

# Physically Challenged Persons Access to Public Recreational Centres in Obio/Akpor Local Government Area, Rivers State, Nigeria

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## ABSTRACT

Throughout the globe recreation is undermined, especially in developing countries of the world. The term recreation is not just play or amusement but to create again new body and mind. Facility used for such play or amusement is recreational facility. Design approaches such as accessible, inclusive and universal design approaches are to meet the need of all, especially the physically challenged persons when accessing public recreational centres, but that is not always the case with most recreational centres. It is on this note that this research assessed physically challenged persons' access to public recreational centres in Obio/Akpor LGA, Rivers State. Both quantitative and qualitative research approaches were adopted, the targeted population is the physically challenged persons in Obio/Akpor. A total of 20 physically challenged persons in Rumuola, Oginigba and Rumuadulo were purposively interviewed using structured questionnaires. The state of the recreational centres was assessed using checklist questionnaires. Finding indicates that most physically challenged persons experienced difficulties accessing recreational centres, most recreational centres do not have ramps, only one of the centres has toilet for both staff and the public, one has for just staff while one does not have. To access some of the facilities, physically challenged persons have to cross major roads. The research recommends that there should be training of recreational centre personnel, Government at all levels should ensure that standards are met and laws enacted and enforced to ensure the safety of the physically challenged and their ability to access recreational centres. Professional bodies in the built environment should enlighten their members and the general public on the need to adhere to guideline and standards for designing, approving and constructing recreational centres that will meet the need of the physically challenged.

**KEYWORDS:** Accessibility; Facilities; Obio/Akpor; Physically Challenged; Public; Recreation.

## INTRODUCTION

Recreation is an activity that involves the use of body and mind, it is done voluntarily and during leisure, it's aim is to relieve all involved from tension and fatigue (Gulam, 2016). Recreation contributes to the satisfaction of basic human needs for creativity and development of physical, mental, emotional and social health. It is the refreshment of health by relaxation, activity that refreshes and recreates. It is considered as activity through which leisure may be experienced and enjoyed (Cushman & Laidler, 1990).

Globally, the aim of recreation is not adequately reached, especially in developing countries. Of course recreational centres are needed in order to carry out outdoor and indoor recreation which can be passive or active. Recreational centres are facilities designed to enhance the act of recreation. These facilities are to be accessible by all humans, including the physically challenged persons since their inability to access recreational facilities are somewhat challenging and embarrassing (Hayati & Faqih, 2013).

Often times, the physically challenged persons have difficulties accessing the recreation centres; and in

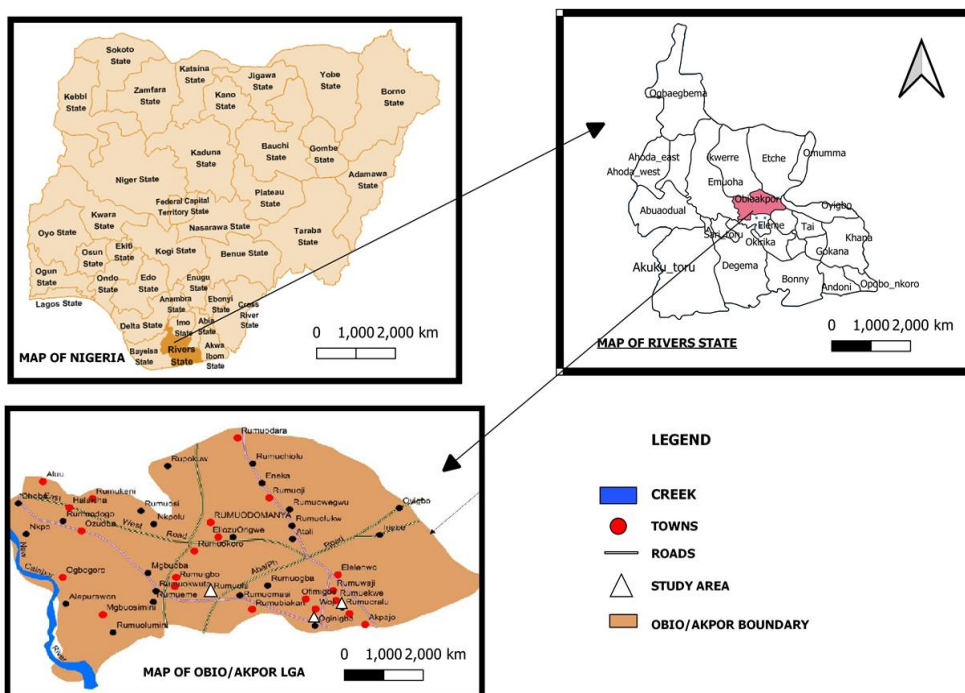
some cases they do not have access at all. These individuals face challenges in their daily living and participation due to their physical condition. Being physically challenged encompasses the idea of inclusivity, accessibility, and equal opportunities in various aspects of life (Walsh-Allen, 2010; Assembly, 2006). Free barriers environment has been introduced to facilitate the needs of physically challenged persons with many design approaches such as accessible design, inclusive design and universal design (Hayati & Faqih, 2013), and there are a growing number of physically challenged persons who are interested in recreation and sport activities (Erdmann, 2018). However, problems of accessibility in public facility have been recognized as challenges in everyday movement of physically challenged people (Hayati & Faqih, 2013).

