

## COMMENTARY

# Providing reproductive health information to rural women: The potentials of public libraries

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## Abstract

Access to reproductive health information is an integral part of the sustainable development goal<sup>3</sup> of good health and well-being. The World Health Organization (WHO) recommends a gender-based approach to public health that should holistically address the physical, mental and emotional well-being of women. However, women in urban areas seem to be benefiting more from various laudable reproductive health programmes than those in rural areas. This scenario negates the concept of sexual and reproductive health and rights, which have fundamental bearing for sound economic development and poverty alleviation. It is against this background that this paper examined the provision of reproductive health information to rural women in Nigeria. It identified the reproductive health information needs of rural women, including information on fertility, management of unplanned pregnancies, sexually transmitted diseases, prenatal and postnatal care. It further discussed the problems hindering rural women from accessing reproductive health information. To alleviate these problems, the paper discussed various roles public libraries can play in helping rural women gain access to reproductive health information. It recommended adequate funding, community engagements, and collaboration with relevant agencies for public libraries to take their place in the dissemination of reproductive health information to rural women. (*Afr J Reprod Health 2021; 25[5s]: 210-218*).

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**Keywords:** Reproductive health information, information accessibility, rural women, Nigeria, public libraries

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## Résumé

L'accès à l'information sur la santé reproductive fait partie intégrante de l'objectif de développement durable<sup>3</sup> de bonne santé et de bien-être. L'Organisation mondiale de la santé (OMS) recommande une approche de la santé publique basée sur le genre qui devrait aborder de manière holistique le bien-être physique, mental et émotionnel des femmes. Cependant, les femmes des zones urbaines semblent bénéficier davantage de divers programmes de santé reproductive louables que celles des zones rurales. Ce scénario nie le concept de la santé et des droits sexuels et reproductifs, qui ont une incidence fondamentale pour un développement économique sain et la réduction de la pauvreté. C'est dans ce contexte que cet article a examiné la fourniture d'informations sur la santé reproductive aux femmes rurales au Nigeria. Il a identifié les besoins d'information sur la santé reproductive des femmes rurales, y compris des informations sur la fécondité, la gestion des grossesses non désirées, les maladies sexuellement transmissibles, les soins prénatals et postnatals. Il a également discuté des problèmes qui empêchent les femmes rurales d'accéder à l'information sur la santé reproductive. Pour atténuer ces problèmes, le document a discuté des divers rôles que les bibliothèques publiques peuvent jouer pour aider les femmes rurales à accéder à l'information sur la santé reproductive. Il a recommandé un financement adéquat, des engagements communautaires et une collaboration avec les agences compétentes pour que les bibliothèques publiques prennent leur place dans la diffusion d'informations sur la santé reproductive aux femmes rurales. (*Afr J Reprod Health 2021; 25[5s]: 210-218*).

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**Mots-clés:** Information sur la santé reproductive, accessibilité de l'information, femmes rurales, Nigéria, bibliothèque publique

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## Introduction

Reproductive health among rural women has become an issue of concern due to high mortality rates recorded in recent times. Globally, more than 800 women in rural areas die each day from

complications resulting from poor reproductive health practices<sup>1</sup>. In Nigeria, one hundred and forty-five (145) women die in childbirth every day<sup>2</sup>. Morris and Rushwam<sup>3</sup> observed that rural women worldwide face challenges ranging from unwanted pregnancy to high rates of HIV/AIDS, sexually

transmitted diseases, etc. Despite the need for reproductive health information for women of all categories, those that live in the rural areas are excluded from various laudable programmes designed for the benefit of all<sup>1</sup>. According to the World Health Organization<sup>4</sup>, a gender-based strategy could be adopted to address issues on public health to achieve holistically physical, mental and emotional stability among rural women.

