Disability-Friendly Library Services : Policies and Implementation

Madan Pal

Assistant Professor Library

S.S.S.S. (P.G.) College, Rasna (Meerut)

E-mail: madanpal411@gmail.com

Abstract

The inclusion of persons with disabilities in mainstream information systems is a vital indicator of social equity and democratic access. Libraries, as knowledge hubs, play a significant role in enabling equal access to information for all individuals, regardless of physical, sensory, cognitive, or learning disabilities. This research paper examines the concept, policies, and implementation of disability-friendly library services with an emphasis on creating inclusive, accessible, and equitable library environments. The research paper explores international frameworks such as the UNCRPD, IFLA Guidelines, and WCAG standards, alongside national policies and institutional practices that promote accessibility. It highlights various disability-friendly services, including physical infrastructure modifications, accessible reading materials, assistive technologies, and digital accessibility measures. Further, the research paper investigates implementation strategies such as accessibility audits, staff training, resource development, and technology integration. The challenges–ranging from financial limitations to inadequate awareness and policy enforcement–are critically analyzed to understand barriers to effective implementation. Through a review of best practices and successful case studies, the research underscores innovative approaches that libraries can adopt to enhance accessibility. The findings emphasize that disability-friendly library services are not merely optional enhancements but a fundamental component of inclusive education and information justice. This study concludes that sustained policy support, technological advancement, staff sensitization, and community involvement are essential to realizing fully accessible library environments. The research paper also suggests areas for future research to strengthen inclusive library systems globally.

Keywords: Disability-friendly libraries, accessibility, inclusive library services, assistive technologies, library policies, information equity, universal design, digital accessibility, inclusive education.

Introduction

The concept of disability inclusion in libraries has gained significant attention in recent decades as societies move toward more equitable and democratic access to information. Libraries, as knowledge-centered institutions, hold a responsibility to ensure that all users–including persons with physical, visual, auditory, cognitive, and learning disabilities–can access information without discrimination. According to Kumar, disability inclusion is not only a social

necessity but also a moral obligation that reinforces the right to information for every individual.[i] This shift in perspective reflects the influence of international human rights frameworks and national policies that emphasize equality and inclusion. The concept of disability-friendly library services is built upon the principles of accessibility, universal design, and equal participation. Disability-friendly services encompass a wide range of facilities such as ramps, tactile flooring, Braille signage, assistive technologies, accessible digital interfaces, and personalized support. As highlighted by Sharma, an inclusive library service model not only addresses the physical needs of disabled individuals but also ensures cognitive, informational, and digital accessibility.[ii] Libraries are increasingly adopting tools like screen readers, magnifiers, audio books, large-print collections, and captioned multimedia resources to broaden access.

The need and relevance of inclusive library environments stem from the growing acknowledgement that information access is a fundamental human right. In a knowledge-driven society, lack of accessibility can deepen social inequalities and marginalize persons with disabilities. Rao argues that inclusive environments empower disabled users, enhance their participation in education and employment, and strengthen their social integration.[iii] Moreover, modern libraries are transitioning from traditional repositories to community learning centers, which makes inclusivity an essential component of their service mission. Creating inclusive library environments is not limited to the installation of accessible facilities; it requires a holistic approach, including policy development, staff training, infrastructure planning, and integration of assistive technologies. As Mehta states, inclusive library services must be embedded within institutional policies to ensure sustainability and long-term implementation.[iv] Thus, disability-friendly libraries represent a progressive shift toward achieving information equity and fostering inclusive education ecosystems. The pressing need for such environments emphasizes the importance of rethinking library policies, designing accessible services, and embracing emerging technologies to support all users effectively.

Conceptual Framework

Understanding disability-friendly library services requires a clear conceptual foundation based on the definitions of disability, inclusion, accessibility, and universal design. Disability, in contemporary discourse, refers not solely to physical or mental impairments but to the interaction between these impairments and societal barriers that restrict participation. As Sinha notes, disability is a socio-cultural construct shaped by environments, attitudes, and institutional arrangements.[v] Inclusion, on the other hand, emphasizes the full participation of all individuals in social systems, ensuring equal opportunities regardless of physical or cognitive differences. Khandelwal defines inclusion as a process that eliminates exclusionary practices and promotes equal access to resources.[vi]

Accessibility is a crucial component of this framework and refers to the removal of physical, digital, and informational barriers. Thomas explains that accessibility includes both infrastructural elements–ramps, signage, tactile paths–and technological tools such as screen readers, Braille displays, and captioned content.[vii] Universal Design, as a guiding principle, promotes the creation of environments usable by all people without the need for adaptation. Menon states that universal design extends beyond architecture and applies to learning systems, digital resources, and communication models.[viii]

