

Resilience as Resistance: Building a Sustainable Library Career during Political Polarization

Stella Hudson, American University
Bridget Scoles, Whitman College

Abstract

The contemporary landscape for new librarians in the United States is characterized by a volatile intersection of systemic professional inequities and a hostile political climate. This paper examines the intersection of persistent gendered stereotypes, the significant lack of diversity within the field, and unrealistic expectations and standards, which can negatively impact the emotional and mental well-being of early-career librarians. Additionally, the current political climate in the United States has increased threats to intellectual freedom, library funding, and information access. This only exacerbates existing pressures while necessitating increased advocacy and resilience. Drawing upon existing literature and current events, this paper argues that well-established techniques for combating burnout, imposter syndrome, and other early career obstacles have become critical strategies for navigating the complexities of the present sociopolitical landscape. By setting goals, maintaining boundaries, prioritizing rest, and cultivating supportive communities, new librarians can foster resilience and sustain their engagement and activism while protecting their physical, emotional, and mental health.

Keywords: Early Career Librarians, Gender Stereotypes, Imposter Syndrome, Self-care, Political Activism

Article Type: Conceptual Paper

The path of a new librarian is often fraught, especially for anyone with a marginalized identity. Not only must they become accustomed to a new environment, new people, and new responsibilities, but they must also navigate a field marked by gendered expectations and systemic inequalities. Persistent stereotypes surrounding predominantly female professions, the dismissed demands of care work, and unrealistic expectations can fuel burnout, self-doubt, and stagnation (Gaines, 2014; Phillips et al., 2024; Vaughn, 2020). These challenges are significant for librarians navigating the early stages of their careers, especially for those at

the intersection of marginalized identities. Unfortunately, the current political landscape – marked by attacks on intellectual freedom, slashed funding, and backlash against any mention of diversity – only increases the challenges for all librarians.

Young librarians need practical strategies to build resilience, prioritize their well-being, and navigate the complexities of this profession and political climate. This is not only a matter of feeling better but of building internal resilience that can be leveraged into external action. New professionals are often advised to set achievable goals, rest, maintain boundaries, and build

supportive relationships (Armann-Keown, 2025; Phillips et al., 2024; Vaughn, 2020). In a time of change, confusion, and fear, we argue that these skills are essential for weathering the hostile, chaotic social and political storm. The arguments in this paper are grounded in literature applicable to our current conditions, as well as in our personal perspectives and experiences as young women in academic libraries. Our focus is to outline the challenges we see, and to provide small personal steps to preserve our mental health and well-being while fighting to make change. We apply literature designed to support women and workers in their professional lives to suggest strategies for new librarians in the United States today. The same competencies that build sustainable, healthy careers can also help librarians protect their mental and physical well-being amid an unpredictable and hostile political environment.

Librarians have long railed against the stereotypes that color our profession. Because librarians are predominantly female (Gaines, 2014), most stereotypes associated with the profession center on women. Librarians are often portrayed as dowdy spinsters or crazy-cat ladies who frequently wear cardigans and glasses on the tip of their noses. They are either cold and ruthless or meek and timid. They silence you with a shush, a glare, and a finger to their lips. These stereotypes create a negative image of librarians. Gaines (2014) argues that the profession's feminized status "is what leads to the persistence of its negative and demoralizing stereotypes" (p. 85). She classifies librarianship and other fields dominated by women, such as nursing, teaching, and social work, as "pink-collar" jobs. While these jobs typically require advanced degrees, they tend to be lower-paying and carry less social status, partly due to being categorized as care work (Gaines, 2014). Since nurturing, accommodation, and service are considered inherently feminine traits, care work and librarianship are also feminized.

Pagowsky and DeFrain (2014) further examine the feminized traits of librarianship by examining the differences between the traits of "cold" and "warm" in librarians. Cold is classified as a

traditional librarian and masculine stereotype, while warm is framed as more caring and an extension of mothering. This further aligns warmth with femininity. Due to this alignment, the expectation of warmth affects women across all feminized professions as a form of emotional labor (Pagowsky & DeFrain, 2014). However, while librarians push against the stereotype of librarians as cold, it is actually warmth that "hinders us in striving for status, respect, and greater collaborations on campus" (Pagowsky & DeFrain, 2014, p. 8). This sentiment is echoed by Gaines (2014) when she states, "female librarians also serve as warnings about the power of the library system, showing what happens when one becomes controlled by its rules. Women become less than themselves, losing their humanity, their empathy, their sexuality" (p. 87). As a counterreaction, many librarians try to avoid stereotypes to prove their humanity rather than be tied to them (Gaines, 2014).

