

Attitude of Solo Librarians in Promoting Sustainability in India: Challenges and Opportunities

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Abstract

This study explores solo librarians' perceptions of their role in sustainability and assesses their opinions, familiarity, and interest concerning the topic. It also examines their attitudes toward promoting the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and evaluates professional perspectives on the level of management support for such initiatives, identifying factors that influence engagement and collaboration. Data was gathered from 180 solo librarians across Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and Karnataka. The findings show librarians recognize their crucial function in advancing sustainability through inclusivity, lifelong learning, and open access. Those with higher qualifications and experience were significantly more active. While most solo librarians do promote sustainability activities, the research highlights a pressing need: varied management support and reliance on non-professional staff undercut their efforts. However, varied support from management and frequent reliance on non-professional staff highlight the need for greater institutional support and formal recognition to encourage librarians to undertake sustainability-related initiatives.

Introduction

As the world moves towards sustainable development, libraries are organizations that need to be initiative-taking, and for that, they require careful planning. Creating awareness of sustainability could be considered an extracurricular activity; it is now time to integrate it into their daily routine. Ranganathan (1938) estimated the routine library jobs at around a thousand pieces and provided detailed descriptions of each distinctive factor of work, along with other miscellaneous parts. His staff formula provided a method for calculating the personnel needed for library work. However, the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) has

strongly advocated the need to recognize librarians as essential partners in advancing inclusive and sustainable development. They primarily achieve this by ensuring that everyone has meaningful access to information (IFLA, 2017). In this study, the authors aim to investigate the attitudes of solo librarians towards sustainability.

A solo librarian runs a small library alone, usually with help from community volunteers. Running even a small library single-handedly requires energy, initiative, versatility, and self-sufficiency. Judith Siess reports in the February 1999 issue of *American Libraries* that 80% of public libraries serving populations under 25,000 were staffed by only one professional librarian, based on statistics from the U.S. Department of Education (Siess, 1999, pp. 32-34). Solo librarians are organized in the Solo Librarians Division of the Special Libraries Association (SLA) and the Independent Librarian's Exchange (ILEX), a section of the Association of Specialized and Cooperative Library Agencies (ASCLA) of the American Library Association (ALA). The term solo librarian is often used synonymously with *independent librarian* (Reitz, 2004). Other descriptors used in the past include the *singleton* post and the *one-man band* (Feather & Sturges, 2003, p. 463).

Another definition provided by the Dictionary of Library and Information Science is *one person library* (OPL) (Reitz, 2004). A solo librarian manages and runs a library or information service independently, often with minimal support. This model is more prevalent in special libraries than in other types of libraries. In public library systems, most of the small libraries are overseen by a solo librarian or paraprofessional, sometimes with voluntary support from the community. Similarly, bookmobiles are typically run by a single individual.

The definition of a solo librarian is often confined to the size and type of library rather than explaining the role itself. In the OPL definition, the library manager may or may not be a librarian. The authors define a solo librarian as a professionally qualified person who works independently in a library and manages all library operations and tasks. Being in such a role presents both advantages and disadvantages for professional development. For instance, orientation programs are often used as an induction initiative to educate users on using library resources. Similarly, sustainability education can be promoted at the grassroots level through libraries, which have the potential to shape a more informed and responsible society.

Understanding Sustainable Development Goals

World leaders adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in September 2015, which encompasses 17 goals that span multiple disciplines, sectors, and institutional mandates. These goals recognize the interconnectedness of the numerous challenges humanity faces, ranging from gender inequality to inadequate infrastructure, and from youth unemployment to environmental degradation. In the preamble to the 2030 Agenda, world leaders affirmed that they are:

“We are determined to protect the planet from degradation, including through sustainable consumption and production, sustainably managing its natural resources, and taking urgent action on climate change so that it can support the

needs of the present and future generations.” (United Nations General Assembly, 2015, para. 9).

