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Lived Experiences of Inclusive Public Service Access among Persons with Disabilities in Indonesia

Faisal Hakim Nasution
UIN Sulthan Thaha Saifuddin Jambi, Indonesia
hakimf45@yahoo.co.id

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ABSTRACT

Access to public services is a key issue in promoting social justice and inclusion for persons with disabilities. While previous studies have focused primarily on accessibility and policy implementation, limited attention has been given to how persons with disabilities experience and interpret inclusion in their everyday interactions with public services. This study employs an interpretative phenomenological approach to examine these lived experiences. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews and analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The findings identify four interconnected dimensions of inclusion: structural inaccessibility, subtle discrimination, emotional burden, and adaptive strategies. Together, these dimensions demonstrate that inclusion is experienced not merely through formal access but through ongoing negotiations of dignity, recognition, and participation within institutional settings. The study contributes to the literature by providing an experiential perspective on public service inclusion and highlights the need to incorporate lived experiences into policy design and service evaluation to achieve more equitable outcomes.

INTRODUCTION

Access to public services represents a fundamental dimension of social justice and equity, particularly within contemporary policy frameworks that emphasize inclusivity, human rights, and equal citizenship (Mistry et al., 2025). In many countries, including Indonesia, the discourse surrounding inclusive public services has gained increasing prominence, especially in relation to marginalized groups such as persons with disabilities. Public institutions are expected not only to provide services efficiently but also to ensure that such services are accessible, equitable, and responsive to diverse needs. This expectation is reinforced by global commitments such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), which underscores the obligation of states to remove barriers and promote full participation in public life. Despite these normative advances, the practical realization of inclusive public services remains uneven, often shaped by complex interactions between policy frameworks, institutional capacity, and societal attitudes.

The relevance of this phenomenon extends beyond administrative functionality, as access to public services is deeply intertwined with individuals' lived experiences of dignity, recognition, and belonging (Mariyam et al., 2025). For persons with disabilities, engagement with public services is not merely a procedural activity but a socially embedded experience that reflects broader patterns of inclusion or exclusion. Previous studies have highlighted structural barriers such as inadequate infrastructure and limited accessibility, as well as attitudinal challenges including stigma and implicit bias within service provision. However, these studies often frame the issue from a systems or policy perspective, leaving less attention to how these conditions are experienced subjectively by individuals. The interaction between individuals and public institutions thus becomes a critical site where social justice is either enacted or undermined in everyday life. Experiences within these spaces may shape emotional responses, self-perception, and trust in public systems, making them essential to understanding the human dimension of equity policies.

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Given this context, there is a growing need to move beyond surface-level assessments of accessibility and toward a deeper exploration of how inclusion is experienced and interpreted by those directly affected (Lukman & Hakim, 2024). Phenomenological inquiry offers a valuable lens for addressing this need, as it focuses on uncovering the meaning of lived experience from the perspective of participants themselves. By examining how persons with disabilities perceive, navigate, and make sense of their encounters with public services, it becomes possible to reveal dimensions of inclusion that are not captured through policy analysis alone. Such an approach allows for the identification of subtle forms of exclusion, emotional impacts, and adaptive strategies that shape everyday interactions with public institutions. Understanding these experiential dimensions is essential for developing policies that are not only structurally inclusive but also meaningfully responsive to the lived realities of individuals.

Research on the lived experiences of marginalized groups, particularly persons with disabilities, has increasingly emerged as a critical area within the broader discourse of social justice and equity policies. Scholars have begun to recognize that access to public services cannot be fully understood through institutional performance indicators alone, but must also be examined through the subjective experiences of those who engage with these systems (Kurniati et al., 2024). In this regard, the study of how individuals interpret, navigate, and emotionally respond to public service environments has become an important sub-area, especially in understanding how inclusion is enacted in everyday practice. Existing literature has highlighted that persons with disabilities often encounter complex layers of interaction involving structural barriers, social attitudes, and institutional responsiveness, all of which shape their lived experiences in accessing services.