## STUDY AREA

Obio/Akpor is one of the 23 Local Government Areas (LGA) in Rivers State, Nigeria. It sits between Latitudes  $4^{\circ}45'N$  and  $4^{\circ}60'N$ , and Longitudes  $6^{\circ}50'E$  and  $8^{\circ}00'E$ . Obio/Akpor lies about 66km from the Atlantic Ocean (Wachukwu, Obinna, & Weje, 2020; Wokocha & Omenihu, 2015).

According to Egwuogu, Okeke, Emenike and Abayomi (2016), the study area has an average elevation between 20 metres and 30 metres above sea level. The South-West and North-East winds influence the climate of Obio/Akpor. The South-West wind brings wetness to the study area. It starts from the month of February to November which we can describe as rainy season. The North-East trade wind brings about dry season; it passes through Saharan desert from the month of November to February (Ayo, Obafemi, & Ogoro, 2017). By implication, the study area has nine months of rainy season and three months of dry season. It has an average of 2500mm and 330 days of rain fall (Mamman, Oyebanji, & Peters., 2000; Ayo *et al.* 2017).

Most of the commercial activities existing in Obio/Akpor are brought about by its numerous market places. It is a mixed used residential neighbourhood with a significant amount of local businesses and informal sector activities. Obio/Akpor houses a number of academic institutions and firms or companies that provide job opportunities to the inhabitants. The various commercial activities have provided basic economic base for the area. The location of Obio/Akpor predisposes it to all forms of recreational activities.



**Figure 1: Map of Nigeria showing Rivers State, Obio/Akpor LGA and Sampled Communities.**

Source: Researchers' Conceptualization (QGIS) 2022.

## METHODOLOGY

The research used the mixed method research approach and descriptive research design to assess access to recreational facilities by the physically challenged persons in Obio/Akpor LGA. The purposive non-probability sampling design was also used to select the recreational centres assessed. The recreational centres are Pleasure Park in Rumuola, Port Harcourt Zoo in Oginigba and Amusement Park in Rumuadolu. Since there are no data to determine the actual number of the physically challenged persons in the study area, purposive sampling was used to single out the physically challenged persons who were adjudged to be best informed on the matter involving the physically challenged persons' access to recreational facilities.

A total of 20 questionnaires were distributed in Obio/Akpor Local Government Area of Port Harcourt, for the assessment of the physically challenged persons, on their access to public recreational area. 12 males and 8 females were interviewed. A checklist questionnaire for each recreational facility was used to assess if the recreational centres are of standard and accessible.

## CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL REVIEW

### The Concept of Recreation

According to Ikpoku, Obinna, Emeruem and Weje (2021) and Roberts (1974), recreation is any course engaged upon during leisure time other than endeavours to which people are normally highly committed. It is the various activities people engage in during leisure for enjoyment and social redemption. It encompasses a wide range of activities that promote physical, mental, and emotional well-being, as well as awareness-raising, stigma reduction, and social inclusion (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Khasnabis, *et al.*, 2010).

