



Lived Experiences of Vulnerable Groups in Social Justice and Equity Policy Implementation

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Article Info

Article history:

Received 28-01-2026

Revised 03-03-2026

Accepted 17-03-2026

Keyword:

Lived Experiences; Social Justice; Equity Policies; Vulnerable Groups; Policy Implementation; Interpretive Analysis

ABSTRACT

Social justice and equity policies aim to address structural inequality and promote fairness for vulnerable populations. However, research has primarily focused on policy design and institutional outcomes, with limited attention to how these policies are experienced by those directly affected. This study explores how vulnerable groups experience, interpret, and respond to the implementation of social justice policies in their everyday lives. An interpretative phenomenological approach was employed to explore participants' lived experiences and the meanings they attach to policy encounters. Data were generated through in-depth interviews with individuals from vulnerable groups and analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis to identify key experiential themes. The findings show that justice is perceived as emotional and relational, often viewed as distant and conditional despite inclusive policy intentions. Participants described feelings of invisibility, power asymmetry, and emotional burden in interactions with bureaucratic systems. These findings contribute to policy design by emphasizing the need for policies that are not only formally equitable but also experientially just.



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INTRODUCTION

Social justice and equity policies have become central to contemporary public policy agendas across diverse social and political contexts (Yusoff & Djawas, 2025). Governments and international institutions increasingly frame social welfare, inclusion, and redistribution initiatives around principles of fairness, equal opportunity, and protection of vulnerable populations (Mukhlis, 2025a; Mukhlis & Saidah, 2025). These policies are commonly designed to address structural inequalities related to poverty, access to public services, and social exclusion, and are often articulated through formal policy documents, legal frameworks, and administrative regulations. Within this broader context, social justice is typically presented as a normative goal, emphasizing rights, entitlements, and institutional responsibility.

Beyond their formal design, however, social justice and equity policies are enacted and encountered within everyday social realities (B. Bour et al., 2024). At the level of implementation, these policies intersect with bureaucratic practices, power relations, and cultural expectations that shape how they are experienced by individuals and communities. For groups identified as vulnerable such as those facing economic hardship, social marginalization, or limited political voice policy encounters are not merely administrative processes but lived experiences that carry emotional, relational, and symbolic meanings (Suárez-Ortega et al., 2024). Justice, in this sense, is not only a legal or structural concept but also a subjective experience that is felt, interpreted, and negotiated in daily life.

The relevance of this phenomenon lies in its human dimension. While social justice policies are intended to promote inclusion and equity, their impact cannot be fully understood without considering how they are perceived and experienced by those most directly affected. Experiences of recognition, dignity, frustration, or exclusion shape individuals' relationships with institutions and influence their trust in the state (Ramírez et al., 2025). These subjective dimensions are particularly

salient in contexts where formal policy commitments to equity coexist with persistent feelings of marginalization among policy beneficiaries (Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, & Zulbaidah, 2025; Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, Zulbaidah, et al., 2025). Understanding social justice, therefore, requires attention not only to policy outcomes but also to how justice is lived and made meaningful by individuals within specific social contexts.

This condition underscores the need for research approaches that prioritize experiential meaning rather than solely normative evaluation. Phenomenological inquiry offers a framework for exploring how social justice and equity policies are experienced from the perspective of those who live with their consequences (Tillson & Lewis, 2024). By focusing on lived experience, phenomenology allows for an in-depth understanding of how abstract ideals of justice are translated into everyday encounters, emotions, and interpretations. Such an approach is essential for illuminating dimensions of social justice that remain obscured when analysis is confined to policy design or structural indicators alone.

Existing scholarship on social justice and equity policies has largely concentrated on normative frameworks, institutional effectiveness, and measurable policy outcomes. Studies frequently assess whether policies achieve predefined goals related to redistribution, access, or compliance with legal standards of fairness (Mahfudz, 2023). While these contributions are valuable, they tend to privilege the perspectives of policymakers and institutions, leaving limited space for the voices of those who experience policies in practice. As a result, the lived realities of vulnerable groups often remain peripheral within policy analysis.