However, capturing the depth and complexity of such experiences presents significant methodological challenges. Much of the existing research in this field has relied on quantitative surveys, policy evaluations, or descriptive assessments, which tend to prioritize measurable indicators such as service availability, accessibility compliance, or user satisfaction rates (Kozaman Aygün & Inal-Çekiç, 2025). While these approaches provide valuable insights into systemic patterns, they are inherently limited in their ability to uncover the nuanced, emotional, and interpretative dimensions of human experience (Mukhlis, Suradi, et al., 2023; Mukhlis, 2025b). In particular, quantitative methods often fail to account for how individuals make sense of exclusion, how they internalize or resist institutional practices, and how their identities and past experiences influence their engagement with public services. As a result, the subjective meanings embedded in these interactions remain underexplored.

These methodological limitations have important implications for the overall understanding of the phenomenon. When research primarily focuses on structural indicators or generalized patterns, it risks overlooking the essence of lived experience, which is central to comprehending how inclusion or exclusion is actually experienced by individuals (King et al., 2025). Even qualitative studies that adopt descriptive approaches may not fully engage with the interpretative depth required to reveal how participants construct meaning from their encounters with public institutions. Consequently, there remains a gap in the literature regarding the comprehensive exploration of the experiential essence of accessing public services among persons with disabilities. This gap underscores the need for a phenomenological approach that can capture the richness, complexity, and meaning of lived experience, thereby providing a more holistic understanding of inclusion within the context of social justice and equity policies.

Existing approaches to understanding access to public services for persons with disabilities have largely relied on practical and policy-oriented frameworks, including regulatory evaluations, accessibility audits, and user satisfaction surveys (Hashi & Hock, 2025). These approaches are commonly used because they provide measurable indicators that can inform policy improvement and institutional accountability. For instance, studies have assessed the availability of accessible infrastructure, compliance with legal standards, and general perceptions of service quality as proxies for inclusivity. While such approaches are valuable for identifying systemic gaps at a macro level, they tend to frame inclusion as a technical or administrative issue, rather than as a lived human experience.

However, these prevailing approaches reveal significant limitations when examined from the perspective of meaning and experience. By focusing primarily on observable indicators, they often fail

to capture how individuals with disabilities actually perceive, interpret, and emotionally respond to their encounters with public services (Hariani & Soegiono, 2025). The complexity of lived experience including feelings of exclusion, negotiation of identity, and the search for dignity within institutional interactions remains largely underrepresented in existing research. Even qualitative studies that adopt descriptive methods may not sufficiently engage with the interpretative processes through which individuals construct meaning from their experiences. As a result, the current body of knowledge provides an incomplete and, at times, fragmented understanding of what inclusion truly entails in everyday practice.

This limitation highlights the need for an alternative approach capable of uncovering the deeper essence of the phenomenon (Hamidi et al., 2025). A phenomenological perspective offers a more suitable framework for addressing this gap, as it prioritizes the exploration of lived experience and the meanings individuals assign to it. By moving beyond surface-level descriptions and engaging with participants' subjective interpretations, phenomenology enables a more holistic understanding of how inclusion is experienced, negotiated, and sometimes contested within public service contexts (Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, & Zulbaidah, 2025; Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, Zulbaidah, et al., 2025). Such an approach not only enriches theoretical insights into social justice and equity policies but also provides a more grounded basis for developing policies that are responsive to the realities of those they are intended to serve.

Previous studies have explored the issue of disability and access to public services through various perspectives, including policy evaluation, accessibility frameworks, and social inclusion theories. These studies have contributed significantly to identifying structural barriers and institutional gaps that affect service delivery for persons with disabilities. Research has also highlighted the role of social attitudes and stigma in shaping unequal access to services. However, most of this literature has focused on observable conditions and systemic outcomes rather than on how individuals experience these conditions in their daily lives (Boom-Cárcamo et al., 2025). As a result, the subjective dimension of inclusion, including how individuals interpret and emotionally respond to public service interactions, remains insufficiently explored.

