



## Lived Experiences of Justice Among Survivors of Post-Conflict Human Rights Violations

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### Article Info

#### Article history:

Received 30-09-2025

Revised 25-10-2025

Accepted 17-11-2025

#### Keyword:

Justice; Human Rights;  
Survivors; Post-Conflict;  
Lived Experience; Healing

### ABSTRACT

Post-conflict justice is a key theme in human rights and socio-legal studies, focusing on the moral and psychological reconstruction of societies after violence. This study explores how survivors of human rights abuses internalize and interpret justice as a lived experience, emphasizing the human dimension beyond legal frameworks. Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), twelve survivors who participated in truth commissions and community reconciliation programs were interviewed. The analysis revealed four main themes—reclaiming dignity, fragile institutional trust, the silence of collective memory, and justice as healing. These findings indicate that justice is not only a legal construct but also a moral and existential process of restoration and recognition. The phenomenological perspective provided a deeper understanding of how survivors' sense of justice evolves through personal and collective meaning-making. This study contributes to developing survivor-centered justice mechanisms that are empathetic and contextually grounded. However, its scope is limited by the small sample size and the specific post-conflict context, suggesting the need for broader comparative research.



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## INTRODUCTION

In societies emerging from conflict, the pursuit of justice for survivors of human rights violations remains one of the most profound moral and institutional challenges (Frans et al., 2025). Across post-conflict contexts, survivors often find themselves navigating complex systems of truth commissions, reparations programs, and judicial proceedings that promise recognition and redress but frequently fall short of their expectations (Gowen, 2025). The phenomenon of post-conflict justice is not only a legal or political process but also a deeply human experience that intertwines memory, trauma, and the search for dignity. As transitional justice mechanisms evolve globally, the focus has increasingly shifted toward understanding how individuals and communities experience justice beyond formal verdicts and institutional reforms.

Justice, in this setting, is lived as an emotional and existential reality rather than merely an outcome of procedural law. Survivors' experiences reveal tensions between hope and disillusionment between the promise of justice and the reality of bureaucratic and political constraints (Sharp et al., 2025). The social reintegration of survivors, their sense of belonging, and their trust in state institutions are often shaped by how they perceive justice to be enacted or denied (Mukhlis, 2025a). These subjective dimensions of justice remain critical for the reconstruction of moral order in societies recovering from systematic violence (Reyes et al., 2025). Thus, the study of justice in post-conflict settings requires attention to the personal and experiential dimensions that are often overlooked in policy-oriented discourses.

The phenomenon also carries significant cultural and psychological implications. In many societies, collective memory and silence coexist uneasily: survivors are encouraged to “move on,”

while their narratives of suffering risk being marginalized or politicized (Mukhlis, 2025b). This tension illustrates that justice, reconciliation, and healing are not uniform processes but deeply contextual and mediated by social relationships, cultural norms, and personal histories (Hanna, 2025). Understanding how survivors give meaning to their experiences of justice is therefore essential to bridging the gap between institutional mechanisms and lived realities.

Given these complexities, a phenomenological approach provides a valuable framework for exploring the essence of survivors' experiences. Unlike positivist or purely normative analyses, phenomenology prioritizes the subjective meanings that individuals ascribe to their encounters with justice (Vagwala et al., 2025). This approach enables an exploration of how survivors perceive, internalize, and articulate the moral and emotional significance of justice within their lived worlds. Through the lens of phenomenology, justice is not merely a principle to be applied but a phenomenon to be experienced, interpreted, and understood in its full human depth.

Research on the lived experiences of individuals confronting post-conflict justice has emerged as a significant area of inquiry within the broader fields of human rights law, transitional justice, and socio-legal studies (Boom-Cárcamo et al., 2025). Over the past two decades, an increasing number of studies have examined how survivors perceive and respond to justice mechanisms such as truth commissions, international tribunals, and reparations initiatives (Mukhlis, Suradi, et al., 2023). These studies have highlighted that justice is not merely a matter of legal reparation but also an affective and moral process through which survivors reconstruct meaning, agency, and social identity after systemic violence (Savaresi, 2025). The growing attention to survivors' voices underscores a crucial epistemological shift from evaluating justice as an institutional outcome to understanding it as a lived and evolving experience.

