



## The Public Libraries in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa: A Bench Marking Study Against IFLA Guidelines

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## **The Public Libraries in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa: A Bench Marking Study Against IFLA Guidelines**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The aim of the study was to assess the status of public libraries against IFLA standards regarding library collection, staff, books storage space, user space/study hall, accessibility for the physically handicapped individuals, and safety. The purpose of this valuation is to guide investments, promote best practices, and enhance library capacity, line up with global standards for educational and cultural enrichment. Study has been conducted by employing a quantitative research design, physical surveys were administered to In-charge/Head librarians of all the 17 public libraries in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The data on library book resources, infrastructure, and facilities were analyzed using Excel worksheets. Findings shows that the current state of public libraries in KP falls significantly below IFLA standards across multiple domains. However, with proper planning, resource allocation, and staff development, these gaps can be bridged. Implementing the recommendations of research would lead to more equitable access to information, safer environments, and a culture of lifelong learning across the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan.

**Keywords:** Public libraries, IFLA Guidelines, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan

### **INTRODUCTION**

Since long, the Directorate of Archives and Libraries has been trying to improve the public libraries, in the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. It has the responsibility to oversee the collection development, preservation of library resources, improving services to users across the province, which is a key to foster a culture of reading, particularly among youth. Historically, in this province, public libraries were limited, however a substantial progress has been made since 1990s. Initially, KP had only a few public libraries, including those in Peshawar, Abbottabad, and Mardan. However, the public library network has been expanded to include public libraries in other districts such as D.I. Khan, Bannu, Swat, and Swabi etc.

Globally, the public libraries serve as a foundation in educational infrastructure, supporting research and public reading. Therefore, the provincial government of (KP) has not only prioritized

to establish new libraries, but also to upgrade the existing libraries. This ongoing development is part of KP's broader educational and cultural initiatives, aimed at enriching the community through accessible knowledge resources. In KP, there are seventeen public libraries (Khan, et. al, 2025). In fact, these libraries are not enough for the public of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa due to its larger population i.e. 40.85 million as of the 2023 census, even so, these libraries are trying to meet the needs of users with a diverse collection of books, periodicals, and digital resources, for a wide range of users, including students, researchers, educators, and the general public.

Public Libraries, a vital resource for community, must assess its condition against international standards, particularly those set forth by the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA), to ensure it meets globally recognized benchmarks of library service and infrastructure. By comparing its condition with IFLA guideline, the library can evaluate its strengths, identify areas for improvement, and contribute to its enhancement as a modern, efficient, and inclusive public library. The primary objective of this research is to evaluate the condition of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Public Libraries with the standards set forth by the International Federation of Library Associations in 2010. By comparing the current state of public libraries in KP with international benchmarks, this study identifies strengths, weaknesses, and areas for improvement. The findings inform policymakers, library administrators, and stakeholders to develop strategies for enhancing public library services in KP, ultimately contributing to the province's social, economic, and cultural development.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Global Library Standards

The International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) and UNESCO have established comprehensive frameworks for public libraries, stressing the importance of universal access, inclusive collections, professional staffing, infrastructure suitability, and community-focused services. According to IFLA's Public Library Manifesto (UNESCO, 2022), libraries should provide free access to information and serve as centers of lifelong learning. IFLA's updated guidelines (2023) outline key standards, including per-capita collections of 2–3 items, 56 m<sup>2</sup> of library space per 1,000 residents, wheelchair-accessible infrastructure, and one professional librarian for every 2,500 individuals (Koontez & Gubbin, 2010; IFLA, 2015; IFLA, 2023). Such benchmarks are widely used to evaluate library systems globally.

