

THE STATE OF ARMENIA'S LIBRARIES: PRESENT AND FUTURE

Keywords: survey, data, analysis, libraries, Armenia, physical, operational, cultural, trends, development.

In Fall 2021, the National Library of Armenia put out a nationwide, anonymous survey of librarians [Հարցում գրադարանավարների համար, 2022] to collect data on the state of libraries in Armenia, as well as the approach of the country's librarians to their profession. They invited any librarian or person working in a library, from any type of library, to participate in the survey, which ran for about 3.5 weeks in October 2021. The survey had 52 questions, which were a mix of multiple choice and short answer questions. In total they received 272 responses, which out of about 1500 library workers in Armenia, is less than 20%. Since this is not a significant amount, possible margins of error need to be taken into consideration when analyzing the results.

The survey was divided into three main sections: physical, operational, and cultural. This was meant to gain a more holistic understanding of the state of Armenia's libraries, and to understand how all of the different aspects relate to and feed off of each other. Physical refers to the physical aspects of the library (space, furniture, location, etc.). Operational refers to the processes and flow of the library's day-to-day operations (types of users, services and programs implemented, online presence, etc.). Cultural refers to cultural perceptions of libraries and librarianship in Armenia.

This article will cover some highlights of the survey. To view the full survey results, please visit the National Library of Armenia's website. The survey asked participants if they believed their libraries needed major physical or structural renovations. Overwhelmingly, the answer was yes, with 56.8%. If librarians feel this way, it's very likely that their users feel this way as well. And it's very likely that their users do not feel comfortable within the library's physical space, and will choose not to go there. Similarly, if we look at the availability of computers, over half of respondents said that their library either doesn't provide computers, or they don't have enough. These are two major physical issues which create access to information issues. If we think about the context of Armenia, many people live in an apartment with their parents, siblings, grandparents, and if they have a computer at home, they're all sharing it. That's a major information access issue that Armenia's libraries have a fantastic opportunity to solve.

We also asked about the accessibility of the library's book stacks. This is important because during the Soviet era, it was not uncommon for libraries to be completely closed stack, and so we expect that with Armenia's independence and shift to democracy, we would also see a democratization of information represented through the presence of open stacks. There has been some movement in this area for sure, however based on the chart, almost 75% of Armenia's libraries either partially or fully restrict access to their materials. Of course, this survey covered a wide range of different types of libraries, so further analysis would need to be done to determine how each library type responded, but in general, this signifies that there is still a lot of work to be done in terms of further democratizing information and fully opening stacks to the public.

We then asked participants if they had users with physical or mental disabilities. 58.7% said yes. And when asked whether their libraries had the necessary facilities to serve users with disabilities, almost the exact percentage of participants said no. Armenia is a country that has seen many wars, and unfortunately will probably continue to see many wars. And as a result of those wars, many people, many young people, now are disabled, and that number continues to grow. It is unacceptable that anybody with any disability is not able to use the library, and is not able to independently pursue their own education.

One of the other interesting data points is that 54.2% of respondents reported that they have experienced some kind of health issue from working in their libraries. This links back to the data shown earlier about major library renovations needed. Old buildings that haven't been maintained and do not adhere to any health standards, plus old books that have not been well preserved, equals a recipe for health disaster for both library workers and users.

In regard to charging fees for late books, this is actually an area in which Armenia's libraries are more modern. 73.9% of participants stated that their library does not charge a late fee for books. In the last few years, in more developed countries, there has been a major shift toward rejecting the idea of charging late fees because

it is exclusionary to low-income people, it creates barriers between the user and the information, and it's just counterintuitive to the mission of the library, which is to create a more equitable society. This is not necessarily connected to why libraries in Armenia do not charge fees. It simply has not been part of library culture. But, as a country with a high poverty rate, charging fees would be an additional huge barrier to library use, and percentage wise would not contribute that much to the library budget.

Participants were also asked what three things they wish their library could provide. According to the data, the top answers were new books, computers, and a modern library environment. This reinforces the data that we saw earlier about needed building renovations and computers, and the need for newer books. What we see here is that librarians are asking for the basic foundational elements of a library. Without these things, it's hard to imagine the library field in Armenia moving forward.

