
Global Perspectives on Occupational Health and Safety Challenges in Library Profession

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Abstract

Occupational safety and health (OSH) management is reflected as a high-priority concern in many sectors such as production, industry, and construction. However, the occupational safety of library professionals remains a low-priority area. This research investigated occupational safety and health risks faced by library professionals globally, highlighting both the physical and psychological health challenges appeared in library environments. Employing a comprehensive desk-based research methodology, this research examined peer-reviewed journal articles published after 2010 and accessible through ResearchGate and Google Scholar. 15 research articles which directly aligned with the research objectives were selected using purposive sampling following content analysis. Results highlighted that psychological stress, ergonomic hazards, musculoskeletal disorders, computer vision syndrome, and workplace conflicts, among working groups and peers, and systematic OSH policy gaps are highly affected challenges for the well-being of library professionals. Literature review further identifies persistent systemic gaps in institutional OSH policies. The study recommends developing integrated OSH policies addressing different types of libraries according to their nature, user community, services provided, and collection holdings. The study further emphasized the requirement for establishing standard ergonomic interventions and proper managerial support to minimize occupational risks and ensure the safety and well-being of library professionals in this evolving field.

Keywords: Occupational safety, health policy, library professionals, ergonomic hazards, workplace stress

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Received: 19th November 2025, Accepted revised version: 27th January 2026

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1. Introduction

Libraries are frequently considered as safe, quiet, and stress-free environments. However, for librarians and other library professionals, the work environment presents a variety of occupational safety and health challenges that remain underexplored in both research and practice. (Devi & Lahkar, 2021) Occupational safety and health (OSH) includes physical, psychological, and social aspects of working environment. Ergonomic problems caused by repetitive tasks, prolonged screen exposure, long hours of sitting, and handling of heavy materials are commonly recognized OSH risk for library professionals. Further it is identified psychosocial risks such as stress from workplace relationships, dealing with demanding patrons, and conflicts arising from enforcement of library policies such as overdue fines or lost books are some pressing factors for the library profession. Most of these challenges are compounded by the absence of structured OSH management policies and inadequate institutional support in many library systems.

This study addresses a critical gap by drawing attention to occupational health challenges faced by the librarians, a field often overlooked in mainstream OSH research and library management studies. Directed by the major research questions, “What are the key occupational health risks encountered by library professionals, factors contribute to these risks, and which measures can be recommended to minimize them?”, the study systematically examines both physical and psychosocial hazards reported in contemporary scholarly literature. Aligning with research objectives, the study explores the major OSH risks affecting library professionals, analyses the reasons for these risks, and synthesises global evidence to propose practical, evidence-based recommendations for minimizing occupational hazards. By highlighting both physical and psychosocial risks, it advocates for comprehensive, policy-driven change in library environments. By doing so, the study advocates for improved awareness and responsive strategies that enhance the safety, well-being, and long-term sustainability of library professionals in evolving workplace environments.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Psychosocial Risks: Stress, Conflict, and Patron Interactions

Psychosocial risks in libraries are well-documented and have been linked to reduced wellbeing and job performance. Akakandelwa and Jain (2013) in a comparative study in Southern Africa found that interpersonal relationships, workload, user demand, lack of recognition and resource

constraints were primary factors affecting for stress among academic library staff. Similarly, Ozioko, Uwakwe, and Asadu (2012) reported that polytechnic library staff experienced elevated stress due to interpersonal conflicts, limited resources, administrative pressures and poor communication.

Kaur and Kathuria (2018) analysed occupational stress among library professionals in Punjab and Chandigarh universities, showing that administrative pressure and work-life imbalance were significant contributors. Mahanta (2014) conducted a case study on stress in a university library, confirming similar stressors. Similarly, the studies done by devi and Kaur indicate that organizational factors such as support from managerial side, clarity of job, and organizational structure indicate the level of staff are strong predictors of occupational stress in library settings (Devi, 2021; Kaur & Kathuria, 2018).