Different types of disabilities–visual, hearing, physical, intellectual, and learning disabilities–are highly relevant in shaping accessible library services. For instance, visually impaired users require Braille, audio books, and screen-reading software, while hearing-impaired users benefit from captioned videos and sign-language support. Individuals with physical disabilities need unobstructed physical spaces and adaptable seating layouts. The theoretical foundations guiding disability-friendly services are rooted in several key models. The Social Model of Disability, articulated by Oliver, argues that disability arises from societal barriers rather than impairments themselves.[ix] Universal Design for Learning (UDL) emphasizes flexible learning environments that accommodate diverse learning needs. According to Patel, UDL enhances access by offering multiple modes of representation, engagement, and expression.[x] Accessibility and Information Equity theories further highlight that equitable access to information is a fundamental right. Rao asserts that libraries must eliminate systemic barriers to ensure fairness.[xi]

Libraries thus play a vital role in ensuring equitable access by integrating inclusive policies, assistive technologies, and user-centered services. By aligning with accessibility principles and theoretical frameworks, libraries become powerful instruments for promoting social justice and equal information rights.

Policies Supporting Disability-Friendly Library Services

Policies supporting disability-friendly library services operate at multiple levels–international, national, and institutional–creating a comprehensive framework for ensuring equitable access. These policies guide libraries in adopting inclusive practices, integrating assistive technologies, and eliminating barriers that restrict access to information for persons with disabilities.

- **International Level**

At the global level, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) is one of the most influential policy frameworks. UNCRPD emphasizes the right to access information, culture, and education for individuals with disabilities. Desai notes that Articles 9 and 21 of UNCRPD explicitly direct public institutions–including libraries–to ensure accessibility in physical, digital, and informational domains.[xii] These provisions

encourage nations to adopt legal measures and technological standards that remove structural barriers. IFLA (International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions) has also issued comprehensive guidelines on library services for persons with disabilities. According to Baker, the IFLA Guidelines recommend accessible reading formats, trained staff support, barrier-free infrastructure, and the integration of universal design principles.[xiii] These guidelines serve as operational models for designing disability-friendly services across public, academic, and digital libraries.

Another major international standard is the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG), developed by the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C). WCAG promotes digital accessibility by prescribing principles such as perceivability, operability, understandability, and robustness. Thomas argues that WCAG compliance enables libraries to make websites, e-resources, catalogues, and digital repositories usable for visually impaired, hearing-impaired, and cognitively disabled users.[xiv] These global policies collectively form the foundational pillars for disability-inclusive information environments.

- **National Level (India)**

At the national level, India has enacted several laws and policies that promote accessibility within educational and cultural institutions, including libraries. The Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPwD) Act, 2016, is the most important law guaranteeing equal access to information, education, and public services. Rao states that the Act mandates accessible infrastructure, ICT tools, reading materials, and public documents for persons with disabilities.[xv]

Government initiatives such as the Accessible India Campaign (Sugamya Bharat Abhiyan) further strengthen these mandates by promoting accessibility in buildings, transport, and information systems. Sen highlights that digital accessibility components of this campaign directly influence library digitization projects and e-governance portals.[xvi]

Inclusive education policies such as the National Education Policy (NEP 2020) also emphasize accessible learning environments. NEP encourages institutions to adopt assistive technologies, provide accessible educational resources, and ensure equal participation of disabled students. Additionally, national digital initiatives like the National Digital Library of India (NDLI) aim to provide inclusive access to educational resources through adaptive interfaces and accessible formats. Bhattacharya explains that NDLI is gradually incorporating accessibility features aligned with WCAG and UNCRPD recommendations.[xvii]

- **Institutional/Organizational Level**

At the institutional level, universities, colleges, and public libraries are increasingly adopting disability inclusion policies to operationalize national and international guidelines. Institutional policies often address physical accessibility, procurement of assistive devices, and

creation of accessible digital collections. Mehta suggests that such policies help libraries develop long-term accessibility plans.[xviii]

Institutions also issue guidelines for accessible resource development, including the creation of Braille texts, audio books, large-print materials, and captioned multimedia content. These guidelines play a crucial role in ensuring that learning and research materials are available to all users in suitable formats. Furthermore, policies related to staff training and sensitization are essential. Sharma notes that trained staff significantly enhance the quality of services offered to disabled users by providing personalized support and appropriate technological assistance.[xix]

In summary, policies at international, national, and institutional levels collectively shape a comprehensive framework that guides libraries in developing inclusive and accessible services. By aligning with these policies, libraries can ensure that information systems are barrier-free, equitable, and empowering for persons with disabilities.