To address this limitation, this study adopts an interpretative phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of persons with disabilities in accessing public services. This approach is selected because it allows a deeper understanding of how participants make sense of their interactions with public institutions, including their perceptions of inclusion, exclusion, and dignity. By focusing on lived experience, the study responds directly to the identified knowledge gap, which highlights the lack of insight into the meaning and interpretation of these experiences. The phenomenological framework enables the exploration of both individual and shared meanings that emerge from participants' narratives. Through this approach, the study aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding of inclusion as it is experienced rather than merely implemented.

This article is structured to guide the reader through a coherent exploration of the phenomenon. The introduction presents the general and specific background, followed by the identification of the knowledge gap that motivates the study (Mukhlis et al., 2024; Mukhlis, Maryam, et al., 2023). The method section explains the phenomenological approach, participant selection, data collection, and data analysis procedures. The results section presents the key themes derived from participants' lived experiences, supported by narrative descriptions and direct quotations. The discussion section interprets these findings in relation to existing literature and highlights their implications for social justice and equity policies, followed by a conclusion that summarizes the main contributions of the study.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

A qualitative study was conducted using an interpretative phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of persons with disabilities in accessing inclusive public services in Indonesia. Phenomenology was selected because the central concern of the study was not the measurement of service performance, but the meaning participants attached to their direct encounters

with public institutions. This design is particularly appropriate when the aim is to understand how a phenomenon is experienced, interpreted, and emotionally negotiated in everyday life.

An interpretative phenomenological orientation, informed by Heideggerian philosophy, was adopted to examine how participants made sense of inclusion, exclusion, dignity, and recognition within public service settings. Unlike descriptive phenomenology, which emphasizes the description of experience as it appears, interpretative phenomenology allows deeper engagement with the social, cultural, and relational meanings embedded in lived experience (Lutz & Knox, 2014; McNabb, 2015). This approach was considered suitable because access to public services is not experienced as a purely administrative process; rather, it is shaped by prior encounters, expectations, institutional behavior, and wider structures of inequality. Through this design, the study was able to capture both the immediate texture of participants' experiences and the broader meanings attached to them.

Participants

Participants consisted of persons with disabilities who had direct experience accessing public services in Indonesia, including health services, civil administration, social protection services, transportation-related services, or other state-administered services relevant to daily life. Participants were selected using purposive sampling in order to ensure that those included had first-hand experience of the phenomenon under investigation and were able to provide detailed, reflective accounts of their interactions with public institutions.

The inclusion criteria comprised adults aged 18 years or older, individuals who self-identified as persons with disabilities, individuals who had accessed at least one form of public service within the past 12 months, and individuals who were able to communicate their experiences verbally or through appropriate communication support. Participants with sensory, physical, or mild-to-moderate communication limitations were included as long as meaningful participation could be facilitated ethically and respectfully. Individuals were excluded if they had no direct experience with public service access, were unable to provide informed consent, or experienced conditions that made participation potentially distressing without adequate support.

In phenomenological inquiry, emphasis is placed on depth rather than breadth; therefore, a relatively small and information-rich sample is generally appropriate (Hillman & Radel, 2018; Migdal, 2018). The study was designed to include approximately 8 to 15 participants, which is consistent with interpretative phenomenological analysis and allows detailed idiographic engagement with each case before moving toward cross-case thematic understanding. Relevant demographic characteristics, such as age, gender, type of disability, educational background, and type of public service accessed, were documented to provide contextual depth and to support interpretation of the findings.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews, as this method provides sufficient flexibility to explore personal meanings while maintaining focus on the research question. An interview guide was developed based on the study objective, the identified research gap, and key concerns within the literature on disability inclusion, public service access, and social justice (Carreiras & Castro, 2012; Iosifides, 2016). The guide contained open-ended questions designed to elicit participants' experiences, perceived barriers, emotional responses, coping strategies, and interpretations of fairness, dignity, and recognition within public service encounters.

Interviews were conducted either face-to-face or through accessible online platforms, depending on participants' preferences, mobility considerations, and communication needs. Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 90 minutes. Data collection was undertaken in settings considered safe, quiet, and comfortable for participants, including private rooms in community centers, service-adjacent neutral spaces, or secure virtual environments. Attention was given to accessibility throughout the interview process. Where necessary, communication adjustments were made to support participation, including extended response time, simplified pacing of questions, or the presence of an agreed companion or interpreter where ethically appropriate.