Avila<sup>5</sup> regretted that rural women and girls all over the globe experience exclusion and poverty. They are marginalized in the provision of basic amenities such as health services, education, healthcare, etc. Invariably, this situation affects their health, social and, economic well-being. Despite the avalanche of information and services now available in the field of health, women who reside in rural areas lack the awareness and skills required to access them. Ezema<sup>6</sup> opined that there was a need for women in rural areas to have information to advance their reproductive health. The concept of health entails a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being, not just being free from a particular disease or ailment<sup>4</sup>. Reproductive health, therefore, implies that individuals should have a responsible, satisfying, and safe sexual life. They also have the freedom, not only to reproduce but also to decide if, when and how to have children. Women need information in areas such as teenage pregnancy, family planning, HIV/AIDS, and other sexually transmitted diseases. The United Nations Population Fund (no date)<sup>7</sup> observed that evidence from developing countries reveals that teenage mothers often face severe complications during delivery. Unlike their counterparts in other countries, rural women in Nigeria do not have access to adequate reproductive health information<sup>6</sup>. As a result, they are vulnerable to different reproductive health challenges that would have been effectively dealt with if armed with adequate information. Rural women make up about 27% of Nigeria's total population<sup>8</sup>. This figure cannot be neglected in terms of access to quality and adequate information. To facilitate better access to information among rural women, public libraries' role as community information gatekeepers cannot overemphasized. Therefore, this paper investigates the strategic roles of public libraries in the provision of reproductive health information to rural women.

### ***Reproductive health information needs of rural women: A review of literature***

Rural women are entitled to reproductive health information, like their counterparts in urban areas. According to Hossain, Mondal, and Akter<sup>9</sup>, reproductive health rights are entrenched in the modern human rights system developed under the United Nations' auspices. The necessity for reproductive health rights stems from its noticeable impact on poverty alleviation and the economic growth of every nation. The contributions of women in these areas are undeniable. There has been a gradual increase in awareness regarding the role played by women in the socio-economic development of their nations. In recognition of this, the United Nations signed a charter for equal rights for women in 1945<sup>6</sup>.

Reproductive health information is essential for women, whether they live in rural or urban settings<sup>35</sup>. For example, Ilo and Adeyemi<sup>10</sup> observed that the lack of information awareness increases the risk of adverse sexual behaviour among rural market women in Ogun State, Nigeria. Health information not only plays a significant role in the personal lives of women but also in the health of their family members. Ngwenya<sup>11</sup> observed that rural women play vital roles in determining the health status of societies. They are the fulcrum on which the health of the family revolves. Women face various reproductive health challenges, necessitating the provision of necessary services meant for providing solutions.

In the study carried out by Ngwenya<sup>11</sup> on the health information needs and health seeking behavior of rural women in Zimbabwe, the respondents indicated their health information needs relate to epidemics such as tuberculosis, prostate cancer, and cervical cancer, HIV/AIDS and Diarrhea. Similarly, Coraggio<sup>12</sup> wrote on women's needs in developing countries, and discovered that the primary information needs of Ugandan women were reproductive health and birth control. These needs were not met due to a lack of access to information and the local clinics' inability to meet their demands. These women undergo different kinds of suffering, having no information with which to decide on the proper line of action. These needs are similar to those of rural women in Nigeria. In a study on the reproductive health information needs of rural women in

Nsukka, Southeast Nigeria, Ezema<sup>6</sup> discovered that fertility, abortion-related information, management of untimely pregnancies, information on sexually transmitted diseases, rape and female genital mutilations are among the reproductive health information needed by rural women in the area. Rural women in Borno State, Nigeria, require reproductive health information on safe delivery, prevention, and management of vascular vaginal fistula (VVF), prenatal and postnatal care, and immunizations against childhood killer diseases<sup>13</sup>.

### ***Reproductive health information services and advocacy for rural women: Global trends***

In recognition of the various reproductive health services and information needed by rural women, various countries have put programmes in place to help provide necessary services for women. Aside from the critical roles being played by government agencies in the provision of timely reproductive health information to rural women, non-governmental organizations provide complementary services. For example, in the United States of America, the Women's Health and Family Planning Association of Texas (WHFPT), which was founded in 1977; is dedicated to the idea that Texans, regardless of financial or insurance status, should have equal access to affordable reproductive health services and high quality family planning services<sup>14</sup>.