### Collection Development and Digital Integration

Internationally, library services have increasingly shifted focus from static collections to diverse, digitally integrated resources tailored to community needs (IFLA, 2023). The EIFL (Electronic Information for Libraries) a global non-profit organization that supports libraries in developing countries to provide access to electronic information and resources, has assessed public libraries in African countries such as Kenya, Uganda, and Ghana highlights this shift: digital inclusion programs now often precede physical book lending (EIFL, 2020). In Pakistan, however, systemic issues remain. In research by Mushtaq and Shah (2023) documented outdated collection policies, underfunded acquisitions, and poor digital resource integration in Punjab. Similarly, Warraich,

Malik, and Ameen in year (2018) found severe deficits in both collection volume and variety. Rafi, Ahmad, and Ming (2020) specifically analyzed public libraries in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, revealing that collection sizes fall short of IFLA's 2–3 items per capita recommendation by over 98%. Their study also found that outdated policies and irregular funding cycles further exacerbate these shortfalls (Rafi et al., 2020). Collectively, these findings highlight a persistent gap between global standards and local realities in Pakistan's public libraries.

### **Infrastructure: Accessibility and Space Allocation**

The physical accessibility remains a central component of modern library design and infrastructure. IFLA's Public Access Principles (2015) assert that public libraries must include wheelchair ramps, adjustable shelving, and assistive technologies to ensure equitable access (IFLA, 2015). Research in developing contexts shows this remains aspirational. An empirical study in urban Zimbabwe found limited physical access, inadequate signage, and insufficient staff training in disabled services (Munemo & Chiwanza, 2024). Similarly, in a study conducted in 2024 in Jakarta demonstrated that although basic IFLA guidelines were present, tactile orientation aids and accessible restrooms were largely absent (Erza, Ghani, & Prakoso, 2024).

In Pakistan, empirical reviews further underscore these infractions. Rana and Bhatti (2020a; 2020b) identified that public libraries lacked both accessible shelving and inclusive furniture, while Haider, Chen, and Hussain (2023) found that provincial libraries, including KP, displayed poor accessibility in physical infrastructure and digital access. A systematic review by Khan et al. (2021) reinforced these conclusions, highlighting outdated management practices and inconsistent adoption of ICT—factors deeply tied to poor infrastructure (Khan et al., 2021). In a recent study, by Khan et al. (2025) expressed that KP, the public libraries lack adequate services and facilities, particularly, for the disabled community, hindering their access to books and other information resources. The study suggests that, to meet the needs of the disabled users the libraries need to be upgraded in terms of their infrastructure to provide accessible services, which would likely involve allocating sufficient space for wheelchair accessibility, assistive technologies, and other accommodations. In another study, Saberi and Pazooki (2015) compared the conditions of Iran Public Libraries with the IFLA Standards and concluded that in Iran the public libraries do not meet the standards recommended by IFLA for public libraries and stated that despite the efforts made by the Iran's Institute of Public Libraries (IIPL) discrepancies still exist between the existing and the required services levels as mentioned by IFLA's guidelines. Therefore, further work is needed to meet the IFLA standards.

### **Staffing and LIS Education**

IFLA emphasizes staffing as a cornerstone of quality library service. However, international development initiatives have used varying ratios, such as 0.5–1.0 full-time librarians per 1,000 residents, depending on circulation activities (Reddit librarian discussion, 2025). In Africa, EIFL's ICT training programs have empowered librarians in countries like Kenya, Namibia, and Zambia to integrate technology and community-driven services at scale (EIFL, 2021).

In contrast, Pakistan faces persistent challenges. Malik and Ameen's (2017) documentary analysis of eleven Pakistani master's-level LIS programs showed limited compliance with IFLA standards—particularly in the areas of ICT and modern service delivery. Most coursework remained management-focused with outdated content (Malik & Ameen, 2017). Haider et al. (2023) found that while most library heads held MLIS qualifications (71.4%), fewer had practical experience with technology-based services. Moreover, Khan et al. (2021) found that many libraries lacked national-level coordination and functional ICT policies. Consequently, staffing levels, qualifications, and ICT integration in Pakistan's libraries fall short of the professional benchmarks embedded in IFLA standards.