Recreation can be outdoor and/or indoor. It can be classified as passive and/or active. Outdoor recreational activities are those activities that are undertaken outside the confines of buildings, while indoor recreation activities are those activities undertaken on the comfort of one's home. Active recreation is a physical activity that a person undertakes voluntarily in their leisure time and it involves exerting energy, while passive recreation is marked by relative inactivity with less energy exerted (Ikpoku *et al.* 2021; Lawson & Band-Bovy (1977).

Recreational activities are diverse, not limited to sports, gardening, drawing, playing games, or dancing. Its significance is crucial for fostering a balanced and fulfilling lifestyle. As individuals and societies continue to navigate the challenges of modern life, prioritizing recreation becomes essential for achieving holistic well-being and a higher quality of life. Participating in recreational activities helps to develop physical, social, and other skills that contribute to personal development, rejuvenation, and a positive self-image (Khasnabis *et al.*, 2010).

### The Physically Challenged and Accessibility

The physically challenged is an individual who is heterotopic, who by implication has some deviations from how body structure ought to be. It can also be an individual that has health conditions that restricts him/her from usual movement and/or limits the person from exerting energy as it ought to be. They may be orthopedically impaired, crippled, physically impaired, motor impaired and the neurologically impaired (Obodo, 2014).

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities defines disability as long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder

one from full and effective participation in society like others (Pyaneandee, 2019).

Accessibility can be viewed as the ability to approach and benefit from some system or entity (Goldberg, 1996). It is the inclusive practice of ensuring there are no barriers that prevent interaction with, or access to the object of focus.

Even though the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities has been signed by all states and by regional integration organization in the year 2007, in developing countries, providing barrier free environment is still questionable, physically challenged persons still struggle to do their activities and needs in public facilities (Hayati & Faqih, 2013), of which recreational facilities are not exception. In fact, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA, 1990), prohibits discrimination against individuals with disabilities, including physically challenged individuals in various areas. The law ensures that people with disabilities enjoy the same rights and opportunities as those without disabilities. Physically challenged individuals exhibit a wide range of abilities and limitations, such as mobility impairment, visual and hearing impairment, cognitive impairment, and many others. These challenges require special accommodations and attention to enable a physically challenged person to use assistive devices such as wheelchairs, crutches, or prosthetics and fully participate in daily activities (Assembly, 2006).

It is crucial to create an accessible environment for physically challenged individuals to promote independence. This will involve designing infrastructure, public spaces to accommodate a variety of activities with special needs, such as ramps, elevators, tactile paths, and maps (ADA, 1990). Employment opportunities can promote a diverse and capable working environment and provide support and access to learning opportunities for physically challenged individuals. This can help challenge the stereotypes faced by disabled individuals in society and reduce the stigmatization the physically challenged face (Section, 2000).

### **The Social Model**

Mike Oliver a disabled academic coined the phrase “Social Model of Disability” in 1983. The idea was thereafter being extended to include those with learning, emotional, behavioural difficulties or mental health, and others (Oliver & Sapey, 2006). The aim is to have a physically challenged child included in the normal life of the community, irrespective of the level of the function (Engber, 2021).

The social model of disability identifies systemic barriers, derogatory attitudes, and social exclusion whether intentional or not, which makes it difficult or impossible for physically challenged people to attain their esteemed functioning. The social model of disability is not same as the dominant medical model of disability, which is a functional analysis of the body as a machine to be fixed in order to conform with normative values (Paley, 2020). The focus is on how social structures and institutions influence human behavior.

Recreational facilities, when designed with inclusivity, can become centers for social interaction and community engagement (Kennedy, McKenzie, Holmes, & Shields, 2022). These spaces accommodate diverse needs, allowing individuals with physical challenges to participate in activities alongside their peers (Kennedy *et al.*, 2022). These spaces also promote social change by challenging societal perceptions of disability and providing opportunities for shared experiences. They serve as a platform for education, awareness, and the dismantling of societal prejudices surrounding physical disabilities (Afacan & Isik Afacan, 2021; Kamyuka, Carlin, McPherson, & Misener, 2020). Accessible spaces contribute to forming supportive communities that foster social cohesion and a sense of belonging. This enables physically challenged individuals to connect with others who share similar experiences (Devine, 2015; Kennedy *et al.*, 2022).

## Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

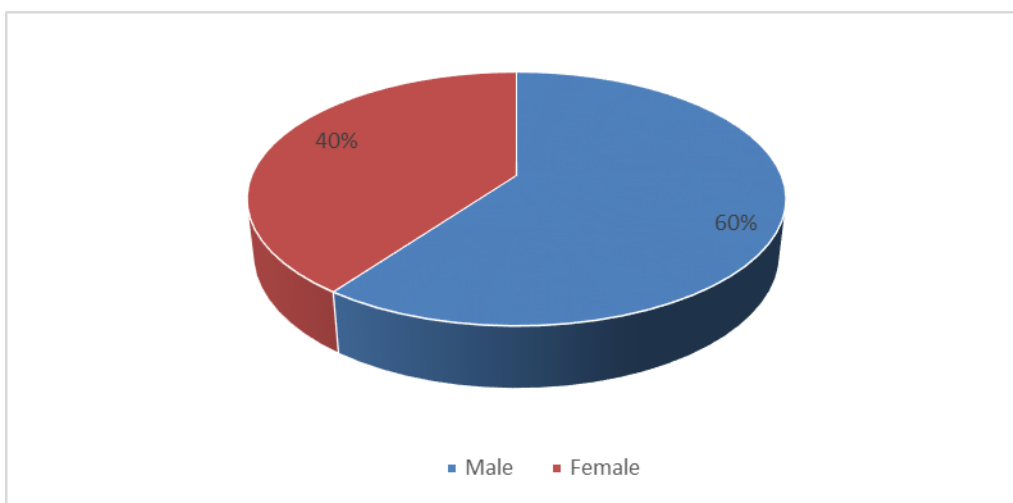
Access to recreational facilities is a fundamental aspect of a society that promotes inclusivity and equal opportunities to all humans. Maslow grouped human needs into five layers to understand the importance in fulfilling physiological, safety, belongingness & love, esteem, and self-actualization, in addition with cognitive and aesthetic needs (Zhang, *et al.*, 2022). To physically challenged individuals, ensuring access to recreational facilities is crucial in addressing their overall well-being. Exercise, sports, and other recreational activities are essential for maintaining a healthy lifestyle for physically challenged individuals as they may face barriers to these activities. However, a well-equipped facility with inclusive features such as ramps and accessible spaces can become imperative in meeting their physiological needs (Maslow, Frager, Fadiman, McReynolds, & Cox, 1987). Accessible recreational facilities not only provide a safe environment for exercises and recreational activities, but also promote a sense of security and belonging allowing disabled persons to engage in activities without fear of injury or exclusion (Maslow *et al.*, 1987).

In Maslow *et al.* (1987), hierarchy of love and belonging, it emphasizes the importance of social connections. Recreational facilities serve as spaces for community engagement, fostering connections among individuals. Inclusivity in these spaces can allow physically challenged individuals to participate in group activities, sports, social events, to promote a sense of belonging and reduce the feelings of isolation that may arise from their physical conditions. Participating in recreational activities also allows physically challenged individuals to showcase their abilities, breaking down stereotypes and gaining recognition for their accomplishments. Inclusive recreational facilities play a pivotal role in promoting a positive self-image and building self-esteem. And at the peak of Maslow's Hierarchy is self-actualization of realizing one's full potential. Access to recreational facilities becomes a catalyst for self-actualization in physically challenged individuals, by providing opportunities for personal growth, skill development, and the pursuit of passions. These facilities empower individuals to transcend their physical limitations and achieve a higher sense of fulfillment. As societies strive for greater inclusivity, it is essential to recognize and prioritize the importance of accessible recreational spaces in creating a more equitable and fulfilling environment for everyone.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Gender of Respondents

More male physically challenged persons responded to the questionnaires than females.