Pinto and Ochoa (2017, pp. 46-59) documented the contributions of public libraries in Portugal to the SDGs and emphasized the need to strengthen librarians' engagement in advocacy for the UN 2030 Agenda by providing adequate evaluation reports. The study provides an evaluation model for assessing the contributions of public libraries to the SDGs. The study concludes that raising awareness of the librarian's role in the future is as important as measuring and gathering evidence of their performance. In this study, the authors only focused on the 4th of the SDG: *“Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.”*

Public libraries can directly or indirectly contribute to all these goals. The importance of academic and research libraries acting against global climate change is inevitable. Internationally, there are numerous examples that point to the involvement of libraries and library associations in sustainable activities since the 1980s. The Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) and the University College Cork, Ireland, have implemented sustainable initiatives in their library and promoted them (Charney & Hauke, 2020).

The UN Environment Programme's challenge within the 2030 Agenda is to develop and enhance integrated approaches to sustainable development – approaches that prove how improving the health of the environment can generate social and economic benefits. By aiming to reduce environmental risks and increase the resilience of societies and ecosystems, UN Environment's initiatives promote the ecological dimension of sustainability while leading to socio-economic progress (Ermolina et al., 2021).

Public Libraries as Promoters of Sustainability

Striving to balance economic and social development with environmental protection is an ambitious goal that requires the sharing of correct and comprehensive information among all stakeholders. Public libraries can play an essential role in promoting knowledge about sustainability. It is an undeniable fact that the status of public libraries in India and their efforts towards a sustainable society are less popular. Despite this, public libraries have an unbounded potential to promote sustainability by highlighting literature, events, and programs on environmental, social and economic issues as three core components of the SDG.

The 2021 study sheds light on the transformative and innovative strategies employed by public libraries to meet community needs and fulfil their social obligations to patrons during the COVID-19 pandemic (Varghese, 2021). The best example of a public library successfully combating COVID-19 was the Valapatanam Grama Panchayat Library (VPGP), which used robust and up-to-date technology solutions to foster community support and user satisfaction through unfiltered connections. To combat pandemic challenges and keep users engaged in the realm of information and entertainment, it implemented several novel strategies. The VPGP library's responsibilities extend beyond serving as a resource for information and students; they also foster the intellectual development, creativity, social commitment, personal

growth, and intensification of technical and digital knowledge of its patrons, particularly the young. This library serves as an example for solo librarians, and its activities could garner worldwide attention and recognition from IFLA. Despite limited resources, the VPGP public library made a significant contribution to sustainability and was featured as an SDG story on IFLA's Library Map of the World (IFLA, 2023).

Academic Libraries as Promoters of Sustainability

Maria Jankowska and Mareum (2010, pp.160-170) discussed the multidimensional issues of sustainability in academic libraries. The study found the need to develop an integrated framework for sustainable strategies in academic libraries. The growing concern about an increasing interest in sustainability is changing the agenda of academic libraries. They are central to the future's three E's: economy, ecology, and equity. They serve as sources for sustainability and explore their role in promoting this idea through their services, such as developing collections on sustainability, teaching information literacy skills, spreading awareness, and organizing events.

Atta-Obeng and Dadzie (2020, pp. 177-192) aim to examine the role of academic libraries in promoting knowledge and skills for lifelong learning opportunities among students in Ghana, taking into account the significance of the SDGs on a global scale and the current underdevelopment of public library services in Ghana. The research population consisted of three heads and three deputy librarians from selected academic institutions. Purposive sampling was used to show participants. Researchers also gathered the data through individual interviews, non-participatory observation, and documentary evidence. The research has pointed out several basic issues in lifelong learning. The results are consistent with the idea that educational institutions play a crucial role in lifelong learning by helping access to pertinent information, providing instruction on research publications, and teaching search strategies, communication skills, information literacy, and reading skills.