### **Community Engagement, Digital Inclusion, and Lifelong Learning**

IFLA's 2015 Principles emphasize libraries as catalysts for lifelong learning, participatory governance, and sustainable development. A 2010 EIFL study in sub-Saharan Africa showed libraries expanding beyond traditional roles to offer ICT training, agricultural information, and entrepreneurship programs—while gaining community recognition (EIFL, 2010). Paul & Chauhan (2024) suggested that libraries may be designed in such a way that involve user participation to maximize accessibility. Pakistan's public libraries, however, largely remain static. While some urban libraries like the Liaquat Memorial and National Library of Pakistan have digital catalogues and quiet study spaces, they serve niche audiences and do not reflect grassroots community engagement initiatives. Rana and Bhatti (2020a) noted some progress in transforming libraries into community learning centers through ICT in Punjab, but chronic funding shortages and policy inertia have limited impact. Pakistan's lack of a unified national library authority further hinders coordinated implementation (Khan et al., 2021). In KP, Rafi et al. (2020) observed that public libraries do not function as community hubs, shelf-to-shelf borrowing remains the primary service model, and comprehensive outreach is absent.

### **Safety, Emergency Preparedness Practices**

Although IFLA guidelines include safety and disaster preparedness, scholarly attention to these topics is limited. Anecdotal reports in regional contexts cite inadequate smoke alarms and emergency exits. Available KP data indicate less than 30% of libraries have trained staff or fire safety infrastructure, though little formal research exists on this topic (Rafi et al., 2020). Muhammad (2025) conducted research on disaster management practices in universities libraries. He concluded that, most libraries lack disaster management plans, with some basic safety measures, like fire extinguishers, emergency exits. Similarly, libraries were vulnerable to cyber-attacks due to outdated computer systems, lack of firewalls, poor backup strategies and therefore recommended appropriate disaster management planning, training of staff to face emergencies and facilitating libraries to avoid cyber-security risks.

### **Literature Gaps**

Bhowmick & Chakrabarty (2024) recently conducted a study of 'benchmarking the Jharkhand library in India' and concluded that public libraries in Jharkhand are under serious threat and required serious attention to be saved. The research revealed that few libraries have adhered to the minimum guidelines outlined in the IFLA public libraries manifesto. This research recommends

the government focus on public libraries to bring them in line with the IFLA guidelines, thereby providing better services to the community. Moreover, the overall, global literature on libraries tend to focus on digital inclusion and accessibility, whereas research in Pakistan highlights substantial deficiencies in public libraries relative to IFLA standards. Key gaps in local research include limited evaluations of digital accessibility and inclusive technologies, a scarcity of participatory design case studies in KP libraries, few longitudinal studies on policy interventions, and almost no research on safety and emergency planning in public libraries. This study aims to fill these gaps by systematically benchmarking KP public libraries against IFLA guidelines across areas like collection development, infrastructure, staffing, accessibility, digital inclusion, and safety. It also seeks to develop context-specific policy recommendations based on global best practices and local realities.

## OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

To compare library's collection, staff, storage space, user space/study hall, access for the physically handicapped individuals, and safety, with IFLA guidelines for public libraries given in 2010.

## METHODOLOGY

This exploratory study adopts a quantitative research design to assess public libraries in light of IFLA standards. The target population is the In-charge/head librarian of 17 public libraries in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP). Physical surveys (designed in the light of IFLA guidelines) are administered to head librarians to compare the library's collection, staff, storage space, user space/study hall, access for the physically handicapped, and safety with IFLA guidelines (2010). IFLA guidelines are reviewed and compared with the public library's current state. Survey data (e.g., number of books per capita, storage spaces, users' spaces, accessibility and safety equipment's) are analyzed using Excel worksheets to quantify the library's current situation in light of IFLA guidelines.

## FINDINGS

### Evaluation of Public Libraries Book Collection Vs IFLA Guidelines

This below table 1 shows the comparisons of books available in KP public libraries with the IFLA standard which recommends 2–3 books per person (IFLA, 2010. p.75). The data reveals a significant gap in book collections across all districts. For example, Peshawar, with over 4.7 million people, should have at least 9.5 million books, but it only has around 112,000. Similarly, for a population of more than 6.6 million in Swat there are only 22000 books with a gap of more than 5.3 million. This shortfall of books collection in all libraries reflects a broader pattern where most libraries have less than 2% of the required collection size, indicating a serious need for investment in library resources.