Though stereotyping and misunderstandings surrounding the roles of librarians are limiting and should be dispelled, data suggest that the industry as a whole is still demographically homogeneous. According to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, there were over 133,700 librarians employed in the United States in 2023 (Librarians and Media Collections Specialists, 2024). The vast majority of those librarians are female. In a 2023 survey, 82.5% of librarians identified as women, a number that has remained relatively stagnant since the 90s (Library Professionals, 2024). Additional data from the Integrated Public Use Microdata Series, Current Population Survey, shows the racial demographics of librarians have changed very little between 2010 and 2022, with respondents who identified as white increasing slightly from 78.76% to 81.31% (Kendrick & Hulpert, 2023). Hispanic or Latino individuals account for 11% of responses, while Black or African Americans account for only 7% (Library Professionals, 2024). This means that white women are significantly overrepresented within the library profession. Librarians from marginalized backgrounds continue to face discrimination, as well as unique challenges due to the isolation of

working in such a homogeneous field (Ndumu, 2021). This is a challenge that has continued throughout the existence of libraries. To make a change, we need to “investigate what it is about ourselves and our profession that is preventing underrepresented people from being able to, or even wanting to, enter and stay” (Vinopal, 2017, para. 1). Librarians must strive to create an inclusive community for both professionals and patrons.

In contrast to the negative stereotypes surrounding librarianship, the public often proclaims the librarian a superhero. Fobazi Ettarh (2018) coined the term “vocational awe” defining it as “the set of ideas, values, and assumptions librarians have about themselves and the profession that result in beliefs that libraries as institutions are inherently good and sacred, and therefore beyond critique” (para. 3). While it is normal to feel pride and love for your career, that pride can hinder progress when you are blind to the faults of your profession. Libraries as institutions of knowledge and information are imperfect and have perpetuated harm against minorities through forced assimilation (Ettarh, 2018). While Ettarh’s definition focuses on how librarians feel, the same can be applied to the general public’s perception of our profession. There is a divide between the public who think librarians are pedophiles promoting porn, versus people who think librarians are heroes on the front lines of the war for democracy. Ettarh frames the library as a sanctuary and the librarian as a savior. She notes that after significant events, there is an outpouring of love for the libraries that open their doors and show support for their communities (Ettarh, 2018). This muddles the reality of systemic and institutionalized problems within librarianship that cannot be addressed without a balanced view of the benefits and challenges libraries and library workers face.

While libraries can be wonderful places, framing librarians as superheroes creates expectations that librarians cannot meet. These expectations often lead librarians to overwork themselves, whether from internal or external pressures (Burns & Green, 2019). Additionally, budget cuts

in libraries, an increasing issue across the country, can eliminate crucial positions, increase the workload for remaining staff members, and further exacerbate feelings of burnout and inadequacy (Shahzad et al., 2024). Many librarians feel that to be valued, they must dedicate an extraordinary amount of time to the profession, often at the cost of their mental health and well-being. Failure to meet those expectations can result in exhaustion, stress, self-doubt, and even imposter syndrome (IS), the internal belief that you are not as intelligent or competent as others believe and have fooled those around you (Clance & Imes, 1978). Signs of IS include maladaptive perfectionism, anxiety, and obsessive-compulsive behaviors. People experiencing IS may also have impossibly high expectations for themselves, be overly critical of personal performance, procrastinate, and over-prepare (Hernandez & Lacarenza, 2023). IS frequently starts in library school due to a lack of support transitioning into the workforce after graduating, a lack of hands-on orientation in new positions, and the ambiguity of job descriptions and positions (Lacey & Parlette-Stewart, 2017). IS disproportionately affects those early in their careers, especially women and those who are part of a minority or marginalized group (Clance & Imes, 1978; Hernandez & Lacarenza, 2023). These challenges can compound on themselves, creating an environment where it is difficult for new librarians to thrive.

Layers of inaccurate stereotyping, role ambiguity, systemic sexism and racism, a lack of understanding or respect from those around you create significant challenges for new professionals (Jacobs et al., 2024; Lacey & Parlette-Stewart, 2017; Vaughn et al., 2020). In the essay “It’s Not Imposter Syndrome: Resisting Self-Doubt as Normal For Library Workers,” Andrews (2020) challenges the tendency to pathologize self-doubt as an individual failing rather than examining systemic workplace issues. IS is seen “as a natural part of entering a profession, particularly for women” (Andrews, 2020, para. 1). She emphasizes the need to avoid tone policing and the instinct to recommend confidence as a simple remedy (Andrews, 2020). Writing that “advising

performance of confidence can function as a form of tone policing or shutting down concerns from a vulnerable party – particularly if the advisor has enough privilege to ignore existing power dynamics” (Andrews, 2020, para. 11). Librarians should release any guilt around the idea that self-doubt or IS are failures of character or issues that should be overcome by force of will.