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All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and were subsequently transcribed verbatim. Field notes were also produced to document contextual elements such as pauses, emotional tone, non-verbal expressions, and situational features that enriched interpretation (Daly, 2007; Longhofer et al., 2012). Data collection continued until experiential depth and thematic sufficiency were achieved, indicated by the recurrence of central meanings across participants while still preserving individual nuance.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). This analytical method was chosen because it is well suited to studies seeking to understand how individuals interpret significant lived experiences, especially those shaped by identity, vulnerability, and institutional interaction. The analysis was conducted through a systematic and iterative process aimed at identifying essential experiential themes while preserving the distinctiveness of each participant's account.

The analytical process began with repeated reading of each transcript to enable immersion in the data. Initial noting was then undertaken to capture descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual observations. These notes focused on how participants described events, the language used to convey meaning, and the implicit assumptions or emotional undertones within each account. From these detailed notes, emergent themes were developed within individual transcripts. The themes were then examined for patterns of connection, clustering, and conceptual relationship within each case.

After idiographic analysis had been completed for each participant, cross-case analysis was undertaken to identify shared thematic structures while preserving points of divergence. This process allowed the development of higher-order themes that reflected the common meaning of the phenomenon across participants (Fife, 2020; Kawamura, 2020). The resulting thematic structure formed the basis for the Results section, which was organized around the major experiential patterns identified in the data, including structural inaccessibility, subtle discrimination, emotional burden, and adaptive strategies for preserving dignity and access.

NVivo software was used to assist with data organization, coding management, and retrieval of relevant excerpts. However, interpretative decisions remained grounded in close reading of participants' narratives rather than in software-generated outputs. Credibility of interpretation was strengthened through iterative comparison between transcripts, field notes, coded segments, and emergent themes.

To enhance trustworthiness, several validation strategies were applied. Member checking was used selectively by inviting participants to confirm the accuracy of key meanings derived from their interviews. Triangulation was supported through comparison between interview narratives and contextual field notes. An audit trail was maintained to document analytic decisions, theme development, and interpretative reflections. Reflexive attention was also sustained throughout the analytic process in order to remain aware of how assumptions, background knowledge, and positionality might influence interpretation.

RESULTS

Encountering Structural Inaccessibility Behind Formal Inclusion

Participants consistently described a contradiction between the official discourse of inclusion and the practical reality of public service delivery. Although public institutions were often presented as accessible and disability-friendly, participants' lived experiences suggested otherwise. Accessibility was not only a matter of ramps, signage, or facilities, but also of procedural clarity, responsive communication, and institutional preparedness. Many participants experienced public services as systems that appeared inclusive in policy language but remained exclusionary in practice.

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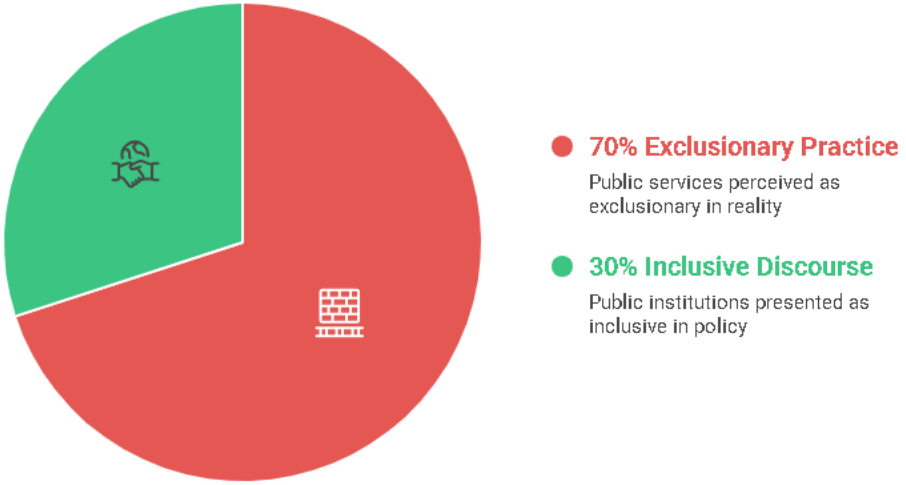
Participants' Perception of Public Service Inclusion



