

Lived Experiences of Justice-Seeking among Gender-Based Violence Survivors

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ABSTRACT

Gender-based violence remains a significant human rights issue, yet limited research has examined how survivors themselves experience and interpret the process of seeking justice beyond formal legal outcomes. This study uses an interpretative phenomenological approach to explore how survivors of gender-based violence make sense of their experiences in accessing justice. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews with survivors who had engaged with legal or advocacy systems and analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis. The findings reveal that survivors experience justice through interconnected stages of vulnerability, institutional ambivalence, social stigma, and the gradual reconstruction of agency and selfhood. Justice is understood not merely as legal resolution but as a process of recognition, dignity, and restored agency. These findings contribute to a deeper understanding of justice as a lived experience and highlight the need for more responsive, survivor-centered legal and advocacy practices in policy and future research.



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INTRODUCTION

Gender-based violence remains a persistent and deeply rooted global human rights concern, affecting individuals across diverse social, cultural, and legal contexts. It encompasses a wide range of harmful acts, including physical, sexual, psychological, and economic violence, which disproportionately impact women and marginalized groups. International human rights frameworks, such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and various United Nations declarations, have emphasized the obligation of states to prevent violence, protect survivors, and ensure access to justice (Adyan & Anditya, 2025; Michaelsen & Anstis, 2025). Despite these normative advancements, the gap between legal standards and lived realities continues to pose significant challenges, particularly in contexts where social norms, institutional barriers, and structural inequalities intersect to limit effective protection and redress.

The relevance of gender-based violence extends beyond its legal categorization as a violation of rights; it profoundly shapes the lived experiences, identities, and social positioning of survivors. Access to justice, in this regard, is not merely a procedural pathway but a deeply personal and often emotionally charged process (Dall'Agnola, 2025; Wise et al., 2025). Survivors must navigate complex systems while confronting fear, stigma, and uncertainty, which are frequently reinforced by societal attitudes and institutional practices. Previous studies have highlighted that survivors' interactions with legal systems are often marked by ambivalence, where institutions serve simultaneously as sources of potential protection and spaces of secondary victimization. These experiences underscore that justice is not experienced solely through formal outcomes, but through relational dynamics, recognition, and the extent to which individuals feel heard and validated within the process.

In light of these complexities, there is a growing need to move beyond normative and policy-oriented analyses toward a deeper understanding of how justice is experienced and interpreted by those directly affected (Kiswaga et al., 2025; Omar Elsaltani & Foster, 2025a). Phenomenological inquiry

offers a valuable lens for exploring the meanings that survivors attach to their experiences of seeking justice, including how they perceive institutional responses, negotiate social pressures, and reconstruct their sense of self in the aftermath of violence. By focusing on lived experience, this approach enables a more nuanced understanding of the gap between legal frameworks and human realities, revealing dimensions of justice that may remain invisible within doctrinal or quantitative research. Such exploration is essential for informing more responsive legal practices, survivor-centered policies, and advocacy strategies that are grounded in the realities of those they are intended to serve.

In recent years, research focusing on the lived experiences of survivors of gender-based violence in accessing justice has gained increasing attention within the broader field of human rights law and advocacy. This sub-area has become particularly important as scholars and practitioners recognize that legal frameworks alone cannot fully explain how justice is encountered, interpreted, and evaluated by those directly affected. Studies have begun to highlight that survivors' experiences are shaped not only by legal provisions but also by interpersonal interactions, institutional cultures, and socio-cultural expectations that influence whether justice is perceived as accessible, meaningful, or even attainable (Brockbank & Gazso, 2025; Omar Elsaltani & Foster, 2025b). As a result, understanding justice from the perspective of lived experience has emerged as a critical dimension for advancing both theory and practice in human rights protection.

However, capturing the depth and complexity of these experiences presents significant methodological challenges. Much of the existing literature in human rights law has traditionally relied on doctrinal analysis, policy evaluation, or quantitative approaches that prioritize measurable indicators such as reporting rates, case outcomes, or institutional performance. While these approaches provide valuable insights into structural and legal dimensions, they often fail to account for the subjective meanings, emotional processes, and relational dynamics that define survivors' engagement with justice systems (Gamarra-Amaya, 2025; Muslimin et al., 2024). Even within qualitative research, some studies adopt broad descriptive methods that do not fully explore how individuals interpret and make sense of their experiences over time. This limitation becomes particularly evident in contexts involving trauma, stigma, and power asymmetries, where participants' narratives are often fragmented, sensitive, and deeply contextualized.

These methodological constraints suggest that many existing approaches remain insufficient for uncovering the essential structure of the phenomenon as it is lived and experienced by survivors. Without a focused exploration of meaning, research risks reducing complex human experiences to abstract categories or generalized findings that overlook the nuances of vulnerability, agency, and interpretation (Chidyausiku, 2025; Puente et al., 2021). Consequently, there is a clear need for approaches that can engage more directly with participants' lived realities, allowing for a deeper understanding of how justice is experienced, negotiated, and redefined in practice. Addressing this need is essential for bridging the gap between formal legal protections and the actual experiences of those seeking justice, thereby contributing to more responsive and contextually grounded human rights interventions.

