Introduction: Gender Issues in Information Needs and Services

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Are gender issues in information needs and services really a "trend" worthy of examination in the first decade of the twenty-first century? Isn't this a passé topic? Aren't we well into the "post-feminist" era? As the editors of this issue, we answer these questions with a resounding "no!" Although North American society has made enormous strides in the past half-century, we have yet to reach true equality between men and women. Libraries and information workers continue to operate in a social environment where information needs and services are affected by gender and gender politics.

Starting in the late 1960s, librarianship as a profession embraced second-wave feminism and its principles and responded creatively on many fronts. "Equal pay for equal worth" became a rallying cry for all the female-intensive professions, including librarianship. The mentoring, promotion, and retention of women in top leadership positions became a priority for many libraries and for the major professional associations as well.

Additionally, women (and sympathetic men) in librarianship and other information professions used their skills to improve service to readers who sought information on gender issues. Firm in the belief that information is power, librarians embraced their responsibility to empower women to be full citizens and whole persons. Whether a patron wanted a consciousness-raising novel by Doris Lessing, or a how-to book on succeeding in the male-dominated business world, or a non-sexist fairytale for her child, or medically accurate information on birth control options, public librarians and community information workers responded. Academic libraries created budget lines for acquiring new works of feminist scholarship, designated subject liaisons to emerging women's studies programs, and occasionally established separate libraries or reading rooms. Dedicated historical archives were also founded; Mason and Zanish-Belcher's article

describes the purpose and operation of such collections. Librarians who worked with youth made it a point to acquire materials and generate programs that would appeal to girls as well as boys. Many of these initiatives have become standard practice. In this issue, Cassell and Weibel provide numerous examples of programming for and about women that is now routinely offered by public libraries. In the 1970s and 1980s, independent women's resource centers flourished, along with feminist bookstores. Libraries have never been the only venue where information-seeking occurs; today the Internet, with all its advantages and pitfalls, is for many the primary source of gender-related information.

Librarians' gender-focused efforts continue unabated today, with creative new twists that incorporate new technologies and appeal to new generations. Yet the professional and scholarly literature does not fully reflect this activity. While the number of articles indexed in *Library and Information Science Abstracts* that carry a descriptor related to gender has held relatively steady over the last two decades, even a cursory skimming of titles reveals how much our information landscape has shifted. Today, articles in the library press are more likely to focus on Internet use and electronic information sources, rather than service policies or patrons' needs for gender-related information. Questions of gender are often subsumed (and at worst diluted) under broader discussions of multiculturalism and diversity. On the other hand, "gender" as a concept is no longer commonly used simply as a euphemism for "women." Increasingly, attention to gender means attention to men's needs and behaviors. In addition, the dimension of "gender" often incorporates gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered people, as Mehra and Braquet demonstrate in their case study of LGBT awareness and information needs at a university.

Our intention in this issue is to take stock of the current situation regarding gender issues in information needs and services across a broad spectrum of LIS environments and user groups. The first group of articles focuses on the role of librarians and archivists in identifying and meeting gender-inflected information needs. Cassell and Weibel, authors of an influential *RQ* article on this very topic in 1980, report on a survey of major public libraries. They find vibrant and creative programming around women's issues, including but hardly limited to National Women's History Month in March. Their article teems with examples, and they profile three libraries with different, equally successful approaches to meeting women's information needs. Fidishun's survey provides a complementary perspective on public library services from the vantage point of adult women users. The final article in this section, by Mason and Zanish-Belcher, offers a behind-the-scenes look at the challenges and opportunities faced by archivists in charge of women's collections. From soliciting donors to mounting programs, archivists are intimately connected to communities of women and build on personal contacts to make a difference in women's lives.

We are fortunate to have three articles focused on youth as readers and library users. In the experiences of the youngest among us, we may read the future of gender relations in America. Two studies of Internet use by youth in major public libraries look at different age groups and find similar patterns. Dresang, Gross, and Holt studied children in grades five through eight; Agosto, Paone and Ipock surveyed adolescents aged fourteen through seventeen. In both studies, the researchers discovered fewer gender differences than previous writings on the digital divide would lead one to expect. The closing of the gender gap between boys and girls in computer use is good news indeed, especially for public libraries that offer free access to the Internet. As Stauffer's article makes clear, gender differences in children's interactions with information and texts are not a new phenomenon. Library reading promotion efforts throughout the twentieth century reinforced gender role expectations.

Information seekers eventually connect with information resources. In her study of women's health information needs, grounded in the emerging field of gender-based medicine, Allison posits an important role for librarians as social entrepreneurs, working to effect change and to empower readers. Two articles look at particular sources of information about women and gender. Ingold compares three online databases to determine their coverage of core women's studies journals. Like some other interdisciplinary fields (for example, LIS), women's studies and gender studies are served by multiple online indexes and full text aggregators. And like other relatively new academic areas, the budget allocated for women's studies materials is rarely sufficient. Careful choices must be made regarding online subscriptions. Searing explores trends in biographical reference publishing during the four decades since the advent of the women's liberation movement. While scholarly and popular interest in women's lives remains strong, as reflected in a steady stream of biographical dictionaries and collective biographies devoted to female subjects, shifts in content and emphasis are discernable.

We close the issue with three articles that take a thoughtful approach to basic aspects of information services. Broidy describes the development and delivery of a college course, "Gender and the Politics of Information," that blended feminist theoretical approaches with principles of information literacy. She models not only a way to think about library instruction in a broader context, but also demonstrates a pedagogy in which teachers and students co-construct a learning experience. Olson gets to the heart of librarians' work—the organization of information for retrieval—by applying feminist philosophy to the project of classification. This article builds on her earlier work in this area and begins to outline a new approach to classification that transcends the hierarchical and linear thinking associated with male world views. The final article by Mehra and Braquet demonstrates how LIS professionals can work for change in gen-

der assumptions at their employing institution and in the communities they serve. Positioning themselves as participant observers, they are able to identify information needs and barriers among lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered peers on their campus, and to propose policies and services to meet needs and eliminate obstacles.

We believe that the articles in this issue represent an inspiring cross-section of current work on gender issues in information needs and services, both among scholars and among practicing librarians. But there are many topics untreated here, ripe for future research and reporting. The Women's Studies Section of the Association of College and Research Libraries recently compiled a research agenda that outlines many intriguing areas for further exploration (http://www.libr.org/wss/committees/research/resagenda.html). Some of the questions proposed by this research agenda are answered in this issue, but many remain to be tackled. And, we would argue, it may be time to revisit some of the old questions, as Cassell and Weibel have done.

We are grateful to Wilf Lancaster, former editor of *Library Trends,* who broached the possibility of an issue devoted to gender issues. We hope that the net effect of this issue is to spur further research and experimentation with new services.