For several participants, the first barrier emerged before the service interaction even began. Difficult building layouts, a lack of tactile guidance, inaccessible transportation to service centers, and inadequate communication systems created the impression that disability inclusion had been addressed only superficially. Participants described these conditions not as isolated inconveniences, but as repeated signals that their needs had not been seriously anticipated.

Participants' narratives showed that these obstacles accumulated over time and shaped how they understood the public service system as a whole. Rather than perceiving the institution as a neutral provider of assistance, many came to see it as a space that demanded extra effort from them simply because they were disabled. Thus, structural inaccessibility became an experiential marker of unequal citizenship, where access depended not on entitlement but on an individual's ability to endure and adapt to the system's limitations.

Experiencing Subtle Discrimination and Conditional Recognition

Beyond physical and procedural barriers, participants described a more subtle but equally powerful form of exclusion: the experience of being socially diminished within public service interactions. These experiences did not always take the form of explicit rejection. More often, they emerged through tone, body language, assumptions, or institutional attitudes that positioned disabled persons as dependent, burdensome, or secondary to other service users. In this way, exclusion was experienced relationally, through how participants were seen, addressed, and responded to by service providers.

Several participants reported feeling that they were treated with impatience or pity rather than with professional respect. In some cases, service personnel spoke to accompanying family members instead of addressing the disabled person directly. Such interactions communicated an implicit denial of agency. This statement highlights how the service encounter became a site where personhood itself was negotiated.

Other participants described the emotional discomfort of sensing that their presence disrupted the normal flow of service. They were made to feel that accommodations were exceptional favors rather than rights. In phenomenological terms, this kind of experience reveals how discrimination is not always overtly verbalized; it can be felt through repeated micro-interactions that communicate lesser worth.

Importantly, participants did not frame these incidents as isolated interpersonal misunderstandings. Instead, they understood them as expressions of broader social attitudes toward disability. Their experiences suggested that the lack of inclusivity in public services was sustained not only by inadequate infrastructure but also by ableist assumptions embedded within everyday institutional behavior. Recognition, therefore, was often conditional. Participants were allowed to enter the system, but not always to participate in it on equal terms.

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Carrying Emotional Burdens in the Process of Seeking Services

Participants' narratives revealed that accessing public services involved a substantial emotional burden. Feelings of frustration, shame, anxiety, disappointment, and exhaustion were frequently intertwined with the practical task of obtaining services. What might appear externally as a routine administrative process was internally experienced as emotionally draining, especially when participants had to repeatedly explain their condition, justify their needs, or confront inaccessible procedures.

For many participants, the emotional burden was cumulative. It stemmed not only from a single negative encounter but from the repeated anticipation of difficulty. Some participants described preparing themselves mentally before entering service settings, already expecting delays, misunderstanding, or humiliation. One participant captured this emotional anticipation through the statement, "[Insert verbatim quote on anxiety, fear, or emotional exhaustion before seeking services]." This suggests that public service access was not experienced as a simple event but as an emotionally loaded process shaped by prior memories of exclusion.

Participants also described a deep sense of disappointment when institutions that were supposed to protect their rights failed to do so. In these moments, emotional pain was linked to a broader sense of injustice. Public services symbolized the state's presence in everyday life, and when that presence was experienced as dismissive or inaccessible, participants felt not only personally hurt but civically abandoned. Another participant might state, "[Insert verbatim quote on feeling ignored, humiliated, or losing trust in public institutions]." Such narratives demonstrate that the emotional consequences of exclusion extended beyond the immediate interaction and affected trust, belonging, and self-worth.

At the same time, participants' emotional expressions were not reducible to vulnerability alone. Some participants articulated anger and critical awareness, indicating that their emotional responses were tied to moral judgment. They did not merely feel hurt; they recognized that they were being treated unfairly within structures that claimed to serve all citizens equally. This emotional consciousness points to the depth of the phenomenon and underscores why lived experience is central to understanding policy implementation.