Recent critical and qualitative studies have begun to acknowledge this limitation by calling for greater attention to bottom-up perspectives and experiential knowledge (Camp et al., 2025). Nevertheless, empirical research that systematically examines how vulnerable individuals experience, interpret, and respond to social justice policies remains relatively scarce. In particular, there is limited understanding of how individuals make sense of the tension between policy promises of inclusion and their everyday encounters with bureaucratic systems (Mukhlis, Maryam, et al., 2023; Mukhlis et al., 2024). Questions surrounding how justice is felt, how exclusion is emotionally processed, and how these experiences shape trust or disengagement from the state are still underexplored.

This gap highlights the importance of adopting an interpretative phenomenological perspective to examine social justice and equity policies as lived phenomena (Li & Lin, 2025). By centering on participants' subjective experiences, such an approach makes it possible to reveal how justice is understood not as an abstract principle, but as a meaningful and sometimes contested aspect of everyday life. This study responds to this need by focusing on the lived experiences of vulnerable groups, thereby contributing to a more nuanced and human-centered understanding of social justice and equity policies.

Current understandings of social justice and equity policies are largely shaped by practical and institutional approaches that prioritize policy design, implementation efficiency, and measurable outcomes (Nkansah, 2025). Within this framework, social justice is commonly assessed through indicators such as program coverage, eligibility compliance, and distributional effects. These approaches have generated important insights into whether policies function as intended at a structural level and whether they align with normative principles of fairness and equality (Mukhlis, Janwari, et al., 2023; Mukhlis & Abdullah, 2025). However, they tend to conceptualize policy beneficiaries primarily as recipients of services rather than as meaning-making subjects whose experiences shape the lived reality of justice.

A key limitation of these dominant approaches lies in their restricted capacity to capture the depth of human experience embedded in policy encounters (Sanchez Neto et al., 2024). Quantitative evaluations and normative policy analyses often overlook how individuals emotionally, relationally, and symbolically experience social justice initiatives. As a result, the ways in which vulnerable groups interpret fairness, navigate bureaucratic processes, and respond to perceived inclusion or exclusion remain insufficiently understood (Sovacool et al., 2025). This gap leads to an incomplete picture of social justice, where formal success at the policy level may coexist with persistent feelings of invisibility, frustration, or mistrust among those the policies aim to support.

An alternative and necessary response to this limitation is the adoption of a phenomenological approach that foregrounds lived experience as a legitimate and essential source of knowledge (Susana et al., 2025). Phenomenology offers the conceptual and methodological tools to explore how social justice and equity policies are experienced from within, revealing the meanings individuals assign to policy encounters and the emotional and relational dimensions that accompany them. By focusing on the essence of these experiences, phenomenological inquiry enables a more holistic understanding of social justice one that integrates structural intent with experiential reality (Dikuraisyin et al., 2024). Addressing this knowledge gap through phenomenology is crucial for advancing theory and informing policy practices that are not only formally equitable but also experientially just.

Previous studies on social justice and equity policies have primarily examined institutional frameworks, policy effectiveness, and normative principles of fairness. A growing body of qualitative research has begun to address the experiences of policy beneficiaries, highlighting issues of recognition, dignity, and exclusion within policy implementation. Theoretical perspectives on social justice emphasize that justice is not only a structural condition but also a lived and relational experience shaped by social interactions (Lubis et al., 2025). Methodologically, earlier studies have often relied on descriptive qualitative approaches that document experiences without fully engaging with participants' processes of meaning-making. Consequently, the experiential depth and subjective interpretation of justice within everyday policy encounters remain insufficiently explored.

This study addresses this gap by adopting an interpretative phenomenological approach to examine how vulnerable groups experience and make sense of social justice and equity policies. Phenomenology is employed to access the meanings embedded in participants' lived experiences rather than to evaluate policy performance (Herman & Rajagukguk, 2025). By focusing on subjective interpretation, this approach provides insight into how abstract ideals of justice are translated into emotional, relational, and practical realities. The study responds directly to the knowledge gap by foregrounding participants' voices as central sources of understanding (Mukhlis, 2025b; Mukhlis, Suradi, et al., 2023). In doing so, it offers a deeper and more human-centered account of social justice policy implementation.