People who experience IS tend to attribute their successes to external factors, while they blame their failures on internal flaws (Clance & Imes, 1978). Given the financial, temporal, and emotional limitations placed on librarians, unrealistic goals and expectations can lead to further doubt. Librarians who create a clear sense of purpose and a defined role and goals for themselves feel more positive about their professional skills (McGuinness, 2011). Lacey and Parlette-Stewart (2017) echo this, suggesting librarians “reflect when possible and think carefully about what success looks like to them. This can be done by looking at both short and long-term goals, to break things down into smaller, more achievable steps” (p. 6). Rather than building confidence, which can be inconsistent and hard to define, new professionals should build healthy workplace practices while acknowledging and honoring their honest emotions. Cultivating a strong sense of your underlying values helps librarians set realistic, tangible goals and enhances their awareness of the unique perspectives and skills they possess.

However, many librarians who have a strong set of values and realistic goals still struggle with feelings of IS, alongside over-commitment and burnout. New librarians, who are particularly vulnerable to IS, also tend to find it challenging to establish and maintain healthy professional boundaries (Lacey & Parlette-Stewart, 2017; Martinez & Forrey, 2019). The desire to prove oneself and the service-oriented nature associated with the field, particularly given its historical gender demographics, can lead to overextension (Andrews, 2020). New professionals often feel compelled to accept every opportunity and resist taking necessary

breaks (Andrews, 2020). This idea is echoed in Hogarth's 2017 article “Avoiding Burnout,” which explicitly links burnout to negative outcomes within emotionally demanding fields like librarianship, including “physical, emotional, and behavioral consequences, and to high turnover and loss of engagement” (p. 71). To combat this, Andrews and Hogarth agree that workers should emphasize the importance of setting work hours, declining excessive tasks, and utilizing benefits to protect well-being (Andrews, 2020; Hogarth, 2017). Resting intentionally allows you to be active and engaged with the people and activities that are most important to you.

Despite the well-documented importance of rest, feelings of guilt often impede librarians' ability to set boundaries and prioritize time away. Those who set boundaries and rest may find that their leisure and restoration are disturbed by guilt and other feelings of distress. Like IS and burnout, new librarians are especially vulnerable (Lacey & Parlette-Stewart, 2017; Martinez & Forrey, 2019). Baatz and Werzberger (2025) note the heightened psychological stress experienced during the initial year of professional work, making the cycle of overexertion and exhaustion a significant concern (p. 56). Gender also plays a significant role. Agrawal (2024) writes, “in a world that is often eager to extract the most from women's time, resting, relaxing, solitude, and even silence serve as a powerful resistance,” (p. 2). Because women are the majority of the workforce within libraries (Library Professionals, 2024), this is a professional and health issue that needs to be addressed. Workers, especially women, should shift their perception of productivity to see it as a societal construct rather than an inherent moral imperative (Agrawal, 2024). Librarians should position leisure as essential self-care within service-oriented professions, helping to alleviate guilt and enhance well-being (Gaines, 2014). Reframing rest as a form of resistance against the relentless demands often placed on individuals, particularly women, underscores that rest and self-care are necessities, not luxuries.

Librarians who cultivate their core values, enforce their boundaries, and prioritize their

health and well-being as humans are positioned to be resilient as they learn, make mistakes, and face personal and workplace challenges. Both as new professionals and people working in an ever-evolving field, continued education is essential. One of the best ways to continue growing and thriving is to engage in community building. This can take many forms, including networking, continued education, and formal and informal mentorship (Martinez & Forrey, 2019). Conferences, webinars, leadership groups, affinity groups, professional organizations, and even social media can all be great ways to develop your skills as a librarian and your library support network. This can be particularly helpful for librarians from marginalized backgrounds. The homogeneity and whiteness of librarianship create unique obstacles and isolation for librarians of color, especially as they can find themselves being the only non-white body in their workplace. Healy and Gaha (2021) outline clearly the challenges, including “discriminatory behavior from colleagues, patrons, and library administration that creates hostile work environments for professionals who are marginalized; the additional unpaid labor of diversity work often relegated to librarians of color; and the isolation these conditions create” (pp.113-114). While interviewing midcareer librarians of color about their choices to remain in the profession, authors Sterling, Fiedler, and Cheng (2025) found through their interviews of mid-career librarians of color that “there was general agreement that mentorship and community were the main factors for staying” (p.1). As Martinez and Forrey (2019) point out, while discussing community building as a solution for IS and other professional challenges, “by talking to others in similar positions, or to a mentor, that feeling of isolation is diminished. The individual is no longer the only one harboring these feelings and knows there are others to help carry the load” (Martinez & Forrey, 2019, p. 388).