Despite this progress, significant methodological challenges remain in capturing the depth and complexity of survivors' subjective experiences (Leandro Maia et al., 2025). Much of the existing literature continues to rely on empirical-legal or policy-oriented frameworks that prioritize procedural efficiency, measurable outcomes, or institutional performance over experiential meaning (Homer et al., 2025). Quantitative or survey-based approaches, while valuable for assessing general trends, often overlook the nuanced emotional, existential, and moral dimensions of justice as experienced by survivors (Mukhlis & Saidah, 2025). These methods tend to fragment the phenomenon into variables and indicators, failing to grasp how justice is felt, internalized, and narrated in everyday life.

Consequently, many previous studies have offered only a partial understanding of how survivors make sense of justice in the aftermath of violence (Diab et al., 2025). The absence of interpretive depth has limited our comprehension of the transformative and at times contradictory meanings that justice holds for those most affected by human rights abuses. In this context, a phenomenological approach becomes not only methodologically appropriate but also epistemologically necessary (Lusasi et al., 2025). It allows for the exploration of justice as a lived phenomenon one that is shaped by memory, emotion, and moral reflection rather than solely by institutional logic (Mukhlis & Abdullah, 2025). By prioritizing first-person accounts and interpretive understanding, phenomenology offers the means to uncover the essential structures of experience that underlie survivors' engagement with justice in post-conflict societies.

Existing approaches to understanding post-conflict justice have largely relied on institutional, legal, and procedural frameworks aimed at measuring effectiveness, accountability, and compliance (Couto et al., 2025). These practical solutions such as truth commissions, reparations programs, and hybrid tribunals have provided valuable insights into structural and policy outcomes (Mukhlis, Janwari, et al., 2023). However, they often privilege administrative success over personal meaning, focusing on how justice is implemented rather than how it is lived. While such frameworks contribute to evaluating institutional performance, they remain insufficient in explaining the moral, emotional, and existential dimensions through which survivors experience justice.

This limitation reveals a critical gap in current scholarship: the lack of deep, interpretive engagement with survivors' subjective experiences of justice as a lived phenomenon (Ren et al., 2025). Prior research has tended to conceptualize justice as a universal or external construct,

neglecting the diverse ways individuals internalize and make sense of it within their social and historical realities (Mukhlis et al., 2024). The human experience of justice—how survivors perceive fairness, recognition, and moral repair—remains underexplored, particularly in contexts where trauma and memory intersect with institutional processes (Liu et al., 2025). As a result, the prevailing understanding of post-conflict justice is often incomplete, failing to capture its transformative or restorative potential as experienced by those most affected.

Addressing this gap requires moving beyond descriptive or outcome-based models toward an exploration of meaning and essence (Pryma, 2025). A phenomenological approach offers a methodological alternative that prioritizes the subjective and interpretive dimensions of experience. By attending to survivors' narratives, perceptions, and reflections, phenomenology seeks to uncover how justice is embodied, understood, and lived in the aftermath of human rights violations (Mukhlis, Maryam, et al., 2023). This interpretive focus allows for a more holistic comprehension of justice not merely as a legal outcome but as a profound human encounter with memory, dignity, and moral reconstruction (Al-Ani et al., 2025). Through this lens, the present study aims to illuminate the essential structures of experience that define how survivors navigate the complex moral landscape of post-conflict justice.

