

# Library Services for the Women's Empowerment: Activities of the Library, Osaka Prefectural Women's Center Library

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In Japan, unlike other countries, we have women's centers as public organizations, where we undertake comprehensive projects such as offering enlightenment programs, counseling programs, and information providing programs. Women's center libraries, taking on one of the functions, specialize in women's information, and aim at supporting the activities for solving gender issues and creating a gender-equal society through offering information.

Our mission is to cope with various needs for information, and support women's lifelong and diverse activities, such as work, learning, childcare, community, social, and NPO activities in view of information.

I would like to cite a few examples which I have practiced at the Osaka Prefectural Women's Center (nicknamed Dawn Center) for ten years, and consider the possibilities of library activities aiming at lifelong supporter.

Keywords: Women's centers, Women's information, Special library, Study counseling, Lifelong learning, Librarian

## 1 What Is the Women's Center

### 1.1 The Background of the Establishment of Women's Centers in Japan

In Japan there are about 250 women's centers, which develop various activities as bases to advance women's policies of local governments. Looking back over the history of women's centers, most of them had been privately-established and privately-operated to a certain time, and they had played the roles as bases of women's groups in women's liberation movements and women's education. The first women's center in Japan is said to have been "*Jiaikan* (benevolent house)"<sup>1)</sup> which was constructed in 1900 by Japan Christian Women's Group Kyofukai as a base of prostitute abolishment movement. As for social education, Japan Association for Women's Education<sup>2)</sup> was inaugurated in 1936 as a base for Japan Women and Youth Organization. Afterwards, there established House for Housewives Foundation: *Shufukaikan* (1956), The Fusae Ichikawa Memorial Association: *Fusen* (1962) and the like. These organizations served as women's community activity bases, as well as social educational organizations for advancing after-war women's education, in cooperation with educational committees<sup>3)</sup>. Though privately established and administered, their activities have involved social factors, and exerted great influence on the formation of advancing

women's social participation.

Women's centers began their history as the ones privately established and administered by private organizations through gathering personal funds. In 1962, there appeared the first women's center which was publicly established and administered: Osaka City Women's Center. After that, in the 1980s central and local governments constructed women's centers around Japan as part of the policies to tackle women's issues, which trend was favored by the UN "International Women's Year" in 1975, and "International Women's Decade (1976-1985)." National Women's Education Center (present National Institute) which was established in 1977, was a memorial project of "International Women's Year" in 1975. The advent of comprehensive women's centers as we see today was by the inauguration of Kanagawa Women's Center in 1982. Since then, women's centers were constructed all over Japan with the similar concepts of having comprehensive functions to support women.

Worldly seen, it is unusual that comprehensive women's centers are established as public organizations like Japan. For example, there exist women's centers and the similar organizations or groups in the USA, but there are no public ones<sup>4)</sup>. The reason is, it is analyzed, that, in the USA, respect for the freedom of individuals restricts the role of administrations, and there is some objection to the services exclusive to women<sup>5)</sup>. In Germany, there are organizations named women's centers, but they are voluntary ones, which played central roles in the women's movements in the former West Germany<sup>6)</sup>. In the case of Japan, the momentum to establish women's centers spread all over Japan reflecting women's policies of local governments. That is to say, it is one of the characteristics of Japan's women's policies that we have libraries specializing in women's information within women's centers.

## **1.2 Summary of the Dawn Center Information Library**

The Dawn Center was inaugurated in November 1994 as a base to create a gender-equal society. It has comprehensive functions of offering enlightening programs, counseling projects, providing information projects in order to implement various original programs in line with its missions.

Situated on the second floor, the Information Library supports the activities to solve gender issues and create a gender-equal society by providing information. Specifically, it copes with individual and special needs for information through information counseling, study counseling, holding seminars to utilize information, sending out information through the internet, issuing reference materials, as well as doing lending or browsing services. It holds about 46,000 books or administrative materials, about 1,600 audio-visual materials, and about 1,300 magazines. It is one of the greatest special libraries in scale and quality specialized in women's information. It opens for long hours: from 9:30 a.m. to 9:30 p.m. and copes with the needs of users having various lifestyles.

## **2 Characteristics of the Information Projects at Women's Centers**

Women's center libraries clearly belong to the category of special libraries in that they collect and provide materials and information limited to special areas. There are six

characteristics of women's center libraries as special libraries. Firstly, they are public-run organizations open to general public, that is, they don't limit the service targets. While most special libraries in Japan are situated in some companies such as drug companies or electronic appliances firms, and the service targets are limited to their employees, women's center libraries come close to public ones in terms of the openness to general public.

Secondly, they assume the role of supporting women's policies of local governments. According to the "Action Plan" of local governments, women's centers are regarded as the places to specifically promote and realize their women's policies.