When dealing with public, patron aggression presents a distinct psychosocial hazard. Employees tasked with enforcing rules such as collecting fines, recovery of lost items, or maintaining quiet and clam environment and implementing code of conduct inside the library environment has been experienced to library staff often face verbal abuse, threats, or aggressive behaviour. Zimmer, S. (2022) assessed workplace bullying and psychosocial hazards in South African academic libraries

Such interactions contribute to chronic stress, fear, and reduced sense of safety. Studies on urban libraries reveals that secondary trauma and compassion fatigue where staff routinely experiencing homelessness, mental health crises, or substance misuse. These exposures demand informed policies and staff supports. (Devi & Lahkar, 2021)

Gender intersects with psychosocial risk. Female library staff have reported heightened safety concerns, especially when required to work night shifts with poorly facilities. The absence of gender-sensitive protocols for late duties, transport, and lone working increases vulnerability and contributes to anxiety and stress. (Zimmer, 2022)

2.2 Physical and Ergonomic Risks: MSDs and Visual Fatigue

Musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs) are recognized as one of the most common and prevalent physical risk among librarians. Numerous studies from diverse regions report high prevalence of neck, shoulder, arm, and back pain associated with prolonged computer use, repetitive tasks, and suboptimal workstation design. For example, research at the library of university of Colombo reported substantial proportions of staff experiencing neck, shoulder, and wrist pain

(Silva, 2021). More recent literature further underscores these challenges. For example, Okanlawon (2019) explored ergonomic risks in Nigerian university libraries, finding that poor workplace design contributed to musculoskeletal problems. Studies in Iran and South Africa similarly identify strong associations between furniture design, repetitive activities (shelving, binding, digitization), and MSDs (Joulahi, Emami & Joulahi, 2016).

Ergonomic interventions ranging from adjustable chairs, office tables and monitor stands to participatory workstation adjustment have been tested with positive outcomes. Culbertson's (2011) evaluation of a library ergonomics training program confirmed that staff education and hands-on adjustments can improve workstation set-up and reduce musculoskeletal complaints. Yuan et al. (2015) applied a participatory ergonomics approach and reported reductions in reported discomfort and improvements in ergonomic awareness.

Computer vision syndrome (CVS), or digital eye strain, is another common occupational health concern appears among many professionals as well as library professionals. Similarly, Chiparausha, B. (2022) investigated digital fatigue among librarians due to increased reliance on electronic resources. Studies (Alamri, 2022; Lema, 2022) indicate that prolonged screen exposure, poor lighting, glare, and inadequate screen positioning increase this risk of CVS. Librarians who engage in digitization projects, cataloguing, Classification and long periods of online reference services are particularly facing this risk.

2.3 Systemic and Policy Gaps: OSH Literacy and Institutional concern

Despite clear evidence of physical and psychological risks face by the library professionals, many libraries lack formal health and safety plans tailored to their work contexts. Mahanta (2014) and Ratha et al. (2012) emphasized that neglecting or lack of awareness in institutional/managerial level and limited budgets discourage the implementation of OSH policies in library settings. Moreover, in several countries such as USA, Canada, Australia, Japan, South Korea and many European countries where national OSH frameworks exist, they are really adapted library workplaces when they belong to government bodies and which ordinary office tasks with manual handling and public service duties. (Health Libraries Australia, 2022)

OSH literacy is the capability of staff and managers to understand, apply, and act on safety information is identified as frequently low among library professionals. Lack of literacy delays recognition of hazards, reporting the risk, actions against the incidence and follow of preventive practices. Furthermore, psychosocial safety climate (PSC) research shows that organizational

commitment on mental health and safety of employers predicts very poor results limited to incidence such as absenteeism, and incident reporting (Dollard et al., 2010; Loh et al., 2024).

3. Methodology

This study adopts a desk research approach, reviewing and synthesizing literature relevant to occupational safety and health in library environments. Secondary data sources include peer-reviewed journal articles, conference proceedings, professional reports, and institutional reports and guidelines. A thematic analysis approach was used to organized findings into three main risk domains as psychological risks, physical and Ergonomic facts, and organizational and policy gaps. This thematic review leads enabling a comprehensive understanding of OSH challenges facing by the library professionals worldwide. This research was limited by including on secondary sources and potential publication bias toward several studies available in online resources.

4. Findings

The review of literature identifies a wide range of occupational safety and health risks faced by library professionals globally.

