



Social Equity Policies and Urban Poor Migrants' Lived Experiences in Public Services

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ABSTRACT

Social equity policy has become a central topic in public administration and urban governance, yet its practical impact on marginalized populations remains poorly understood. Specifically, little is known about how urban poor migrants interpret and emotionally respond to their experiences with public service systems under such policies. What remains unclear is how these individuals perceive justice in state-led equity initiatives and what meanings they assign to their encounters with bureaucracy. This study adopts an interpretative phenomenological approach to examine how urban poor migrants construct meaning from their lived experiences with social equity programs in metropolitan environments. Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with twelve participants and analyzed thematically using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The findings reveal four major themes: formal invisibility, bureaucratic alienation, micro-resistance, and reframed hope. These themes reflect how participants navigate institutional structures that recognize them in form but often exclude them in practice. The results suggest that justice, for these individuals, is experienced less as procedural inclusion and more as personal affirmation and relational recognition. This study enhances our understanding of equity by uncovering emotional and existential dimensions often absent in traditional evaluations and offers new insights for policy reform grounded in lived realities. However, the study is limited by its small sample size and focus on a single metropolitan context, which may constrain the generalizability of its findings. Despite this limitation, the study makes a distinct contribution by foregrounding the lived, emotional, and relational dimensions of social equity, offering both theoretical enrichment for equity scholarship and practical guidance for policymakers seeking more human-centered reforms.



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INTRODUCTION

In contemporary urban societies, access to public services represents not only a fundamental right but also a measure of inclusion and dignity for citizens (Unger et al., 2021). Migrant populations, particularly those living in poverty, often find themselves navigating bureaucratic structures that were not designed with their social realities in mind (de Boon et al., 2023). They face a dual condition of socioeconomic vulnerability and systemic exclusion, shaped by policies that are well-intentioned but overlook lived complexities (Caillier, 2023). Equity-based social policies have emerged globally to redress structural inequalities, yet their practical impact on marginalized groups remains contested.

Despite the growing prevalence of such policies, their implementation frequently reveals a disconnect between institutional frameworks and the subjective experiences of those they are meant to serve (Place et al., 2021). Urban poor migrants, in particular, face a paradoxical existence: they are simultaneously visible in public records and invisible in practice, formally included but practically excluded (Park et al., 2019). This disjuncture reflects a broader socio-cultural challenge how systems

conceptualize justice and equity often diverges from how individuals experience them (Efrat-Treister et al., 2024). Understanding these experiences is critical, not only for evaluating policy effectiveness but also for illuminating the human consequences of governance mechanisms that operate through abstraction and generalization.

The subjective dimensions of policy encounters feelings of exclusion, hope, resistance, or adaptation remain underexplored in current scholarship (Ozdemir et al., 2022). While existing research often emphasizes policy outcomes and statistical coverage, there is a paucity of inquiry into how marginalized individuals make sense of their place within these systems (Chavez & Mathers, 2019). A phenomenological exploration is thus warranted to give voice to those whose narratives are frequently omitted from formal evaluations (Marcano & Castaño-Collado, 2020). By foregrounding personal meanings and emotional landscapes, such an approach provides a deeper, more human-centered understanding of how social justice policies are lived, interpreted, and internalized by individuals at the margins.

Research on the lived experiences of individuals interacting with public service systems has increasingly been recognized as essential in evaluating the effectiveness and equity of social policies (Tassybekov et al., 2024). Particularly within the field of social justice and equity studies, the need to understand how policies are experienced rather than simply how they are designed or measured has grown in prominence (Oetke et al., 2023). Scholars have emphasized that exploring how marginalized groups interpret and emotionally respond to bureaucratic processes can uncover important dimensions of exclusion that are often overlooked by conventional policy assessments.

