CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Background to Study

Information is a traditional resource of mankind. Over the last few years it acquired a central importance in the development of man, where it has come to be regarded as a critical source for development and empowerment. It is generally the goal of most countries to have their information services organized in such a way to ensure that individuals, families, and communities obtain the maximum benefit from current knowledge and technology available to them. In this process, governments and other agencies must obtain as much information as is possible on the size, extent, and urgency of their needs. Without accurate information, planning can be misdirected. A process of an evaluation needs to be built in to the program depending on reliable information and accurate assessment (Britannica online).

Durrance (1997) stated that studies of information needs and information seeking have provided researchers with basic knowledge of various factors that operated when people need information. There is no doubt, however, that the key to more responsive information systems in the future is a better understanding of information users and the environments in which they function.

The identification of information needs is essential for designing information systems in general, and for providing effective information services in particular. In order to identify information needs, one should adopt various methods to gather information on the various factors that influence the information needs. Each community in society has its own distinctive needs. These needs are often influenced

by the purpose, occupation, culture, and the life-style of the members of the community.

Mashiri (1997) stated that women have always been talking about gaining control of their lives and participating in decisions that affect them at home and in their community, in government and development policies. They have also been talking about gaining their individual rights as feminists. The word "empowerment", as it is used now, captures this sense of gaining control and participating in decision making and thus improving women's welfare and status. Empowerment is a process and is not therefore something that can be given to people. According to an officer's statement in Mashiri's (1997) study, it was found that rural women want information on income generating activities, legal issues, and materials such as cookery books and novels.

Libraries can contribute to the empowerment of women by providing information to develop this awareness. Among the studies that have been conducted on identification of information needs of women in Zimbabwe, a great deal of information has been written and produced on women and for women and for their benefit, but is not easily accessible to the rural women. The rural women have also been left out of these studies because the information is mainly concentrated in the urban areas and very little reaches them. Libraries as information centers can contribute to the empowerment of women by providing information in the form that is easily understood by rural women. Libraries should target specific areas of interest to the rural women. One such area where women have displayed an interest is the issue of legal rights. Another area where the rural women can obtain information from libraries is in the area of agriculture in order to improve their agricultural output and thus improve their economic status.

There are many challenges facing the information profession as the information society emerges. These challenges include assisting users in dealing with information overload and the high level of technical skills required to manage the new information and communication technologies. A wide variety of communication technologies and standards are available and under development. These developments in information and communication technologies have encouraged the growth of the Internet. Moore (1996) stated in his paper that we are living in an era of profound change. The introduction of new information and communication technologies is having far-reaching effects on individuals, organizations and on nation states. It is changing the ways in which we work, learn and play, changing the relationships between individuals and the state, changing the nature of business and commerce. The goal of telecommunication is to provide cheap and efficient information infrastructure that enables individuals and organizations to communicate with one another. Initially, the need is to extend the reach of these networks so that it provides universal services. The second goal is to improve the industrial and commercial competitiveness and productivity by making organizations use information as a resource. Thirdly, it is to improve education and training. An information society is seen as a means of promoting social harmony and cohesion. Finally, most of the information policies adopted by governments seek to provide some forms of support for the information needs of the society. Therefore, it seems clear that information systems and the creation of an information society have a distinct bearing on the way the political system operates. The information that the systems provide must be rapid, precise, and relevant to respond to the requirements of globalization. Carrasco and Vanderkast (1996) stated in their study that during the last decade society has undergone technological, economical and cultural changes. Those changes have their origin in

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the first communication revolution "the print"; the second revolution was caused by "computers", and innovations in technology of communication and the establishment of the free trade. The advances of those technologies made it possible for the proliferation of computer networks while telecommunications provided the link between these networks causing an intensive trans-border data flow in both directions. These technologies have made it possible for information to be available. The impact of the communication industry has made dissemination of information both more effective and rapid.

The term "information society" has its origin from the Americans' point of view as Machlup (1962) indicated in his work '*The Production and Distribution of Knowledge in the United States'*. The Japanese authors quoted in this study, declared that Trado Umesao invented the term in 1963 and later in 1968 was viewed by Yoneji Masuda as " the basis of this society is the production of information values and not the material values which will be the driving force". According to Cronin quoted in the same study, the most relevant characteristics of the information society are "the displacement of the work force from labor-intensive extractive and manufacturing industries to service and knowledge industries".

Background to Malaysia and the Sudan

Malaysia is situated in the heart of South East Asia, and is bordered by longitude 100° and 120° east and latitudes formed by the Equator and 7° north. The official language of the country is the Malay language although English is widely used through out the country. Being a multi-cultural nation, the indigenous languages of the various races are also widely used. According to the General Report of the

Population Census (1991) Malaysia had a population of 18.3 million in 1991 and is a nation of diversity in unity where Malays, Chinese, Indians and the indigenous people of Sabah and Sarawak live in caring cultural harmony. On account of its' diverse mix of ethnic races, Malaysia is often dubbed as "Little Asia". The nation's population falls into two main distinct groups: those with cultural affinities indigenous to the region who are classified as *Bumiputra*, and those whose cultural affinities lie outside the region. All the races of Malay descent in Penninsular Malaysia share a common culture and most of all, the bond of Islam.