Mentorship is a particularly effective form of community building to help both marginalized and new or young librarians navigate challenges. These mentorship programs need to focus on serving diverse librarians while acknowledging

the challenges of being a BIPOC librarian and a woman in the world of higher education. Endo (2020) advocates for equity-centric mentoring programs that “radically shift the focus on assimilating and integrating BIPOC faculty into White-dominated organizations into a model where assumed or real differences are embraced as strengths” (p. 172). Authors Vaughn, Taasobshirazi, and Johnson (2019) note that attempts to support women in higher education “should highlight women’s abilities and the effort they put into their successes, help build support systems and provide resources to nurture existing close relationships, and increase feelings of relatedness, competence, and autonomy,” (p. 791). People at all stages of their careers benefit from building community, but it is crucial for those just beginning (Martinez & Forrey, 2019). Mentor relationships can provide valuable insight, strong advocates, and emotional support, mitigating the effects of IS, self-doubt, and isolation (Endo, 2020; Jacobs et al., 2024; Lacey & Parlette-Stewart, 2017). With the aid of a mentor or supervisor, a new librarian can find guidance and discuss their position and how it aligns with their values and future goals (Lacey & Parlette-Stewart, 2017). Additionally, “developing a supportive network with others who share experiences of IS can be very helpful... it is key to create an environment in which one feels safe and has the opportunity to be open about experiences” (Lacey & Parlette-Stewart, 2017, p. 6). Sharing your feelings and burdens can be a good way to ease your struggles and create authentic bonds with others.

The current administration has only amplified the challenges that librarians face. Libraries have faced a barrage of censorship, budget cuts, and overall threats to intellectual freedom. In just the first few months of 2025, thousands of government websites were scrubbed of information belonging to the American public due to mandates from the Trump Administration. Research articles about sexually transmitted disease treatment, overdose prevention training, and vaccine guidelines for pregnant people were among the information removed from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Information from the Census Bureau and information for veterans' care were also scrubbed (Singer, 2025). Furthermore, researchers were left in disarray as many pages that fall under the umbrella of DEI initiatives and "gender ideology" were targeted (Steenhuysen & Hesson, 2025; Stobbe & Schneider, 2025). In response, librarians launched efforts to archive government pages before they were tampered with in an attempt to preserve and protect vital research.

In recent months, the Supreme Court has refused to hear an appeal on a Texas book-banning law, a court case that began all the way back in 2022 (Vertuno, 2026). The activities of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) in places like Minnesota have had massive impacts on people's ability to exercise their rights to free speech, with administration officials warning protesters about the might of the military and falsely claiming ICE agents have full immunity to commit crimes against American citizens (Aleaziz & Nehamas, 2026; Guilfoil, 2026). Journalists have been arrested at peaceful protests (Duster, 2026). The very presence of heavily armed ICE agents on the streets makes it difficult for children to attend school and people to access services they need, including public libraries. The Department of Homeland Security has also ordered many libraries to stop processing passport applications. The ALA estimates this could impact around 1400 libraries across the country (Haigh, 2026). Under this administration, librarians have to navigate the problems caused in both their personal and professional lives.

Given the attacks on libraries and our values, librarians must play a significant role in defending the rights of everyone who calls America home. In an interview with the PBS News Hour on April 1st, 2025, then ALA President Cindy Hohl stated, "It's so important that Americans continue to be able to have access to programs that enrich their lives." She continued, "the focus of programming in any public sector is to always be able to provide information to people that is credible and trusted" (Brown et al., 2025). To answer this calling,