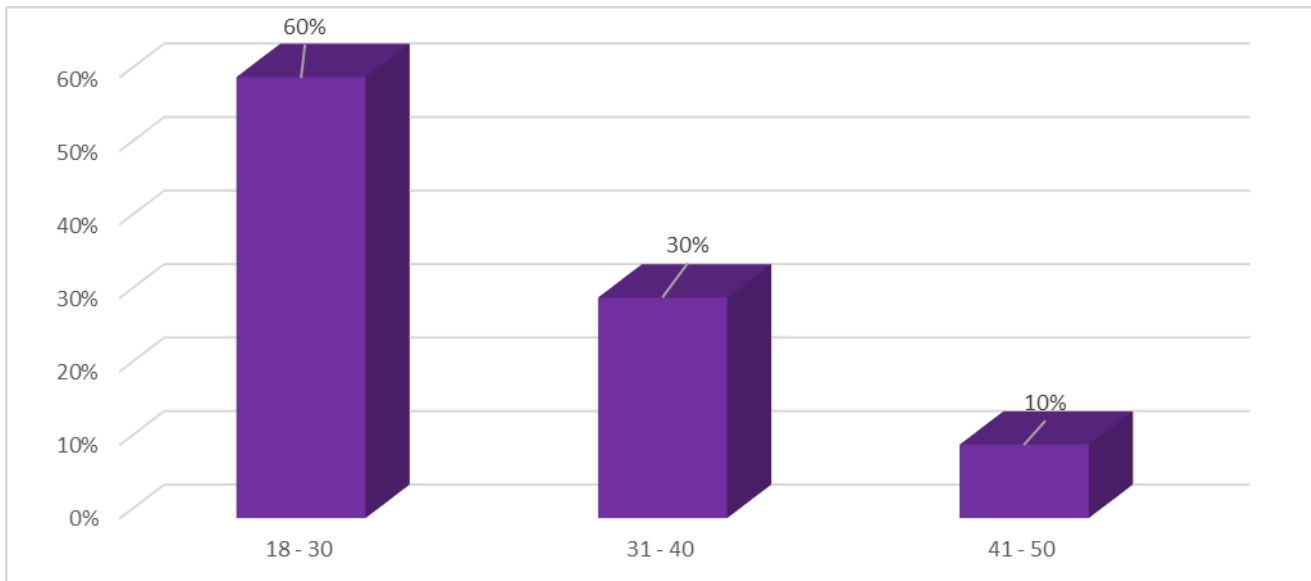
**Figure 2: Gender of Respondents**

**Source: Researchers' Field Survey, 2022.**



### Age of Respondents

The modal age of respondents took 60% of the respondents which is the age bracket of 18 – 30 year, while 30% of the respondents fell into the (31 – 40) age bracket and 10% fell into (41 – 50) age bracket.

