

Rural Public Library Supporting Rural Women Development and Empowerment

Roziya Abu⁺

Victoria University Melbourne Australia

Abstract. Rural development has always be the priority focus of the Malaysian government. A variety of facilities and infrastructure were built to support the process of the rural community social and economic development; rural public libraries are one of these facilities. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the initiatives of development activities and programs that underpin rural public libraries in supporting rural women development and empowerment in Malaysia. The discussing of the initiatives is based on cross-case analysis findings in three rural public libraries in Selangor, Malaysia. It draws on original empirical research conducted in investigating the relationship, participation and contribution of rural public libraries towards rural community development in Malaysia.

Keywords: Rural Public Library, Rural Women Development, Rural Women Empowerment, Rural Women.

1. Introduction

Women and Library: Public library has always been viewed as an important entity in a local community development and empowerment process, particularly in a rural and disadvantaged community. It has been established as a crucial element in the life of community members, as it provides information that is essential for the community progress. However, in the beginning, many early public libraries had denied women and children right to use libraries; thus, they are forced to rely on their male relatives for access to library resources. According to Jolie Valentine, ‘in the public libraries of 1876, borrowers were not permitted to wander amid the stacks; children (as well as women, in some places) were not allowed inside libraries at all’ [1].

Currently, in the contemporary public library environment, the situation has change. Today women and children has become the primary focus of any services, programs or activities develop by a public library. Many librarians presently seem to be developing more programs that attract women more than men. This is because they (women and children) have always been enthusiastic and devoted users of public libraries [2].

2. Research Method

This study adopted a case study methodology as described by Yin [3] and Sarantakos [4], using qualitative methods of personal interview, discussion and observations of group meetings and documents to examine the activities and programs of rural public library in three rural public libraries in Selangor, Malaysia namely, **CSM1**, **CSM2** and **CM3**. The sample for this research is generated using a purposive sampling technique, as suggested by Alston and Bowler [5]. In this framework, in-depth and semi structured interviews were conducted in a way which allows a guided conversation to occur in the respondents’ own terms but still provides a thematic guide [6][3]. These interviews involved nine users (three from each rural public library Selangor, Malaysia), three rural public library librarians (one librarian from each rural public library in Selangor, Malaysia), three rural public library assistants (one librarian from each rural public library in Selangor, Malaysia) and one staff member from the State of Selangor Public Library (SLS) [15]. This study focuses on understanding the respondents’ experiences and the meaning of those experiences from their own perspectives [7][15].

⁺ Corresponding author. Tel:+61399192436; fax: +61399192218.
E-mail Address: roziya.abu@live.vu.edu.au.

This article presents the results of cross-case analysis of the three cases studied through fieldwork in the three selected rural public libraries in the state of Selangor, Malaysia – **CSM1**, **CSM2** and **CSM3**. In this cross-case analysis the approach used was the thematic approach [8]. The feedback gathered through interviews with respondents, provides a range of opinions that is necessary to assess current Malaysian rural public library services, activities and programs supporting their local rural women development and empowerment [15].

3. Rural Public Library

A rural library is a library or library system that serves a rural community or population that primarily lives on farms and ranches, and in remote communities [9]. Kempson[10] lists three guidelines for creation and operation that should be considered as a definition of rural libraries: the rural library should not solely be based on the provision of printed materials; the rural library should be rooted in the community and for the most part, facilitated by members of that particular community; and the rural library service should be a channel for transferring information both to and from the local community.

After its independence in 1957, Malaysia's economic and social development has grown gradually and it has developed its rural areas with infrastructure utilities, social and health amenities and school facilities. This is to support the economic development of the country as well as increasing the quality of Malaysians' rural social and economic life. Throughout the rural development progress, the Malaysian government has heavily invested in building rural public libraries in all rural villages around the country [15]. Through its national cultural policy, sponsorship was given to all kind of activities and programs such as performances, exhibitions and educational continuously in all public libraries, including rural public libraries[11].

In 2009, the total number of rural libraries in Malaysia was 1,089. These rural libraries are built with the purpose of enabling rural society to enjoy a recreational facility that is comprehensive and complete. It is intentionally to be use as a place and space of engagement and learning for everyone in a village, despite their age and interest. The Director of the Library's Assistant Chain Department in the National Library of Malaysia (NLM), MohdAzmi Aziz, states that the NLM greatly hopes that through village library establishment, interest among the rural community for reading not only will increase, but that the information acquisition gap between them and friends in the city can also be reduced [13][15].

3.1. Rural Women Development and Empowerment: Malaysia

In Malaysia, women is said to play an important role in poverty eradication and in improving the level of general living of Malaysian household. A study carried out by Augusto Lopez-Claros and SaadiaZahidi in three countries including Malaysia, showed that women to have a greater say in spending priorities, they would be far more likely to spend family and community resources for improving health, education, community infrastructure and eradication poverty [12]. In addition, Malaysian labour force statistics reveals that women labour in Malaysia comprises of 4,165.4 million people from the total of 11,517.2 million Malaysian labours and number of women labour force increased from 1,111.4 million in 2007 to 1,145.7 million in 2010 [13].