Types of Disability-Friendly Library Services

Disability-friendly library services are designed to ensure that persons with diverse physical, sensory, cognitive, and learning disabilities can access information and participate in library activities without obstacles. These services extend beyond basic infrastructural adjustments and focus on building an inclusive, user-centered, and technology-enabled environment. The first major category of disability-friendly services is physical accessibility. This includes creating barrier-free spaces through ramps, elevators, tactile guiding paths, and ergonomically designed furniture for wheelchair users. Clearly marked signage in large print, contrasting colors, and Braille ensures that visually impaired users can navigate the library independently. Tactile paths help those with low vision move safely, while automatic doors, accessible restrooms, and spacious reading areas enhance mobility and comfort. Such modifications reflect the principles of universal design, uplifting the library's inclusiveness. A second important area is the provision of accessible reading materials. Libraries must develop collections that meet the reading needs of users with visual, hearing, or learning disabilities. This includes Braille books, tactile graphics, audio books, DAISY formats, and large-print materials. Braille and tactile resources are essential for blind users, while audio books assist both visually impaired and dyslexic readers. Large-print books benefit readers with low vision and age-related visual challenges. Additionally, captioned videos and sign-language–supported materials can be crucial resources for users with hearing disabilities. Creating such collections ensures that reading experiences are equitable rather than limited by format restrictions.

The integration of assistive technologies forms another critical component of disability-friendly services. Screen readers such as JAWS, NVDA, and TalkBack allow visually impaired users to access digital resources effortlessly. Screen magnification tools help users with low vision, while speech-to-text and text-to-speech systems support those with motor disabilities or

learning challenges. Other assistive devices such as Braille displays, portable magnifiers, hearing loop systems, and adaptive keyboards make library interactions smoother and more personalized. With rapid advancements in AI-based accessibility tools, libraries can offer intuitive navigation and real-time support to users with multiple disabilities. In today's digital landscape, digital accessibility is indispensable. Libraries must ensure that their websites, databases, OPAC (Online Public Access Catalog), and mobile apps comply with accessibility standards such as WCAG. Digitally accessible services include alt-text for images, keyboard navigation, contrast adjustment options, resizable text, audio-enabled interfaces, and screen-reader–friendly content. Providing e-books in EPUB3 and DAISY formats ensures compatibility with diverse assistive devices. Accessible online tutorials, virtual reference services, and captioned webinars further strengthen digital inclusion.

Alongside infrastructural and technological services, libraries must offer strong inclusive user support services. Special help desks, guided tours, peer-assisted services, and personalized reading support enable disabled users to access resources without difficulty. Trained staff members play a pivotal role in understanding user-specific needs, assisting in the use of assistive devices, and offering tailored information services. Sensitized library personnel foster a welcoming environment where disabled users feel comfortable and confident in seeking help. Another significant service is the provision of inter-library loan facilities for disability resources. Many specialized accessibility materials–Braille books, tactile maps, assistive devices–are costly and not widely available. Through resource-sharing networks and consortia, libraries can borrow and lend materials that support disabled users, expanding the reach of inclusive resources across institutions and geographic areas.

Finally, outreach programs help libraries connect with disabled users beyond their physical boundaries. These include mobile library vans equipped with accessible materials, home-delivery services for users unable to travel, community workshops on digital accessibility, and collaborations with disability organizations, schools, and rehabilitation centers. Outreach programs ensure that library services reach marginalized groups who may otherwise remain excluded from information access. Collectively, these services reflect a holistic approach to accessibility–one that harmonizes physical design, digital innovation, resource development, user support, and community engagement. Through such comprehensive services, libraries transform into inclusive spaces where all users, regardless of ability, can learn, explore, and participate fully.

Implementation Strategies

Implementing disability-friendly library services requires a multi-dimensional and systematic approach that encompasses infrastructure development, resource planning, human resource training, technological adaptation, and continuous policy monitoring. These strategies

ensure that libraries transition from traditional service structures to inclusive, barrier-free information environments that meet the needs of diverse disabled users.