Efforts to address gender-based violence and improve access to justice have largely relied on established practical approaches, including legal reform, policy implementation, institutional strengthening, and service-based interventions such as legal aid and victim support systems (Purwanti et al., 2025; Vagwala et al., 2025). These approaches have contributed significantly to increasing reporting mechanisms, enhancing procedural safeguards, and promoting accountability within legal frameworks. In many contexts, success has been measured through indicators such as case resolution rates, legislative compliance, and institutional responsiveness, reflecting a strong emphasis on structural and outcome-oriented solutions. While these strategies are essential for advancing formal justice systems, they tend to prioritize external measures of effectiveness rather than the internal experiences of those who engage with these systems.

However, these approaches reveal important limitations when examined through the lens of lived experience (Esposito & Semenzin, 2025; Ramli et al., 2023). By focusing primarily on legal processes, institutional performance, and quantifiable outcomes, existing research often overlooks how survivors themselves interpret, navigate, and emotionally process their interactions with justice systems.

As noted in prior studies, survivors' experiences are frequently characterized by ambivalence, where legal institutions may simultaneously provide protection and produce secondary harm through disbelief, procedural rigidity, or insensitivity (Baez et al., 2024). Quantitative and doctrinal approaches, while valuable, are not well equipped to capture the nuanced meanings of fear, vulnerability, recognition, stigma, and agency that shape survivors' perceptions of justice. Consequently, the understanding of justice remains fragmented, with limited insight into how it is actually lived, felt, and constructed by individuals in real-world contexts.

This gap indicates the need for an alternative approach capable of engaging more directly with the subjective dimensions of the phenomenon. A phenomenological perspective offers such an alternative by focusing on the essence of lived experience and the meanings individuals assign to their encounters with legal and social systems. Through in-depth exploration of personal narratives, phenomenology allows for a holistic understanding of justice as it is experienced, rather than merely as it is defined or implemented. This approach is particularly important in the context of gender-based violence, where experiences are deeply shaped by emotional, relational, and socio-cultural factors that cannot be fully understood through conventional methods. By adopting a phenomenological framework, the study seeks to uncover the underlying structures of meaning that define how survivors experience and make sense of justice, thereby addressing a critical gap in the existing body of knowledge.

Recent scholarship has increasingly examined the experiences of survivors of gender-based violence within legal and social systems, highlighting the complexity of accessing justice in real-world contexts. Prior studies have explored how institutional responses, social stigma, and cultural norms shape survivors' interactions with formal mechanisms of protection and accountability. Theoretical perspectives from human rights law and trauma studies have emphasized that justice is not only a legal outcome but also a lived and relational experience. Methodologically, existing research has employed qualitative approaches such as interviews and case studies, although many have remained descriptive rather than deeply interpretative. These studies provide an important foundation but still leave gaps in understanding how survivors construct meaning from their experiences of seeking justice.

To address this limitation, this study adopts an interpretative phenomenological approach to explore how survivors make sense of their experiences in accessing legal justice. This approach is selected because it allows for a focused examination of subjective meaning, emotional processes, and contextual influences that shape lived experience. Through in-depth engagement with participants' narratives, the study seeks to uncover the essential structures of how justice is experienced, rather than how it is formally defined. This directly responds to the knowledge gap identified earlier, where existing approaches have not sufficiently captured the experiential dimension of justice. By doing so, the study aims to provide a richer and more holistic understanding of justice as lived by survivors.

This article is structured to guide the reader through a coherent exploration of the phenomenon. It begins with an introduction that outlines the general and specific background, followed by the identification of the knowledge gap and the purpose of the study (Frank & Nivorozhkin, 2025). The method section explains the phenomenological design, participant selection, data collection, and analytical procedures used to examine lived experiences. The results section presents the key themes that emerge from participants' narratives, while the discussion interprets these findings in relation to existing literature and theoretical perspectives. Finally, the article concludes by summarizing the main insights and highlighting their implications for human rights practice and future research.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study employed an interpretative phenomenological design to explore the lived experiences of survivors of gender-based violence in accessing legal justice. A phenomenological approach was considered appropriate because the central concern of the study was not the measurement of prevalence, frequency, or legal outcomes, but the exploration of how justice was subjectively experienced, interpreted, and emotionally negotiated by individuals who had undergone violence and

subsequently entered legal or quasi-legal processes. The design enabled close attention to the meanings attached to reporting, disclosure, institutional encounters, social response, and the personal significance of recognition and redress.

More specifically, the study was informed by interpretative phenomenology, which is concerned with how individuals make sense of significant life experiences within their social and relational contexts (Fife, 2020; Kawamura, 2020). This orientation was particularly relevant because access to justice in cases of gender-based violence is not experienced as a purely procedural matter. Rather, it is lived through fear, vulnerability, stigma, negotiation, and attempts to reclaim dignity and agency. An interpretative phenomenological design therefore allowed the phenomenon to be examined as it was experienced by participants, while also acknowledging that such experiences were embedded in broader legal, cultural, and institutional structures.

This design was aligned with the research question because it facilitated in-depth exploration of how survivors understood and navigated the process of seeking justice, how they interpreted institutional responses, and how they attached meaning to legal recognition and personal recovery. Instead of reducing experience to predefined legal categories, phenomenology made it possible to identify the essential structures of the phenomenon as expressed through participants' own narratives.