This article is structured to guide the reader through a coherent exploration of the phenomenon under study. It begins with an introduction that outlines the broader context of social justice and equity policies and identifies the knowledge gap addressed (Setiawan et al., 2024). The methodological section then explains the phenomenological approach, participant selection, data collection, and analytical procedures. The results section presents the essential themes derived from participants' lived experiences. Finally, the discussion and conclusion sections situate the findings within existing literature and reflect on their theoretical and practical implications.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study employed a phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of vulnerable groups in relation to the implementation of social justice and equity policies. Phenomenology was selected because it is specifically concerned with understanding how individuals experience, interpret, and assign meaning to particular phenomena within their everyday contexts (Lutz & Knox, 2014; McNabb, 2015). This design is particularly relevant for examining social justice policies, as it allows for an in-depth exploration of how abstract policy ideals are encountered, felt, and negotiated in lived reality.

An interpretative phenomenological approach was adopted, drawing on the philosophical foundations of Heideggerian phenomenology. This approach emphasizes interpretation (*Verstehen*) and acknowledges that experiences are always situated within social, historical, and political contexts. By focusing on participants' meaning-making processes, this approach enabled a nuanced understanding of how justice, equity, and state policies are experienced beyond formal policy objectives.

Participants

Participants consisted of individuals identified as belonging to vulnerable social groups who had direct experience with social justice or equity-related public policies (Hillman & Radel, 2018; Migdal, 2018). Selection was conducted using purposive sampling to ensure that participants possessed rich, first-hand experiences relevant to the phenomenon under investigation.

Inclusion criteria included: (a) adults aged 18 years or older, (b) direct engagement with or receipt of benefits from social justice or equity policies, and (c) the ability to articulate personal experiences related to policy implementation. Individuals without direct experience of such policies or those unable to participate in in-depth interviews were excluded.

A total of 12 participants took part in the study, comprising men and women from diverse socio-economic backgrounds. Participants ranged in age from early adulthood to late middle age, providing varied perspectives on policy encounters (Fife, 2020; Kawamura, 2020). These demographic characteristics were considered essential for contextualizing the diversity of lived experiences without aiming for representativeness.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews designed to elicit rich descriptions of participants' lived experiences. An interview guide was used to facilitate consistency across interviews while allowing flexibility for participants to elaborate on issues they considered significant. Questions focused on experiences of accessing policies, perceptions of fairness, emotional responses to bureaucratic processes, and interactions with policy implementers.

Interviews were conducted in settings chosen to ensure privacy and participant comfort, including community spaces or participants' homes when appropriate. Each interview lasted approximately 60–90 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants' consent. Field notes were taken to capture contextual details and non-verbal cues that supported interpretation (Carreiras & Castro, 2012; Iosifides, 2016). Data collection continued until experiential saturation was reached, indicated by repetition of themes across interviews.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed the principles of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim prior to analysis. Transcripts were read repeatedly to achieve immersion in the data and to develop a holistic understanding of each participant's account.

Analysis proceeded through several iterative stages: initial noting to capture descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual elements; identification of emergent meaning units; and clustering of related meanings into thematic patterns. Themes were first developed idiographically within individual cases before being examined across cases to identify shared experiential structures (Daly, 2007; Longhofer et al., 2012). Qualitative data analysis software (NVivo) was used to support data organization and coding, although interpretative decisions remained grounded in close engagement with the transcripts.

This analytical process enabled the identification of essential themes that reflected how participants experienced and made sense of social justice and equity policies in their daily lives.