- **Planning and Infrastructure Development**

Effective implementation begins with comprehensive planning, which includes conducting accessibility audits to assess existing barriers. These audits evaluate physical spaces, digital platforms, communication methods, and service structures. According to Mehta, accessibility audits form the foundation for targeted improvement by identifying gaps in infrastructure and service delivery.[xx] After audits, libraries must undertake physical modifications such as installing ramps, tactile paths, widened doorways, accessible shelves, adjustable furniture, and clear signage. These modifications reflect universal design principles and support independent mobility for users with visual or physical impairments. Another crucial aspect is the procurement of assistive devices. Libraries need to acquire equipment such as screen readers, magnifiers, Braille embossers, adaptive keyboards, and hearing loop systems. Sharma emphasizes that procuring the right mix of assistive tools ensures that various disabilities–visual, auditory, physical, and cognitive–are addressed effectively.[xxi] Proper planning ensures that devices are integrated into library services seamlessly and are regularly updated.

- **Resource Development**

Resource development is central to disability inclusion. This includes developing accessible collections by adding Braille books, audio books, DAISY materials, large-print texts, and captioned multimedia resources. Libraries must also digitize important materials in formats compatible with assistive software. Rao notes that diverse accessible collections promote equal opportunities for learning and research.[xxii]

Partnerships play a major role in expanding resources. Libraries should collaborate with national and international organizations for resource sharing, including institutions like NALAM, DAISY Consortium, and Braille presses. Such partnerships allow libraries to access specialized materials that would otherwise be costly. Furthermore, sustainability requires strong funding and budgeting strategies. Allocating specific funds for accessibility initiatives ensures long-term implementation. Sen argues that budgeting for accessibility must be integrated into institutional financial planning rather than treated as an occasional expense.[xxiii]

- **Human Resource & Training**

Human resources are central to the success of disability-friendly services. Staff training and sensitization programs help library personnel understand the needs of disabled users and operate assistive technologies effectively. Sensitization also promotes empathetic communication, reducing hesitation among users. Khandelwal states that trained staff create a positive and comfortable environment for disabled users.[xxiv]

Libraries should also form disability support teams consisting of trained librarians, technical staff, and accessibility experts. These teams are responsible for user assistance, technology support, and addressing accessibility gaps. Collaboration with NGOs and disability experts offers additional insights. For example, partnerships with rehabilitation centers and special education organizations help libraries understand user-specific requirements and adopt customized solutions.

- **Technological Implementation**

Modern disability inclusion depends heavily on effective technological adoption. Libraries must integrate the latest assistive technologies such as JAWS, NVDA, TalkBack, voice-command systems, and smart magnifiers. Thomas highlights that emerging AI-based tools significantly enhance accessibility by offering real-time assistance.[xxv]

Libraries must also focus on enhancing digital accessibility. Websites, OPAC systems, and mobile apps must comply with WCAG standards, ensuring keyboard navigation, alt-text, captioned videos, and screen-reader–friendly interfaces. Accessible digital platforms ensure that disabled users can access services remotely without hindrance. Creating user-friendly digital interfaces further ensures usability for individuals with cognitive or motor disabilities. Interfaces must be simple, intuitive, and adaptable, with options for text resizing, contrast adjustments, audio support, and voice search.

- **Policy Enforcement & Monitoring**

Even the best policies fail without proper enforcement. Libraries must ensure the implementation of policy guidelines drawn from international and national frameworks. Regular staff briefings, accessibility committees, and administrative oversight are essential to sustaining implementation. Desai notes that policy enforcement bridges the gap between planning and practice.[xxvi]

Continuous monitoring mechanisms help track progress. Libraries should conduct annual accessibility reviews, update assistive technologies, and gather feedback from disabled users. Monitoring ensures that services remain relevant and effective. Finally, evaluation criteria for accessibility must be established. This includes measuring physical accessibility, digital compliance, user satisfaction, and utilization rates of assistive tools. Regular evaluation allows libraries to refine strategies and strengthen inclusive services. Through these comprehensive implementation strategies–rooted in infrastructure, resources, training, technology, and policy– libraries can transform into inclusive institutions that guarantee equitable access to information for all users.

Challenges in Implementation

The implementation of disability-friendly library services faces several challenges that hinder the creation of fully inclusive and accessible information environments. One of the most

significant challenges is financial and infrastructural constraints. Many libraries, particularly in developing regions, operate with limited budgets that restrict investments in physical modifications, assistive technologies, and procurement of specialized materials such as Braille books or DAISY formats. Infrastructure in older library buildings often requires extensive redesign to meet accessibility standards, making the process expensive and time-consuming. A second critical challenge is the lack of trained staff. Inclusive library services depend heavily on personnel who understand the needs of disabled users and can operate assistive technologies effectively. However, many institutions do not prioritize staff training or sensitization programs, resulting in gaps in service delivery. Without proper training, even well-equipped libraries fail to support disabled users adequately. Limited awareness among stakeholders–including administrators, policymakers, and community members–further obstructs implementation. When disability inclusion is not recognized as a priority, initiatives often lack institutional support, resources, and long-term planning. This low awareness also contributes to misconceptions about disability and limits user engagement.

