users with visual impairment. www.makingpubliclibrariesaccessiblepwdcentreforinternetandsociety.html

Expertise of Library Staff in Assisting Library Users with Visual Impairment

The study established that there was no expertise or limited expertise on the part of Library staff to help people with visual impairment who wanted to library services. This was a major indictment on the part of library staff. One reason to explain this is that during their training as librarians the staff may not have been trained or exposed to helping library, users with visual impairment. The curriculum for their training may not have had such aspects, hence this gap. Another issue could be that the curriculum planners for such courses may also not have anticipated or be aware of the need to include such aspects in the curriculum for Librarians, something which exonerates librarians, to some extent. Seen from yet another perspective, policy makers may not have foreseen the need to include people with visual impairment as potential library users one day. This may not be surprising considering that people with visual impairment have historically been subjected to discrimination over the years. It may therefore take quite some time for all stakeholders to get to fully appreciate the importance of including people with visual impairment in their programmes and operations right from the curriculum design stage, teaching and learning and provision of other related services. This finding disagrees with Ayiah (2007) who also established that thorough knowledge and an understanding of visual impairment, and its attendant problems were critical. The finding is also at odds with what was obtaining in India where they have a provision for training library staff and digitizing all existing books over seven years and the new ones over 60 days. www.makingpubliclibrariesaccessiblepwdcentreforinternetandsociety.html

Lack of and Limited Advocacy

The study also revealed that it appears there have not been concerted efforts in advocacy work to push for a

better understanding of the issues involved in the provision of library and information services targeted at people with visual impairment. A few factors can account for this unfortunate position. Firstly, organizations of people with visual impairment may be failing to make an impact on policy makers and other authorities to have their voices heard. They may therefore need support from other state, civic and private organizations to promote inclusion of the needs of this constituency in the provision of library and information services. Advocacy work may take time to be heard by those for whom the message is intended. Another perspective could be that the advocacy efforts may be there, but the calls were falling on deaf ears. Stakeholders who were supposed to take appropriate action appear not to hear anything or just choose to ignore the requests being made to promote inclusion of people with visual impairment in the provision of library and information services. Another issue could be that the authorities just don't have interest to ensure that services for library user with visual impairment are timeously and effectively provided to the intended beneficiaries. This finding does not concur with what was happening in India for example, where through aggressive advocacy they have a Copyright Act, that allows for changing formats at free cost and without the need for authority from publishers.

www.makingpubliclibrariesaccessiblepwdcentreforinternetandsociety.html

CONCLUSION

The study established several relevant findings that can be followed up with a view to implementing them or subjecting them to further scrutiny. These include the inaccessibility of the library entrance and the outside of the library. Another key finding was that even the inside of the library was not accessible to people with visual impairment to move freely in the library as well as to access other ancillary services that should be offered within the confines of the library itself. User friendly library materials and other resources were not being used by the libraries. Key library resources and materials for people with visual impairment were not being availed to public libraries. The failure by library staff to avail reading and study material in appropriate electronic formats was also another critical finding. Another finding was that there was too much reliance on people with visual impairment being assisted by third parties who may not necessarily have the expertise to help individuals with visual impairment. The expertise of library staff also left a lot to be desired. Lastly, the advocacy efforts to empower people with visual impairment were not there or were too limited, making it extremely difficult for them to break through.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In view of the findings highlighted above, the following recommendations were felt to be worth considering.

1. Carrying out an accessibility audit/needs analysis for all public libraries to determine and ascertain the levels of compliance with established benchmarks.
2. Ensuring that all library staff are trained in handling issues to do with library users with visual impairment.
3. Increasing the number of library books that benefit people with visual impairment and these should be in the appropriate formats such as Braille, enlarged print, audio, talking books etc
4. Setting aside specific budgetary allocations to cater for the needs of library users with visual impairment.
5. Providing more user-friendly electronic resources gadgets and devices that help people with visual impairment in the libraries.
6. Increasing advocacy activities to help empower people with visual impairment in library and information services.
7. Putting together a public library and information services policy focusing on addressing pertinent issues to do with people with visual impairment.