strategies for resilience like cultivating core values, setting realistic goals, intentional rest, and community building transform from recommended self-care best practices to essential tools for survival. In the epilogue to her 1988 essay collection *A Burst of Light*, Audre Lorde wrote, "caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare" (p. 124). The same skills that help us build resilience in our professional lives must now be called on to sustain us in our ever-overlapping professional, personal, and political lives. Israel (2025) notes that news overconsumption "can increase stress and decrease well-being. Ask yourself: How much news helps me stay engaged? How much makes me feel powerless? Try turning off your news notifications and setting designated times for checking the news" (para. 4). Actively deciding when to engage and when to rest allows people to be at their best (Andrews, 2020; Hogarth, 2017). When we are not resting, we should strive for reachable goals that align with our values, just as we do in our professional lives. Carpenter (2025) recommends setting intentions that are "not with vague hopes but with sharp, clear objectives that are Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Rewarding, Timely, Inclusive, and Equitable" (p. 74). While many of our current challenges feel like they were conjured with a single sweep of a pen, they cannot be solved the same way. Small steps and small successes can add up to make a big difference.

Scholarship within the library community echoes the themes of effective action and resistance, while avoiding a sense of hopelessness (Carpenter, 2025; Jaeger, 2025). In his article, "We Are Not Helpless," Paul Jaeger (2025) reassures, "for all the scariness of the current situation, cultural heritage professionals and their institutions have options for responding effectively" (p. 188). He recommends that we engage politically in all areas, build coalitions and alliances, and act proactively (Jaeger, 2025). Likewise, Carpenter (2025) advises librarians of best practices for community organizing and activism, including recommendations to "mobilize volunteers and community members to advocate for policies that

protect libraries and schools” (p. 82) and “train advocates in public speaking, digital organizing, and grassroots outreach to amplify their impact” (p. 82). In addition, both Jaeger (2025) and Carpenter (2025) point out the importance of sustained efforts. Carpenter (2025) highlights the need to “understand the importance of long-term effort, as real change can take years or even decades to achieve” (p.84). Messages like this are essential as we all try to build a strategy to move forward on the shifting dunes of this president’s policies. However, we must also advocate for a space to seriously discuss how librarians can fight for our values and communities without unnecessarily sacrificing our minds and bodies. Sustained action not only requires effective strategizing and power moves, but it also requires participants with the physical, mental, and emotional energy to keep pushing.

In just a year, we have already seen marked successes through our collective action. We must leverage professional networks, mentors, friends, and communities, both for the sake of effective change-making (Brown et al., 2025; Carpenter, 2025; Jaeger, 2025) and for the sake of our mental health (Israel, 2025; Jacobs et al., 2024; Lacey & Parlette-Stewart, 2017; Martinez & Forrey, 2019; Vaughn et al., 2020). Amid the political attacks on libraries, we can see our community members taking action. Last year, the Federal Courts stopped the defunding of IMLS, a critical win for libraries across the nation (Federal Court Halts Dismantling, 2025). Despite this success, people in the library profession and in the community continued to advocate for libraries. With the aid of these advocates and library champions, Congress approved a \$1.4 million increase in funding for library programs (Varga, 2026). In 2025, a majority of elected school board positions shifted to support protecting the right and freedom to read, even flipping formerly pro-book-banning school boards (Metallo, 2026). The National Coalition Against Censorship recently partnered with the Brooklyn Public Library to train students from across the United States on advocacy surrounding book bans and censorship. The inaugural Teen Advocacy Institute focused on giving a voice to those most directly affected by book banning: the

students themselves (Price, 2025). We have also seen the documentary film “The Librarians” receive critical acclaim, centering the public librarians at the forefront of the fight against book banning and censorship (Clarke, 2025). The communities we serve and the people around us can be our greatest sources of strength and power.

Librarians who cultivate resilience and wellness in their professional lives are well-positioned to step into this new trial. The challenges facing new librarians, particularly those from marginalized groups and young women, are significant and deeply intertwined. The enduring stereotypes of a feminized profession contribute to systemic inequities, while the unrealistic expectations of librarians as infallible heroes can breed burnout and IS. Compounding these issues is the stark lack of diversity within the field and the current political climate. More research is needed into how the systemic issues that shape librarianship have informed and exacerbated the challenges of the present. Many of our issues are escalations and modernizations of the historical obstacles that have shaped our profession. It is essential as we move forward to include discussions about librarian well-being alongside political strategizing. As a small start, we should recognize that the same strategies recommended for building sustainable careers are now essential tools for navigating this turbulent landscape. By establishing core values and goals, setting boundaries, prioritizing rest, and fostering strong communities, librarians can weather the storm and contribute to a more equitable, resilient, and effective profession capable of safeguarding knowledge and serving diverse communities in an increasingly challenging world.

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