Recent studies have examined how individuals experience justice, reconciliation, and recovery after human rights violations, emphasizing the moral and psychological dimensions of post-conflict societies. Scholars such as (Larsson et al., 2025) have highlighted that justice is not only a structural process but also an experiential one, deeply rooted in survivors' perceptions and emotions. However, much of the existing research has remained descriptive or policy-oriented, offering limited insight into how justice is lived and internalized (Jensen et al., 2025). The phenomenological tradition, particularly within human rights and transitional justice contexts, provides a foundation for re-engaging with justice as a personal and collective lived reality. This perspective situates justice as a moral encounter, shaped by memory, suffering, and resilience.

In this study, phenomenology is adopted as the central methodological framework to explore the essence of survivors' lived experiences in accessing justice. The approach enables a deep examination of the subjective meanings survivors attribute to justice—meanings often overlooked in empirical-legal analyses. By employing Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the study captures both individual sense-making and the shared structures of experience that emerge across narratives (Loen & Skivenes, 2025). This methodological stance directly responds to the gap identified earlier, allowing for a richer, more holistic understanding of justice as a lived phenomenon rather than as an institutional output (Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, & Zulbaidah, 2025). Through this interpretive lens, the study reveals how survivors experience recognition, moral repair, and transformation within post-conflict justice processes.

This article is structured to guide the reader through a logical and interpretive exploration of the phenomenon. The introduction outlines the research context, conceptual background, and rationale for employing phenomenology (King et al., 2025). The Method section details the study design, participant characteristics, data collection, and analytic procedures (Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, Zulbaidah, et al., 2025). The Results section presents the emergent themes derived from participants' narratives, highlighting the essential meanings of their experiences (Varlık et al., 2025). The Discussion then interprets these findings within the broader theoretical and practical landscape of human rights advocacy, followed by the Conclusion, which reflects on the implications of these insights for future research and justice practices.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

### **Study Design**

This study employed a phenomenological design to explore and interpret the lived experiences of survivors of human rights violations in their pursuit of justice within a post-conflict context. The phenomenological approach was selected for its emphasis on uncovering the essence of

subjective human experience, allowing a comprehensive understanding of how individuals construct meaning from complex and often traumatic events.

An interpretative phenomenological framework was adopted, grounded in the principles of Heideggerian hermeneutics, which views human experience as inseparable from its social and historical context. This approach enabled the study to move beyond mere description of experiences toward an interpretative understanding of how survivors perceive, internalize, and articulate justice in their post-conflict realities. The design thus allowed a nuanced examination of the moral, emotional, and existential meanings embedded in survivors' narratives.

### **Participants**

Participants consisted of survivors of human rights abuses who had engaged, directly or indirectly, in post-conflict justice mechanisms such as truth commissions, reparations programs, or community reconciliation processes. Selection was conducted using purposive sampling to ensure that all participants had first-hand experience relevant to the phenomenon under investigation.

Inclusion criteria comprised adults aged between 25 and 60 years, of diverse gender backgrounds, who experienced or witnessed human rights violations during the conflict period and had since participated in justice or advocacy processes. Exclusion criteria involved individuals currently undergoing acute psychological treatment for trauma to avoid re-traumatization during data collection.

A total of 12 participants were included, representing a balanced distribution of gender and regional backgrounds within the post-conflict setting. The sample size followed the phenomenological principle of depth over breadth, ensuring data saturation and richness of meaning rather than numerical generalization.

### **Data Collection**

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews designed to elicit rich, reflective narratives of participants' experiences. Each interview followed a flexible guide that encouraged participants to describe their feelings, interpretations, and sense-making processes regarding justice, recognition, and recovery.

Interviews were conducted face-to-face in confidential and comfortable settings chosen by the participants to promote openness and psychological safety. Each session lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and was audio-recorded with consent. Field notes were taken to capture contextual cues and non-verbal expressions that complemented the verbal data.

All interviews were conducted in participants' preferred language and later transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were carefully translated into English while preserving semantic and emotional accuracy. Data collection continued until thematic saturation was achieved when no new insights or variations in meaning emerged from subsequent interviews.

