Research Paper

Professional Development and Challenges Faced by Academic Women Librarians

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Abstract

Librarianship is often described as a women's profession, yet the picture inside university libraries is more complicated than that label suggests. Women make up a large share of the workforce, but their path to professional growth and senior leadership is shaped by structural, institutional and social pressures that are easy to overlook. This article examines how women librarians in academic institutions develop professionally, through education, continuing training, research, networks and mentoring, and what stands in their way. It looks at the historical background of the profession, the Indian higher-education setting, gendered expectations of care and service, the double burden of work and home, and the uneven status of librarians within universities. It closes with practical steps that institutions, professional bodies and individual librarians can take. The central claim is that professional development for women librarians cannot be treated as a matter of personal effort alone. It depends on whether the institution is built to let that effort count.

Keywords: Professional Development, Women, Librarian, Challenges

1. Introduction

Walk into almost any university library and count the people at the desks. In many places, women will be in the majority. Walk into the library director's office, or the committee room where budgets are decided, and the count often looks different. That contrast is the starting point for this article.

Academic librarians do work that is easy to describe and hard to see. They build collections, teach research skills, manage digital systems, support faculty and students, and keep a complicated service running from one semester to the next. For women in these roles, that work happens inside institutions that have their own habits about who leads, who speaks in meetings, whose time is considered flexible and whose career is expected to bend around other responsibilities.

Two questions guide what follows. First, how do women academic librarians grow professionally, and what resources help them do it? Second, what obstacles make that growth harder than it should be? The discussion draws on international scholarship about gender and work, on the literature of librarianship, and on conditions in Indian universities, where the profession sits within a particular regulatory and cultural frame. It does not claim to speak for every woman or every institution. Experiences differ by region, by type of institution, by caste, class and language, and by whether a librarian is permanently appointed or working on a contract. The aim is to map the common terrain, not to flatten it.

2. A Profession Shaped by Gender

It helps to remember that the link between women and librarianship is historical, not natural. In the United States in the late nineteenth century, library work expanded at the same time as the number of educated women seeking respectable paid employment. Garrison (1979) described how early public librarianship was framed as a refined, nurturing occupation suited to women, and how that framing helped keep wages and status low. Hildenbrand (1996) later showed how much of the history of women in libraries had been left out of the standard accounts, and called for writing them back in.

Harris (1992) put the argument sharply in the title of her book, describing the erosion of a woman's profession. Her point was that when an occupation becomes associated with women, it tends to be paid less and regarded as less technical, regardless of the skill involved. The same occupation, if it moves toward men, can gain in prestige. Whether or not one accepts every part of that thesis, it explains something about why librarianship has so often been told to justify itself to the university, and why the work of care, service and teaching that libraries do has sometimes been valued below the work of research.

India has its own history. Library science as an academic discipline owes a great deal to S. R. Ranganathan, whose Colon Classification and Five Laws gave the field intellectual standing (Ranganathan, 1931). Over the decades, as higher education expanded and the number of colleges and universities rose, so did the number of library posts, and women entered them in growing numbers. Yet there is no tidy story of steady progress. Entry is not the same as advancement, and numerical presence is not the same as influence.

3. The Indian Academic Library Context

In Indian universities and colleges, librarians generally work within the framework set by the University Grants Commission. UGC regulations lay out the posts, such as assistant librarian, deputy librarian and university or college librarian, along with qualifications, pay scales and career advancement schemes (UGC, 2018). In principle, this gives librarians a defined route upward and a status broadly comparable with teaching staff. That parity is a significant achievement, one that library associations fought for over many years.

In practice, the picture is uneven. State universities, central universities, private universities and affiliated colleges all differ in how faithfully they apply these rules. Some libraries have filled posts and run well. Others depend on a single permanent librarian supported by temporary staff, or by staff whose contracts are renewed year by year. Promotions can stall when committees meet irregularly, when vacancies for senior posts are not advertised, or when assessment systems favour the kinds of output that library work does not always produce.

Women librarians feel these gaps in particular ways. A contract position with no security leaves little room to take leave for family reasons without worrying about renewal. A senior post that requires relocation to another city may be out of reach for someone with caring responsibilities or whose family cannot move. And in smaller institutions, where the librarian may be the only professional in the building, there is often nobody within reach to ask for guidance. These are not complaints about individuals. They are descriptions of how the structure works.

4. Routes of Professional Development

Professional growth in librarianship rarely follows a single line. It tends to be assembled from several sources over many years, and women often assemble it in the gaps that remain after work and home responsibilities have been met.