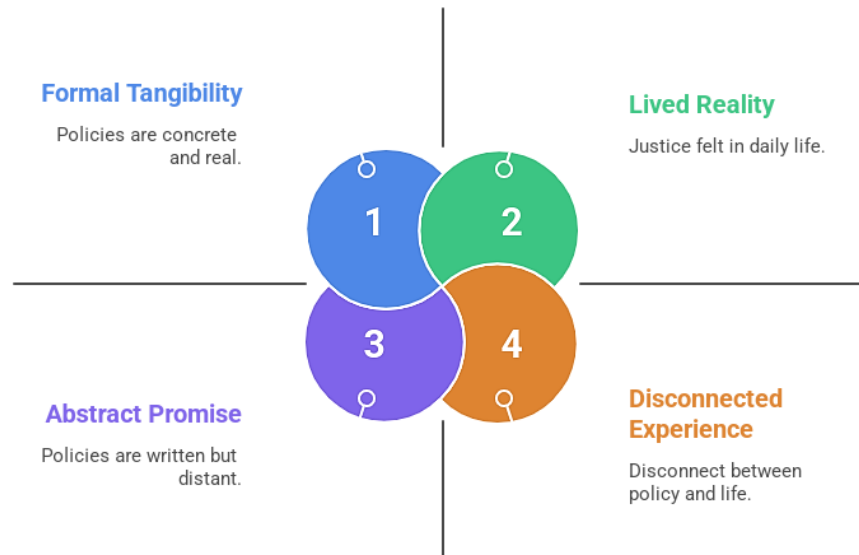
RESULTS

Experiencing Justice as a Distant and Abstract Promise Participants consistently described social justice policies as something that exists formally but feels distant in practice. While policies are officially framed as inclusive and fair, participants experienced them as abstract promises that rarely translate into meaningful support in their daily lives. Justice, in this sense, was perceived more as a rhetorical concept than as a lived reality.

Several participants expressed a sense of disconnection between policy language and their actual experiences. One participant noted:

“On paper, the policy says everyone has equal rights. But in real life, I don’t feel those rights at all. Justice feels like something written for others, not for people like me.” (P4)

This quote illustrates how justice is experienced as something externally defined by the state, rather than as a tangible condition that shapes participants’ lived realities. The formal discourse of equality did not resonate with their everyday struggles, reinforcing a perception that justice remains symbolic rather than experiential. **Justice Experience**



Feeling Invisible within Inclusive Policy Frameworks

Despite being identified as policy beneficiaries, participants frequently articulated feelings of invisibility. Inclusion, as promised by social justice and equity policies, was experienced as procedural rather than relational. Participants felt recognized as data points or administrative categories, but not as individuals with complex needs and lived realities.

One participant explained:

“They call us ‘beneficiaries,’ but no one really listens to us. We are counted, registered, and processed, but never truly seen.” (P7)

This participant’s statement highlights how feelings of invisibility were reinforced through bureaucratic encounters where participants felt reduced to documents and eligibility criteria. The policy process, rather than empowering them, often amplified feelings of marginalization. Inclusion, therefore, was experienced as conditional and superficial, lacking genuine acknowledgment of participants’ voices and agency.

Emotional Burden of Navigating Bureaucratic Justice

Participants’ narratives revealed that engaging with social justice policies involved a significant emotional burden. Feelings of frustration, humiliation, and exhaustion were recurrent, particularly during interactions with administrative systems. Justice was not only evaluated in terms of outcomes but also through the emotional experience of accessing those outcomes.

As one participant stated:

“Every time I have to deal with the office, I feel small. I have to explain my situation again and again, as if I’m begging, not claiming a right.” (P2)

This verbatim quote emphasizes how emotional experiences shaped participants’ interpretation of the legitimacy of social justice policies. The process of accessing support often undermined their sense of dignity, leading them to question whether the policy truly embodied justice or merely managed poverty and vulnerability.

Power Asymmetry and the Silencing of Lived Experience

A prominent theme across narratives was the perceived imbalance of power between policy implementers and beneficiaries. Participants felt that their experiences and perspectives carried little weight in decision-making processes. The authority to define what counts as “fair” or “deserving” was seen as residing entirely with institutions.