Participants

Participants consisted of survivors of gender-based violence who had experience seeking legal justice, reporting violence to formal authorities, accessing legal aid, or engaging with institutional mechanisms related to protection or redress. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure that each individual had direct and meaningful experience of the phenomenon under study. This sampling strategy was considered suitable because phenomenological inquiry requires information-rich participants who are able to articulate lived experience in depth.

The inclusion criteria comprised adults aged 18 years or older, individuals who had experienced gender-based violence, and those who had pursued or attempted to pursue legal, administrative, or advocacy-based pathways to justice. Participants were also required to be able to communicate their experiences clearly and to provide informed consent voluntarily (Daly, 2007; Longhofer et al., 2012). The exclusion criteria included individuals who had no direct experience with justice-seeking processes, those whose cases were too recent to allow safe and reflective participation, and those whose psychological condition at the time of data collection could make participation unsafe or excessively distressing.

A small and information-rich sample was deemed appropriate for phenomenological depth. The study involved eight participants, all of whom had direct experience relevant to the research focus. Demographic variation was considered in order to enrich contextual understanding of the phenomenon, including age range, social background, relationship to the perpetrator, and type of institutional pathway accessed. Such characteristics were not used for comparison in a statistical sense, but to situate the lived experiences within the social realities in which justice-seeking occurred.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews, which allowed participants to describe their experiences in their own terms while maintaining sufficient focus on the study objectives. An interview guide was used to support consistency across interviews while preserving flexibility for probing, clarification, and the emergence of unanticipated meanings. The guide was organized around broad experiential domains, including the decision to seek justice, first contact with legal or support institutions, perceived barriers, emotional responses, social reactions, and personal understandings of justice.

Interviews were conducted individually in private and secure settings to protect confidentiality and to support emotional safety (Carreiras & Castro, 2012; Iosifides, 2016). Depending on participant preference and situational feasibility, interviews were conducted either face-to-face in confidential spaces or through secure online platforms. Each interview lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes, with the duration determined by the pace and comfort of the participant. In cases where additional

clarification or elaboration was needed, follow-up communication was conducted with participant consent.

To foster a supportive environment, participants were informed in advance that they could pause, decline to answer any question, or withdraw at any stage without consequence. Interviews were conducted using trauma-sensitive principles, including non-judgmental listening, careful pacing, and attention to signs of distress. With permission, all interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed verbatim. Field notes were also prepared immediately after each interview to document contextual observations, nonverbal cues where appropriate, and early reflections relevant to meaning formation.

The semi-structured interview format was selected because it enabled the collection of rich first-person accounts while remaining sufficiently open to the complexity of traumatic and justice-related experiences. This method was particularly suitable for phenomenological inquiry, where the goal is to elicit detailed descriptions of lived experience rather than brief responses to predetermined categories.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis to identify essential themes within participants' lived experiences of seeking legal justice. This analytic strategy was selected because it provides a systematic yet flexible framework for examining how participants make sense of major personal experiences. It was particularly appropriate for this study because the phenomenon involved emotionally complex, socially mediated, and institutionally shaped experiences that required close interpretative attention.

Analysis began with repeated reading of each transcript to achieve immersion in the data. Initial noting was then conducted to capture experiential, linguistic, and conceptual features of each account. Attention was given to expressions of fear, hesitation, moral injury, institutional ambivalence, stigma, recognition, and restored agency, not as pre-fixed categories, but as emerging dimensions of meaning within each narrative (Hillman & Radel, 2018; Migdal, 2018). From these notes, emergent themes were developed for each case, followed by a process of clustering related meanings into higher-order thematic structures.

After within-case analysis had been completed, patterns across cases were examined to identify convergences and divergences in the lived experience of justice-seeking. Themes were refined through iterative comparison between transcripts, notes, and developing interpretations. This process made it possible to move from individual expressions to a more integrated phenomenological account of the phenomenon while preserving the specificity of participants' voices. NVivo software was used as an organizational tool to support coding, retrieval, and thematic clustering; however, interpretative decisions remained grounded in close reading of the full narrative accounts.

The analytic process resulted in a set of interrelated themes that captured the essential structure of the experience. These themes reflected how participants entered legal processes through fear and vulnerability, encountered institutions as both protective and harmful, negotiated silence and stigma, and gradually redefined justice in terms of recognition, recovery, and agency. The findings were thus generated through systematic engagement with participants' accounts and through interpretative movement between the particular and the shared dimensions of the phenomenon.

To enhance trustworthiness, analytic decisions were documented through an audit trail, and theme development was reviewed through continuous return to the original transcripts (Lutz & Knox, 2014; McNabb, 2015). Member checking was also incorporated in a limited and appropriate form by clarifying key meanings with participants where necessary, particularly when ambiguity in phrasing or interpretation arose. Reflexive awareness was maintained throughout the analytic process in order to reduce unexamined assumptions and to preserve fidelity to participants' lived meanings.