Objectives of the Study

This study has been conducted with the broad objective of analyzing the attitude of solo librarians in fostering sustainability:

- Understand the perception of solo librarians on their role in sustainability.
- Recognize the opinion, familiarity, and interest towards sustainability.
- Analyze the attitude of solo librarians towards promoting the SDGs.
- Evaluate the opinions of working professionals on the level of cooperation from management if librarians take such initiatives.

Methodology

The study employs a two-step method for systematically reviewing and organizing the existing literature and collected data. The research is a novel study of its kind, evaluating the role of solo librarians in achieving the SDGs in India. The authors used the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) technique to select articles for review. The study population consists

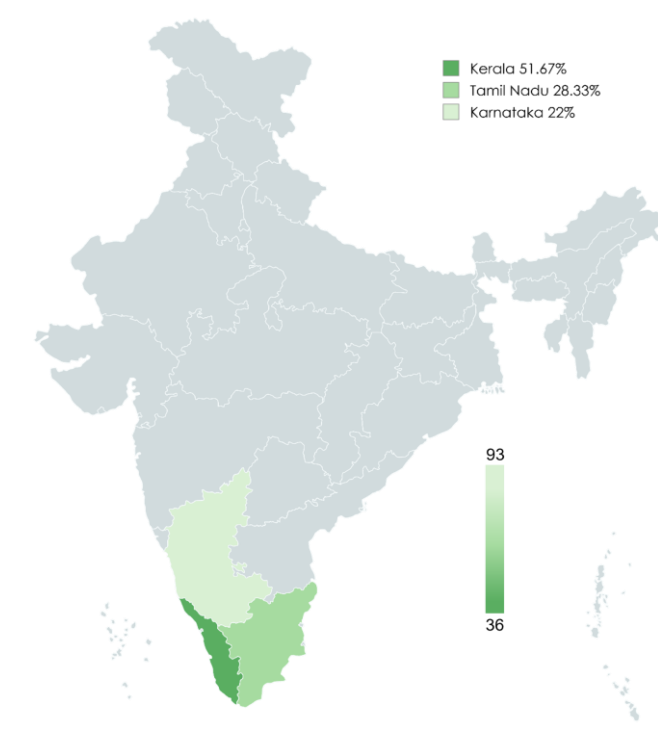
primarily of single library professionals from Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and Karnataka. The study population was infinite, and the authors were unable to decide the correct numerical count of single-person libraries. Therefore, they employed the opt-in voluntary response sampling technique. The authors used an online questionnaire to collect the data, which was distributed to respondents via email, WhatsApp groups, Telegram communities, and other social media platforms, including Meta, Instagram, and Library and Information Science Forums. The authors limited the link's dynamicity to 24 hours, successfully collecting 180 valid responses. Microsoft Excel 2019 and IBM SPSS were used for statistical analysis.

Analysis and Interpretation of Data

General Information

The data collected from the 180 solo librarians have been analyzed using statistical techniques and interpreted using tables and figures. The study population was scattered over Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and Karnataka. Figure 1 presents the map of respondents who took part in the survey. Different gradients of green represent different values.

Figure 1
Respondents' Map



Source: Authors' compilation from the MapChart website

As a prelude to the analysis, the respondents' distribution map is presented here. The map shows that most respondents, 93 solo librarians (51.67%), were from Kerala, followed by 51 participants (28.33%) from Tamil Nadu, and the remaining 36 participants (20%) from Karnataka.

Type of Library

Since the study focuses on the perception of solo librarians towards sustainability, usual demographic information, such as gender and age, is not taken as a variable. Instead, it considers the type of library in which the target librarians work. The primary information collected is whether the library they are working in is automated or not.

Table 1
General Information of Respondents

General Information			
Variables	Ballot	Response	Percentage
Type of Library	Academic Library	159	88.33
	Public Library	12	6.6
	Special Library	9	5
Status of Library	Automated	147	81.66
	Non-automated	33	18.33

It is clear from Table 1 that 159 (88.33%) respondents were from academic libraries, 12 (6.6%) respondents were from public libraries, and 9 (5%) respondents were from special libraries. Most of the responses were from academic libraries, which also proves that academic librarians are more actively engaged and interested in social networks and forums than librarians in public and special libraries. Meanwhile, when checking the automation status in libraries, among the 180 responses, 147 (81.66%) respondents affirmed that their library was automated. On the other hand, 33 (18.33%) libraries have yet to be automated. The findings show that librarians are well-positioned to engage in sustainability initiatives alongside their core professional responsibilities.

