

Occupational Therapists in War-Torn Countries: The Emerging Role

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Introduction

- Global conflict is a growing social determinant (World Population Review, 2024)
- In 2024, 39 countries were involved in war, 23 in Africa (World Population Review, 2024)
- Context influences the role of OT's and their professional agency (Picotin et al, 2021)
- Occupational Justice (Gupta, 2016; Molineux, 2017)

Problem statement

- Healthcare workers in conflict area's frequently face threats, detention or violence resulting in many abandoning these regions.
- Individuals in war –torn contexts experience occupational injustices as their daily routines are disrupted, displacement is forced and access to health care is impacted.



Research question

What is the role of occupational therapists in war-torn countries?

Aim:

- To explore and describe the experiences of occupational therapists within war-torn countries and understand how their roles and professional agency is enacted within the current conflict in Palestine, Kenya, and Mozambique.

Objectives:

- Explore OT experiences in conflict environments
- Identify emerging roles and professional strategies
- Describe barriers when addressing occupational needs

Methods:

- Qualitative descriptive study
- 3 occupational therapists (purposive sampling)
- Online semi-structured interviews (2 sets)
- Inductive thematic analysis

Findings

Four themes were generated through the analysis process.

The theme “We Are Here and We Are Occupational Therapists” explored the unique role of occupational therapists in a war-torn context. It captures the meaning of practicing in this setting, reflected across three main categories:

- the lack of occupational therapists and shortage of service delivery,
- role confusion within occupational therapy, and
- the knowledgeable occupational therapist.



Significance to the Profession:

- Expands understanding of OT in global conflict
- Informs curriculum development
- Strengthens OT's advocacy and justice mandate

Practice Implications:

- Provides insight into OT roles in war-affected settings
- Highlights advocacy and occupational justice strategies
- Supports responsive, context-driven OT practice

Conclusion

The study brings forward the notion that occupational therapy in war-torn context is not defined by limitations, but by it's will to re-imagine what is possible.

Therapists working in these disrupted settings transcend beyond traditional models to co-create practice alongside communities, enabling dignity, meaningful participation and resilience, where systemic injustice has constrained life's possibilities.

“Advocacy must be embraced as core practice, recognising care as both clinical and political.”

References

