



PERCEPTION OF WOMEN USING WHEELCHAIR IN TAMILNADU ABOUT THEIR HOMEMAKING OCCUPATION AND ITS PERFORMANCE: AN EXPLORATIVE QUALITATIVE STUDY

Occupational Therapy

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ABSTRACT

Background: Women who use wheelchairs, essential for mobility, continue to participate in homemaking activities despite challenges that often prevent full engagement and satisfaction. Various barriers within the home environment increase their dependence on others. This study explores the perceptions of women using wheelchairs in Tamil Nadu regarding homemaking tasks and the difficulties they face. **Methods:** A qualitative, phenomenological study was conducted with nine women selected through purposive and snowball sampling. Data were collected via telecommunication interviews and analyzed thematically. **Results:** Ten key themes emerged, including pain and discomfort, architectural barriers, self-confidence, wheelchair accessibility, societal participation, support, safety measures, and independence in daily activities. **Conclusion:** This study highlights the physical and psychological barriers these women face and their impact on occupational performance. The findings offer valuable insights for occupational therapists to develop interventions, addressing issues like home modifications, family support, and enhancing independence and quality of life for wheelchair users.

KEYWORDS

Homemaking, Participation, Independence, Wheelchair, Accessibility

INTRODUCTION

Wheelchairs are essential for individuals with mobility impairments, including those with conditions like cerebral palsy, spinal cord injuries, and muscular dystrophy. They often become the primary mode of transportation for long-term users. However, returning to inaccessible environments after rehabilitation can hinder progress and negatively impact quality of life (Pendleton & Schultz-Krohn, 2013).

In India, where homemaking is the primary occupation for over 90% of women, limited research exists on the challenges faced by wheelchair users in this domain. Environmental barriers can restrict participation in essential activities like cleaning and meal preparation, increasing dependence (Mortenson et al., 2012; Herrera-Saray et al., 2013).

Understanding the homemaking experiences of women using wheelchairs is crucial from an occupational therapy perspective to identify barriers and enhance performance. This study aims to address these gaps by exploring the perceptions of women using wheelchairs in Tamil Nadu regarding their homemaking roles, contributing to a better understanding for assessment and intervention in improving their quality of life.

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative phenomenological study explored the homemaking experiences of nine wheelchair-using women in Tamil Nadu, aged 18 to 60, who had been wheelchair users for at least two years. Participants were selected using purposive and snowball sampling, with two affected by polio and seven by spinal cord injuries. These women, who had been using a wheelchair for at least the past two years and were the primary homemakers in their households, were selected based on specific inclusion criteria. Data were gathered using a socio demographic questionnaire and a semi-structured interview guide developed from previous literatures. Interviews conducted over the phone, lasting 30 minutes to an hour, were recorded, transcribed, and translated into English. Thematic analysis was used to identify key themes from the data.

DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's six-phase process, was conducted manually. This involved transcribing, coding, and categorizing data into themes, followed by reviewing and refining those (Meyers et al., 2002). Finally, themes were named, and relevant extracts were selected to write a detailed report connecting findings to the research topic and literature.

Data Analysis Revealed Ten Key Themes:

- (1) Pain and discomfort, linked to prolonged sitting and repetitive strain;
- (2) Architectural barriers, such as high shelves and inaccessible kitchens;
- (3) Self-confidence and self-esteem, with many gaining confidence over time;
- (4) Wheelchair accessibility and home modification challenges;
- (5) Societal participation, hindered by psychological barriers and negative attitudes;
- (6) Bedroom accessibility through modified furniture arrangements;
- (7) Support and motivation from family, crucial for overcoming obstacles;
- (8) General safety measures for wheelchair use;
- (9) Independence in daily activities, achieved by some participants over time; and
- (10) Importance among family, with participants feeling more valued in decision-making. These findings highlight the need for accessibility and support to enhance quality of life.

DISCUSSION

Homemaking, a crucial social activity, can be challenging for wheelchair users due to the emotional and physical effort required. This study explores the perceptions of women using wheelchairs in Tamil Nadu regarding tasks like meal preparation, cleaning, and organizing. While wheelchairs boost independence, architectural barriers often hinder participation. A barrier-free environment promotes independence despite disabilities. The study aligns individual experiences with existing literature on disability and homemaking.

PAIN AND DISCOMFORT:

Earlier studies (Herrera-Saray et al., 2013) highlighted that individuals with pain made minor adjustments, like using pillows or limiting wheelchair use due to barriers. Similarly, participants in the current study made small adjustments, took breaks, or did push-ups to relieve pain. They reported discomfort during homemaking tasks, such as lifting heavy objects, and preferred to limit these activities, with some experiencing significant back pain, only using medication when necessary.