In the Netherlands, there is a Women Global Network for Reproductive Right (WGNRR)<sup>15</sup> founded in 1984 to build and strengthen the movements for sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) and social justice for all people especially the marginalized groups. WGNRR's objectives are to campaign and fight for and to promote social justice and dignity around the world. They support any call for reproductive justice initiated by activists and social advocates. They also support community health workers' efforts and campaign for dignity and justice in carrying out their professional duties to meet the needs of the communities under their care. They equally demand universal, public, accessible, affordable health care inclusive of non-discriminatory access to contraceptives and safe abortion services and the freedom from forced sterilization practices. These campaigns are carried out using petition and actions at regional and global levels<sup>15</sup>.

In the United Kingdom, the provision of reproductive health information and services is treated with utmost concern. Interestingly, the UK government is not concerned about her citizens only but is also interested in rural women's condition in developing countries. The United Kingdom Department for International Development (DFID) funded two international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) to implement a programme to reduce maternal mortality from unwanted pregnancy in Africa and Asia<sup>37</sup>. Alongside providing various family planning and safe abortion services, the DFID in 2011 established a non-governmental organization in South Sudan to expand its operations in Malawi<sup>37</sup>. Both countries were classified as having extensive reproductive health care needs. It has been discovered that unsafe abortions are a significant cause of maternal mortality in South Sudan and Malawi.

ASTRA Network is non-governmental women organization that fights for the sexual and reproductive rights of women in Central and Eastern Europe (ASTRA is a greek word meaning from the stars). It aims to promote sexual and reproductive health and women and girls' rights in accessing reproductive health services. It works with many NGOs in Croatia, Bosnia Herzegovina, and Macedonia<sup>16</sup>. Its numerous programmes and services are expected to be accessed by all women, irrespective of age, educational level, and location; otherwise, the purpose of setting them up will not be fully actualized. The Nigerian Government has not been able to provide necessary and adequate reproductive health infrastructure and services; non-governmental agencies have tried to come to the rescue of the rural dwellers, though not much have been achieved due to an avalanche of challenges<sup>6</sup>. The Association for Reproductive and Family Health (ARFH) is a non-governmental organization established in 1989 in Nigeria. It aims at promoting access to quality health care and partners with other organizations in fighting HIV/AIDS. It equally undertakes sexual reproductive health and family planning programs<sup>17</sup>. The Association aims to mobilize people for behavioural and attitudinal changes towards best sexual and reproductive health practices to minimize HIV/AIDS, malaria and tuberculosis, and other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). The organization and a few others

like it have not been able to achieve much due to a lack of necessary infrastructure and high rate of illiteracy among rural women.

### ***Problems hindering rural women from accessing reproductive health information in Nigeria***

Different factors hinder the ability of rural women to access reproductive health information in Nigeria. These include their low level of education, limited availability of quality health facilities and services in the rural areas, shortage of health workers, and poor infrastructure<sup>38</sup>. There is a considerably high percentage of illiterates among rural women and this poses a significant challenge to the process of accessing reproductive health information. Harande<sup>18</sup>, in his study on information service for rural communities in Nigeria, revealed a high rate of illiteracy among rural women. Bla me<sup>19</sup> observed that two - thirds of adult women are illiterates and mostly cut off from health information. The case of Nigeria is similar to other developing countries. Nwokocha and Chimah<sup>20</sup> noted that of the various categories of information users in Africa, the group of illiterate information users makes up the largest. Rural women form a major part of the illiterate information users.

Reproductive health information is sometimes packaged in formats not familiar to this group of users. Most of the information on available services are packaged in print and electronic formats. Rural women rarely access this information because of their enlightenment problems and lack of exposure. These formats invariably limit the rural women's access to health information. A reasonable percentage of rural women do not even see the importance of information about their reproductive health. They have little or no knowledge about dangerous diseases such as HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases. As a result, they do not see the need for information on preventing or managing such diseases. Amanze and Ibenne<sup>21</sup> posited that the format of information resources inhibits the process of information accessibility in rural areas. For example, most rural women cannot access information in electronic format due to lack of infrastructure and facilities.

Lack of libraries and information centres is a contributing factor to poor access to reproductive

health information, coupled with apparent lack of skilled information professionals<sup>6</sup>. Library and Information professionals are responsible for packaging and repackaging information to the group's level in question. When this is done haphazardly and unprofessionally, there is usually a challenge. The information on the reproductive health for rural women may be available, however, if it is not packaged correctly in accessible formats, access will be a herculean task for rural women. This can be achieved through rural library and information centres.