Since one of the key elements of modern librarianship is partnership and community development, the survey aimed to get a sense of how knowledgeable librarians were with what was going on in their communities and what type of potential partners there were. The majority of participants were at least somewhat familiar, but Armenia's library field should be aiming for all librarians being very familiar with their local community partners. There is definitely room to grow in this area.

Given what the data has shown, it's not surprising that, when asked if they receive enough support from the relevant state bodies, only 15% of Armenia's librarians said yes. Of course, most libraries in the world struggle with this issue. But it is up to those state bodies to listen and provide solutions, and it is also up to the librarians to advocate for themselves and their communities. We also asked if people thought they were paid enough for the work that they do. 72% said no. Salaries in Armenia are extremely low, especially for those working in public services. This leads to low motivation and interest both in daily work and in the profession as a whole.

The survey also asked participants how often they participated in professional development activities, either online or in person, in the last three years. The majority of people, 43%, said that they rarely participated in professional development over the course of 3 years. What this shows is that Armenian librarians are either not interested in professional development, or we as a field are not doing enough to create professional development opportunities for each other or we're not doing enough to share or promote news about potential professional development activities. This also relates to the low salaries for librarians, which leads to low motivation for doing any sort of extra work.

The survey also asked librarians what the top five words are that they think of when they think of their profession. Most people responded with books, reading, literacy, youth, and information. These are words more commonly associated with a traditional idea of libraries and librarianship. Very few people picked words like community, inclusion, democracy, or equality, which are more commonly discussed and highlighted once you step into the global library field. But these issues are unfortunately not yet at the forefront of library discussion in Armenia.

The next two questions asked 'How would you rate the quality of library science education in Armenia?' and 'How familiar are you with the global library field?' From the responses, we understand that most people have a neutral or slightly negative opinion of library science education in Armenia. After taking a closer look at the data and comparing the two, there was no obvious correlation between those who described themselves as "very familiar" with the global library field and those who described library science education in Armenia as "very bad", or vice versa. So, if we take these at face value, the majority of people are quite unenthusiastic about the quality of library science education, and we have a library field that really does not engage with the global library field at a level that is necessary for addressing the numerous issues that Armenia's library field faces.

My conclusions about the results of the survey are numerous. My first conclusion is that we need more surveys. This is a good start, but we need more data and analysis in order to have a better idea of how to move forward. The National Library of Armenia is interested in doing a big survey of library users as well, which will give great insight into how community members perceive the library.

The physical issues that were discussed are nothing new. They have been that way for the past 31 years. Waiting another 31 years for this to change is a recipe for the extinction of libraries in Armenia. This means that we need to start advocating for ourselves as much as possible, and making as much noise as possible. Which leads into the next point, which is that more advocacy is needed at the local and state level. I encourage every library in Armenia to make an appointment with your local municipality, with your local governing body, and have them visit your library. Show them exactly where the problems lie, sit down with them and have an honest discussion about your library's role in the community. Start with small steps, and small requests.

Reform in library science education and more involvement in the global library field is necessary if we intend to attract a new generation of young librarians. Fresh ideas and ways of thinking are the only thing that is going to push Armenia's library field forward.

Finally, there's a lot of potential for growth between libraries and local NGOs, institutions, community groups, and other organizations. What is needed is to see more projects and activities related to helping Armenia's libraries recognize and utilize their local community organizations.

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Հոդվածը միտված է վերլուծել 2021 թ.-ին Հայաստանի ազգային գրադարանի կողմից անցկացված համազգային գրադարանային հարցման արդյունքները, որի նպատակն էր գնահատել Հայաստանի գրադարանների ներկայիս ֆինանսական, գործառական և մշակութային վիճակը: Տվյալները համեմատվում են աշխարհի գրադարանների հարցումների արդյունքների հետ՝ փորձելու հասկանալ Հայաստանի տեղը համաշխարհային գրադարանային դաշտում:

Զեկուցման մեջ վեր են հանվում նաև Հայաստանի գրադարանային համակարգի գլխավոր բացերը, և առաջարկություններ կարվեն երկրի գրադարանային ոլորտի հետագա բարելավման ուղղությամբ:

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