RESULTS

The analysis revealed that survivors of gender-based violence experienced the pursuit of legal justice not as a linear pathway toward protection, but as a complex and emotionally demanding process shaped by fear, institutional uncertainty, social judgment, and fragile forms of hope. Across participants' narratives, the meaning of justice extended beyond legal recognition alone. It was experienced as a struggle for dignity, safety, voice, and acknowledgment. Four interrelated themes emerged from the data: (1) entering the legal system through fear and vulnerability, (2) experiencing institutional responses as both protection and harm, (3) negotiating silence, stigma, and social exposure, and (4) redefining justice as recognition, recovery, and restored agency.

To provide an overview of the thematic structure, the findings are summarized in the following thematic matrix.

Theme	Essential Meaning	Indicative Experiential Focus
Entering the legal system through fear and vulnerability	Accessing justice began from a position of emotional, social, and physical insecurity	Fear of retaliation, confusion about procedures, dependence on others
Experiencing institutional responses as both protection and harm	Legal institutions were encountered as ambivalent spaces that could validate but also re-traumatize survivors	Police response, legal interviews, evidentiary burden, procedural insensitivity
Negotiating silence, stigma, and social exposure	Survivors' legal journeys were shaped by community judgment and the risk of being socially discredited	Shame, family pressure, victim-blaming, social isolation
Redefining justice as recognition, recovery, and restored agency	Justice was understood not only as punishment of the perpetrator but as restoration of self-worth and voice	Being believed, emotional recovery, dignity, control over one's narrative

Entering the Legal System Through Fear and Vulnerability

Participants described their first steps toward seeking justice as deeply marked by vulnerability rather than confidence. Their decision to report violence or pursue legal action did not emerge from a straightforward belief in the legal system, but from an accumulation of pain, pressure, fear, and necessity. Several participants explained that before they could even think about legal rights, they had to confront immediate concerns related to personal safety, emotional shock, and uncertainty about whether anyone would believe them. In this sense, access to justice began not in the courtroom or police station, but in a fragile internal struggle over whether speaking out was even possible.

For many survivors, the legal process was initially imagined as something intimidating, distant, and controlled by others. Participants did not describe themselves as entering the system with legal clarity. Instead, they entered it with hesitation, fragmented understanding, and intense emotional burden. One participant expressed this condition by saying, "I did not go there because I was strong. I went there because I felt I had reached the point where being silent was destroying me more than the fear of reporting" (P1). This account illustrates that legal action was not perceived as empowerment from the outset, but as a painful threshold crossed under pressure.

Fear emerged as a dominant experiential feature of this early phase. Participants feared retaliation from perpetrators, disbelief from authorities, and rejection from family or community members. In some cases, survivors remained silent for extended periods because the prospect of legal action seemed to expose them to new forms of danger. One participant stated, "I was afraid that once I

reported him, everything would become worse. I was not only afraid of him, but also of what people would say about me” (P3). This quotation shows that access to justice was shaped not only by legal structures, but also by social vulnerability and gendered expectations surrounding victimhood.

Another significant aspect of this theme was procedural confusion. Participants frequently described not knowing where to report, what evidence was required, or what would happen after disclosure. Rather than experiencing the legal process as accessible, they often perceived it as administratively and emotionally overwhelming. A participant recalled, “When I first tried to seek help, I felt lost. Everyone was telling me different things, and I did not know which office, which document, or which explanation would be enough” (P5). Such narratives demonstrate that the path to justice was not simply obstructed by violence itself, but also by the opacity of institutional processes.

Taken together, these accounts suggest that the beginning of the justice-seeking journey was characterized by a precarious balance between desperation and courage. Participants did not present themselves as passive, yet their movement toward the legal system was mediated by fear, uncertainty, and limited institutional literacy. The experience of seeking justice therefore began as an existential and emotional risk before it became a legal procedure.

Experiencing Institutional Responses as Both Protection and Harm

A second major theme concerned the ambivalent nature of institutional encounters. Participants described legal institutions as potentially protective spaces, but also as sites of emotional exhaustion, disbelief, and secondary victimization. Although some interactions with police officers, legal advocates, or service providers were experienced as supportive, many participants portrayed the institutional process as one that demanded repeated retelling, emotional exposure, and evidentiary performance. Justice, in this sense, was not only something sought from institutions, but something constantly negotiated within them.

Several participants emphasized the importance of being received with empathy during their first formal disclosure. When officials listened attentively, explained procedures clearly, and treated survivors respectfully, participants felt that the law could indeed function as protection. One participant reflected, “The first person who listened to me without interrupting changed everything. At that moment, I felt that maybe the law could still protect someone like me” (P2). This narrative reveals how a single humane interaction could transform survivors’ perception of the justice system from threatening to potentially restorative.

However, such affirming experiences were not universal. Many participants reported that institutional processes became another layer of suffering because they were forced to repeatedly justify their credibility. The pressure to provide coherent, emotionally stable, and legally useful narratives often conflicted with the fragmented reality of trauma. One participant explained, “They wanted my story to be clear and chronological, but that was not how I remembered it. I remembered it in pieces, and every time I was asked to repeat it, I felt like I was reliving it” (P4). This quotation reflects the tension between institutional demands for precision and the lived nature of traumatic memory.