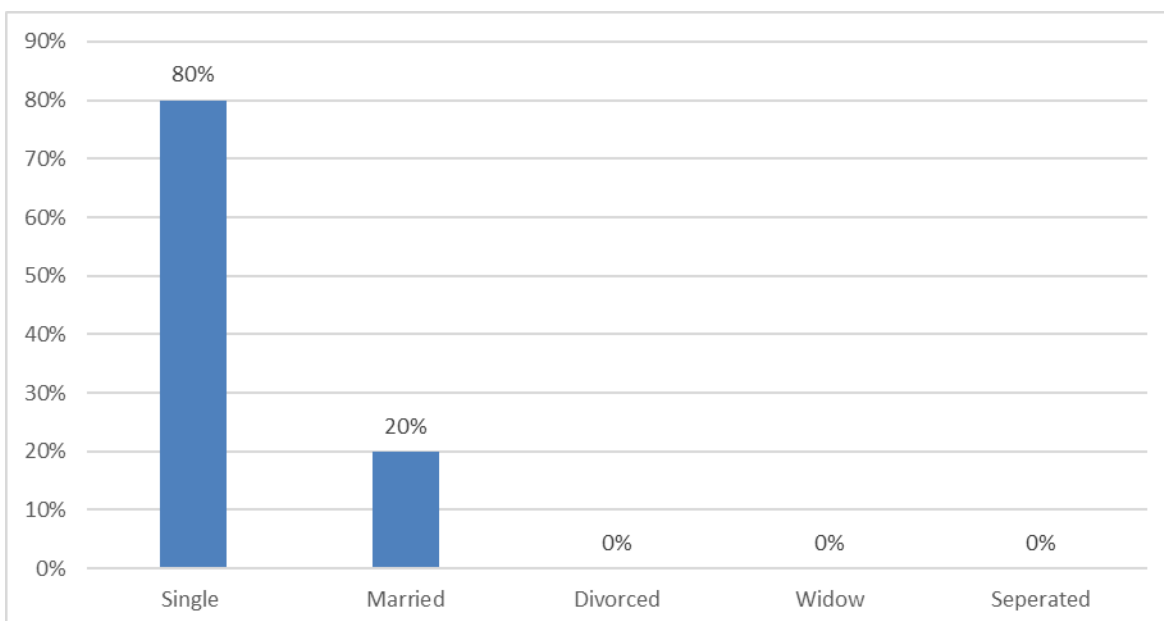


**Figure 3: Age of Respondents**

Source: Researchers’ Field Survey, 2022.

### Marital Status of Respondents

Unsurprisingly, 80% of the respondents were “single” while those who reported themselves as married accounted for 20%.

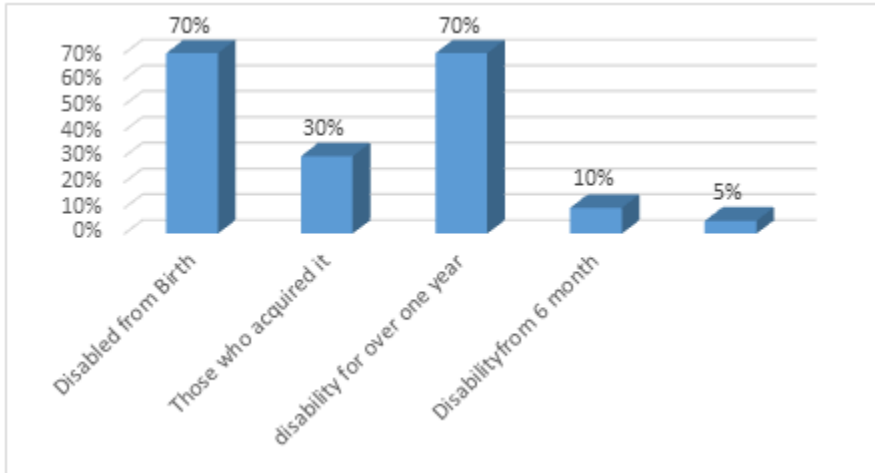


**Figure 4: Marital Status of Respondents**

Source: Researchers’ Field Survey, 2022.

### Type of Disability

Those who are disabled from birth (congenital) accounted for 70% while those who acquired it accounted for 30% (Fig. 5). Most respondents reported themselves as having the disability for “over one year” accounting for 70%, however, those whose disability has lasted from “6 months to “1 year” accounted for 10% and less than 6 months accounted for 5% of respondent.

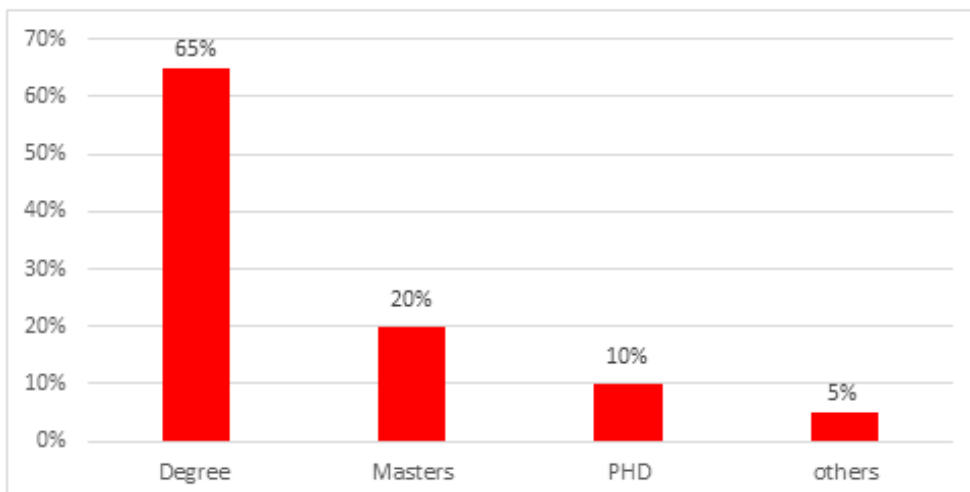


**Figure 5: Marital Status of Respondents**

Source: Researchers’ Field Survey, 2022.