Many rural inhabitants live in poverty<sup>20</sup>. This group of people are usually not very financially buoyant and can rarely afford some essential medium of technology that could aid access to information on their reproductive health. Some of these gadgets include mobile phones, tablets, iPad, television, computer systems, radio set, and others. These media enhance the process of information access by rural dwellers, but unfortunately, most cannot afford to purchase them. Apart from these gadgets, information on reproductive health could also be packaged in print formats like books, novels, and magazines; these are usually sold at a cost. The low financial status of the rural dwellers may constrain them from purchasing these information resources, thereby limiting their access to the information contained therein.

Another major challenge faced by rural women in Nigeria in a bid to access information on reproductive health is the language barrier. Given the fact that the majority of these females are illiterates, they can neither read nor write. Even when information is transmitted orally, they are still faced with the barrier of the second language. Invariably, this hinders their information access because they do not understand the language of the source. If reproductive information resources and services are not brought to the language of the illiterate society, accessibility becomes doubtful. Mansoor and Kamba<sup>22</sup> regretted that some rural communities are left out of the existing information flow due to this challenge.

Furthermore, geographical boundaries constitute bottlenecks to most rural communities, thus depriving the inhabitants of access to quality information on reproductive health due to geographical barriers. These communities are usually located on the outskirts of towns. Some of

the communities do not have proper access roads and while others are located in riverine areas that are only accessible through the use of boats and ferries. Thus, lack of access roads constitutes a hindrance to information provision. Sokey and Adisah-Ata<sup>23</sup> reiterated that geographical isolation is a major challenge faced by rural community dwellers. The location of these rural villages discourages the dwellers from travelling long distances to access information in nearby libraries or information centres. Thus, rural women may prefer to stay without reproductive health information instead of taking the pains.

Necessary infrastructure is often lacking in rural areas. Despite the importance of amenities such as electricity, good roads, and internet facilities, rural inhabitants are denied these facilities in developing countries, including Nigeria, thereby making life complicated and tedious. This scenario negates the accessibility of reproductive information by rural women. Also, Ezema<sup>6</sup> noted that rural areas in Nigeria are faced with inadequate information access. The major contributors to this deficit are irregular electrical power supply, low internet bandwidth, and inadequate electronic communication access. This challenge was further buttressed in a study carried out by Anduaem, Gasham, and Abera<sup>24</sup> which revealed that only a few of the respondents could afford access to information on the internet due to the challenge of insufficient bandwidth and financial constraint. The traditional methods of disseminating information in rural communities include face-face interpersonal channel, use of town criers and marketplaces. The major limitation of these channels is that health officials must be physically present to provide required information and make necessary clarifications<sup>38</sup>.

### ***Role of the public library in improving the accessibility of reproductive health information by rural women***

Libraries are custodians of knowledge and information; various kinds of libraries exist (such as academic, school, public, national, and special libraries.) but with the overall objective of satisfying the information needs of its users. However, this paper is concerned with the peculiar roles of public libraries in improving access to reproductive health information for rural women.

Public libraries have the responsibility of acquiring, processing, preserving, and making information accessible to the general public or persons within a given geographical location. Therefore, they provide information and create access to the same for the development of nations and their citizens. Public library services can be extended to rural women to help them access various services and information in reproductive health. The involvement of public libraries in the provision of health information is not new; it is very prevalent in developed countries. It is reported that 81% of local or community libraries in the United Kingdom provide information materials on health and well-being<sup>25</sup>. Therefore, public libraries in Nigeria can play strategic roles in solving the challenge of information access through various programmes and projects, some of which are discussed below.

### ***Health education programmes and campaigns***

Public libraries, in collaboration with health workers, can organize education programmes and campaigns geared towards addressing specific reproductive health challenges and equipping rural women with accurate and comprehensive information. Hossain *et al.*<sup>26</sup> suggested that such programmes and campaigns can enhance sex education among women and girls. Public libraries can help in significantly reducing the rate of information illiteracy among rural women, and this will in the long run, enhance the process of access to reproductive health information. This point was further underscored by Adebayo<sup>27</sup>, noting that public libraries in Nigeria must positively impact on their immediate community through the promotion of information literacy via the organization of educational activities, adult literacy programmes, and mobile library services. Libraries in developed countries routinely advance these types of programmes. The Queens Library in New York City (in the United States of America) is an excellent example. In 2017, the library organized 600 health events across its 53 locations, in partnership with local hospitals, health centres, and other organizations. Besides, the Queens Library has two full-time professional staff with backgrounds in public health<sup>28</sup>.