The base is formal education. A Bachelor's and Master's degree in Library and Information Science are the standard entry qualifications, and many librarians add an M.Phil. or Ph.D., or clear the UGC National Eligibility Test, which can open the way to senior posts. Distance and open-university programmes have been especially important for women who could not leave home to study full time. Online and blended courses, now more common, extend this further, though they bring their own demands on time and equipment.

Continuing professional development comes next. Library schools, INFLIBNET and associations such as the Indian Library Association and IASLIC run workshops, refresher courses and conferences on topics ranging from open-source library software to research metrics and information literacy. Many of these have moved online, which has lowered the cost and removed the need to travel. For a librarian with young children or an unsupportive employer, a two-hour webinar is far more attainable than a week away. Still, attending such events depends on permission to take time, and on funds for fees, which not every institution provides.

Research and publication form a third route, and a more contested one. In many universities, promotion depends in part on publications, conference papers and sometimes funded projects. Librarians who work long hours at the desk may find that research time is simply not part of the job as it is actually lived, however much it is part of the job as it is described on paper. Women who also carry household duties may face a double squeeze. Those who do publish often write about practice, such as user studies, information literacy programmes and digital collections, work that is valuable but sometimes given less weight than theoretical scholarship.

Skills in technology are a fourth, and increasingly necessary, area. Librarians are now expected to manage discovery systems, repositories, licensing arrangements, data services and tools for research support. Keeping up with this pace takes steady learning. Women librarians sometimes report that technical roles are quietly assigned to male colleagues while they are steered towards service and teaching duties, a pattern that mirrors wider findings about gendered divisions of labour in organisations. The consequence is that fewer women gain the kind of technical experience that counts toward leadership.

5. Networks, Mentoring and Belonging

Professional development is not only about courses and certificates. It also depends on relationships. Kram (1985) distinguished between the career functions of mentoring, such as sponsorship, coaching and exposure to visible work, and its psychosocial functions, such as encouragement, acceptance and a model to learn from. Both matter, and both can be harder to find for women in fields or institutions where senior positions are held mostly by men.

A mentor can explain how promotion rules are really applied, suggest which committee to join, recommend a colleague for a conference panel, or simply say that a feeling of self-doubt is common and passes. Without that, early-career librarians can spend years uncertain whether they are doing well. Informal networks work in

a similar way. Many opportunities, such as invitations to speak, nominations for awards and introductions to editors, travel through personal contact. Those outside the circle may never hear that the opportunity existed.
Professional associations can fill some of this gap, though they are not without their own imbalances. When committees and executive boards are mostly male, the issues that matter to women, such as maternity provisions, safe working conditions and flexible schedules, risk being treated as secondary. Women's groups and special interest sections within library associations have been one response, offering a space to exchange experience and press for change. Online communities, mailing lists and social media groups serve a similar purpose and are accessible to librarians in small towns who might otherwise be isolated.
Peer support deserves more credit than it usually receives. A group of colleagues across institutions who read each other's drafts, share job postings, compare notes on difficult supervisors and cheer each other on can make a great difference. It costs little and requires no one's permission.

6. Structural Barriers to Advancement

Turning to the obstacles, it is tempting to treat them as personal: a lack of confidence, a failure to push forward, a choice to put family first. The research on gender in organisations suggests otherwise. Acker (1990) argued that organisations are not neutral. Their job descriptions, career ladders and ideas of a good worker are built around assumptions, often unspoken, about the kind of person who will fill them, assumptions that tend to favour someone with few demands outside work. When women do not fit that template, the problem is located in them rather than in the template.
Kanter (1977) described how people who are few in number in a group, whom she called tokens, are made highly visible, are held to exaggerated standards and are often pushed into stereotyped roles. In library leadership, where women may be well represented overall but scarce at the very top, aspects of this pattern can appear. A woman who is the only female head of department may find that her mistakes are noticed more and her successes put down to luck or to other people's help.
Role congruity theory adds a further layer. Eagly and Karau (2002) proposed that prejudice toward female leaders arises when the traits expected of a leader, such as assertiveness and decisiveness, conflict with the traits expected of women, such as warmth and deference. A woman who behaves in a decisive way may be seen as cold. A woman who is warm may be seen as not tough enough. In both cases she is judged against a standard that her male colleagues rarely face. For librarians who are already expected to be helpful and accommodating by profession, the bind can be especially tight.
Ely and Meyerson (2000) pointed out that explanations of gender inequality in organisations often swing between two poles: blaming women's socialisation, or blaming men's bias. They argued for looking instead at the organisation's practices and its culture of work. This is a useful move in a library context. Rather than asking why women do not apply for senior posts, one might ask what the senior posts demand, how they are advertised, who sits on the selection panels and what an applicant is expected to sacrifice.

