



67th IFLA Council and General Conference

August 16-25, 2001

Code Number: 002-152-E
Division Number: VI
Professional Group: Women's Issues
Joint Meeting with: -
Meeting Number: 152
Simultaneous Interpretation: -

Partnership with NGO's as a great opportunity for librarians for promotions of women's information needs in Croatia

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Croatian librarianship – new trends

Today in the Croatian librarian theory there are changes regarding the mission of our activity that even in the world's proportions have transformed from the traditionally marginalized profession to an active performer in the development of the modern society. As a country of the new democracy, Croatia is in the process of transition that has multiple consequences on the librarianship. First of all, the modern librarianship has become more and more a profession that bounds us to social and political participation, while libraries and our professional associations depend on the democratic changes. The question is whether the librarians are aware of the changes mentioned above and ready to change their attitude towards the work they do. Our professional associations, regional and national, are still traditionally organized. Also, public libraries, that are forced to quickly modernize the working conditions, base their offer on the well-established long-standing practice, and are not in favor of big changes in their routine. Everything mentioned resulted in the fact that the space for the new programs, like the "indiscrimination of women" or the "partnership with NGOs" is restricted, and the interest is at its beginning. Right now there are no specialized forums inside the librarian profession that would deal with the problems of the social responsibility of the librarians or the indiscrimination of women. The first progress happened in 1998¹, when the Committee for the free access to information was founded. Our work in the Committee raised the question of the position of women in

¹ The committee has been founded at the annual conference of the Society, initialised by our female colleague, dr. Alka Horvat, then chosen to be the first president. The two-year program was based on informing the society about the problems of the librarian profession.

the Croatian librarianship². Although in our profession there are more than 80% of women, the serious interest in the position of women is still not present. For now there is no critical mass among the female members of our association, so the forum is not yet possible, which means that the debates on the subject cannot be held on their own. The consciousness-raising is not improved by the fact that the top positions of the five university libraries are occupied by men, which is the case in many other public libraries as well. The fact is even more significant when we take into consideration that the large number of our female colleagues are involved in scientific researches. Many of them have a Masters' or Ph. Doctors' degree in librarian science, but in the competition with the male colleagues they are satisfied with the position of deputies or the managers of particular departments or projects. We believe that in Croatia further development of the civil sector depends largely on the consciousness rising of the female librarians recognizing the problem of women. For now, apart from some solitary voices inside our profession, all the major activities come from outside, mostly from the female NGOs. Today there are over 60 of them in Croatia, with different aims, but each with the stressed female mission.

The position of women in Croatia

The idealization of the patriarchal culture of the Southern Slavic people, their customs, lives and traditional values such as moral, patriotism and heroism strengthened the position of women inside the particular social circle. The woman was once denoted as the sexual and natural being, the man was denoted to be the social being. The social spaces were divided in the same way; for women there was the family and the privacy, for men the politics, culture and public projects. But, with the beginning of the civil society women not only had to manage the housekeeping, but also to take care of their families. The interest for the fashion magazines grew.³ It was the beginning of the first female information needs, different from the male needs. Women started more intensively to engage in literature and painting so the consciousness of the female way of understanding slowly started entering the society. If we observe Croatia as a part of the Mediterranean, we can see that the emphasized difference between the North and the South helps the different dynamics in maturing the interests for the female position in the society. For the Mediterranean people the "male" principle is emphasized, so the feminist movement started in Zagreb much before than in Dalmatia. The similar situation is present in other Mediterranean countries. The representatives of the women's NGOs, attending the 7th annual conference entitled: "Woman and Work in the Mediterranean" held in Italy in 1998, concluded that we, Mediterranean women, are confronted to the variety of problems, starting from the violence towards women, to the difficult working conditions⁴. This is just an additional reason for the Croatian feminist movement to consider the regional experience. Integration of women in the school system in Croatia moved slowly. At the University of Zagreb female students were allowed only to listen the lectures (1895), and their students' status was fully acknowledged in 1901. In 1904 a woman earned a doctor's degree, but the acceptance of women into different professions was not yet secured. The battle for women's rights started in 1920, led by prominent leaders of the women's organizations. University graduate women joined the net of the women's organizations and started working together on reforming the society and on achieving the right to vote. In summer 1927 the President of the *International Federation of University Women* encouraged the opening of the branch-office in Yugoslavia (1927), so our women's organizations joined the net of the international movement for women's rights. Since then the women's movement in Croatia passed through many phases, and the long-term engagement of our activists brought to the intensive development of the women's scene in Zagreb. With the disintegration of Yugoslavia and the change of the political system in 1991 the non-governmental sector has been strengthened. Along with the ecologists and the organizations dealing with the protection of human rights, women's organizations nowadays play the important role in the development of democratic society in Croatia.