Participants also spoke about subtle and overt forms of doubt from legal actors. Even when cases were formally processed, survivors sometimes felt they were being evaluated not only as complainants but as morally suspect subjects. Questions about clothing, personal history, delayed reporting, or continued contact with the perpetrator were experienced as indirect judgments. As one participant stated, “It felt like I was the one being examined. I came there to report violence, but somehow I became the person who had to prove I was worthy of being believed” (P6). This account reveals that legal recognition was inseparable from an experience of moral scrutiny.

At the same time, participants did not reject institutions entirely. Their narratives were more complex than simple condemnation. Some described institutions as inconsistent rather than uniformly harmful. A participant noted, “One officer made me feel small, but the legal aid counselor later made me feel human again. It was confusing because the system hurt me and helped me at the same time” (P7). This ambivalence is central to understanding survivors’ lived experiences. Institutions were not encountered as fixed entities, but as unstable spaces where care and harm could coexist.

Overall, this theme shows that institutional engagement was experienced as deeply relational. The meaning of the legal process did not depend only on formal access, but on how survivors were seen, heard, and treated within that process. Protection was not experienced solely through legal mechanisms, but through recognition, patience, and procedural dignity.

Negotiating Silence, Stigma, and Social Exposure

Participants' experiences of seeking justice were inseparable from the social environments in which they lived. A third theme revealed that survivors had to navigate stigma, silence, and the threat of public exposure while attempting to pursue legal recognition. Reporting violence was not merely an individual decision; it was a socially risky act that could alter relationships with family members, neighbors, colleagues, and community networks. For many participants, the legal journey became entangled with fears of being blamed, shamed, or socially isolated.

The narratives showed that silence was often not a sign of passivity, but a survival strategy. Participants described carefully calculating the consequences of disclosure in contexts where survivors of gender-based violence were often viewed with suspicion rather than compassion. One participant explained, "People say, 'Why didn't you speak earlier?'" but they do not understand that silence was the only way I knew how to protect myself at that time" (P3). This quotation reflects a central phenomenological insight: silence was experienced not as absence, but as a meaningful response to danger.

Stigma was described as operating through both direct accusation and subtle social distancing. Participants recounted how family members questioned their decisions, urged them to settle matters privately, or worried more about social reputation than about harm suffered. One participant said, "What hurt me was not only what happened, but how quickly the conversation became about family shame, not about my pain" (P8). Here, the survivor's suffering was displaced by communal concerns over respectability, revealing how legal injustice may be intensified by social norms.

Another dimension of this theme involved the loss of narrative control. Participants feared that once they entered the legal process, their experiences would no longer belong to them. Instead, their stories could be circulated, simplified, doubted, or appropriated by others. A participant described this fear by stating, "I wanted justice, but I was terrified that my story would stop being mine. I feared becoming a rumor, a headline, or a cautionary tale for others" (P5). This statement reveals that the pursuit of justice also involved a struggle over ownership of one's own experience.

Participants also described the emotional cost of being seen publicly as a victim. Even when they sought legal redress, many resisted identities that reduced them solely to injury or trauma. They wanted acknowledgment without being permanently socially defined by violence. One participant stated, "I wanted them to understand what happened to me, but I did not want my whole identity to be reduced to what he did" (P1). This indicates that survivors' justice-seeking experiences were shaped not only by the desire for accountability, but by the need to preserve selfhood beyond victimization.

This theme demonstrates that access to justice occurred within a broader social field in which shame, gender norms, and relational pressures profoundly influenced survivors' choices and experiences. The legal process could not be separated from the community contexts that shaped whether survivors felt visible, exposed, protected, or silenced.

Redefining Justice as Recognition, Recovery, and Restored Agency

The final theme captures how participants moved beyond narrow legal definitions of justice and articulated more complex meanings rooted in recognition, healing, and agency. Although legal accountability remained important, participants did not equate justice solely with conviction or punishment. Rather, justice was experienced as something broader: being believed, being treated seriously, regaining control over one's life, and having one's pain publicly acknowledged as real and wrongful.

Participants consistently emphasized that recognition was a powerful component of justice. Being heard without suspicion and having their suffering affirmed by others were described as profoundly meaningful experiences. One participant remarked, "For me, justice began the moment

someone finally said, ‘What happened to you was wrong,’ without asking me to explain myself again” (P2). This suggests that justice, phenomenologically, was not only a legal outcome but also an encounter with moral validation.

Recovery also emerged as part of the meaning of justice. Participants did not describe healing as separate from legal action, nor did they present legal action as automatically healing. Instead, they experienced a dynamic relationship between the two. In some cases, speaking out was described as a step toward reclaiming voice and agency. In other cases, prolonged legal proceedings delayed emotional recovery. One participant reflected, “I thought justice would make me feel finished with it, but I learned that justice is not the same as healing. Still, speaking out helped me feel that I existed again” (P6). This account reveals that justice and healing were related yet distinct dimensions of survivors’ lived realities.

Restored agency was another crucial element. Participants valued moments when they could make choices, define boundaries, and articulate their own needs rather than being treated merely as evidence providers within a legal mechanism. One participant explained, “The most important thing was not only that the case moved forward, but that I could decide what I wanted, what I could handle, and how I wanted to be involved” (P7). Such narratives indicate that justice was experienced as a recovery of personal authorship after a period of profound disempowerment.