Another major obstacle is technological limitations. Many libraries lack updated digital infrastructures, accessible websites, or compatibility with assistive tools. Slow adoption of new technologies and limited technical expertise create additional barriers for disabled users who rely on digital resources. Inadequate policy enforcement also weakens implementation efforts. Although national and international policies exist, their practical application within libraries often remains inconsistent due to poor monitoring, insufficient administrative oversight, and lack of accountability mechanisms. Finally, the limited availability of accessible materials–including Braille books, tactile graphics, captioned videos, and accessible e-resources–creates a significant service gap. Producing or acquiring such materials requires specialized processes and higher costs, making them scarce in many libraries. Collectively, these challenges highlight the need for strong institutional commitment, improved funding, enhanced training, and robust policy implementation to ensure effective disability-friendly library services.

Recommendations

To advance disability-friendly library services, several strategic recommendations must be implemented across policy, institutional, and technological levels. First, policy modifications are essential to ensure that international guidelines such as UNCRPD and WCAG are effectively incorporated into national and institutional frameworks. Libraries should revise their accessibility policies to include mandatory accessibility audits, minimum infrastructure standards, and clear guidelines for digital accessibility. Policies must also emphasize the procurement of assistive technologies and accessible reading materials as core components of library development rather than optional enhancements. Second, capacity building and staff training should be prioritized. Regular workshops, sensitization programs, and hands-on training

sessions are necessary to equip library personnel with the knowledge to assist disabled users effectively. Training must cover the operation of assistive devices, accessible cataloguing methods, empathetic communication, and understanding of diverse disabilities. Forming dedicated disability support teams can further strengthen service delivery.

Third, libraries must focus on enhancing both digital and physical accessibility. This includes upgrading physical spaces with ramps, tactile paths, Braille signage, and accessible furniture, while simultaneously improving digital platforms by ensuring WCAG compliance, providing alternative formats for e-resources, and designing user-friendly interfaces. Investments in modern assistive technologies–such as screen readers, AI-based navigation tools, and magnification systems–should be expanded. Additionally, government and institutional support must be strengthened to ensure sustainable implementation. Increased funding, policy enforcement, and inter-departmental collaboration can help bridge existing gaps. Partnerships with NGOs, accessibility experts, and disability organizations can also provide technical and advisory support. Finally, libraries should develop long-term strategic plans for inclusive services. These plans should include continuous monitoring, periodic evaluation, user feedback systems, and future-oriented goals for accessibility improvement. A long-term vision ensures that accessibility remains an ongoing commitment rather than a one-time initiative, ultimately creating inclusive and equitable library environments for all users.

Conclusion

Disability-friendly library services represent a vital cornerstone in the pursuit of equitable access to information, education, and lifelong learning. As societies increasingly recognize the rights and dignity of persons with disabilities, libraries must evolve from traditional service providers to fully inclusive knowledge centers. The analysis of policies, service types, implementation strategies, and challenges demonstrates that accessibility is not merely a technical or infrastructural requirement but a holistic commitment to social justice. Inclusive library environments empower disabled users by offering them independence, confidence, and equal opportunities for academic, professional, and personal growth. The research paper reveals that while international and national policies–such as UNCRPD, RPwD Act, and IFLA guidelines–provide strong frameworks, their translation into practice requires persistent institutional dedication. Physical accessibility, accessible reading materials, assistive technologies, and digital inclusion must become integral components of library services. Equally important is the role of trained and sensitized staff who act as facilitators, ensuring that disabled users experience libraries as welcoming and supportive spaces.

However, the challenges identified–limited funding, technological gaps, inadequate training, and scarce accessible resources–highlight the need for coordinated efforts among government bodies, institutions, and communities. Addressing these barriers demands strategic

planning, sustained investment, and collaboration with disability experts and NGOs. Ultimately, creating disability-friendly libraries is an ongoing process rather than a one-time initiative. By embracing accessibility as a core value and continuously refining policies, technologies, and services, libraries can uphold their foundational mission: to provide equal, barrier-free access to knowledge for all members of society, regardless of ability.

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