Thirdly, they are connected with the projects hosted by the women's centers. Women's centers are not single-functioned institutions, but comprehensive ones which offer learning, training, or counseling programs, giving support to public activities, doing international exchange and research projects. For this reason, libraries take on the roles to support the projects hosted by the other departments in terms of information. These are divided into two parts: giving support to the work of the women's center staff and giving support to the users. Specifically, we offer reference materials in planning seminars and give information about the lecturers, always providing the staff with the information related to women's issues, and we also collect, stock and provide the information of the programs hosted by our center. As for the support to users, we collect and offer books or materials regarding our hosted programs. Moreover, by making lists or displays of related documents, we try to increase the opportunities of the users' access to the materials, and appeal to the attendants to make more active use of the library.

The fourth is the diversity of the contents and forms of the materials we collect and provide. It is the characteristics of special libraries to regard non-library materials and gray literature as important for library materials. In women's center libraries, materials about women's groups produced through women's viewpoints are of special importance as alternative information, and worthy of special collection. In our library, about one-third of the magazines we collect are the bulletins issued by women's groups. They are very effective sources of information to the women who try to participate in the community activities or make their scope of activities wider.

The fifth point is that we have the function to support the administrative officers in charge of women's policies through offering information. Over forty percent of the reference to our library is by such administrative officers, and the most frequent reference is about how to plan the programs or about the lecturers.

The sixth and the last one is that we are tackling user education as information literacy support to women. Several women's center libraries hold programs which are not merely limited to library guidance. In order to promote their participation in this information society, women have to acquire the knowledge to utilize information and the ability to send out information. Specifically, we offer (1) the programs to search information, how to know the sources of information, and how to organize information, (2) OPAC search workshop, (3) IT course and (4) media literacy program. In senior high schools, teachers started to include the subject "information," and in recent years emphasis has been put on the education

to utilize libraries in colleges and universities. Universities are becoming more open to public as working people are increasing in classes. However, there still exist a lot of women who were not benefited nor had the chance to get the user education or rich information education at senior highs or universities. The contents of the information literacy support programs all reflect the needs that we have grasped through the reference we get everyday at the library counter or over the phone.

### **3 Library Projects Aiming at Lifelong Supporter**

#### **3.1 Needs for Information Seen through Practices at Our Library**

One of the problems for women in building up their careers is that there is no comprehensive system to have the opportunities to learn or get necessary information<sup>7)</sup>. For women, whether or not they have the ability or skills to utilize information will not only dominate the work efficiency, but exert great influence on their career building, or even their ways of living. The function to provide information needed to our library specialized in women's information is becoming specialized and upgraded, which reflects people's greater aspiration for lifelong education.

One way to find out women's needs for information is to focus on what kinds of materials are borrowed among the displays of books in line with certain themes, which our library holds every three weeks. Of the displays held from March 1995 to July 2004, the top themes, about which over 90 percent of the displayed books were borrowed, were "Women and counseling," "Spring has come! Make a fresh start," "Live your way in foreign countries: work and life," and "When women start their own businesses." Most of these themes indicate that women turn to them for searching how to live. Next theme was about work; not business or how-to books, but had the contents when women consider their outlooks about work or their ways of working. So, broadly speaking, it belongs to the same category as the top ones: searching how to live. In this way, users of women's center libraries are looking for such information as gives them clues to further advance their careers or take a new action, while keeping their present lives. Though the start may be triggered by some books, in order to make a move, women need information in addition to books, such as information about a certain group or about related organizations. For this reason, women's center libraries are needed to be totally equipped with the functions to provide all the information mentioned above.

Next, I would like to refer to the information needs I have grasped through "information counseling." The "information counseling" practiced at our library is the service focused on solving the problems by finding out what lies behind the consulters' needs for information. This service seems similar to the reference service of the libraries, but we dare to give it a different name. We analyze the outcomes of 7,000 information counseling over a year from various viewpoints: consulters, the contents of the counseling, and the way we replied. One of the analyses is the trial to sort out the users' information needs into 10 categories<sup>8)</sup> and to try to bring to light the needs that lie behind the questions. Two of these categories, "information for solving problems," and "information for changing ways of living" are

mostly heard from women; while men account for twenty percents of the consultants, about half of them need the information necessary for their business, that is, "information about lecturers," and "information about materials, seminars, or trainings." That women turn to our library for information in this way illustrates our missions aiming at supporting women to solve problems through providing information.

Furthermore, I would like to refer to the information needs seen through "study counseling" which we offer by subscriptions. "Study counseling" practiced at our library is to offer support personally about how to utilize the materials or information of the library and how to acquire the study methods of using the internet. The contents of the information we offer or the way we pose them vary in accordance with the situations of the consultants, therefore, like other information counseling, it is necessary to conduct elaborate hearings. By doing so, we can give shape to our response: to give concrete advice of selecting the theme or setting the issue, to look for reference materials or priority review, or to pose how to develop the theme or how to write. Though the goal of a consultant is not to write a thesis or report, but to write up her life history, the process is the same: to pick out the awareness within herself and put it down in writing by using information. It is said that in trying to solve women's issues the vital viewpoint for women is to establish their initiatives<sup>9)</sup>. So the learning process itself may sometimes lead a woman to change her lifestyle or make a move.