As this study is discussing the information needs of foreign women, with special reference to the Sudanese women community in Malaysia, it necessitates the inclusion of a brief account about the Sudan. The Sudan is the largest country in Africa. It lies between 5-22° N and 23- 37° E. Its' area is about 2,505,810 square km; the land being 2,376 million square km and the water being 129,870 square km. The countries that are bordering the Sudan are Central African Republic, Chad, Libya, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya and Uganda. The climate is tropical in the south and arid desert in the north. The natural mineral resources are petroleum, small reserves of iron ore, copper, mica, chromium ore, silver, gold and tungsten. Agriculture and small-scale industries are the main source of income (Sudan net).

The Sudanese-Malaysian relationship has grown rapidly through the last years especially in trade, industry and education. This has been accompanied by a flow of Sudanese to Malaysia seeking postgraduate and undergraduate education, jobs, trade, etc.

The identification of Sudanese women community information needs is the subject of study. The Sudanese women community comprises of about 120 individuals who

accompany their husbands, hold jobs or are studying in Malaysia. The women include housewives, undergraduate and postgraduate students, teachers and lecturers. Thus, their information needs vary widely and it the intention of this study to identify and analyze these needs.

Statement of the Problem

The Sudanese women population in Malaysia comprises various groups. Each category is designated to carry out certain tasks. Housewives for example are supposed to take care of their own children and any other duties related to them. Students, on the other hand, are expected to pursue their studies, either undergraduates or postgraduate students. They have the freedom to join some other activities which may or may not be related to their field of studies. The lecturers devote most of their time to their career and have little time for social activities.

However there is little evidence on the information needs of these groups and other Sudanese in Malaysia. In view of the importance of information, and the lack of information available to women, as mentioned in the earlier section, there is a need to understand the information needs of this small but important group. The researcher had intended in this study to identify their main information needs, sources, and types of materials they use in the library and had intended to investigate the main barriers for not meeting those needs.

Objectives of Study

This study strives to achieve the following broad aims:

1. To assess the information needs of the Sudanese women community living in Malaysia.

2. To examine ways of meeting the information needs of these Sudanese women.

Research Questions

This study attempts to answer the following questions:

1. What are the main information needs of the Sudanese women community living in Malaysia?

2. What are the main sources of information for these Sudanese women?

3. Do these women use the library for their information needs, and if so, what types of material do they use in the library?

4. What are the major barriers to meeting their information needs?

The Significance of the Study

A search through the literature revealed no evidence of any study research done on information needs of foreign women in general and living in Malaysia in particular. Foreign women information needs, if met, would enable them to solve problems in particular situations. The study should strive to identify their information needs, their sources, the best way to meet these needs and to acknowledge the reasons of not meeting these needs. The Sudanese women community living in Malaysia comprises mainly of housewives, post and undergraduate students, teachers and lecturers. Thus their information needs are varying and cover different aspects of life. In order to meet these needs, they may be faced by certain obstacles and barriers such as

difference of language, culture, extend of exposure and use of information channels and means available in Malaysia.

Thus the findings of the study can be used as a significant reference guide for administrative and policy makers and moreover as a basis for further studies.

Scope/ Limitations of the Study

The limitations to this study are that the study was confined to women living in Kuala Lumpur and Petaling Jaya. In addition, only 90 out of 120 women were reached. Moreover, the questionnaire was designed in English to collect data pertinent to the study, though the respondents' mother's tongue is Arabic. Hoever, most of the women are able to understand English.

Definition of Terms

Information

Various authors from various perspectives without reaching an overall accepted definition have defined the term "information". Webster (1976) defines information as the "communication or reception of knowledge or intelligence; something obtained or received through informing, and the process by which the form of an object of knowledge is impressed upon the apprehending mind so as to bring about the status of knowing". However the term "information " used in this study is referred to as any piece of text, or data, document, report, book, collection, knowledge, market intelligence, link, association, perception, rumor, hunch or simple idea which is held in any medium."(Webster 1976).

"Information" was also defined as any data, facts, ideas or interpretations which are perceived as relevant, or potentially relevant, to a topic of concern or interest (Vincent 1987).

Information Needs

The term "information needs" is defined in a variety of ways by authors. The association of the word "information" with "needs" in this study implies basic needs in defining information needs. A need is what an individual ought to have, for his work, his research, his edification, his recreation, etc. Two other terms "wants" and "demands" have to be distinguished. A want is what an individual would like to have, a want may or may not be translated into a demand. A demand is what an individual asks for; a request for an item of infromation believed to be wanted. Line (1974). *The United States national commission on libraries and information science (1975)* views them in terms of a general need for information. According to Roberts (1975) the information needs were viewed in terms of wants, desires, demands and requirements.

Information Technology

Information technology, is the application of a combination of computing, telecommunications, and microelectronics to the collection processing , storage, and transmission of information (Oxford Illustrated Encyclopedia. Rev. ed. 1993).

Foreign Women

The term in the context of this study refers to women of nationalities other than Malaysians, who have lived not less than one year in Malaysia.

The Internet

Internet is a gigantic collection of millions of computers that are all linked together on a computer network. (Source:WYSIWYG //http:www.howstuffworks.com/web-server.htm).

Organization of the Report

This report is organized into five chapters, which are presented in the following manner. Chapter One provides an introduction and background information about Malaysia and the Sudan. This chapter also included the statement of the problem, the objectives, research questions, significance of the study, definition of terms and the scope and limitations of the study. Chapter Two reviews and analyses relevant literature on information needs, as well as pervious research on information needs in general. Chapter Three presents the methodology and procedure for the study. Chapter Four presents the results and the statistical analysis of the findings. Chapter Five concludes the research and provides interpretations of the findings, recommendations and suggestions for future work. The bibliography and the appendices which include the questionnaire follow the main chapters.