### **Data Analysis**

Data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which involves a systematic process of identifying and interpreting patterns of meaning across participants' narratives. The analysis proceeded through several iterative stages: reading and re-reading the transcripts to immerse in the data; initial noting of descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual comments; developing emergent themes; clustering related themes into higher-order categories; and finally, synthesizing these into overarching thematic structures that captured the essence of the phenomenon.

NVivo software was utilized to assist in the organization and coding of qualitative data, supporting transparency and traceability in the analytic process. Constant reflection and comparison between individual cases ensured that the final thematic framework represented both shared and unique aspects of participants' lived experiences. The ultimate outcome of the analysis was the articulation of essential meanings reflecting survivors' moral and emotional encounters with justice..

## RESULTS

### Reclaiming Dignity Through Justice

Participants described their pursuit of justice as a personal and collective process of reclaiming dignity that was once stripped away by systematic violence. Justice, in this sense, was not limited to legal proceedings but intertwined with emotional healing and social recognition. One participant stated:

“It was not only about punishment; it was about showing that what happened to us truly mattered that we were not invisible anymore.”

Beyond individual testimonies, this sentiment reflects a broader moral reclamation—justice as a way of reasserting personhood and visibility in a social landscape marked by denial. Survivors collectively positioned justice as a means to restore self-worth, dignity, and belonging. Their engagement in truth-seeking and testimonial acts was both empowering and painful, representing a dialectic between vulnerability and liberation.

### The Fragility of Institutional Trust

A recurring sentiment among participants was a profound ambivalence toward formal justice mechanisms. Many survivors expressed disappointment with legal institutions that failed to deliver timely or impartial outcomes. One interviewee remarked:

“They asked us to speak, but nothing changed. It felt like our pain was documented, not understood.”

Analytically, this illustrates how justice processes risk becoming performative when institutional responsiveness is absent. Survivors’ trust eroded not merely due to inefficiency, but because of the symbolic disconnection between testimony and tangible change. Despite this, their continued engagement with community-based reconciliation suggests an enduring belief in grassroots justice as a more human-centered alternative. This tension underscores the coexistence of cynicism toward state institutions and hope rooted in communal solidarity.

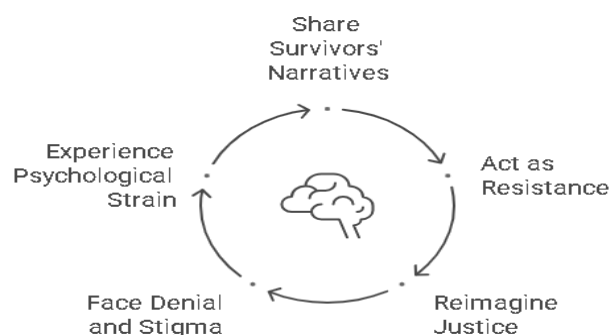
### Collective Memory and the Burden of Silence

The data revealed that the experience of seeking justice was deeply connected to collective memory. Many survivors felt responsible for preserving the truth of their experiences for future generations, even as they struggled with persistent social stigma and cultural pressures to “move on.” As one participant shared:

“We carry the stories of those who didn’t survive. Speaking is painful, but silence kills us slowly.”

This statement encapsulates the moral responsibility embedded in memory work. Survivors’ narratives transcend personal trauma, functioning as acts of resistance against societal amnesia. Analytically, justice here is reimagined as remembrance — a moral obligation to sustain collective awareness. Yet, the persistence of denial and stigma magnifies emotional exhaustion, revealing that justice, when unsupported socially, can paradoxically perpetuate psychological strain.

### The Cycle of Memory Work and Justice



### **Justice as a Pathway to Healing**

For many participants, justice symbolized not retribution but transformation. Healing was understood as an ongoing process facilitated through recognition, empathy, and acknowledgment of harm. One respondent described:

“When the truth was finally told, I could breathe again. Justice gave me peace, even if the perpetrators were never punished.”