### Educational Qualification

The most common degree amongst the mobility challenge was 20% first degree accounting for 65% while those with Master’s and PHD accounted for 10%. Others kinds of certificate programmes accounted for 5% of the distribution.



**Figure 6: Program of Study**

Source: Researchers’ Field Survey, 2022.

### Access to Main Entrance of Facilities

Table 1 shows that 50% of the respondents agreed that they encountered difficulties, when accessing the recreational area, 30% of persons had a neutral response to the access of the recreational area. 5% totally

agree that they had difficulties accessing the areas while 10% and 5% of the respondents disagreed and totally disagreed respectively. 35% of the respondent totally disagreed that there is no ramp at the entrance to the facility. 30% totally disagreed, 20% were neutral and 5% totally agreed and disagreed respectively. 40% of the respondents disagreed that the ramp at the entrance are really steep and 40% totally disagreed that the ramp at the entrance are really steep, while 10% agreed and 10% were neutral. Regarding moving in and out of the facilities, 40% of the respondents agreed that they had difficulties getting in and out of the building, 30% were neutral, 5% totally agreed to having difficulties, while 10% disagreed to having difficulties and 5% totally disagreed to having difficulties.

**Table 1: Main Entrances**

S/No.	Indicators	Totally agree		Agree		Neutral		Disagree		Totally disagree		Total	
		No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%
1	Difficulties accessing the public recreational areas	1	5	10	50	6	30	2	10	1	5	20	100
2	Availability of ramps at the entrance	1	5	1	5	4	20	7	35	6	30	20	100
3	Ramps at the entrance very steep	0	0	2	10	2	10	8	40	8	40	20	100
4	Difficulties getting in and out of the building	3	15	8	40	6	30	2	10	1	5	20	100

Source: Researchers' Field Survey, 2022.

### General Access to Facilities

Regarding general access to the recreational facilities studied, only 20% of the respondents had no issues accessing the facilities, 20% said they had no access at all, 10% said they experienced a lot of difficulties accessing the recreational facilities while 50% said they some difficulties.

**Table 2: Facilities**

S/No.	Indicators	No Difficulties		Some Difficulties		A lot of Difficulties		No Access		Total	
		No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%
1	Access to most of the facilities	4	20	10	50	2	10	4	20	20	100

Source: Researchers' Field Survey, 2022.

### Access to Toilets

Some difficulty when going in and out of the toilet was reported as 60%, "no difficulty" had 30% and a lot of difficulties had 10% (see table 3). No helping side rail facilities at the toilet: some difficulties – 40%, and a lot of difficulties – 40%, no difficulties – 10% while no access – 10%.



**Table 3: Toilets**

S/No.	Indicators	No Difficulties		Some Difficulties		A lot of Difficulties		No Access		Total	
		No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%
		1	Difficulties getting in and out of the toilet	6	30	12	60	2	10	0	0
2	Availability of side rails facilities at the toilet	2	10	8	40	8	40	2	10	20	100
3	Difficulties turning or moving into the toilet	8	40	10	50	2	10	0	0	20	100

Source: Researchers’ Field Survey, 2022.

From assessment, 50% of the respondent had “some difficulties” turning in the toilet while 40% had “no difficulties” and 10% had “a lot of difficulties while turning in the toilet. There was no respondent that had no access.

### Access to Recreational Facility

**Port Harcourt Pleasure Park:** When going to the Port Harcourt Pleasure Park, there is need to cross a highway to access the facility, there are parking lots inside the recreational facility and it is easy to enter the facility.

**Port Harcourt Zoo:** To access this facility, there is need to cross a high way to access this facility. There are parking lots inside the facility, it is easy to access.

**Amusement park:** The recreational centre is located in a residential area, close to the PH/Aba express way, close to a major bus stop called the presidential hotel bus stop. There are no parking space/lot in the premises.

### Management Attitude and Staff Strength

**Port Harcourt Pleasure Park:** There are regular maintenance practices done in the recreational facility (e.g. repair of broken equipment, renewal of equipment, daily cleaning of facilities). There is a reception area at the entrance to the facility. The facilities are clearly sign posted.