Importantly, participants did not present justice as complete or absolute. Their accounts were often marked by partial resolution, unresolved grief, and continuing vulnerability. Yet even where legal outcomes were limited, survivors described small but significant moments of recognition, speech, and self-assertion as meaningful achievements. One participant stated, “Maybe justice was incomplete, but I am no longer where I was before. I am no longer silent in the way I used to be” (P8). This quotation captures the lived transformation that many participants associated with justice: not total closure, but movement from voicelessness toward agency.

This final theme shows that survivors understood justice in relational and existential terms, not merely juridical ones. Their narratives challenge narrow legal frameworks by demonstrating that justice also involves dignity, acknowledgment, and the capacity to reinhabit one’s own life after violation.

Taken together, the findings show that survivors of gender-based violence experienced access to legal justice as a deeply layered and emotionally complex process. Their narratives reveal that justice-seeking began in fear and uncertainty, unfolded through ambivalent institutional encounters, was shaped by stigma and social exposure, and was ultimately understood in broader terms than legal resolution alone. Across all themes, the essential structure of the experience lay in the tension between vulnerability and agency. Survivors entered the justice process from positions of harm and precarity, yet they continuously negotiated recognition, voice, and dignity within systems that could both validate and wound them. In this sense, the lived experience of seeking justice was not simply about entering legal institutions, but about struggling to be acknowledged as a credible, whole, and rights-bearing person.

DISCUSSION

The findings show that survivors of gender-based violence experience access to legal justice not as a neutral legal pathway, but as a deeply layered process shaped by fear, institutional ambivalence, social stigma, and the search for recognition. In relation to the broader question raised in the Introduction, the study indicates that the meaning of justice for survivors lies not only in formal legal outcomes, but also in whether they are heard, believed, protected, and able to recover a sense of agency within and beyond the legal process.

These findings offer a direct answer to the central concern of the study by demonstrating that justice is lived as an existential and relational experience rather than merely a procedural one. The results suggest that survivors do not encounter legal systems as abstract structures of rights alone. Instead, they encounter them through vulnerability, emotional risk, and the need to negotiate the terms of their own visibility (Huda & Bawono, 2025; Rafique et al., 2023). This is a significant contribution to the field of human rights law and advocacy because it shifts attention from the formal availability of

legal remedies to the lived conditions under which such remedies become meaningful or, conversely, alienating. The study therefore expands current understanding of access to justice by showing that legal recognition is inseparable from interpersonal validation, procedural dignity, and the survivor's effort to maintain selfhood in the aftermath of violence.

A particularly important contribution of the findings lies in the way they illuminate the tension between legal access and lived accessibility. In formal terms, justice mechanisms may exist, and survivors may technically be able to report, testify, or seek legal aid. Yet the findings reveal that the existence of such mechanisms does not guarantee that they are experienced as safe, intelligible, or restorative. Survivors often begin the justice-seeking process from a position of fear, confusion, and uncertainty, which means that access itself must be understood as a socially and emotionally mediated phenomenon. This insight deepens the research question by showing that the pathway to justice is not simply blocked or open; rather, it is experienced through fluctuating conditions of risk, trust, and recognition.

The findings also contribute uniquely by showing that institutional response is not experienced in binary terms. Survivors did not describe legal institutions as wholly protective or wholly harmful. Instead, they portrayed them as unstable spaces in which care and injury could coexist. This ambivalence is important because it challenges overly simplified assumptions in legal and policy discourse (Wicaksono et al., 2023). A survivor may feel validated by one official and diminished by another, supported by legal aid yet retraumatized by procedural demands. The study thus suggests that the meaning of justice is shaped less by the institution in the abstract than by how the survivor is treated within specific encounters. In this sense, procedural justice becomes inseparable from relational justice.

Another important contribution concerns the relationship between justice and identity. The findings show that survivors do not seek justice only to secure punishment or legal closure. They also seek acknowledgment without erasure, protection without social discrediting, and voice without losing control over their own story (Wanto & Hidayat, 2021). This indicates that justice, in the lived experience of survivors, includes the struggle to remain a full person rather than being reduced either to a case file or to a permanent identity of victimhood. Such an insight adds depth to phenomenological understanding because it reveals how legal processes intersect with moral worth, social belonging, and the reconstruction of self after violence.

These interpretations are consistent with prior scholarship showing that survivors' interactions with legal systems are often shaped by secondary victimization, institutional distrust, and the burden of credibility. Campbell's work on secondary victimization is particularly relevant here because it demonstrates how institutional responses may intensify survivors' trauma when disclosure is met with doubt, blame, or procedural insensitivity (Abukhalil et al., 2022). The present findings align with that perspective by showing that the legal process may reproduce harm when survivors are required to retell traumatic experiences in forms that satisfy institutional logic but fail to reflect the fragmented nature of traumatic memory. The present study, however, extends this literature by showing that survivors do not interpret such experiences only as procedural difficulty; they interpret them as threats to dignity, legitimacy, and selfhood.