Nigerian Libraries have to be strategic in carrying out these programmes; location, date, and

time for the programmes have to be agreed upon by all stakeholders, especially the target audience. Most of the rural women are farmers and petty traders. They spend most of the time on their farms and markets. Relevant stakeholders must consider these before fixing the date and time. Traditionally and historically, for most rural areas, important events occur in what is regarded as 'village square'. The village square is a central location within a rural area where important ceremonies take place. There is the likelihood that rural women will attach more importance to these programmes if they take place in the village square. There is also a need for proper publicity and mobilization for the programmes. Libraries should involve local chiefs in publicizing the programmes. The local chiefs are very influential and are accorded great respect by their subjects; so, their involvement would help promote these programmes. Since most of the rural women are illiterates, the medium of communication for the programmes should be the local language or dialect. This can be achieved with the use of indigenous facilitators or interpreters.

### ***Awareness creation***

Public libraries can create awareness of trending reproductive health issues through various media. The media include illustrated posters, leaflets, billboards and others. For example, public libraries in Botswana use these methods in providing health information to users. Ntlotlang and Grand<sup>29</sup> observed that the Mochudi and Molepolole public libraries in Botswana have successfully used brochures/leaflets, outreaches, and exhibitions to promote health information among library users. Public libraries can out rightly produce outreach materials or collaborate with relevant agencies. Government and non-government agencies produce posters and flyers periodically, especially during health promotion campaigns; libraries can take advantage of such campaigns to acquire promotional materials for their community. The materials need to be colorfully illustrated and simple to understand. Pictorial illustrations are extremely useful in information communication and assimilation. Idiegbeyan-ose, Adekunjo, Ilo and Odion<sup>30</sup> stated in their study on availability of library and information services for rural community development in Nigeria that in order to increase awareness and accessibility of community

library resources, librarians should not only acquire resources relevant to the information needs of the rural dwellers, but they must ensure that the users can easily understand the content of the materials.

### ***Information packaging and repackaging***

One of the ways by which the public libraries in Nigeria can improve access to reproductive health information for rural women is through the process of information repackaging. Information repackaging simply entails changing the physical format of the information resource to suit the status of the information users, in this case, the rural women. Most of the rural women are illiterates or semi-literate and cannot read or write; it is therefore pertinent that information on reproductive health is repackaged in other media like audio, visuals, and audio-visuals to enhance access. Ilo and Yusuf<sup>36</sup> suggested that information could be repackaged in the form of visual materials, songs, pictures, and drama. Public libraries have the responsibility to ensure that reproductive health information is taken to the level that rural women can gain access, irrespective of their level of literacy. Information contained in printed and electronic resources could also be transcribed to their local dialect with a lot of pictorial illustrations; this would also enhance access.

### ***Mobile library services***

It has been observed that many rural areas do not have a public library to serve them<sup>30</sup>. In some cases, there is just one library to serve two or more local government areas. Therefore, there is a need for public libraries to engage in mobile library services to areas where there are no libraries. This kind of service would enable public libraries to extend their services to persons in places where there are no libraries. The service involves the use of vans or ferries/boats to convey information resources and library personnel to rural areas at periodic intervals. All the programmes mentioned above targeted at reproductive health information literacy can be implemented through mobile library services. Libraries can work with charity and volunteer non-governmental organizations to enhance this service. A good example of a charity group that supports libraries in providing mobile services is the Women's Royal Voluntary Service (WRVS) in the United Kingdom. The WRVS helps libraries to

deliver print and non-print materials to rural communities. In 2004, the WRVS provided 144 home library services in 74 local authorities<sup>31</sup>. However, librarians and other facilitators will need to work with the targeted women on time for visit and delivery.