However, capturing the complexity of these subjective experiences poses significant methodological challenges (Sarti, 2019). Predominant reliance on quantitative tools tends to reduce human experiences to numerical patterns, failing to capture the emotional, psychological, and symbolic meanings embedded in daily interactions with institutions (Haas & Yorrio, 2022). These approaches often prioritize outcome indicators and demographic aggregates, leaving little room to explore how individuals feel, perceive, or make sense of their marginalization (Arendt et al., 2023). Even in mixed-methods studies, qualitative data is frequently used to support predetermined themes rather than allowing themes to emerge organically from participants' narratives.

As a result, many previous research methods have proven inadequate for grasping the essence of how marginalized individuals actually experience social equity policies (Kang & Lee, 2025). Without intentional efforts to explore meaning-making processes from the ground up, the nuanced realities of these populations remain underrepresented in both scholarship and practice (Stensdal & Heggelund, 2023). This gap underlines the importance of phenomenological inquiry, which centers the voices of participants and seeks to uncover the structures of meaning that inform their understanding of the world (Perry & Hasisi, 2020). By adopting an interpretative lens, this study aims to engage with the deeply personal and contextually embedded experiences that define what it means to seek justice in an often indifferent system.

Current approaches to evaluating social equity policies commonly rely on established frameworks that emphasize procedural access, service coverage, and efficiency indicators (Gupta et al., 2025). These practical models, while useful for administrative assessments, often presume that inclusion can be measured through enrollment rates, service usage, or compliance levels. In policy evaluations, success is frequently equated with numeric benchmarks such as the number of identity cards issued, the volume of housing subsidies distributed, or the frequency of community consultations held (Romão & Correia, 2024). While these indicators reflect certain aspects of access, they fail to illuminate how affected individuals interpret, experience, and internalize these interactions.

This reliance on surface-level data has created a significant blind spot in understanding the emotional, psychological, and existential dimensions of policy encounters (Kesberg & Pfattheicher, 2019). Particularly for urban poor migrants, whose lives are shaped by precarity and structural exclusion, access to services is not only about institutional availability but also about perceived legitimacy, dignity, and agency (Shoab & Baruch, 2019). Existing methods rarely engage with these

deeper meanings, and as a result, overlook the ways in which individuals navigate, negotiate, and sometimes resist the very systems designed to serve them.

Given these limitations, there is a pressing need for an alternative approach that centers subjective experience as a legitimate and valuable source of knowledge (Uraon & Kumarasamy, 2024). A phenomenological method offers this pathway by seeking to uncover the essence of human experiences as lived and understood by the individuals themselves (Iqbal et al., 2023). Rather than reducing experience to variables, phenomenology invites a rich exploration of meaning how participants construct understanding, assign value, and respond emotionally to their encounters with public institutions (Kleshinski et al., 2023). This study addresses this gap by employing an interpretative phenomenological approach to examine how urban poor migrants make sense of social equity policies in the context of their daily realities.

Several studies have examined how marginalized populations interact with public services, yet most rely on metrics that overlook personal meaning and lived experience. For instance, (Fadul, 2021) explored urban poverty through voice-based methods but emphasized general patterns rather than individual meaning. Other works, such as (Narisada et al., 2021), used qualitative tools but often employed pre-coded categories that limited interpretive depth. Theoretical discussions on social justice commonly draw from normative frameworks, yet they rarely engage with how justice is subjectively experienced by those on society's margins (Alenizi & Alkhadher, 2022). This gap calls for a method that focuses on meaning-making processes embedded in daily life.

This study adopts an interpretative phenomenological approach to explore how urban poor migrants experience and make sense of social equity policies (Mustafa et al., 2023). The method emphasizes understanding how people interpret their interactions with public institutions based on their own contexts (Varela & Correia, 2023). Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was chosen to answer the central question: how do urban poor migrants perceive justice in their encounters with state services? This approach is especially relevant in unpacking emotional, symbolic, and existential dimensions of policy experience. It allows for a nuanced understanding that goes beyond administrative access to reveal deeper meanings of inclusion and exclusion.

