



Office of the Principal and Vice Chancellor

Prof Mandla Makhanya

Vice Chancellor and Principal of UNISA

Welcome Address

International Federation of Library Association (IFLA)
satellite meeting of Women in Libraries: Special Interest
Group with Unisa Women's Forum

*"Library and Information Services Profession's potential
contribution to the post-2015 sustainable development goals
related to women."*

11 August 2015

Senate Hall, Unisa

📌 Programme facilitator

📌 Our keynote speaker from the UN Women Multi-Country Office, Dr

Auxilia Ponga

- 🔊 IFLA leadership and representatives in attendance at this occasion
- 🔊 I also acknowledge the former president of IFLA, Dr Kay Raseroka, who will be delivering keynote address tomorrow
- 🔊 To all our international delegates participating in this conference.
- 🔊 The Executive Director of Library Services at Unisa and co-host of this event, Dr Buhle Mbambo-Thata
- 🔊 The leadership and representatives of Unisa Women's Forum
- 🔊 Unisa staff members and students
- 🔊 Distinguished audience

Accept our warm African Ubuntu/Botho welcome to the University of South Africa. Feel at home as you deliberate, after all, you are in Africa, the cradle of mankind. That this meeting, reflecting on the role of library and information services in empowering women, takes place during the women's month is of great significance and relevance to us. That the organizers of this event have selected Unisa as the host is an honour that we do not take for granted given the international footprint of IFLA and

the global significance of the subject this conference or satellite meeting is poised to tackle.

Just a cursory reference to the theme and focus of this conference is a tempting option for an academic like myself. We live in an epoch that has generally been referred to as an Information Age driven by the explosion of information technology and innovations. This has fundamentally changed the character, the outlook and key variables that define our globalized world. In the same epoch we are informed that knowledge is the critical differentiator for success and/or failure in what is called the "knowledge economy". Indeed, when you look at internet, emails, social media, e-governance, e-commerce, e-news and many other web-based distance learning education platforms, it is an indication of this fundamental shift in information generation, management and dissemination. Traditionally, family and communities were primary socializing agents and later formal education became another significant role player but in the era of social media, gaming and applications or apps it is clear that this picture has changed in many ways.

Timothy Garthon Ash captures the essence of the power of mass information and its impact on public opinion as he states that “developments in information technology and globalized media mean that the most powerful military in the history of the world can lose a war, not on the battlefield of dust and blood, but on the battlefield of world opinion”. For me this invites yet another question on the gender issue, what is the mass information circulated on gender issues? Is it gender sensitive or does it serve to reproduce and reinforce centuries of gender prejudice and stereotypes? It is this clinical dissection and unpacking of information that is managed by our libraries and information services that will reveal the nature of the beast and inform strategies of dealing with these challenges, be they conscious or sub-conscious.

A paradox of our time is that the world is more connected in sharing knowledge or information than ever before but it is equally more divided as this information has led to a plethora of prejudices and misinformation. It is for this reason that we witness radical, fanatical and fundamentalist movements reacting to what they perceive to be an onslaught of western information that threaten to erode their values and belief systems. We see this in some parts of our own continent, Africa, in

the Middle East, in South Asia and, yes, in the developed western world. This often violent rhetoric and even physical violence against "the unfamiliar other" is a growing trend of our times. Just as forces of progress and goodwill utilize the abundant platforms of information technology so does the counter force which seek to harm. It is this duel in the information highway and platforms of mass-communication that is a dominant feature of our era. It is in this same space that prejudice on gender, religious, racial and ethnic basis gets proliferated.

It is within this context that professionals in the library and information services can assist to create some space that begin to challenge the existing patriarchal power structures. The struggle for gender equality and gender justice in general will be fought mainly, but not exclusively, in the information highway and in the manner knowledge is generated and managed. Universities or institutions of higher learning like Unisa, have a responsibility to partner with all progressive forces in ensuring that subtle and not so subtle gender biases that often impose a glass ceiling for women is exposed and dismantled.

As you meet here and later in your IFLA annual conference we are ready to learn and be informed by your deliberations on how library and information services can play a role in meeting the goal of gender equality. Your inputs will assist in shaping policies in our university and community libraries and resource centers.

As experts managing learning material on a massive scale you have an opportunity to expose trends in publications and research that may be reinforcing old patriarchal stereotypes and prejudices. You may also assist in exposing recruitment, training and promotion practices that may be putting women at a disadvantage in the sector. I am even more interested to learn about peculiar challenges of distance learning institutions in the sphere of library and information services or any related field. This will also assist us as we are hosting an international conference of Open Distance Learning Institutions in October 2015.

Universities or any knowledge institutions are natural homes and theatre for library and information practitioners hence the need for greater

collaboration and dialogue between the two entities in addressing current and emerging challenges.

Let me take this time to congratulate the organizers of this conference and wish you a productive and groundbreaking engagements in the next two days. For those visiting South Africa, may you enjoy our truly African hospitality and make sure that you enjoy every moment and leave your hard currency behind whist loaded with all what the country can offer.

I thank you

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