One participant reflected:

“They decide what justice means for us. Even when we speak, it doesn’t change anything. Our experiences don’t seem to matter.” (P9)

This direct quote highlights how power asymmetry contributed to a sense of voicelessness. Participants experienced policies as something done to them rather than with them, reinforcing the perception that justice is imposed rather than co-constructed.

Between Trust, Resistance, and Resignation toward the State

Participants’ responses to social justice policies varied, ranging from cautious trust to quiet resistance and eventual resignation. Some initially believed in the promise of justice, only to become disillusioned over time. Others developed adaptive strategies, complying outwardly while emotionally distancing themselves from the system.

As one participant expressed:

“At first, I trusted the system. Now, I just do what is required and expect nothing more. That way, I don’t get disappointed.” (P11)

This quote illustrates how lived experiences of policy implementation shape participants’ evolving relationships with the state. Justice was not experienced as a stable condition, but as a fragile and often eroding expectation influenced by repeated encounters with institutional practices.

Taken together, the findings reveal that social justice and equity policies are experienced by vulnerable groups not merely as regulatory frameworks, but as deeply personal and emotional phenomena. Justice emerges as something that is felt, questioned, negotiated, and sometimes abandoned in everyday life. Participants’ lived experiences, illustrated through their quotes, expose a persistent gap between the normative ideals of social justice policies and their practical, relational, and emotional realities at the level of implementation.

DISCUSSION

Summary of the Main Findings

This study reveals that social justice and equity policies are experienced by vulnerable groups as lived, emotional, and relational phenomena rather than as purely institutional arrangements. The findings directly address the central question posed in the Introduction by showing how justice is perceived, interpreted, and negotiated in everyday encounters with policy implementation.

Contribution of the Findings to the Research Question

The findings contribute to answering the research question by demonstrating that vulnerable groups experience social justice policies through a complex interplay of meaning, emotion, and power relations. Rather than encountering justice as a stable or guaranteed condition, participants described it as distant, conditional, and often disconnected from their lived realities. This insight deepens understanding of how policy ideals are translated or fail to be translated into meaningful experiences at the ground level.

By foregrounding participants’ interpretations, this study highlights that justice is not merely evaluated through policy outcomes but through how individuals feel recognized, respected, or marginalized in policy encounters (Naheed, 2024). The themes of invisibility, emotional burden, and power asymmetry illustrate how institutional processes shape subjective experiences of justice. These experiences, in turn, influence participants’ trust, resistance, or resignation toward the state, offering a nuanced answer to how vulnerable groups respond to social justice policies in practice.

Importantly, the findings extend existing knowledge by revealing that experiences of justice are not uniform, even among individuals exposed to the same policies. Justice emerges as a fragile and evolving experience, shaped by repeated interactions with bureaucratic systems. This contribution emphasizes that understanding social justice requires attention to lived meaning, not only to formal policy intent.

Relationship to Previous Literature and Theory

The findings align with theoretical perspectives that conceptualize social justice as both a structural and experiential phenomenon. Scholars such as Fraser (2018) have argued that justice involves not only redistribution and recognition but also lived experiences of dignity and participation. The present study complements this view by empirically illustrating how recognition is often absent in policy encounters, leading participants to feel unseen despite formal inclusion.

The findings also resonate with critical policy studies that challenge top-down conceptions of policy effectiveness. Bacchi's (2017) argument that policies shape subjects through discourse is reflected in participants' experiences of being categorized and processed rather than engaged as active agents. However, this study extends prior work by moving beyond discursive analysis to capture the emotional and relational dimensions of policy encounters as lived experiences.

At the methodological level, the study supports calls within phenomenological research to prioritize meaning-making processes in social policy analysis. While previous qualitative studies have documented dissatisfaction with welfare systems (Dinika, 2025), this study adds depth by interpreting how such dissatisfaction is rooted in experiences of powerlessness and emotional strain. By situating these experiences within participants' broader life contexts, the findings contribute to a more holistic understanding of social justice as something that is felt, negotiated, and, at times, withdrawn from in everyday life.