The article begins with an introduction to the broader issue of social equity and its relevance for urban poor communities (Mousa Alriyami et al., 2024). It then narrows the focus to the specific gap in knowledge about lived experience under these policies (Lau et al., 2021). The methodological section details the rationale for using IPA, describes the participant selection and data collection process, and outlines the thematic analysis used. The results section presents four main themes supported by direct participant quotes. Finally, the article concludes with a discussion of implications, limitations, and future directions for research and policy.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study employed an interpretative phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of urban poor migrants navigating public services within the context of social equity policies. Phenomenology was selected as the guiding methodology due to its emphasis on capturing the subjective meanings and deep structures of individual experience (Fife, 2020). By focusing on how participants interpret their realities, this approach enables a nuanced understanding of the emotional, psychological, and social dimensions of marginalization. The interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), grounded in Heideggerian philosophy, was deemed appropriate for examining how individuals construct meaning in response to systemic and structural conditions. This design facilitates a contextualized, narrative-driven investigation that aligns with the study's objective to uncover the essence of participants' encounters with public systems under equity-based policy regimes. To minimize researcher bias, reflexive journaling and regular peer debriefing sessions were employed throughout the research process, ensuring that interpretations remained grounded in participants' accounts rather than the researcher's assumptions.

Participants

Participants consisted of individuals classified as urban poor migrants residing in high-density settlements within metropolitan areas. A purposive sampling strategy was used to identify those with direct experience in accessing or attempting to access public services under existing equity-focused policies. Inclusion criteria required participants to be adults aged 18 or older, with a minimum residency of one year in their current urban location, and with at least one encounter with public services such as healthcare, education, housing, or civil registration within the past two years. Exclusion criteria included individuals currently employed in government administrative roles or those lacking verbal communication ability due to cognitive or physical limitations. A total of 12 participants were included in the final sample, comprising 7 females and 5 males, with ages ranging from 23 to 58 years (mean age: 41). The participants represented diverse ethnic and migratory backgrounds, ensuring a broad spectrum of lived experiences relevant to the research focus. To enhance transferability, detailed demographic and contextual descriptions of participants and their settings are provided to allow readers to assess the applicability of findings to other contexts.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth, face-to-face interviews using a semi-structured interview guide designed to elicit detailed narratives about participants' interactions with public service institutions. Interviews were conducted in participants' homes or community centers to foster a sense of comfort and safety, and lasted between 45 to 90 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded with prior consent and supplemented with field notes capturing non-verbal cues and environmental context. To ensure clarity and relevance, the interview guide was piloted and minor revisions were made to accommodate local dialects and linguistic sensitivities. Data collection continued until thematic saturation was reached and no new significant insights emerged from subsequent interviews. Member checking was conducted with selected participants to verify interpretations, thereby strengthening the credibility of the findings.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to identify core themes reflecting participants' subjective experiences. Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim and reviewed multiple times for immersion. Transcripts were coded manually and with the assistance of NVivo software to enhance data organization and thematic mapping. Initial meaning units were identified and clustered into emergent themes through an iterative process of abstraction, comparison, and synthesis. These themes were then refined into higher-order constructs that captured the essential meanings of participants' lived experiences. The analytic process was guided by IPA's core principle of double hermeneutics, wherein the researcher interprets the participant's interpretation of their experience, thereby enabling the extraction of rich and layered meanings from the data. To ensure dependability, a clear audit trail was maintained, documenting coding decisions, theme development, and analytic reflections for external review.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional research ethics committee prior to data collection. All participants provided informed written consent after being fully briefed on the study's purpose, voluntary nature, and confidentiality measures. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of participants, and all data were stored securely with restricted access. The research process adhered to internationally recognized ethical standards for qualitative research involving human subjects, including respect for autonomy, privacy, and the right to withdraw at any stage without consequence.