This perspective indicates that justice operates as both a psychological and existential force, validating survivors’ experiences even in the absence of punitive outcomes. The analytical synthesis reveals that justice functions therapeutically—bridging trauma and recovery through meaning-making. Healing, therefore, emerges not as closure but as an ongoing reconfiguration of identity within renewed moral and social frameworks.

### **DISCUSSION**

The findings of this study revealed that survivors’ pursuit of post-conflict justice is an existential process rooted in the restoration of dignity, trust, and moral order. The essence of the phenomenon lies in the survivors’ perception of justice as both a deeply personal and collective journey of healing, recognition, and reconciliation a process that transcends legal outcomes to encompass emotional and moral transformation.

#### **Contribution of Findings to the Research Question**

The present study contributes to a deeper understanding of how survivors of human rights abuses experience justice as a lived and evolving phenomenon rather than as a fixed institutional construct. By addressing the central research question How do survivors of human rights violations make sense of justice in post-conflict contexts? this study highlights the moral and emotional dimensions often excluded from conventional discourses on transitional justice.

The analysis demonstrates that survivors interpret justice not merely as a retributive act but as a restorative and transformative process that affirms their humanity (Howlader et al., 2025). The findings underscore that the act of testifying, seeking truth, or engaging in reconciliation initiatives represents a reclamation of moral agency. These experiences foster a sense of empowerment even amid systemic failures or political inertia. In this way, justice becomes an act of meaning-making a moral negotiation between memory, pain, and hope.

The contribution of this research lies in its illumination of the lived moral experience of justice. Through a phenomenological lens, it reveals that survivors’ pursuit of justice is not a passive response to legal procedures but an active engagement with personal and collective identity reconstruction (Caswell, 2025). This insight enriches current understandings of post-conflict recovery by emphasizing that justice is both an outcome and an experience a continuous process through which survivors redefine their relationship with self, society, and state.

#### **Relationship with Previous Literature and Theory**

The findings resonate with existing theories of restorative and transitional justice that emphasize recognition, healing, and moral repair as central to reconciliation (Lederach, 1997; Clark, 2018; Daly, 2020). Similar to these frameworks, this study confirms that justice gains meaning when it restores victims’ sense of humanity and social belonging. However, the phenomenological interpretation presented here extends prior discussions by foregrounding the subjective interiority of justice how survivors feel, remember, and embody justice in their lived realities.

Whereas prior empirical studies have focused primarily on institutional effectiveness or policy outcomes, the current findings reveal that survivors’ experiences are shaped by existential dimensions often absent from policy discourses. For instance, the theme of “reclaiming dignity through justice” aligns with (Hansen, 2025) philosophical notion of recognition as a moral act, while the “fragility of institutional trust” reflects (Haas & Davis, 2025) concept of late-modern disembedded

trust. These connections position justice not simply as a juridical phenomenon but as an ethical encounter between human vulnerability and institutional response.

Furthermore, the findings challenge the adequacy of purely procedural conceptions of justice by demonstrating that survivors' meaning-making processes are inherently relational and contextual. Justice is understood as an affective and symbolic reconstruction of order, echoing phenomenological perspectives advanced by scholars such as (Zhang et al., 2025), who argue that meaning emerges from embodied, situated experience. Thus, this study contributes theoretically by reframing justice as a lived moral phenomenon, integrating phenomenological interpretation into the broader discourse of human rights advocacy and transitional justice research.

### **Implications of the Findings**

The findings of this study hold significant theoretical, social, and practical implications. From a theoretical standpoint, they expand the understanding of justice as an experiential and moral process rather than solely an institutional one. This phenomenological interpretation redefines justice as a lived moral encounter where survivors negotiate meaning through memory, pain, and resilience (Dardas et al., 2025). Socially, the results reveal that recognition and moral restoration are as critical to survivors' healing as institutional accountability. In post-conflict societies, acknowledging survivors' narratives is therefore not only an ethical act but also a political necessity that contributes to rebuilding collective trust and social cohesion.