### ***Advocacy and sensitization of relevant agencies***

Public libraries can sensitize governmental and non-governmental agencies to see the need to embark on the provision of necessary infrastructure useful for information dissemination and accessibility. These should include providing electricity and information and communication technology (ICT) facilities through which access to reproductive health information can be achieved. Ezema<sup>6</sup> suggested some activities could be based on collaboration and counterpart funding, where the rural communities provide a small proportion of the fund and land. Similarly, through advocacy, libraries can task relevant agencies on training health extension workers and librarians to facilitate reproductive health information provision to rural women. Availa<sup>5</sup> reiterated that the need for the government to get committed to public health activities in rural areas. They should develop specific programmes that guarantee universal access to comprehensive sexual and reproductive health care services and information. Libraries should be at the forefront in advocating for necessary action from relevant agencies. The Illinois Library Association (n.d)<sup>32</sup>, in its advocacy toolkit, posited that libraries should support causes that facilitate equitable access to information in a democratic society.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The need for rural women to be provided with reproductive health information cannot be overemphasized; the capability of the public library to meet these reproductive health information needs is not in doubt. However, for the Nigerian public libraries to deliver on this target, there is a need to address their challenges. Therefore, this paper makes the following recommendations as panacea to the challenges of public libraries as well as creating an enabling environment for providing reproductive health information to rural women.

**Funding:** Public libraries need funds to carry out the programmes mentioned earlier and projects targeted at providing reproductive health information to rural women. Unfortunately, public libraries, like other government agencies, are currently underfunded due to the country's economic recession. The management of these libraries should look for alternative means for funds. They could approach charity organizations and multi-national companies, especially those who do businesses around the locations under consideration. Asamoah-Hassan<sup>33</sup> stated that it is necessary for non-governmental and commercial organizations that are involved in carrying out various activities in these rural communities to support efforts geared towards providing information; funds provided by such organizations could be used in the purchase of various infrastructure and communication facilities that aid the process of information availability, access and even dissemination. Library authorities can also adopt strategic corporate social responsibilities (CSR) initiatives usually characterized by philanthropic donations, charities and indigenous community developments.

**Community engagement:** For public libraries to effectively and efficiently render the services mentioned above, they must engage members of the community. They must adopt a workable community engagement model. In this regard, the community engagement model for public libraries proposed by Sung and Hepworth<sup>34</sup> is recommended. The latter identified the following elements in community engagement:

- **Accountability:** the ability of the library to carry out statutory duties and meet reporting guidelines.
- **Belonging:** members of the community should have a feeling of ownership, and there should be an emphasis on relationship building between service and the community.
- **Commitment:** relevant stakeholders should be committed to the project.
- **Communication:** there should be proper and cordial communication between the service and community.
- **Flexible approach:** methods and techniques engaged in the service should be flexible and in partnership with members of the community.
- **Genuineness:** authenticity and transparency

- Relevance: the service and project should be relevant to stakeholders.
- Sustainability: impact and continuity of the service/project.

**Inter-sectorial collaboration:** Librarians are information facilitators and providers; they are not trained health professionals. In the process of providing reproductive health information, they need professional health workers like doctors, nurses, and others. Fortunately, there are health extension workers in Federal and State Government Ministries of health who are readily available for collaboration. They only need mobilization and provision of necessary logistics to go to rural areas<sup>39</sup>. Hopefully, with adequate funding, libraries should be able to provide the necessary logistics for collaboration<sup>40</sup>. Charity organizations are also instrumental in health information provision; Nigerian libraries can collaborate with them. Some health-based charity organizations in Nigeria that could be useful in this regard include Worldwide Fistula Fund, Aid for Africa, Medical Bridges, Association for Reproductive and Family Health (ARFH), Society for Family Health and others.

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## Contribution of authors

Promise Ilo: conceived and designed the study  
Goodluck Ifijeh: designed the study and edited the manuscript. He also handled corrections from the reviewers.

Chidi Segun-Adeniran: wrote the following aspects of the manuscript- Reproductive health information needs of rural women and Reproductive health information services and advocacy for rural women: Global trends

Happiness Michael-Onuoha: wrote the following aspects of the manuscript- Problems hindering rural women from accessing reproductive health information in Nigeria and Role of the public library in improving the accessibility of reproductive health information by rural women

Loveth Ekwueme: wrote the conclusion and recommendations

All the authors mentioned in the article approved the manuscript.

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