Implications of the Findings

The findings of this study carry important scientific and practical implications for understanding and advancing social justice and equity policies. From a theoretical perspective, the results reinforce the view that justice cannot be fully understood through institutional design or policy outcomes alone, but must also be examined as a lived experience shaped by emotional, relational, and contextual factors. By illuminating how vulnerable groups experience justice as distant, conditional, and emotionally demanding, this study contributes to a more human-centered understanding of social justice that integrates structural intent with experiential meaning. Such an understanding is essential for enriching theoretical debates on justice by grounding them in everyday lived realities.

From a practical standpoint, the findings suggest that policy effectiveness should be evaluated not only by coverage or compliance, but also by how policies are experienced by their intended beneficiaries (Sabri & Nastiti, 2025). Experiences of invisibility, power asymmetry, and emotional burden indicate that policy implementation processes may unintentionally undermine dignity and trust, even when policies are formally inclusive. These insights are relevant beyond the specific context of this study, as similar dynamics are likely to occur in other settings where vulnerable populations interact with bureaucratic systems. Attending to lived experience can therefore inform more responsive and ethically grounded policy practices that align institutional objectives with human needs.

Limitations of the Study

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings of this study. First, the phenomenological design emphasizes depth of understanding rather than breadth, which limits the generalizability of the findings to broader populations. The study focuses on a specific group of participants within particular social and policy contexts, and their experiences may not fully represent those of other vulnerable groups or policy environments. Second, the reliance on self-reported experiences means that the findings are shaped by participants' reflections and interpretations at a particular moment in time.

Additionally, the interpretative nature of phenomenological analysis involves an inevitable level of subjectivity, as meanings are co-constructed through engagement with participants' narratives.

While strategies such as reflexivity and transparency were employed to enhance credibility, alternative interpretations of the data remain possible (Rodríguez-Vera et al., 2025). These limitations do not diminish the value of the findings but instead highlight the contextual and situated nature of experiential knowledge.

Prospective Directions for Future Research

The findings of this study open several avenues for future research within the field of social justice and equity policy. Further phenomenological studies could explore similar experiences across different policy domains or cultural contexts to examine how meanings of justice vary across social settings. Comparative studies involving multiple groups or institutional environments may also deepen understanding of how structural conditions shape lived experiences of justice.

Future research could also integrate phenomenological insights with other qualitative or mixed-method approaches to examine how experiential meanings interact with policy outcomes over time. By building on the experiential foundations established in this study, subsequent research may contribute to more comprehensive frameworks for evaluating and designing social justice policies that are not only formally equitable but also experientially just.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how vulnerable groups experience and interpret the implementation of social justice and equity policies in their everyday lives. The findings demonstrate that justice is lived as an emotional and relational experience, often perceived as distant and conditional despite formal commitments to inclusion and fairness. By foregrounding participants' lived meanings, the study addresses limitations in prior research that focused primarily on institutional design and policy outcomes. The results show that experiences of invisibility, power asymmetry, and emotional burden shape how individuals relate to the state and evaluate the legitimacy of social justice policies. These contributions advance understanding of social justice by integrating experiential perspectives into policy analysis.

Implications for policy reform include the need to design and evaluate policies not only based on formal equity but also through the lens of lived experiences. Policymakers should ensure that vulnerable groups' voices are genuinely heard and integrated into the decision-making process, addressing the emotional and relational aspects of justice. Furthermore, it is crucial to create policies that are both procedurally fair and experientially just.

Future research could explore comparative studies across different cultural or national contexts to understand how the lived experiences of vulnerable groups may differ in varying policy environments. Additionally, integrating quantitative methods could offer a broader analysis of how widespread these experiences are, and how they correlate with formal measures of policy success. Combining both qualitative and quantitative approaches would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of social justice policies.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. The research was conducted independently, and no financial or personal relationships influenced the study design, data collection, analysis, interpretation of the findings, or the decision to submit the manuscript for publication.

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