Librarians' Qualification Vs Role Analysis

Table 2
Qualification Versus Role Cross Tabulation

Qualification	Role			Total
	I am doing useful and important work.	My role is especially important in this organization, I feel central here.	Truly little importance is given to my role in this organization, I feel peripheral here.	
BLISc.	11 78.60%	0 0.00%	3 21.40%	14 100.00%
MLISc.	50	50	12	112

	44.60%	44.60%	10.70%	100.00%
MPhil	5	24	0	29
	17.20%	82.80%	0.00%	100.00%
PhD	12	13	0	25
	48.00%	52.00%	0.00%	100.00%
Total	78	87	15	180
	43.30%	48.30%	8.30%	100.00%

Table 2 presents the qualifications of solo librarians and their perspectives on the role of a librarian. Out of the total 14 respondents who qualified for BLISc, 11 believed they were doing valuable and necessary work. From the total of 112 MLISc qualified respondents, 50 librarians (44.60%) said that they felt their role was important in their organization, and another 50 librarians (44.60%) were equally of the opinion that they were doing valuable and meaningful work. Altogether, it is concluded that only a small percentage, 15 (8.30%) of the total respondents out of 180, felt they did not have a place in their organization.

Table 3

Chi-Square Test of Years of Experience and Librarians' Perception of Their Role

	Value	Df	Asymptotic Significance(2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	31.143 ^a	6	0
Likelihood Ratio	40.779	6	0
No. of Valid Cases	180		
a. 3 cells (25.0%) expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 1.17.			

$p=0.000$

A Chi-square test of independence was conducted to examine the relationship between years of experience and librarians' belief in their role. The results showed a statistically significant association between the two variables, $\chi^2(6, N = 180) = 31.14$, $p < .001$. Effect Size: Cramér's $V = 0.17$, showing a small association.

Librarians' Qualification Vs Initiation Analysis

Table 4

Qualification Versus Initiation Cross Tabulation

Qualification	Initiation	Total
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	I am alone and have almost no one to consult in my role.	I work in close collaboration with some other colleagues.	No one in the organization responds to my ideas and suggestions.	
BLISc.	3	3	8	14
	21.40%	21.40%	57.10%	100.00%
MLISc.	19	79	14	112
	17.00%	70.50%	12.50%	100.00%
MPhil.	0	25	4	29
	0.00%	86.20%	13.80%	100.00%
PhD.	0	20	5	25
	0.00%	80.00%	20.00%	100.00%
Total	22	127	31	180
	12.20%	70.60%	17.20%	100.00%

Table 4 shows the cross-tabulation of qualification and initiation among the respondents. The respondents were asked to show their role in taking the initiative to do something new in their library. Out of 112 MLISc qualified professionals, 79 (70.50%) responded that they were working in close collaboration with their colleagues. 25 (86.20%) of the 29 MLISc qualified respondents opted for 'I work in close collaboration with some other colleagues.' Of the 25 PhD respondents, 20 agreed with the same statement. This analysis reveals that the majority of solo library professionals work in close collaboration with their colleagues, as shown by a total of 127 respondents; that is, 70.60% said that they take initiatives by cooperating with their colleagues.