**Table1: Analysis of Book Collection in the Light of IFLA Standards**

Public Libraries	Population	Books Available	Books Required	Gap in the Collection
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	<b>(Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2023)</b>			
Abbottabad Public Library	1,419,072	33,000	2,838,144	-2,805,144
Bannu Public Library	1,357,890	30,000	2,715,780	-2,685,780
Buner Public Library	1,016,869	10,000	2,033,738	-2,023,738
Charsadda Public Library	1,835,504	7,100	3,671,008	-3,663,908
Chitral Public Library	1,970,590	12,800	3,941,180	-3,928,380
Directorate of Archives & Libraries, Peshawar	4,758,762	112,000	9,517,524	-9,405,524
Ghazi Public Library, Tehsil Ghazi, Haripur	151,839	8,432	303,678	-295,246
Haripur Public Library	1,174,783	16,000	2,349,566	-2,333,566
Khushal Khan Khattak Memorial Library, Akora Khattak	1,740,705	15,000	3,481,410	-3,466,410
Kohat Public Library	1,234,661	10,721	2,469,322	-2,458,601
Lakki Marwat Public Library	1,040,856	15,000	2,081,712	-2,066,712
Mansehra Public Library	1,797,177	8,000+	3,594,354	-3,586,354
Mardan Public Library	2,744,898	27,000	5,489,796	-5,462,796
Mufti Mehmood Public Library, D.I. Khan	1,829,811	23,700	3,659,622	-3,635,922
Swabi Public Library	1,894,600	22,000	3,789,200	-3,767,200
Swat Public Library, Mingora	2,687,384	22,000	5,374,768	-5,352,768
Timergara Public Library, Lower Dir	1,650,183	12,500	3,300,366	-3,287,866

### Evaluation of Collection Storage Space in Public Libraries Vs IFLA Guidelines

According to IFLA, each 110 books should be supported by 1 square meter of storage space (IFLA, 2010. p.131). Table 2, shows that public libraries in KP generally have much more space than needed for their current collection sizes. For instance, the Abbottabad library has 33,000 square meters of storage for just 33,000 books, when only 300 sq. m. would be required. Similarly, in public library Mardan and Public library swat the available space is much more as required. This suggests significant underutilization of space in all public libraries across the province, likely due to inadequate collection development.

**Table 2: Analysis of Storage Space for Library Collection in the Light of IFLA Standards**

<b>Public Libraries</b>	<b>Total Books in library</b>	<b>Required Space (per sq.m)</b>	<b>Available Space (per sq.m)</b>	<b>Surplus/Deficit space</b>
Abbottabad Public library	33,000	300	450	+150
Bannu Public library	30,000	272	600	+328

Buner Public library	10,000	90	150	+60
Charsadda Public library	7,100	64	900	+836
Chitral Public library	12,800	116	928	+812
Directorate of Archives & Libraries, Peshawar	112,000	1018	1400	+382
Haripur Public library	16,000	145	200	+55
Ghazi public library, Tehsil Ghazi, Haripur	8,432	76	126	+50
Khushal Khan Khattak Memorial Library, Akora Khattak	15,000	136	2023	+1887
Kohat Public library	10,721	97	350	+253
Lakki Marwat Public library	15,000	136	4500	+4364
Mansehra Public library	8,000	72	408	+336
Mardan Public library	27,000	245	2000	+1,755
Mufti Mehmood Public Library, D.I. Khan	23,700	215	300	+85
Swabi Public library	22,000	200	2023	+1,887
Swat Public library Mingora, swat	22,000	200	10,890	+10,690
Timergara Public Library, Lower Dir	12,500	113	21,780	+21,667

### Evaluation of User Space (Study Halls) in Public Libraries Vs IFLA Guidelines

IFLA recommends providing 5 user spaces per 1,000 population, with 2.8 sq. meters per user (IFLA guidelines, 2010, P.132). The table 3 compares required versus actual study hall space in KP libraries. The findings show severe shortages; for instance, Mardan needs over 38,000 sq. m. but has only 7,000. Similar patterns are seen in other districts, indicating libraries are unable to adequately accommodate users for reading, research, and digital access.