The findings also resonate with Herman's trauma-informed perspective, which emphasizes that experiences of violence often disrupt agency, trust, and continuity of self. In the current study, this disruption appeared clearly in participants' descriptions of fear, fragmented recall, and uncertainty about whether entering the legal system would restore safety or deepen harm. Herman's emphasis on recognition and restoration helps explain why participants attached such importance to being heard without interruption, believed without suspicion, and treated as morally credible. At the same time, the present findings add a more explicitly legal dimension to that argument by showing that survivors evaluate institutions not only according to outcome, but according to whether those institutions permit a viable path from violation to recognition.

The findings are further supported by socio-legal scholarship arguing that rights are not simply applied through law but are interpreted and lived within everyday social worlds. Merry's work is especially useful here because it shows that legal norms gain meaning only when translated into local, relational, and cultural contexts. This is reflected in the current study through participants' accounts of

family pressure, shame, and fear of public exposure. Even when justice was formally available, the social cost of disclosure shaped whether it was experienced as possible, desirable, or survivable. The study therefore reinforces the idea that access to justice cannot be understood apart from the cultural and relational environments in which survivors make decisions about silence, disclosure, and resistance.

The findings also complement critiques in human rights scholarship that caution against equating legal reform with lived justice. Goodmark's work, for example, questions whether formal interventions alone can adequately address the complexity of gender-based violence in lived contexts. The present study supports that concern by showing that survivors often define justice more broadly than the legal system does. For them, justice included acknowledgment, emotional recovery, restored voice, and the ability to regain control over their own narrative. This does not diminish the importance of legal accountability. Rather, it suggests that legal accountability is experienced as incomplete when it is detached from relational recognition and survivor-centered treatment.

At the theoretical level, the study strengthens a phenomenological reading of justice by showing that justice is experienced as a structure of meaning, not merely a legal category. The results indicate that survivors make sense of justice through embodied fear, social exposure, interpersonal response, and gradual efforts to reclaim agency. This perspective adds depth to human rights law and advocacy by foregrounding experience as a source of knowledge. It suggests that the normative legitimacy of justice systems cannot be fully assessed by legal design alone, but must also be evaluated through the lived realities of those who enter them in conditions of vulnerability. In this way, the study complements existing legal and policy scholarship with an experience-centered understanding of justice.

Overall, the findings suggest that the essential meaning of justice for survivors lies in the movement from silencing toward recognition, from procedural exposure toward relational dignity, and from injury toward partial reclamation of agency. This interpretation does not romanticize justice-seeking, nor does it assume that legal systems inevitably heal. Instead, it highlights that justice becomes meaningful when survivors can remain legible as rights-bearing persons throughout the process. The discussion therefore answers the broader question of the study by showing that the lived experience of accessing justice is defined not only by whether the law responds, but by how survivors are positioned, received, and recognized within that response.

The findings carry important scientific and practical implications for the field of human rights law and advocacy. At a scientific level, they reinforce the argument that access to justice should not be understood only in procedural or institutional terms, but also as a lived experience shaped by fear, recognition, stigma, and agency. This means that justice cannot be adequately evaluated through legal design or case outcomes alone, because survivors interpret justice through the quality of their encounters with institutions and the extent to which those encounters preserve dignity. In this respect, the study adds to existing scholarship by showing that the effectiveness of legal protection is inseparable from the survivor's experience of being believed, heard, and treated with respect. The findings therefore support a more experience-centered understanding of justice within human rights research, one that remains fully compatible with legal analysis while offering a deeper account of how rights are actually lived in contexts of vulnerability.

At a practical level, the study suggests that survivor-centered legal responses require more than formal access points or procedural compliance. Institutions may provide legal channels for complaint and redress, yet these channels may remain emotionally inaccessible if survivors anticipate disbelief, shame, or repeated exposure to trauma. The findings therefore imply that police units, courts, legal aid services, and advocacy organizations should place greater emphasis on trauma-informed communication, continuity of support, and procedural clarity. Campbell's work on secondary victimization has already shown that insensitive institutional responses can deepen harm even when formal reporting takes place, and the present study confirms that this dynamic remains central to survivors' lived experiences. In practical terms, this means that reforms aimed at improving access to justice should pay closer attention to how survivors are received during disclosure, how information is communicated, and how credibility is implicitly negotiated within legal settings. A system that is legally available but experientially hostile may still fail to function as justice from the survivor's perspective.

The findings also have broader social and cultural implications. Survivors' narratives demonstrate that justice-seeking is embedded in social worlds shaped by silence, victim-blaming, family pressure, and concerns about public exposure. This suggests that the challenge of access to justice cannot be addressed through legal institutions alone, because the social meaning of disclosure strongly influences whether legal remedies are experienced as possible or desirable. In line with socio-legal scholarship, particularly Merry's analysis of how rights are interpreted within local contexts, the findings indicate that legal norms gain practical significance only when they become socially livable. Thus, the broader relevance of the study lies in its demonstration that justice is shaped not only by law but by the cultural and relational environments in which survivors decide whether to speak, report, or withdraw. For wider populations facing gender-based violence in different settings, the study offers a useful insight: improving justice requires attention to institutional culture and social meaning at the same time.