7. The Double Burden and the Question of Time

Anyone who has talked with women in academic work will recognise the theme of time. In many Indian households, domestic and caring work still falls mostly on women, whatever their jobs. A librarian may leave a full working day at the university and begin a second shift at home, cooking, looking after children or elderly relatives, managing the household. When training programmes, conferences or research projects are scheduled in the evenings or at weekends, or require travel, they quietly favour people with fewer such duties.
Library work adds its own pressures. Many libraries keep long opening hours, with evening shifts and Saturday service, and in some institution’s exam-season hours stretch late. Staffing is often tight, so one person's absence is felt at once by colleagues. Taking maternity leave or a leave to care for a sick relative can therefore feel like imposing on others, and women may hold back from asking for what they are entitled to, or may come back to find that their responsibilities and opportunities have shifted without discussion.
Safety and mobility are real factors too. Late closing, poorly lit approaches to the library building, long commutes on public transport and campus environments that are not secure can all limit the hours a woman can work or the roles she can accept. Posts at remote campuses or in cities far from home may be difficult to take up. These realities rarely appear in policy documents about professional development, but they determine who can walk through the door that the policy opens. Flexible arrangements, where they exist, help. Some institutions allow staggered shifts, remote work for tasks such as cataloguing or digital collection management, and part-time returns after leave. These are not charity. They allow capable people to remain in the profession and continue to grow rather than step back or leave. A library that loses its experienced women librarians loses a great deal of institutional knowledge that cannot be quickly replaced.

8. Emotional Labour, Status and Self-Doubt

Hochschild (1983) coined the phrase emotional labour for the work of managing one's own feelings to produce a particular emotional state in others, such as calm, welcome or reassurance. Library service involves a great deal of this. Staff are expected to be patient with confused students, polite with irritated faculty, and cheerful at the end of a long day. Because such work is associated with women, it is often treated as natural, not as a skill, and goes unrecorded and unrewarded.

Status within the university makes the matter more delicate. Librarians in many institutions are placed in an ambiguous position, neither wholly faculty nor wholly administrative staff. Where this is so, they may be left out of academic committees, overlooked in decisions about curriculum and research support, or asked to justify the library's budget in ways that other departments are not. Women librarians sometimes find themselves doing the work of teaching and research support without the recognition that teaching faculty receive for similar work.

Under these conditions, doubts about one's own competence can take root. Clance and Imes (1978) described what they called the impostor phenomenon, a persistent feeling among high-achieving women of being a fraud who will sooner or later be found out, despite evidence of success. Later research has questioned some of the original framing and has stressed that organisational context shapes such feelings. It is not just a matter of individual psychology. When women are given less visible work, receive less feedback and see few leaders like themselves, doubt is an understandable response. Reading it as a personal weakness to be fixed by confidence workshops alone misses the point.

9. Voices from the Ground

Published statistics tell only part of the story, and some of what matters most is found in small, ordinary moments. The scenarios in this section are illustrative composites of situations commonly described in discussions of gender at work, not data from a particular study. One example is about being the default organiser: the woman who is asked to arrange the farewell, the exhibition, the book fair or the orientation tea, on top of her regular duties, because it is assumed she will do it well and not complain. Each task is small. Together they eat the hours in which she might have drafted a paper or prepared an application.

Another concerns being talked over or talked around. A librarian presents a proposal for a new repository workflow, and it is only taken up when a male colleague repeats it a week later. Another is called "madam" by students and "just the librarian" by a visiting dean. These moments are minor in isolation and corrosive over years, and they are precisely the kind of thing that does not show up in an annual report. Institutions that want to understand their own climate would do well to ask, in confidence and without defensiveness, what such moments look like in their own corridors.

There is also quiet resilience to consider: women who complete doctorates while working full time, who start a user education programme with no budget, who build a network of librarians across a district to share resources. Such examples are a reminder that the issue is not any lack of capacity. It is whether the structure makes use of it.

10. Technology, Skills and New Opportunities

Technology has changed the terms of this discussion in both directions. On one hand, it has made some forms of professional development much more reachable. Online courses, recorded talks, open-access journals and virtual conferences allow a librarian in a small town to learn from experts without leaving home. Repositories and social platforms let her publish her own work and be found by others. Remote and hybrid working practices, which expanded rapidly after 2020, have given some women greater control over how and when they work.