² For the promotion of our activities we have also published in the librarians' periodical an article dealing with the position of women and the women's information needs in Croatia

³ Andrea Feldman: Twenty years without feminism in Croatia// *Kruh i ruze*, 10 (1998/99)

⁴ Women and Work in the Mediterranean// *IDOC – internazionale*, 29.03. 1998.

Women's organizations and their influence on the development of women's information needs

From the beginning of the Yugoslav disintegration, especially during the war period, the women's organizations of the newly formed countries showed the need for the future cooperation. They created a net and the main goal was to provide the mutual informational exchange and create new partnerships. At the beginning the net was functioning through the *off line* partnership, such as participating in different initiatives and projects, but soon there was need for an *on line* communication. To make women as present as possible in media for faster experience exchange, on *Zamir net (For Peace.net)*, in August 1994, there was a conference list just for women. *Zamir/Women*⁵ was the title of the conference, and the women had the opportunity to ask questions, make contacts etc. The languages on the net were: Croatian, Slovenian, Serbian, Bosnian, Albanian and Macedonian, which mean that all the women of ex-Yugoslavia had the opportunity to participate. Men could follow the themes and subjects, but they were obliged to respect the women's needs to communicate among themselves. Since the opening of the conference until 1995, 366 projects and announcements passed through the net. Since 1996 the net has still been used for the communication, discussions and creation of partnerships.

In the meantime, many women's organizations chose to tie their programs to the libraries, or to the bibliotherapeutic approach in treatment of the posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). In Split, the center of Dalmatia, the regional Women's Association that worked in refugee camps, decided to start small reading rooms⁶ within the camps. The reading rooms were equipped with books and women and daily newspaper, and were assigned to women and children refugees, the camp inhabitants. At the beginning of 1997 the Librarians' society in Split and the mentioned Women's Association lobbied the local government and citizens and managed to found a library in the Home for retired persons. The Women's Association collects literature for women, and also organizes the bibliotherapeutic workshops for retired women. One of the most important projects was the starting of the *Women's College* and *Women's Information Center*. When the *Women's Information Center* was founded in 1992, the possibility of satisfying the women's information needs increased enormously. Since then it was possible to find all the texts, information and data regarding the problems of women in one place. In the *Women's Information Center* there is the first library exclusively for women that has over 1600 books, almost 300 magazines and a small video – collection of women's films.

I believe that the cooperation with the *Women's Information Center* presents a challenge to the librarians and librarian societies in Croatia. It is possible to start different partnerships, but for now only the interlibrary exchange functions completely.

Women's College was also founded in Zagreb, and has been the first to offer a chance to Croatian women for an alternative female education. Many young female students attend this college, although it has still not become a part the Split University. Since this kind of problem exists in other, more developed democratic countries, we do not consider it as an extremely difficult situation. *Women's College* and *Women's Information Center*, among other activities, also encourage the women's publishing industry, and until now have published a large number of works regarding the problem of the position of women in the society, written by both Croatian and foreign women writers. Soon after the foundation, *Women's Information Center* started publishing women's magazine *Kruh i ruze (Bread and Roses)*, which is an important source of different information on the problem of the position of women. It is also an opportunity for many women, with different professional and individual interests, to find their own media space. The presence in the media is hardly obtained for women, and this magazine helped a lot.

⁵ Suncica Damjanovic: The development of e – mail in ex – Yugoslavia // *Kruh i ruze*, 07/1997

⁶ Edita Bacic: Reading rooms or small libraries in refugee camps// *Glasnik Drustva bibliotekara u Splitu*, 03/1994

Conclusion

The activists of the women's NGOs encouraged women to educate more on the problem of their position in the society, and in that way to identify more easily their need for specific information. Women librarians gathered in Croatian professional associations are still at the beginning of recognizing this problem. I should say that we should advance when the specific number of women librarians recognizes librarianship as the profession that can make space for exchanging the information among women. For now we can follow the practice of our female colleagues that work in different women's information centers and enter as many partnerships as possible.

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3. Public supporting: Women for social changes in the countries of ex-Yugoslavia, STAR Project, Zagreb, 1998
4. Zivojin Peric: Man and woman, Belgrade, 1922.