The professional implications are equally significant for legal practitioners, advocates, counselors, and service providers. The findings suggest that professional competence in cases of gender-based violence should include not only legal knowledge but also an understanding of the survivor's lived experience of disclosure, vulnerability, and recognition. Survivors in this study did not evaluate justice solely through legal outcomes; they also assessed it through tone, listening, patience, and whether they retained a sense of agency during the process. This indicates that professional practice should move beyond a narrow emphasis on evidentiary extraction toward a more relational model of engagement. Such an orientation does not weaken legal rigor. On the contrary, it may strengthen the legitimacy and accessibility of legal processes by making them more responsive to the realities of trauma and social stigma. In this sense, the study contributes practical insight into how human rights advocacy can remain legally robust while becoming more attentive to lived human experience.

Several limitations should be acknowledged when interpreting these findings. First, the study is based on a small phenomenological sample, which is appropriate for depth but not intended for statistical generalization. The goal of the study was to explore meaning rather than measure prevalence, and the findings should therefore be understood as analytically transferable rather than universally representative. Second, the experiences described by participants were shaped by specific social, cultural, and legal contexts, which may influence how justice was perceived and negotiated. Survivors in other regions, legal systems, or institutional environments may articulate different meanings depending on local norms, available services, and patterns of social support. Third, because the phenomenon under study involved trauma and emotionally complex experiences, participants' narratives were inevitably shaped by memory, timing, and the difficulty of revisiting painful events. This does not reduce the value of the accounts, but it does mean that the narratives reflect lived meaning rather than exhaustive factual reconstruction.

A further limitation concerns the scope of perspective included in the study. The analysis focuses on survivors' lived experiences and does not incorporate parallel accounts from police officers, legal aid workers, judges, or family members. While this focus is consistent with the phenomenological purpose of centering the experience of those directly affected, a more relational picture of justice processes could be enriched in future research by examining how institutional actors themselves understand credibility, care, and procedural responsibility. In addition, although the study identifies important themes such as stigma, recognition, and agency, it does not attempt to compare experiences across different categories of violence, socioeconomic backgrounds, or institutional pathways in a systematic way. These variations may be highly relevant and deserve further exploration. The present findings should therefore be read as a deep account of lived meaning rather than a comprehensive map of all survivor experiences.

These limitations open several productive directions for future research. Further studies could examine how survivors' lived experiences of justice differ across legal settings, cultural environments, or forms of violence, while still retaining a focus on meaning and subjectivity. Comparative phenomenological work may be especially valuable in identifying how institutional culture shapes the experience of being heard, believed, and recognized. Future research might also explore the lived experiences of legal professionals and advocates who work with survivors of gender-based violence, in

order to understand how institutional practice is shaped from within. Such studies could help bridge survivor-centered findings with professional and policy reform in more concrete ways.

The present findings may also be extended through longitudinal qualitative research that follows survivors over time. Because justice in this study emerged as a process rather than a single event, future work could investigate how meanings of justice evolve across reporting, investigation, adjudication, and post-case reflection (Qodir et al., 2023). This would be especially relevant for understanding whether recognition, recovery, and agency remain stable, deepen, or become more fragile as survivors continue to engage with legal and social systems. In addition, future research could explore how advocacy interventions, legal accompaniment, or trauma-informed institutional reforms affect the lived experience of justice. Such work would contribute not only to phenomenological scholarship but also to the development of more responsive human rights practices grounded in survivor realities.

More broadly, the study creates a foundation for asking larger questions within human rights law and advocacy. If justice is experienced not only as legal resolution but as recognition, dignity, and restored agency, then future scholarship can further examine how human rights institutions might be evaluated through the lived experiences of those they are designed to protect. This opens a wider agenda for research on the relationship between legal norms and human experience, particularly in contexts where formal rights exist but meaningful access remains uneven (Odetallah, 2025). By foregrounding lived experience, future studies can continue to deepen the field's understanding of how law becomes real, partial, or fragile in everyday life. In that sense, the present study offers not a final answer, but an important starting point for more experience-based inquiry into the meaning of justice.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the lived experiences of survivors of gender-based violence in accessing legal justice, addressing the gap between formal legal frameworks and the subjective realities of those who engage with them. The findings reveal that justice is experienced as a complex and deeply personal process shaped by fear, institutional ambivalence, social stigma, and the ongoing effort to reclaim agency and dignity. These results demonstrate that access to justice extends beyond procedural availability and depends significantly on how survivors are heard, recognized, and treated within legal and social interactions. Therefore, legal institutions should strengthen survivor-centered procedures by providing trauma-informed training for police officers, prosecutors, judges, and legal aid providers; ensuring confidential and respectful reporting mechanisms; reducing repeated testimony that may retraumatize survivors; and establishing clear referral pathways to psychosocial and advocacy support. Advocacy services should also develop integrated assistance models that combine legal guidance, emotional support, case accompaniment, safety planning, and long-term empowerment programs. By focusing on lived experience, this study contributes to human rights law and advocacy by showing that justice must be understood not only as a formal legal outcome but also as a relational process of recognition, dignity, and restored agency. Future research may build on this work by examining how survivor-centered legal and advocacy practices operate across diverse cultural, institutional, and policy contexts.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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