On the other hand, the pace of technological change can widen existing gaps. Librarians who have the time and the encouragement to learn new systems move ahead. Those who are overloaded with routine tasks or not given the chance to experiment fall behind, and then find themselves judged for not being technical enough. Women who are channeled into front-line service while colleagues take on systems and data roles may find that the skills most valued in future posts are exactly the ones, they have had least opportunity to build.

Institutions can counter this by making technical assignments deliberate and shared, offering structured training with protected time, and encouraging women to take on projects such as repository management, research data services and digital scholarship, which carry visibility and lead naturally to leadership. Individuals can seek out free and low-cost learning, from open courses to community forums, and look for small projects that build a portfolio of demonstrable work.

11. Strategies for Change

No single intervention will remove all these obstacles, but a set of practical measures can move things steadily forward. They fall across three levels: institutions, professional bodies and the librarians themselves.

At the institutional level, the first need is transparency. Clear, published criteria for recruitment and promotion, selection panels with balanced membership and regular review of how women and men fare in appointments and advancement would remove a lot of guesswork. Policies on maternity and caregiving leave should be written down and honoured. Funding for conferences, courses and research should be allocated by openly stated rules rather than by informal favour. Flexible scheduling, safe transport arrangements and well-lit, secure premises are practical matters that signal whether the institution takes its women staff seriously.

Institutions can also create formal mentoring and sponsorship schemes. There is a difference between a mentor who advises and a sponsor who actively puts someone's name forward. Pairing early-career women with senior colleagues, whether within the institution or across institutions, spreads the benefit and breaks the dependence on chance meetings.

Professional bodies have a part to play. Library associations can monitor and publish data on gender in the profession, make sure that women are represented on executive committees and programme panels, schedule events at times and in formats that suit people with caring responsibilities, and offer fellowships and travel grants specifically aimed at early-career librarians. They can also act as advocates when universities fail to apply UGC provisions to library staff.

Individual librarians cannot, and should not, be expected to fix structural problems alone. Yet there are things within reach that help. Building a small circle of peers for mutual support, keeping a record of achievements that can be used at promotion time, saying yes to visible projects where possible, asking directly for training or resources, and sharing what one learns with others all add up. Senior women who have made their way through can open the door behind them by mentoring, speaking up on panels and challenging practices that disadvantage junior colleagues.

Men have a part in this too, and it is worth saying so plainly. Male colleagues and heads of institutions who notice when a woman is interrupted, who pass along opportunities, who share the housekeeping tasks of the library evenly and who support flexible arrangements without treating them as favours do more to shift the culture than any written policy. Change that depends solely on women pressing for it tends to be slow and tiring. Change that is owned by everyone in the building tends to last.

Finally, institutions should check whether their measures work. A scheme that exists on paper but is never used is a poor guide to anything. Short, anonymous surveys, exit conversations with staff who leave, and a look at who actually receives training funds and promotions each year can show whether the stated policy matches the loved one. Where the two-part ways, that gap is the thing to fix.

12. Areas for Further Research

Much of what is known about women in librarianship comes from studies in North America and Europe. Systematic research on Indian academic libraries is thinner, and on regional, caste, class and language differences thinner still. Questions that deserve attention include how promotion outcomes differ by gender and institution type, how contract and permanent staff experience professional development, what role caste and class play alongside gender, how safe and flexible working conditions affect retention, and what the effect of digital work has been on women's careers since 2020.

Qualitative studies that listen to women librarians' own accounts would add depth that numbers alone cannot provide. So would longitudinal work that follows cohorts of library graduates over time. Without such evidence, institutions are left to rely on anecdote, and policy tends to follow whoever speaks loudest.

13. Conclusion

Women academic librarians sustain a great deal of what makes a university library work. They also meet a set of barriers that are not caused by lack of ability or ambition: organisational designs built around a different kind of worker, unequal domestic burdens, uneven status within the university, thin mentoring, and expectations that treat their care and service as natural rather than skilled.

Professional development, in this light, is more than a list of courses. It is a question of whether a woman can find the time, the support, the visibility and the encouragement to use what she learns. Where institutions are open about their rules, flexible in their arrangements and serious about mentoring, women librarians flourish and the libraries they run flourish with them. Where they are not, talent is wasted or leaves. The profession has long taught that every reader has a book. It might now make the same promise to its own people: that every librarian, whatever her circumstances, has a fair chance to grow.

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