RESULTS

"Being Present, Yet Invisible" The Paradox of Recognition Without Representation

Participants consistently expressed a sense of formal inclusion in policy discourse but a simultaneous lack of substantive impact. Their presence in demographic records or community hearings often did not translate into meaningful recognition of their needs.

“I filled out the forms, I sat in the musyawarah... but nothing changed. It's like they saw me, but they didn't hear me.” (Participant 04)

This theme directly addresses the research question by showing how migrants perceive justice as absent despite formal acknowledgment. The quotation illustrates a broader pattern reported by most participants, where statistical recognition failed to secure actual access to services such as healthcare, housing, or education. The recurring experience of being ‘seen but not heard’ reflects a structural gap between procedural inclusion and lived justice.

"A Language We Don't Speak" The Barrier of Bureaucratic and Legal Literacy

Another dominant theme was the alienation experienced through complex administrative systems. Participants described policies and programs in terms of "codes", "forms", and "requirements" they could not decipher.

“Every time I go to the service office, they tell me to come back with documents I've never even heard of. It's like they're speaking another language.” (Participant 02)

This quote exemplifies a common narrative across interviews, where nearly all participants described bureaucratic processes as inaccessible. The theme links to the central question by demonstrating how justice is perceived not as fairness but as exclusion through incomprehensible rules. The pattern reveals that administrative opacity functions as a gatekeeper, systematically constraining access to rights.

"Fighting in Silence" Micro-Acts of Resistance and Survival

Despite structural exclusion, participants were not passive. They narrated small, daily acts of negotiation and defiance: seeking sympathetic clerks, borrowing documents, or joining informal networks of solidarity to decode policy requirements.

“We help each other out. I learned from my neighbor what to say to the officer so he would approve my child's school fee waiver.” (Participant 07)

This illustrative quote reflects a collective strategy shared across participants, underscoring how migrants navigate exclusion by mobilizing informal networks. The linkage to the research question lies in showing how migrants reinterpret justice through community-based solidarity rather than institutional provision. These micro-resistances reveal that agency exists but is shaped by systemic neglect, highlighting a broader pattern of resilience amid marginalization.

"Dreaming Through Broken Promises" Reframing Hope Amid Systemic Disappointment

While disappointment was a recurring sentiment, participants also revealed an enduring hope for a future where equity is not a slogan but a lived reality. They expressed aspirations not only for material well-being but for dignity, belonging, and acknowledgment.

“I still hope one day I don't have to beg for what should already be mine as a citizen.” (Participant 11)

This quotation is representative of a widespread theme where participants, despite repeated exclusions, sustained a sense of hope. The linkage to the research question is that migrants perceived justice not merely as procedural fairness but as the promise of dignity and recognition. Hope functioned both as a coping mechanism and as evidence of how participants continued to assign meaning to policy encounters, even when outcomes were disappointing. Overall, the four themes— invisibility, bureaucratic alienation, micro-resistance, and reframed hope—collectively respond to the central research question by illustrating how urban poor migrants perceive justice in their interactions with state-led equity initiatives. The illustrative quotes are not isolated anecdotes but representative expressions of shared experiences, confirming broader patterns of marginalization, adaptation, and aspiration.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that urban poor migrants experience social equity policies not as inclusive mechanisms but as emotionally and structurally complex encounters marked by exclusion, disempowerment, and cautious hope (Liu et al., 2022). These lived experiences, articulated through the themes of invisibility, bureaucratic alienation, micro-resistance, and reframed hope, provide deep insight into how individuals internalize and respond to the dissonance between policy rhetoric and practical reality (Gur et al., 2020). These findings directly address the research question posed in the introduction, which asked how urban poor migrants perceive justice through their interactions with public service systems.

The study contributes to this question by uncovering how participants make meaning of policy encounters that are often dismissive, depersonalized, and emotionally taxing (Iqbal & Shakoor, 2023). The analysis demonstrates that formal recognition through data or eligibility is not experienced as justice unless accompanied by genuine responsiveness and accessibility. Rather than viewing exclusion as a lack of access alone, participants described it as a felt experience one of erasure, frustration, and resistance (Gniza et al., 2022). This contribution is critical in advancing a phenomenological understanding of justice, where meaning is embedded not in outcomes but in the quality and texture of institutional interaction. The results offer a unique and authentic lens to re-evaluate how equity is operationalized and interpreted by those it aims to serve.

