

ACRL Women and Gender Studies Section

Research Agenda — Users

A review of the literature in this area since 2001 shows the following distinct subgroupings of research: issues related to gender and technology, women's health information-seeking, gender differences in the use of public libraries, and the information needs and behavior of women internationally, women's studies faculty, battered women, and lesbian and queer women.

Gender and Technology

Four recent studies reveal the currently ambivalent body of evidence on whether or not there are gender differences in the use of technology for information-seeking. [Goeke \(2010\)](#) shows that women were better than men at using the full flexibility of a data warehouse system, while [Kim \(2010\)](#) found that the ease of use of university libraries web resources is more important for women than men due to lower computer self-efficacy. [Moss & Gunn \(2009\)](#) found that there are gender differences in website production and preference aesthetics, and women's preference for websites made by women is even stronger than men's preference for websites made by men. [Urquhart & Yeoman \(2010\)](#) provide a meta-analysis of other studies that concludes that gender differences in attitudes toward technology were not substantial.

[Dresang, Gross, & Holt \(2007\)](#), in a study of youth, found that gender differences in attitudes toward and use of computers no longer exist for the net generation, and that no more research about attitudes is needed. Instead, they advocate for further research in the following areas:

Research on actual use of technology that is based on observation, not self-reporting

Research on the involvement of youth in the production and creation of computer experiences

Research on why the disappearance of gender differences in use of and attitudes toward computers has not resulted in more women going into computer and technology college programs or career fields

[Urquhart & Yeoman \(2010\)](#) also report more broadly that women prefer “approachable” information resources and therefore tend to find information through connections.

How can academic libraries make their online services and resources more approachable and create personal connections to these resources for their target audiences? Presumably efforts in this area would benefit both women and men.

Women’s Health Information-Seeking

It is widely acknowledged in the literature that women are the primary seekers of health information, presumably due to their caregiving roles in society. Many studies have focused on women’s health information-seeking {[Yoo & Robbins \(2008\)](#), [Ankem \(2007\)](#), [Wathen & Harris \(2006\)](#), [Warner & Procaccino \(2004\)](#), [Davies & Bath \(2002\)](#)}, particularly on the part of rural or underprivileged women. [Ankem \(2007\)](#) showed that women with a higher level of education are more assertive about seeking health information. [Warner & Procaccino \(2004\)](#) found that the majority of women in their study look for information using a search engine on the web and are unsure about what they find. Frequently they then turn to family and friends for information. [Davies & Bath \(2002\)](#) discovered that for Somali women living in the UK, verbal information obtained from health professionals in the community was the most valuable source. Information flows most effectively through verbal social networks and through resources located in convenient locations. [Huber et al \(2003\)](#) reports on a project in Houston to equip local women’s non-profit agencies with workstations that clients can use to research health issues, thus putting authoritative resources out in the locations where the women are.

How can librarians or medical personnel provide access to and awareness of quality sources of health information, like WebMd or the National Institute of Health, in

locations and through information channels that are the most accessible?

Gender Differences in the Use of Public Libraries

Studies by [Applegate \(2008\)](#), [Cassell & Weibel \(2007\)](#), and [Fidishun \(2007\)](#) show that women primarily use the public library for books, children's services, and information related to their family functions. [Fidishun \(2007\)](#) found that they are comfortable with the technology and also appreciate the library as a place. [Agosto, Paone & Ipock \(2007\)](#) found no significant gender differences in the use of a public library by adolescents. Fidishun suggests the following questions for further research:

How do women who do not physically visit the library use library websites?

How do women who are non-library users find information?

Information Needs and Behaviors of Specific Populations:

Women Internationally

A burgeoning area of research is that of analyzing the information needs and practices of women around the world, particularly in developing countries. [Jones \(2009\)](#) advocates for community libraries in rural Uganda to be centrally located and engaged in their communities, and to offer literacy instruction, relevant materials, and engaged personnel. [Jiyane & Ocholla \(2004\)](#), and [Ikoja-Odongo \(2002\)](#) argue further that in many parts of rural South Africa and Uganda, there are no libraries and women need for information to be available close to home, and delivered orally by people in the community or via audio-visual means in schools, clinics, and hospitals. [Badawi \(2007\)](#) advocates for an activist role for Nigerian libraries to provide women with information about politics and empower them to reach full political participation. Finally, the 2003 compilation *Women's Issues at IFLA: Equality, Gender and Information on Agenda* brings together status reports on

women and information from all over the world, including developed countries. This is an area of research that will require constant updating.

What is the status of women as information-seekers in all parts of the world? How developed are library systems and how effective are they at reaching those in greatest need?

Women and Gender Studies Faculty

[Westbrook \(2003\)](#) surveyed women's studies faculty to determine their information-seeking needs and obstacles as well as their relationship with their librarians. About a quarter of respondents felt that they should not seek help from librarians because they should be capable of handling their own research. Westbrook provides advice garnered from 42 women's studies librarians on how to overcome this perception through outreach.

How can women and gender studies librarians provide services to help individual faculty with their own research? How can we market those services effectively?

Lesbian and Queer Women

[Rothbauer's 2005](#) study of lesbian and queer young women's information seeking practices showed that these young women read lesbian/queer materials both to provide a vision of the possibilities for their own lives and to provide a sense of community. Reading practices can lead to community by connecting with local queer women writers, sharing books with others and having book discussions. Unfortunately, libraries were not seen by respondents as good places to find these materials because they were too hard to identify in the catalog. Instead lesbian and queer young women primarily found materials by looking for lists on the internet. Also, in addition to books they read fanfiction, web comics, and web zines, which are internet only.

How can libraries facilitate better access to materials with lesbian content?

How can libraries facilitate the creation of community around lesbian reading practices?

How can libraries provide access to and preservation of fanfiction, web comics, and web zines?

Battered Women

[Dunne \(2002\)](#) outlines the progression of information needs of battered women and the obstacles to finding that information. She concludes by arguing for a mutual information flow between libraries and community agencies.

How can libraries be more active in providing information services at the point of need for women in crisis?

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