**Port Harcourt Zoo:** There is no regular maintenance practice done in this recreational area nor the renewal of equipment, cleaning of the facility. One or two of the staff where seen in the facility and they were friendly enough to attend to people. The opening hours are from 9am in the morning to 8pm in the evening due to the insecurities in that area. Since it’s a zoo, the place where the animals are kept are been sign posted.

**Amusement park:** There are maintenance practices carried out on the recreational facility such as broken equipment, renewal of equipment, daily cleaning of facilities etc. There is a reception area at the entrance of the building, also friendly staff can be seen at the area. Opening hours are from 8am – 7pm in working days, but on holidays 10am – 7pm. Facilities are clearly signpost. There are staffs on ground ready to guide visitors on how to use the facilities.

### Policies Regulating the Centre

**Port Harcourt Pleasure Park:** When using some of the facilities, bookings are required. There are bans on animals like dogs, cats etc. You can exit the building or facilities whenever you want. Smoking on the premises is highly prohibited. The opening hours for the centres is from 9am to 11pm. The use of mobile

phone is allowed.

**Port Harcourt Zoo:** There is no booking of any sort in the recreational centre. Fees in form of ticket are required to access the facilities the use of mobile phone in the premises is allowed. You can exit the premises whenever you like.

**Amusement park:** There is no booking to access the facilities instead there are tickets given at the entrance. Membership is required to use in some of the facilities. Smoking is highly prohibited.

### **Recreation Centre Environmental Safety**

**Port Harcourt Pleasure Park:** The floors /paths are generally in good condition, no sign of cracks or damage of any kind. There is no visible damage on equipment such as broken fence, benches, playground etc. There are not broken bottles, cans, needles etc. nor are they stray dogs or cat. Undesirable people or gang are not seen near the facility. Proper dress code is being conducted so there is no male seen with naked chests. Generally, the facility is properly surrounded by fence/walls. And the surface of the sport court is smooth and even. There is good street lighting near and inside the recreational facilities.

**Port Harcourt Zoo:** The floor/path of the recreational centre are partly interlocked and partly made of sand, which is been swept daily. There are no visible cracks nor damages on the all or fence. There are broken substances seen on the floor, cans etc. the facility is said to be in a dangerous area, so there are undesirable, people or gangs often seen near the facility. Because of the major road close to the recreational area, there is a good lighting near the recreational facility. There are security guard staff been within the facility.

**Amusement park:** The floor of the recreational centre is generally interlocked and are in good conditions no sign of cracks or damages. There is no visible damage on the equipment's such as broken benches, port grounds or playground. There are not form of tools found, such as bottles can, needles etc. The centre is located in a government reserved area (GRA), so there are no forms of gangs near the facility. The centre in general is surrounded by fence. Since the facility is in government residential area and close to a major road, there is good lighting in and outside the facility. There are uniformed security guard staff within the recreational facility.

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

It is obvious that some of the recreational centre in Obio/Akpor LGA were not accessible to the physically challenged persons. One of the observation made in this research is that most of the access created in these centres were totally not accessible for the physically challenged. It's either they have difficulty getting in or getting out while some of them lack standard, it's either part of the centres, ramps we're not provided, or they are not user friendly. These short coming totally renders some of the facilities inaccessible for the physically challenged persons. Some of the facilities like the Port Harcourt zoo lacks maintenance, thereby depositing the facilities in a decaying state. Therefore, this research makes the following recommendations:

- That there should be proper training and orientation of personnel that will handle the handicapped in varieties of recreational activities. This will pave way for the physically challenged to furnish their bodies with pleasurable activities that will refresh their body systems and restore their emotional vigour when mentally fatigued from long concentrated office work, or studies.
- There is need for the government at all levels (local, state or federal) to have a political will and take a giant step in ensuring that public recreational areas meet the standard and also enacting laws which mandates accessibility
- The government should enforce or give responsibility to a body to oversee recreational centres for proper management and avoidance of dilapidation.

- Government at all level should provide adequate recreational facilities and equipment with modifications to suit specific or each handicapped condition.
- Professional bodies in the built environment should always by means of conferences enlighten their members on the need to adhere to the standard guidelines for accessibility of physical challenged person to building s while developing a plan.

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