REFERENCES

1. American Foundation for the Blind (2017) @ mchcy.org/disability/specific/visualimpairment. Accessed 24/10/23.
2. Ayiah, E. M. (2007) *Provision of Library and Information services to the Visually challenged students in University of Ghana, Legon Library Philosophy and Practice*(e-journal)1369@ <http://digitalcommons.univ.edu/libpractice/1369>. Accessed 30/07/23.
3. Bruhn, J. G. (1989) *Counselling Persons with a fear of AIDS* @ www.doi.org/10.1002/j1556-6676.1989.t02.116. Accessed 30/07/23.
4. Cheunwatten, A., (1993) *Books area our first Sight: Library Services for the Visually Handicapped* in Thailand in Olden A., and Wise, M., (eds) *Information and Libraries in the developing World*. Vol Southeast Asia Library Association Publishing @ [lis.sagepub.com/content/vol26\(3\)](http://lis.sagepub.com/content/vol26(3))
5. File://accesiblelibrariesreadingsight.htm. Accessed 24/07/23.
6. <http://socialjustice.niciin/glinecpwd.php>. Accessed 06/09/23.
7. IFLA/UNESCO Public Libraries Manifesto, (1994 @ www.unesco.org/webworld/libraries/manifesto/libraman.htm Accessed 30/09/23.
8. International Federations of Library Associations (IFLA) (2001) @ www.ifla.org/publications/ifla-licensingprinciples Accessed 14/10/23
9. Jasper, J. M., (1994) *Issues in Phenomenology bfor Researchers in Nursing*. *Journal of Advanced Nursing Issues* @ <https://doi.org>. Accessed 17/09/23.
10. Junaid, R., (2017) *Library and Information Services to the Visually Impaired Persons* @ Asia Library Association publishing @ [lis.sagepub.com/content/vol26\(3\)](http://lis.sagepub.com/content/vol26(3)). Accessed 16/10/23
11. Kurgat, M., (2001) *People with Disabilities Table their Agenda*. The East African @ <https://digitalcommons.edu/lipphilpac>
12. Cheunwatten, A., (1993) *Books are our First Sight: Library Services for the visually Handicapped* in Thailand. In Olden, A. and Wise, M., (eds) *Information and Libraries in the developing World*. Vol 2 Southeast Asia Library Association Publishing @ [lis.sagepub.com/content/vol26\(3\)](http://lis.sagepub.com/content/vol26(3)) Accessed 10/08/23.
13. LIS Transformation Charter (2009) Draft Commissioned by Department of Arts and Culture and National Council of Libraries and Information Services @ www.sacr.fs.gov.za/wp-content/uploads. Accessed 23/08/23
14. Machel, G., (1996) *Impact of Armed Conflict on Children*. New York. United Nations.
15. Maynard, J., (1989) *Sociological Theory* @ books.google.co.zw/books/about/sociological_theory.html Accessed 02/11/23.
16. McCombs, S., (2021) *What is a Research design/Types, Guide and Examples* @ scribbr.com/methodology/research Accessed 05/11/23.
17. McCormack, B. (2017) *Person Centred Nursing Research Methodology, Methods and Outcomes* @ www.intspringer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-030-27868-72. Accessed 15/11/2023.
18. Moore, J. E., (2000) *One Read to turnover an examination of work Exhaustion* in *Technology Professionals* @ scrip.org/reference/referencepapers. Accessed 22/07/23.
19. Okinawa Charter on Global Information Society (2000) @ www.bing.com/search?okinawa.tcharterontglobalinf+society. Accessed 10/07/23.
20. Oliver, M., (1990) *The Politics of Disablement: a Sociological Approach*. New York St. Martin's Press.
21. Struebert, H., and Carpenter, D., (1999) *Qualitative Research in Nursing: Advancing the Humanistic Perspective* (2nd Ed) @ www.scrip.org/reference. Accessed 29/08/23.
22. United Nations (2006) *United Nations Convention on the rights of people with disabilities*. New York, United Nations
23. Williason, K., Schauder, D., AND Bow, A., *Information Seeking by blind and Sight Impaired citizens: an 4/paper79.html*. Accessed 28/10/23.

24. Willings, (2018) *Willings Press Guide*, vol 2 World News Media.
25. Wright, K., and Davie, N. W., (1996) *Serving the Disabled. How to do it*. Manual Libraries' York. Neal Schumann. who.int/disabilities/worldreport/2011/factsheet Accessed 07/11/23.