Librarians' Experience Vs Help from Others

Table 5

Experience Versus Help from Others Cross Tabulation

Experience	Help from others			Total
	I can get library professionals for assistance	Management assigns non-library professionals to help me	When I need help, no one is available.	
1 to 5	22	25	6	53
	41.5%	47.2%	11.3%	100.0%
6 to 10	24	20	6	50
	48.0%	40.0%	12.0%	100.0%
11 to 15	24	10	5	39
	61.5%	25.6%	12.8%	100.0%
16 to 20	16	4	0	20
	80.0%	20.0%	0.0%	100.0%

Above 20	10		0	18
	55.6%		0.0%	100.0%
Total	96	67	17	180
	53.3%	37.2%	9.4%	100.0%

Table 5 presents the relationship between the professional experience of solo librarians and the nature of assistance they received. Among the 180 respondents, 53 (29.4%) had 1–5 years of experience as solo library professionals. A total of 96 respondents (53.3%) reported receiving support from library professionals, often in the form of freelance assistance for in-house operations, library automation, and data entry tasks. Out of all respondents, 67 people, 37.2%—showed they received help from professionals outside the library field. Only 9.4% of the respondents said that no aid was available to them when needed.

Table 6

Chi-Square Test of Independence Between Range of Experience and Help from Others

	Value	Df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	14.198 ^a	8	.077
Likelihood Ratio	17.814	8	.023
No of Valid Cases	180		
a. 4 cells (26.7%) are expected to count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 1.70.			

To investigate whether there is an association between experience level and seeking assistance from others, a Chi-square test of independence was performed. The results showed that the association was not statistically significant, $\chi^2 (8, N = 180) = 14.20, p = .077$. Effect Size: Cramér's $V = 0.10$, showing a small association.

Discussion

Although sustainability and solo librarianship remain underexplored together, the authors prove their conceptual foundation through works on workforce management, sustainability, and solo librarianship. Gopinath (2003) clearly clarified the different natures of several types of libraries, thereby emphasizing the importance of library networks. However, Cooperman (2014, pp. 1–10) claimed that the background, education, and kind of library in which they work do not affect the managerial skills of a librarian. Solo librarians differ from their counterparts in that they focus on their responsibility for running the entire library and serving their library clientele effectively and efficiently. At the same time, Vijayakumar (2008, pp. 300-307) said in his dissertation that most university libraries are overstaffed, and he suggested appointing semi-professionals and non-professionals to conduct routine tasks, thereby reducing the wastage of professional workforce in university libraries.

Suggestions

An auditing system and an environmental label would improve sustainability in libraries. Libraries should have their ecological indicators to measure sustainability. Staff commitment to sustainability should be demanded so librarians can function as sustainability educators. Being a solo librarian means doing all the tasks independently, and the parental organization should help any library automation software (such as Koha, eGranthalaya, or SOUL) that allows solo librarians to streamline routine tasks like cataloguing, circulation, and user data management. As a result, this approach lessens the workload, saves time, reduces resource consumption, and allows for increased attention to sustainability efforts and user participation.

Conclusions

The study revealed solo librarians' awareness of their crucial role in championing sustainability as a key agenda, particularly in aligning library services and resources with efforts towards inclusivity, lifelong learning, and free access to information. Due to the comparatively higher level of engagement in professional forums and social networks, most of the responses in the study were from academic librarians. Most solo librarians, irrespective of their qualifications, perceived their work as valuable and meaningful within their institutions, particularly contributing to sustainability. Solo librarians with higher qualifications start collaborative efforts within their institutions, showing an initiative-taking view towards institutional development and innovation. A significant association between years of experience and librarians' belief of their role further affirms that professional experience shapes positive self-perception and confidence in contributing to sustainable outcomes. Solo librarians are familiar with sustainability-related themes and are interested in engaging in sustainable activities. The attitude of solo librarians toward promoting sustainable development is positive, characterized by an intense sense of initiative and collaboration. The study also reveals a mixed picture about managerial support and the quality of help received, emphasizing the need for more institutional support and professional development opportunities. It raises concerns about keeping professional standards when library services rely on outside help. Rather than focusing solely on training librarians, institutions should maximize solo librarians' loop skills by recognizing their contributions and rewarding them accordingly. Boosting their morale can lead to considerable progress in advancing sustainability-related initiatives in the library.

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