Realizing the huge role and function of women especially in rural area, Malaysian government had and continuingly carrying out various development programs with special focus on women. Of all development programs and effort, building rural public libraries in every rural village throughout Malaysia has to be the most effective step done by the government in reaching rural women and assisting them in their daily life doings. Many of these rural public libraries are currently assisting and providing rural women with non-formal activities, and outreach programs that are relevant to their needs and wants [15].

3.2. Supporting Rural Women Development and Empowerment: Rural Public Library

In Malaysia, rural public libraries might not be as special as any of the '*micro-enterprising-scaling up programs*'¹ but rural public libraries has given these rural women the basis input of information to learn and

¹ Refers to home economics programs introduced by the Malaysian government to rural women to help them manage and run their family effectively and efficiently, through training courses of skills development. Recently this programs develop into a programs where women are motivated to assist in increasing family income through venturing into income generating activities.

enhance their quality of life in general terms. Most importantly, the rural public libraries activities and outreach programs, on-going, supporting rural women in developing their self-development and self-empowerment.

Through interview and observation in three different rural public library in Selangor, Malaysia, this study discover that current rural public library is playing its part, successfully, in supporting rural women development and empowerment, through its resources, activities and programs planned [15].

3.2.1. Women Self-development Resources

All rural public library in Malaysia are provided with many relevant and good reading resources that can be used by everyone especially housewives and rural women; such materials are home and entertainment magazine, home economic books, motivational books and referencing assistant. Many female respondents from all three public library are very content with the materials and resources provided to them.

I love to read; especially motivational books and these books are very expensive. I can't effort to buy then, but with the library service available here, I can easily go there and borrow it. For female entrepreneur like myself, these books helped me to strengthen myself esteem. (CSM3 User 2)

I love to cook and I do simple gardening on my own. I sometimes come here and borrow books or magazines to find out about new things. This library provides us with knowledge and information needed. (CSM1 User 2)

All three rural public library in this study have a very small number of populations; **CSM1** have approximately 1,300 residents; **CSM2** is populated with about 300 families and **CSM3** have roughly 1000 residents. All together these three villages consist of not more than five thousand residents. Due to the small community demographic, the librarian in charge of these rural public libraries are relatively aware of their users demographic and make an effort to provide and create the most suitable and fitting program for the residents.

We run as many programs and activities as possible. We try to be less depending on our yearly budget ... so we just need to be creative. For adults' users we try to attract them by running more physical activities and program, like futsal and mini match. For these local women, we currently have a good collaboration programs up running with the local women association. (CSM1 Librarian)

Since I have been working here as a librarian, I notice that the women and children participation and involvement in this library is very encouraging. I believe for them, this library really do contribute to their self-development, because they always come here participate with the activities and also they always borrow books; such as cook books, home deco magazines and anything that are to their like. (CSM2 Librarian)

A young rural women - **CSM2** user 2, find it very easy and convenience to have the library service in her village. She likes to use the internet service provided for free to users of the rural public library, for many personal referencing and activities.

I am member of this library and I always come here at least three times a week. I like the internet service. I use it all the time ... for personal stuff like last week I wanted to buy new hand phone, so I went in the internet to do some searching about hand phone brands and make do comparison. It is a good service. I like surfing the net, I don't have internet at home, so I always come here to check my email and chat with friends. The librarians always help us if we need assistance with the internet service. Other than that I always borrow magazines too (CSM2 User 2)

3.2.2. Women Self-improvement Programs

Other than library collections and resources that were develop to cater the local rural women information needs, many of the Malaysia local rural public library also manages to develop several in-house programs too. For instance in **CSM1** rural public library, the local resident association (JKKK) women representative join together with the **CSM1** rural public library staff members, has organized a weekly cooking class, using the small village hall connected to the **CSM1** rural public library [15].

This weekly activity becomes an activity that allows the women from the community to share their knowledge about cooking – orally and voluntarily. All participants' (including the library staffs) contributed ingredients needed for the cooking class and at the end of each class food were distributed among themselves. All of the group participants are registered members of the **CSM1** rural public library, and they meet every

Thursday at the community hall (linked / next door to **CSM1** rural public library building) for their weekly cooking class. This is a free cooking class, attended and taught by group members alternately. Ingredient use for each session is contributed by each members, and at the end of the cooking class, the food is divided among members to take home. In this weekly activity, women from the **CSM1** village sit together and share their knowledge about cooking – orally, voluntarily and at the end of each class they share the food.