4.1 Psychological Hazards and Workplace Stress

Across studies, psychosocial hazards emerge as the most prevalent risk faced by the library professionals which is driven by conflicts with superiors, working co-workers, and dealing with patrons. Stress is intensified by night shifts, particularly for female librarians, and by pressure related to enforcing library rules such as fines or lost materials. As Akakandelwa & Jain (2013) stated that interpersonal relationships and workload as major stressors in Southern African academic libraries. Kaur & Kathuria (2018) found that administrative pressures and imbalance of work-life were prominent stressors among university librarians in India, while Devi (2021) highlighted occupational stress to reduce in job performance among North-East Indian university library professionals. Moreover, library professionals encounter risk of stress associated to dealing with patrons. Most of those conflicts are associated with fines charging, recovering of lost or damaged materials, and dealing with unusual conduct of patrons such as exhibiting challenging behaviours. Verbal aggression or arguments when fines are imposed, refusal to comply with library regulations, persistent arguments over overdue notices, harassment of staff, intoxicated behaviour within library premises, purposely damaging to resources, and inappropriate conduct such as intimidation or refusal to leave restricted areas

are some examples for such behaviours. These encounters place considerable emotional and psychological demands on library staff, contributing to increased occupational stress.

4.2 Physical Health Risks

Musculoskeletal issues are widely reported physical health risks faced by the library professionals. Ergonomic hazards such as neck, back, and shoulder pain due to inappropriate furniture, continuously lifting of books, and long-term exposure to computer terminals are identified as common issues faced by the library professional all around the world. Studies from South Africa, and Sri Lanka revealed that high rates of neck, shoulder, and back pain among library staff engaged in prolonged computer work and manual handling of heavy books and other materials (Joulahi, Emami & Joulahi, 2016; Silva, 2021). The systematic review literature on ergonomic interventions done by Heidarimoghadam et. al. suggests that a combination of physical and organizational interventions (e.g., adjustable equipment and rotation of works) is more effective than single component approaches to minimize such health risks. (Heidarimoghadam et al., 2020)

4.3 Computer Vision Syndrome (CVS)

CVS is a highly prevalent health risk among professionals working

CVS is one of very popular and highly prevalent health risks among many professionals who working based on screens (Alamri, 2022; Lema, 2022). They further confirm the factors including prolonged screen time, poor lighting, glare, and lack of scheduled breaks are contributed to enhance these issues for librarians, staff working with digitization projects and reference service staff who work long periods with online exposure and staff engaged extended screen time in automated library environments.

4.4 Systemic Weaknesses and Policy Barriers

Research proved that many libraries do not operate integrated OSH policy or strategies. Studies discussed that though sometimes managers recognize problems, budgetary constraints and competing priorities limit making preventive action (Mahadevaiah, 2017). Due to the absent of relevant policies and lack of institutional recognition of these risks staff members hesitate to report issues promptly or seek compensation for work related mental or physical damages. The psychosocial safety climate (PSC) literature underscores the need for management commitment and formalized policies to protect mental health in the workplace (Dollard et al., 2010).

4.5 Intersectionality and Vulnerable Groups

Vulnerable subgroups such as women working on night shifts, older staff with chronic conditions, early career staff with heavy service loads but limited experience face complex risks at the library environments and staff with disabilities or other special health conditions face some unique workplace risks requiring tailored accommodations. (Devi & Lahkar, 2021), (Zimmer, 2022). Gender-sensitive policies, reasonable accommodations or transport, and flexible work arrangements are needed to introduce to minimize this issue.

5. Discussion

The literature reviewed in this paper highlights the multi-dimensional aspects of occupational risks faced by library professionals. While physical problems such as MSDs are more popular and frequently reported, global literature highlight mental stress as the most pressing challenge for librarians. Although the physical risks have clear ergonomic solutions such as redesigning furniture, works, and tasks, the psychosocial risks often remain unreported and institutional neglecting but requires attitudinal shifts and the implementation of policy solutions. Building a psychosocial safety environment includes leadership commitment, transparent policies, and active monitoring mechanism which are absent in many libraries. The studies suggest that integrated interventions including both ergonomic and psychosocial aspect will drive to the best outcomes in occupational safety and health. For example, improvement of human friendly workstation adjustments, while enhanced staff for sustainability of changes. These findings emphasize that adjustment of technical environment must be combined with staff and managerial domains. Lack of enough budget and competing institutional priorities identified as major barriers to manage this situation. Libraries often operate within limited financial stand where funding is mostly allocated to expand the collections and digital access rather than enhance the staff wellbeing.

5. Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following measures are recommended to minimize occupational health risks to ensure the safety of library professionals

5.1 Develop Institutionalize OSH Policies in libraries or introduce common policy framework which applicable to all libraries

Libraries should develop written OSH policies covering both physical and psychosocial risks. These policies must specify identifying risk and damages, roles and responsibilities, reporting

mechanisms, and processes for regular hazard assessments. Incorporating occupation safety into institutional strategic directions ensures accountability as well as fund and resource allocation. In the other hand library professional can develop proper policy framework to ensure its employee's health and safety which can be adapt for common library sector.

5.2 Introduce ergonomic workplace

Implementation and designs adjustable workstations including desks and chairs, Computer furniture, are required to control theses kind of risks. By establish regular monitoring of ergonomic conditions, as well as providing proper training and awareness for staff will support to reduce the risk musculoskeletal disorders. Maintaining proper environmental conditions such as healthy ventilation, proper lighting, anti-glare windows and screens, green surroundings and a noise-free environment are also significant for establishing task concentrated healthy working environment. green surroundings and a noise-free environment

5.3 Enhance Psychosocial Safety

Managerial commitment is highly essential to establish psychosocial safety of employers. Managers and Supervisor should define clear job list for each employee to reduce work overload, supportive monitoring and supervision, proper communication and guidance, regular training and direction for counselling support, when necessary, should be prioritized in managerial role.

5.4 Managerial support and redefining the job role

Introducing duty rotation system among front office duties and back-office tasks also important to minimize the pressure occurred by continuous exposure with patrons or public. Re designing job role by incorporating democratic management strategies such as breaks and rest among task, different kind of physical task for same employer, flexible working hours, open communication culture, involved decision making and shared responsibilities are recommended.

5.5 Gender-Sensitive addressing

Safety Policies must address to ensure that female staff disproportionately not assigned to risky tasks such as night shifts, handling heavy materials or working in high places without support of adequate staff, appropriate technologies, machine and equipment.

5.6 OSH Literacy and Participatory Approaches

Improving OSH literacy of staff through regular workshops, lectures, training programs will empower them to recognize risks or hazards and take necessary action and propose preventive measures.

5.7 Monitoring, Evaluation, and Continuous Improvement

Recognize the key performance indicators for OSH (e.g., training and education, ergonomic audit completion rates, incident reports and action taken) and incorporate them into organizational reviews.

Monitoring, evaluation, and regular improvement can be effectively implemented in resource-constrained libraries by integrating simple OSH indicators such as staff training, ergonomic concerns, and incident reporting into existing administrative processes. Primary tools such as free ergonomic checklists, brief discussions on safety during staff meetings, and basic reporting system (e.g., logbooks or digital forms) enable libraries to identify risks without additional financial cost. Prioritizing simple, practical interventions such as task rotation, workstation rearrangement, and scheduled breaks can significantly reduce risks with available resources. Collaboration with institutional health units or other government authorities can further support for regular assessments. Future research and studies should focus on developing specific OSH monitoring models, evaluating the effectiveness of low-cost interventions, exploring digital tools for safety tracking, and examining psychosocial risk monitoring across different library contexts.

7. Conclusion

With the rapidly emerging information needs of users and constantly growing changing technological development, the library profession faced different challenges. Though it is not widely discussed the occupational safety and health is highly important but under prioritized. As librarians are working with different condition of material, people and situations they are always faced with risks of various physical, psychological threats. This paper highlights that library professional globally face significant physical and psychological risks due to insufficiently addressing of occupational safety and health management at institutional policies. Some cases are ignored while some are even not reported to the management as professionals are not aware that they have occupational safety rights. . The findings urge library administrators and policymakers to adopt integrated OSH strategies, improve workplace

design, and foster a psychosocially safe work culture. Promoting staff awareness and institutional commitment will be vital in minimizing occupational risks and ensuring professional well-being in library environments.

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