Users of "Study counseling" are torn between working people and students, which means that our library is the place to support adult learning. Half of the study counseling from working people is related to their jobs, so they may find study themes through working. Among them, job-related counseling accounts for a quarter of the study counseling, the rest is arisen from people's voluntary will to learn. This reveals the fact that keeping on working and studying are deeply related to each other. In the library world, great attention has been paid to the function to support business these days. However, providing necessary information about the business world for starting business or concrete know-how, such information as to connect people to the interest of a certain company, or offering a place to search, these are not all the business support services that libraries do. Moreover, the support to let people find clues to start their work, and maintain their motivations to go on working and the incentives to move on their careers, these are also the indirect business support services that we can offer.

It is all the more important that the place where such counseling is offered is the library which is packed with tangible and intangible materials and information. As I mentioned in the former chapter, women's center libraries including our library, are collecting and organizing various forms of materials and the ones issued from various publishers, putting such counseling into perspective. It is natural that we should realize that there is a difference between the work of librarians and that of counselors on psychological matters. On the contrary, making sure of the effectiveness of the support with information as its keyword, we will be able to provide the support that only librarians can offer.

In addition, the similar needs for information as study counseling can be seen through

“the programs to utilize information” (charged) which we offer as information literacy support since the inauguration of our center. These are not only the library guidance or bibliographic search programs, but also the ones to support information utilization from many sides, and most of the participants are working people, which means that they are the re-educational or the first-experienced educational programs to utilize libraries.

### **3.2 Situations Surrounding Women**

I would like to explain the backgrounds of the needs seen at our library on the basis of three related research outcomes. One is about what kinds of image working women have about their future careers<sup>10)</sup>. The outcome of the research which targeted women working in companies showed that less than ten percent of women had clear image or ten-year-after image through their working life, and less than half of women had no image or no idea about their future life. It also showed that the clearer image women had about their future, the more firmly they were considering their future careers. As I mentioned above that in our library we have “study counseling” related to jobs, this shows women need information to secure clearer image about their careers.

The second is the research result about what is needed for women and men to be treated equal in every field<sup>11)</sup>. Seen by sex, the percent of the female respondents who replied “Women should actively empower themselves by economically competent or acquiring knowledge and skills” rose 28.1 percent, compared to 25.4 percent of male respondents. Seen by sex and age bracket, the percent of the respondents who chose this answer was higher among women in their fifties or sixties. Considering that women in this generation work part-time rather than full-time, the ambition to acquire knowledge ranges not only from job-related but to the way of living. That is, information support service is needed regardless of lifestyle or age, which we are offering at our library.

The third is the result outcome about what kinds of lifelong learning activities people were doing<sup>12)</sup>. About half of men, 46.6 percent of them, chose “meeting held voluntarily by fellow enthusiasts,” while the highest percent of women, 39.5 percent chose “seminars or culture classes held by local or municipal governments in community centers and elsewhere.” This shows that women prefer public institutions to do their lifelong activities compared with men. Thus, women’s center libraries as public institutions are highly effective and realizable in supporting lifelong learning.

## **4 Future Task**

### **4.1 Improvement in Quality of Librarians as Supporters and Their Training**

I have reported the ten years’ practices at the Dawn Center, and presented the possibilities of library activities aiming at lifelong supporter of women. In the future, in order to implement such projects at social educational institutions, as well as at women’s center libraries, urgent problems are the improvement in quality of librarians and the staff training. Research has been going on in the field of social education regarding how to train the staff in charge of women’s issues and gender learning<sup>13)</sup>. Also, various training programs are being held all over Japan by associations specialized in library. However, there are few studies focused

on librarians or the involvement of librarians through gender perspective. To tackle this, some common factors can be found in the investigation into the consultants at lifelong learning facilities. For example, abilities and qualities that learning consultants are needed are (1) basic qualities, (2) abilities to collect and process information, (3) abilities in communication and (4) abilities in learning skills<sup>14)</sup>. All these are also necessary to librarians who support lifelong learning. A report also clarifies the abilities and specialty needed to the staff in charge of information counseling at women's centers<sup>15)</sup>. The report refers to the qualities of "having the knowledge and skills to research and search literature," and "having the skills to arrange and process the materials and information like making secondary materials for practical use." In fact, considering the numbers of staff and the budgets of each facility, holding the programs to train staff at a single facility do not fit in with reality. It is desirable to develop and implement the staff training programs utilizing the network of libraries regardless of their specialty. In Kansai area, the move is beginning to arise<sup>16)</sup>.

#### 4.2 Other Issues

Other tasks are the widening the learning support service now limited to the visitors to non-visitors, and the cooperation with universities holding women's studies programs and other facilities implementing related programs. I would like to mention specific ways to realize these programs at other time.

Finally, I am looking forward to the practices at our library will develop into the projects in broad areas of places including other women's centers, lifelong learning facilities and libraries, and into the spreading and fixating of places supporting women's lifelong and various learning.

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