This library gives us ... a place, an opportunity and also something to do during our spare time. We contribute in terms of supporting and using the service and activities...but I always offer any helping hand whenever needed. Some of us [the housewives] here were able to arrange a weekly cooking class with the support of the women's committee local residents' association, librarian and staff here in the library. We basically, come here and share our knowledge about cooking and at the end of the session we share our food and stuff. (CSM1 User 3)

This **CSM1** cooking classes attended by the **CSM1** housewives are an excellent example of verbal information sharing. This weekly activity becomes an activity that allows the women from the community to share their knowledge about cooking – orally, voluntarily and at the end of each class they share the food. This small group of housewives have benefited immensely from the **CSM1** rural public library resources and material; also their volunteering effort of non-formal sharing of knowledge and information. This type of activity is a community development effort, will not just help the community to develop their personal skills but also allow this group of people to empower themselves to generate new knowledge.

There were also other programs that were organized in collaboration with the local community association such as the *KEMAS* and the *Pertubuhan Wanita UMNO*. Sadly the program ended once the **CSM3** rural public library was closed for nearly a year as a result of lack of staffing. According to the **CSM3** User 2,

*I like participating with the library activities. Sometime the library organize flower arrangement competition, they also use to have craft classes for women – tissue flowers. They used to run joint-venture programs like handcrafts class and cooking class with the *KEMAS* and *Wanita UMNO*. It would be good if they bring those classes back. (CSM3 User 2)*

Meanwhile for **CSM3** User 3, it's not library resources or group programs that excite her, instead it is the 'English language' day introduced by the **CSM3** rural public library librarian that attract her attention the most.

There have been some new activity developments in the library, like computer classes and language day [once a week English day. In this day all patrons are encourage to speak only in English]. This special language day was introduced by the librarian. This is very creative of her, my daughter and myself was shy in the beginning but eventually I find it interesting. (CSM3 User 3)

4. Conclusion

Around the world, many rural community members believe that rural public libraries support and assist their self-development and self-improvement. Residents come to the rural public libraries for more than just reading. They meet, they talk, they share and they also give to each other. This situation supports Fisher et al.'s [16] emerging concept of public libraries as informational places where people come when they have an information-related need or want to find an environment with an atmosphere that supports the fulfilling of information related needs, whether for educational, business, or recreational purposes or for purposes comprising all themes regarding information finding and seeking, reading, life-long learning, learning resources, and learning environment [16]. In Malaysia, it is very encouraging to take a step further; testing Fisher et al.'s conceptualization of public libraries as informational places and spaces among rural Malaysian communities and to understand better and identify the real types and forms of information needed that will support the development and the empowerment of each rural community independently.

5. Reference

- [1] J.Valentine. Our Community, Our Library: Women, Schools, and Popular Culture in the Public Library Movement. *Public Library Quarterly* 2005, **24**(4): 45-79.
- [2] K.A,Cassell and K. Weibel. Public Library Response to Women and Their Changing Roles Revisited. *Library Trends* 2007, **56**(2): 303-327.

- [3] S. Sarantakos. *Social Research*. Palgrave MacMillan, 2005.
- [4] R.K Yin. *Case Study Research: Design & Method*. Sage: Thousand Oak, 2009.
- [5] M. Alston and W. Bowles. *Research For Social Workers: An Introduction To Methods*. Allen & Unwin, 2003.
- [6] J. W. Creswell. *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative And Mixed Method Approach*. Sage, 2009.
- [7] Henn, Weinstein, et al. *A Short Introduction To Social Research*. Sage, 2008.
- [8] R. EBoyatzis. *The Thematic Analysis and Code Development: Transforming Qualitative Information*. Sage Publications, 1998.
- [9] J. M. Reitz. *Dictionary For Library And Information Science*. Libraries Unlimited, 2004.
- [10] E. Kempson. Information for self-reliance and self-determinations: the role of community informations services. *IFLA Journal* 1998 **12**(3).
- [11] G. Ignatow. What has Globalization done to the Developing Countries' Public Libraries? *International Sociology* 2011: 1-23.
- [12] Augusto Lopez-Claros and Saadia Zahidi. Women's Empowerment: Measuring the Global Gender Gap, *World Economic Forum* 2005. Switzerland pp.1-23)
- [13] MHI, A. 200 Perpustakaan Desa Akan Didirikan Untuk Rapatkan Jurang Maklumat. *Bernama* 2005. Malaysia.
- [14] Department of Statistics Malaysia. Basic Population Characteristics Statistics by Administrative Districts. Putrajaya, *Department of Statistics Malaysia* 2010.
- [15] R. Abu, M. Grace, C. Mary. The Role of Rural Public Library in Community Development and Empowerment. *The International Journal of the Book*, 2011 **8**(2): 63-74.
- [16] E.K Fisher, L. M. LSaxton, et al. *Seattle Public Library As Place: Reconceptualizing Space, Community And Information At The Central Library*. Libraries Unlimited 2007 :136-157.