ARCHITECTURAL BARRIER:

The layout of homes and furniture greatly affects the quality of life for wheelchair users. Previous research (Meyers et al., 2002; Allen et al., 2006) identified barriers like narrow aisles, inaccessible bathrooms, and steep ramps, restricting mobility. The current study found similar

challenges, including inaccessible entrances, high kitchen slabs, and limited leg space under sinks. Due to financial constraints and limited home modifications, participants often had to adapt. External obstacles like sidewalks, curbs, tight bathrooms, and narrow store aisles further hindered wheelchair mobility and social participation.

Self Confidence And Self Esteem:

Over time, wheelchair users build confidence through self-reliance and support, though they initially experienced feelings of inferiority and reluctance to accept their disability. As they adapted, self-acceptance and determination grew, enabling them to overcome societal and daily challenges. Caregivers expressed dissatisfaction with manual wheelchair features, and users' life dissatisfaction appeared to stem more from physical discomfort than psychological factors, underscoring the need for improved wheelchair design and comfort to enhance overall well-being.

Wheelchair Accessibility And Home Modification:

A study on Home Planning for the Severely Disabled (Smith et al., 1969) emphasizes the importance of an accessible environment for maintaining independence post-rehabilitation. It highlights significant differences in mobility and activity levels between homes designed for participation and those that are not. It found that home layout greatly impacts wheelchair accessibility, with many participants unable to make necessary modifications due to financial constraints or living in rental properties. Most reported their homes were not fully wheelchair-accessible, often encountering obstacles like wheelchairs getting stuck at entrances.

Societal Participation:

The study on wheelchair mobility (Tolerico et al., 2007) reveals that activity levels vary between home and accessible environments, influenced by physical, psychological, and environmental factors. Similarly, participants in this study faced societal stigma, undermining confidence and social engagement. Another study (Ferretti et al., 2024) shows that functional ability and disability type affect activity levels, with psychological challenges, societal exclusion, and superstitions contributing to isolation and reduced participation.

Bedroom Accessibility:

Wheelchair users in this study reported bed making and wardrobe organization as primary bedroom tasks. They adapted by arranging clothes on lower shelves for easy access and modifying their environment for independence, such as ensuring items were within reach and using wheelchair-friendly features like wide entrances and bed rails. Though bed making took longer, participants expressed satisfaction in completing these tasks independently.

Support And Motivation:

The study on "Association between Mobility, Participation, and Wheelchair-Related Factors in Long-Term Care Residents" (Smith et al., 1969) highlights how personal factors like cognition and depression impact mobility and participation. Mental well-being, essential for effective participation, is influenced by both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Similarly, in this study, participants' self-motivation and family support (extrinsic motivation) play key roles in boosting confidence, facilitating participation, and providing financial and emotional support, enabling wheelchair users to overcome challenges and engage in community life.

General Safety Measures For Wheelchair Usage:

The study on fall perceptions among power wheelchair users (Rice et al., 2018) highlights how fear of falling limits community participation. Similarly, participants in the current study reported fear of falling during sports, on uneven or sloped surfaces, and during transfers, leading them to seek caregiver assistance and avoid risky situations. Individualized interventions are recommended to help wheelchair users develop strategies for safe participation.

Independence In Daily Activities:

The study on Evaluation on an Ergonomic Design of Functional Clothing for Wheelchair Users (Wang et al., 2014) indicates that daily activities like dressing and bathing pose significant challenges for wheelchair users, often requiring assistance from others. Participants in the current study similarly expressed feelings of hopelessness and worthlessness due to their initial dependence on caregivers for activities of daily living, such as toileting, bathing and dressing highlighting the importance of fostering independence through self-

transfer from the wheelchair.

Importance Among Family:

Family support plays a key role in enhancing the emotional well-being of wheelchair users, helping counter negative perceptions about disability. Participants in this study noted that their families prioritize their needs and involve them in decision-making, fostering a sense of security and openness. The study also highlights the barriers, safety issues, and psychological challenges women wheelchair users face in homemaking. Insights are offered for occupational therapists to improve quality of life through home modifications, safety education, and vocational training, promoting financial independence and alleviating stress related to medical expenses.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the perceptions of women using wheelchairs in homemaking, revealing architectural and psychological barriers impacting daily tasks. Despite expressing a sense of independence, many face physical and mental challenges, leading to feelings of inferiority and reduced well-being. Key themes emerged including pain, accessibility, self-confidence, and family support. The findings highlight the need for developing intervention programs to improve accessibility, independence, and overall quality of life for wheelchair users.

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