Developing Adaptive Strategies to Claim Dignity and Access

Despite repeated obstacles, participants did not portray themselves solely as passive recipients of exclusion. Their narratives also revealed agency, creativity, and resilience. Over time, many developed strategies to navigate inaccessible systems, negotiate with staff, seek informal assistance, or prepare themselves in advance for anticipated barriers. These adaptive strategies reflected a determined effort to secure access and preserve dignity in contexts that often failed to support them adequately.

Some participants described relying on family members, friends, or community networks to help them interpret procedures, reach service locations, or advocate on their behalf. Others reported learning which offices were more accommodating, what times were less crowded, or how to present requests in ways more likely to be accepted. One participant's account may be represented by the quote, "[Insert verbatim quote on preparing carefully, bringing support, or learning how to navigate the system]." Such experiences show that access was often achieved not because the system was inclusive, but because participants had become highly skilled in managing exclusion.

At a deeper level, these strategies also represented acts of self-preservation and resistance. Participants sought not only to obtain a service outcome but also to protect their dignity in interactions that could otherwise be degrading. Another participant may have said, "[Insert verbatim quote on insisting on rights, speaking up, or refusing discriminatory treatment]." This suggests that navigating public services required emotional and moral labor in addition to practical effort.

However, participants' resilience should not be misread as evidence that the system was functioning effectively. On the contrary, the need for such adaptive strategies reveals the insufficiency of existing public service structures. Participants became resilient because the environment remained demanding. Their strength emerged in response to systemic weakness, not in the absence of it. Thus, resilience appeared in the findings as both a personal resource and a silent indicator of policy failure.

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DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that access to inclusive public services is experienced by persons with disabilities not simply as an administrative process, but as a continuing negotiation for recognition, dignity, and equal citizenship. In relation to the broader question raised in the Introduction, the study shows that the meaning of inclusion is shaped less by formal policy language alone and more by how public institutions are encountered, interpreted, and emotionally lived in everyday practice.

These findings contribute to the research question by showing that the subjective experience of accessing public services is fundamentally relational, embodied, and interpretative. The study demonstrates that participants did not evaluate public services only in terms of whether a service was available, but in terms of whether they felt acknowledged, respected, and able to participate without humiliation or excessive burden (Mukhlis, Janwari, et al., 2023; Mukhlis & Abdullah, 2025). This is an important contribution because it shifts the understanding of inclusion from a narrow concern with procedural access toward a deeper concern with lived equality. The findings suggest that inclusive service delivery cannot be understood adequately through compliance indicators alone, since the actual experience of inclusion depends on how institutional arrangements, interpersonal treatment, and emotional consequences are woven together in practice. In this sense, the study answers the research question by revealing that public service access is experienced as a site where broader social justice values are either confirmed or weakened. Structural accessibility, social recognition, emotional safety, and the ability to act with dignity emerged as inseparable dimensions of what participants understood as genuine inclusion.

The contribution of the study is also significant because it clarifies that exclusion operates in both visible and less visible forms. The findings show that barriers were not limited to infrastructure or procedure, although those remained important (Ben-Shlomo et al., 2025). Exclusion was also experienced through subtle interactions that diminished autonomy, such as being ignored, being spoken for, or being treated as an exception rather than a rights-bearing citizen. This insight deepens current understanding by showing that the experience of public services is not merely functional but existential in character. Participants interpreted service encounters as reflections of their social value, which means that public institutions were experienced not only as providers of assistance but also as spaces that symbolically defined who mattered and under what conditions. This interpretative dimension is precisely what phenomenological inquiry helps to illuminate, and it explains why the present study offers a richer account than approaches focused only on measurable service outcomes.