The themes identified in this study both align with and deepen previous findings in the literature (Sibley et al., 2024) highlighted the importance of voice among marginalized urban dwellers, yet this study goes further by exposing how participants' narratives of systemic exclusion are often accompanied by strategies of adaptation and subtle resistance. (Baker et al., 2021) discussed structural pressures in education policy but lacked the interpretive lens needed to grasp emotional disempowerment, which this research makes central. The findings also resonate with Freire's concept of "false generosity," where institutional gestures of inclusion mask deeper patterns of marginalization. Thus, this study not only supports but extends theoretical discussions on justice by integrating existential, emotional, and relational dimensions of policy experience.

The implications of these findings are both practical and conceptual, offering new perspectives for policymakers, social workers, and public service providers engaged in equity-oriented governance (Lambert et al., 2021). At a societal level, the narratives reveal how policies intended to promote inclusion may inadvertently reinforce exclusion if they fail to engage with the lived realities of those they serve. The felt experiences of invisibility and alienation suggest that true equity must go beyond procedural access to include meaningful encounters that respect dignity and cultural understanding. These insights are especially relevant for designing community-based policy interventions that prioritize relational accountability and local responsiveness. From a professional standpoint, the study highlights the need for training public administrators in empathetic communication and culturally sensitive service delivery.

Despite its strengths, this study is subject to several limitations. The sample size, while appropriate for phenomenological inquiry, limits the transferability of findings to broader populations or contexts (van Hall et al., 2024). Participants were selected from a specific urban setting, which may not reflect the experiences of rural migrants or those in different institutional environments. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported narratives introduces the possibility of recall bias or selective disclosure. These limitations underscore the importance of interpreting the findings within their contextual boundaries and avoiding overgeneralization. Nonetheless, they offer valuable insight into a segment of society whose voices are often overlooked.

Future research can build upon these findings by exploring comparative experiences across different urban regions or policy sectors. Longitudinal studies could examine how perceptions of justice evolve over time as policy contexts change. Furthermore, interdisciplinary research that integrates phenomenological insights with legal, sociological, or political frameworks could deepen understanding of systemic barriers and inform more holistic policy design. Ultimately, this study lays the groundwork for a more human-centered discourse on equity that values subjective experience as a legitimate source of policy evaluation and innovation.

CONCLUSION

This study explored how urban poor migrants experience and interpret social equity policies through their daily interactions with public service systems. Using an interpretative phenomenological approach, the research revealed four central themes: formal invisibility, bureaucratic alienation, subtle resistance, and redefined hope. These findings highlight that equity cannot be understood merely through access or service provision, but must also include how individuals perceive fairness, dignity, and inclusion. Unlike earlier phenomenological studies that primarily emphasized exclusion or structural barriers, this study uniquely demonstrates how emotional, relational, and symbolic dimensions—such as hope, micro-resistance, and the paradox of being both visible and invisible—shape migrants’ perceptions of justice. By foregrounding these underexplored dimensions, the research extends phenomenological inquiry beyond descriptive accounts of marginalization to reveal the complex ways individuals actively reinterpret, endure, and negotiate policy encounters. The study contributes a deeper, experience-based understanding of justice that has been overlooked in previous research relying on procedural and quantitative evaluations. This novel contribution lies in positioning lived experience not only as evidence of inequity but also as a source of theoretical insight into how social equity is constituted at the intersection of systemic exclusion and human resilience. By centering the voices of marginalized individuals, this work provides insight for designing more responsive and humane policy frameworks. Future studies may extend this approach across different populations and sectors to further refine our understanding of lived policy experiences.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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