**Table 3: Analysis of Space for Users in Public Libraries in the Light of IFLA Standards**

Public Library	Population (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2023)	Required Space (sq.m)	Available Study Hall Space (sq.m)	Surplus/ Deficit (space) (sq.m)
Abbottabad Public Library	1,419,072	19,866	500	-19,366
Bannu Public Library	1,357,890	19,009	250	-18759
Buner Public Library	1,016,869	14,235	180	-14,055
Charsadda Public Library	1,835,504	25698	500	-25,198
Chitral Public Library	1,970,590	27,588	500	-27,588
Directorate of Archives & Libraries Peshawar	4,758,762	66,622	700	-65,922

Ghazi Public Library, Tehsil Ghazi, Haripur	151,839	2,125	126	-1,999
Haripur Public Library	1,174,783	16,446	500	-15,946
Khushal Khan Khattak Memorial Library, Akora Khattak	1,740,705	24,369	1011	-23,358
Kohat Public Library	1,234,661	17284	300	-16984
Lakki Marwat Public Library	1,040,856	14,571	500	-1,471
Mansehra Public Library	1,797,177	25,160	320	-24,840
Mardan Public Library	2,744,898	38,428	505	-37923
Mufti Mehmood Public Library, Dera Ismail Khan	1,829,811	25,617	200	-25,417
Swabi Public Library	1,894,600	26,524	1,050	-25,474
Swat Public Library, Mingora	2,687,384	37,623	5,445	-32178
Timergara Public Library, Lower Dir	1,650,183	23,102	4,167	-18,935

### Evaluation of Library Staffing in Public Libraries Vs IFLA Guidelines

This table assesses professional staffing in KP libraries against the IFLA standard of one staff member per 2,000 population (IFLA guidelines, 2010, P.132). Table 4, shows that almost all libraries are critically understaffed. For example, Swat, with over 2.6 million people, requires 1,343 staff but only employs 2 professionals. On average, libraries have less than 5% of the staff needed to effectively serve their communities, severely limiting service quality and operational efficiency.

**Table 4: Analysis of Public Libraries' Staff in the Light of IFLA Standards**

Public Library	Population (According to Sensus, 2023)	Required Staff	Available Staff	Gap in Staff
Abbottabad Public Library	1,419,072	710	5	-705
Bannu Public Library	1,357,890	679	4	-675
Buner Public Library	1,016,869	508	4	-504
Charsadda Public Library	1,835,504	918	8	-910
Chitral Public Library	1,970,590	985	3	-982
Directorate of Archives & Libraries, Peshawar	4,758,762	2,379	58	-2,321
Ghazi Public Library, Tehsil Ghazi, Haripur	151,839	76	2	-74
Haripur Public Library	1,174,783	587	2	-585
Khushal Khan Khattak Memorial Library, Akora Khattak	1,740,705	870	4	-866
Kohat Public Library	1,234,661	617	3	-614

Lakki Marwat Public Library	1,040,856	520	2	-518
Mansehra Public Library	1,797,177	899	2	-897
Mardan Public Library	2,744,898	1,372	4	-1,368
Mufti Mehmood Public Library, D.I. Khan	1,829,811	915	4	-911
Swabi Public Library	1,894,600	947	4	-943
Swat Public Library	2,687,384	1,344	2	-1,342
Timergara Public Library, Lower Dir	1,650,183	825	3	-822

### Accessible Shelving and Facilities in Public Libraries Vs IFLA Guidelines

Accessibility is among the core IFLA guideline (IFLA guidelines, 2010, P.61). Facts in table 5, reveals that, shelves should be adjustable, on wheels, steps/wheelchairs should be available for access and the shelves should also be accessible to children and disabled persons. This table 5, reviews wheelchair access, shelf adjustability, child-friendly furniture, and disability-friendly shelf heights. The results show that few libraries meet the basic accessibility requirements. Only 11.1% had mobile seating/wheelchairs facility, 10.5% had ramp/elevator facility, whereas, 11.1% libraries had shelves accessible to disabled users. However, the presence of movable and accessible shelves by the children were satisfactory. The results reveal that the insufficient facilities available in these libraries make it unwelcoming or unusable for many in the community and therefore, needs to be improved as recommended by Khan, et al. (2025).