The findings are broadly consistent with earlier scholarship showing that disability inclusion remains constrained by structural and institutional limitations. Previous studies have identified inaccessible environments, weak implementation of inclusive policies, and insufficient institutional responsiveness as persistent challenges in public service provision. The present study supports these observations, but it extends them by demonstrating how such barriers are lived and felt by participants in concrete situations (Barnett & Pappa, 2023). Rather than treating structural inaccessibility as a policy defect alone, the findings reveal that it is experienced as a repeated signal of not being anticipated within the design of public institutions. This interpretation complements prior policy-oriented work by adding the subjective layer that has often been missing from broader evaluations of inclusion.

The study also aligns with literature emphasizing that disability is shaped by social interaction as much as by formal systems. Earlier work has suggested that stigma, attitudinal barriers, and implicit bias influence the quality of public engagement for persons with disabilities. The present findings reinforce this perspective by showing that participants often experienced exclusion through tone, gesture, assumption, and institutional behavior rather than through explicit denial alone. This is an important point because it suggests that inclusion cannot be reduced to the provision of accessible facilities. Even when services are formally open, the experience may still be exclusionary if participants are not treated as competent, autonomous, and legitimate subjects. In that respect, the findings complement prior literature by highlighting that the meaning of access depends not only on entry into the system but also on the quality of recognition within the system.

At the same time, the findings add nuance to previous studies by foregrounding emotional burden as a central feature of the phenomenon. Earlier studies have tended to focus on barriers,

compliance, or policy implementation, but they have given less attention to the emotional labor involved in preparing for, enduring, and interpreting difficult service encounters (Ballaret, 2025). The present study suggests that this emotional dimension is not secondary; rather, it is constitutive of how inclusion is experienced. Feelings of anxiety, frustration, shame, and disappointment emerged not as isolated reactions but as part of the meaning structure of public service access itself (Mukhlis, 2025a; Mukhlis & Saidah, 2025). This insight is theoretically important because it shows that exclusion is not only spatial or procedural but also affective. When participants anticipated misunderstanding or humiliation before entering a service setting, this indicated that exclusion had already become internalized as expectation, thereby shaping the phenomenon before the interaction even occurred.

Another important contribution concerns the interpretation of resilience and adaptive strategies. Existing research often treats adaptation as evidence of agency and coping capacity, and the findings of this study do confirm that participants developed practical and emotional strategies to navigate exclusionary environments (Attal & Dauchez, 2025). However, the findings also suggest that resilience should not be romanticized. Participants' adaptive efforts were necessary precisely because the public service environment remained insufficiently responsive to their rights and needs. This interpretation adds a critical perspective to the broader literature on disability and inclusion. It shows that while resilience reflects strength, it may also function as a silent indicator of policy failure, since individuals are compelled to compensate for institutional inadequacies through personal effort. In this regard, the findings do not contradict earlier literature, but they deepen it by showing that resilience and exclusion coexist within the same experiential structure.

Taken together, the study contributes to social justice and equity scholarship by demonstrating that inclusion must be understood as a lived condition rather than solely as a formal policy objective. The findings suggest that the real test of inclusive public services lies in whether individuals experience institutions as spaces of dignity, fairness, and meaningful participation (Arante, 2025). This interpretation supports the broader theoretical argument that justice is not fully realized through legal provision alone, but through everyday encounters in which people experience themselves as recognized members of the public. By situating disability access within this experiential frame, the study offers a more comprehensive understanding of how inclusion is enacted, limited, and negotiated in daily life. The discussion therefore confirms that phenomenological inquiry is especially valuable for revealing aspects of equity that remain obscured in more procedural or indicator-based approaches.

The findings carry important practical and scientific implications for the field of social justice and equity policies. At a practical level, the study suggests that inclusive public services should not be evaluated only through physical accessibility, procedural compliance, or policy existence. Inclusion becomes meaningful only when persons with disabilities experience public institutions as spaces of recognition, dignity, and fair treatment. This means that institutional reform should address not only infrastructure but also everyday service culture, communication practices, and the attitudes embedded in frontline interactions. In this context, disability inclusion should be understood as a lived social process rather than as a narrowly technical administrative target.