Professionally, these findings offer guidance for practitioners in human rights advocacy, transitional justice, and psychosocial rehabilitation. Understanding justice through survivors' lived experiences underscores the importance of designing justice mechanisms that prioritize participation, empathy, and recognition (Minkov et al., 2025). Programs that integrate emotional and symbolic dimensions such as storytelling, community truth-telling, and culturally grounded reconciliation efforts can better meet survivors' needs. Thus, the study contributes to reshaping how justice interventions are conceptualized, implemented, and evaluated within diverse socio-cultural contexts.

### **Limitations of the Study**

As with all qualitative inquiries, the interpretative nature of this study introduces certain limitations. The analysis is grounded in a specific post-conflict setting and based on a relatively small group of participants; therefore, the findings are not intended to be generalized beyond their contextual boundaries. The interpretative phenomenological approach emphasizes depth over breadth, which may limit the diversity of perspectives represented (Peng et al., 2025). Additionally, the emotional intensity of participants' narratives may have influenced the articulation of their experiences, potentially shaping the interpretive outcomes.

While these constraints are inherent in phenomenological research, they do not diminish the study's validity; rather, they highlight the contextual richness of lived experience. The insights derived here are intended to illuminate meanings and processes, not to establish universal claims. Future research may address these boundaries by incorporating comparative cross-cultural analyses or longitudinal approaches to trace how survivors' interpretations of justice evolve over time.

### **Prospective Directions for Future Research**

Building upon these findings, future research could deepen the exploration of how justice is experienced across different sociocultural or political environments. Comparative phenomenological studies may uncover variations in how survivors from distinct historical and cultural contexts construct meaning around justice, reconciliation, and healing. Further inquiry could also examine the intersection of justice experiences with gender, community belonging, or intergenerational memory, expanding the moral and psychological dimensions of transitional justice research.

In addition, integrating phenomenology with other interpretive traditions such as narrative inquiry or critical hermeneutics could yield more comprehensive insights into how survivors narrate and transform their experiences over time. These future directions will not only enrich theoretical frameworks within human rights law and advocacy but also inform the development of more

empathetic, human-centered justice practices that genuinely reflect the lived realities of those they aim to serve.

## CONCLUSION

This study explored the lived experiences of post-conflict human rights abuse survivors in their pursuit of justice, emphasizing justice as an existential and moral process rather than a purely institutional mechanism. The findings revealed that survivors perceive justice as a transformative journey of reclaiming dignity, rebuilding trust, and achieving moral restoration within fractured social realities. Through the phenomenological approach, this research illuminated how justice is embodied and interpreted through survivors' personal narratives, offering a deeper understanding of its emotional and ethical dimensions. The study addressed the limitations of prior research by shifting focus from procedural evaluations to the subjective meanings of justice as lived and felt experiences.

Beyond theoretical insights, the findings underscore the urgent need for justice initiatives and human rights policies that move beyond retributive frameworks toward survivor-centered, empathetic, and context-sensitive approaches. Policymakers and practitioners should incorporate survivors' moral and emotional perspectives when designing post-conflict justice mechanisms, ensuring that legal reforms are accompanied by psychosocial and community-based support. These insights contribute to advancing human rights advocacy and transitional justice practices that prioritize empathy, recognition, and community-based healing. In doing so, this study provides a foundation for reimagining justice not only as a moral restoration but also as a guiding principle for inclusive governance and sustainable peacebuilding. Future research may extend these findings by examining cross-cultural variations and integrating phenomenology with other interpretive frameworks to enrich the understanding of justice as a lived human phenomenon.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. All funding and support for this research were provided transparently by the Human Rights Research and Advocacy Fund (HRRAF) under the Post-Conflict Justice and Social Reconstruction Program 2024, with no influence on the study's design, analysis, interpretation, or conclusions.

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