**Table 5: Users' Accessibility to Shelves and other Facilities in Public Libraries in the Light of IFLA Standards**

Facility	Availability (%)
Mobile seating / wheelchairs available	11.1%
Ramp/Elevator provided	10.5%
Shelves movable	47.4%
Shelves accessible for children	42.1%
Shelves accessible for disabled	11.1%

### Safety and Emergency Preparedness in Public Libraries Vs IFLA Guidelines

This table evaluates public libraries on safety measures like fire alarms, smoke detectors, emergency exits, and staff training in first aid, as recommended by IFLA (IFLA guidelines, 2010, P.62-63,). The data in table 6, revealed that the majority of libraries lack essential safety infrastructure. The smoke alarms were installed in only 5.3% libraries; Fire alarms were in 26.3% libraries. In more than half of the libraries possessed Fire extinguishers and emergency exits, which is very encouraging. But, only 22.2% staff were trained in First aid, which needs to be focused by the authorities. This highlights a major gap in user and staff protection during emergencies.

**Table 6: Analysis of Safety and Emergency Preparedness in Public Libraries in the Light of IFLA Standards**

<b>Safety Feature</b>	<b>Availability %</b>
Smoke Alarms	5.3%
Fire Alarms	26.3%
Fire Extinguishers	52.6%
Emergency Exits	60%
Staff trained in First Aid	22.2%

## SUMMARY OF THE FINDINGS

A comparative analysis of public libraries in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) against IFLA's international standards revealed several critical shortcomings as mentioned in table 7 below. Libraries have severely inadequate book collections (98-99% gaps), underutilized storage space, insufficient study hall/user space, and a shortage of professional staff. Additionally, libraries lack accessibility features for disabled and children, and have poor safety and emergency preparedness measures. These issues limit access to quality information, hinder user engagement, and present safety risks. The only aspect which was very encouraging in these libraries was the ample space for books.

**Table7: Findings Summary**

<b>Category</b>	<b>IFLA Standard for Public Libraries</b>	<b>Public Libraries' Status in KP</b>
Book Collection	2–3 books per capita	All libraries underperforming
Storage Space for Book Collection	1 sq. m. per 110 books	Most have excessive space
Study Hall Space	5 seats per 1000 people	Highly inadequate across all libraries
Staffing	1 staff per 2,000 people	Severe shortage in professional staffing
Accessibility	Wheelchair/ramp/shelf access	Insufficient facilities
Safety & Emergency	Alarms, exits, first aid	Mostly non-compliant

## RECOMMENDATIONS

To align with international library standards and improve public service in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), the following key recommendations are proposed:

- ❖ Expansion of book resources: Invest in book acquisitions focusing on science, technology, literature, and local history as there are ample spaces for the new books. Furthermore, utilize donations, digital repositories, and inter-library sharing.

- ❖ Optimize the books storage space: Convert surplus storage into reading rooms, digital labs, or community areas. Plan space according to collection size and user needs.
- ❖ Expand study hall: Provide more reader spaces in high-population districts using modular furniture and flexible layouts.
- ❖ Recruit sufficient library staff: Develop a recruitment plan to meet IFLA standards which would enable the hiring of additional professional librarians to better serve the large populations.
- ❖ Improve accessibility: Install ramps, wheelchairs, adjustable shelves, and child-sized furniture for inclusive spaces.

Increase safety: Install safety equipment like smoke alarms and fire extinguishers. Train staff in emergency response and develop a disaster plan per IFLA guidelines.

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