From a scientific perspective, the study reinforces the value of phenomenological inquiry in revealing dimensions of public service access that are often obscured in policy-centered or indicator-based research. The findings show that structural barriers, subtle discrimination, emotional burden, and adaptive resilience are not separate issues, but interconnected elements within the lived meaning of inclusion. This is important because it broadens the conceptual understanding of equity from distributive provision alone to the quality of subjective experience within institutional settings. The study therefore contributes to a more human-centered interpretation of justice, one that recognizes that equal access is not fully achieved when individuals can formally enter a system but still experience humiliation, dependency, or conditional recognition within it. In line with previous literature, this interpretation supports the argument that social justice must be assessed not only by policy outputs but also by how people experience institutions in their everyday lives.

The findings also have broader social and cultural relevance. Although the study focuses on persons with disabilities in the context of public service access, the meanings identified in the analysis speak to wider questions of citizenship, belonging, and institutional trust. The participants' accounts

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suggest that when public services fail to recognize individuals as legitimate and capable subjects, exclusion is reproduced at both administrative and symbolic levels. This insight is relevant not only for disability studies but also for broader discussions on marginalized populations whose access to public institutions is shaped by unequal power relations. In this sense, the phenomenon explored here reflects a wider issue within social justice and equity policies: the gap between formal inclusion and lived inclusion. The findings therefore invite policymakers, practitioners, and service institutions to reconsider whether current models of accessibility adequately address the experiential realities of those they are intended to serve.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the phenomenological design prioritizes depth of meaning over breadth of coverage, and therefore the findings should not be interpreted as statistically generalizable to all persons with disabilities or to all public service settings in Indonesia. The study provides an in-depth understanding of lived experience, but that understanding remains context-bound and shaped by the specific participants, institutional environments, and service encounters included in the inquiry. Second, participants' narratives were derived from subjective recollection and interpretation, which is appropriate within phenomenology but may also reflect the influence of memory, emotion, and situational context. Third, the diversity of disability types and service settings may have introduced differences in experience that cannot be fully exhausted within a single study. While these differences enrich the analysis, they also mean that the phenomenon may manifest differently across specific institutional, regional, or social contexts.

Another limitation concerns the interpretative nature of the study itself. Because the analysis was developed through interpretative phenomenology, the findings represent a careful engagement with participants' meanings rather than a neutral recording of events. This is a strength of the design, but it also means that the conclusions are shaped by the depth of participants' narratives and the interpretative framework through which those narratives were understood. In addition, the study focused on the experiences of service users and did not include the perspectives of public service providers, policymakers, or institutional actors. As a result, the analysis offers a rich account of lived inclusion from one side of the institutional relationship, while leaving open the question of how service providers understand the same encounters. These limitations do not weaken the value of the study; rather, they clarify the scope of its contribution and indicate where further inquiry is needed.

Future research could extend these findings in several important directions. One promising avenue would be to examine how lived experiences of inclusion vary across different types of public services, such as health care, civil administration, transportation, or social protection. Such studies could reveal whether the meanings identified here remain consistent across institutional settings or whether each setting produces distinct forms of exclusion and recognition. Future phenomenological work could also explore differences across gender, age, socioeconomic background, or type of disability in order to deepen understanding of how inequality is experienced within diverse social positions. This would further strengthen the contribution of phenomenology to equity research by showing how public service inclusion is shaped by layered and intersecting forms of vulnerability.

Further studies may also benefit from linking lived experience more explicitly with institutional reform. For example, future research could examine how disability-sensitive training, procedural redesign, or participatory policy models influence the actual experience of recognition and dignity within public services. Such work would build on the present study by connecting experiential knowledge with policy transformation. In addition, comparative studies across regions or countries could help clarify how cultural and institutional differences influence the lived meaning of inclusion. By expanding the field in these ways, future research can continue to develop a more comprehensive understanding of how social justice and equity policies are translated into everyday institutional life, and how those policies may become more responsive to the realities of the populations they are meant to serve.

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CONCLUSION

This study examines the lived experiences of persons with disabilities in accessing inclusive public services within the framework of social justice and equity policies. The findings show that access to public services is experienced not only as a procedural activity but as a complex process shaped by structural barriers, subtle discrimination, emotional burden, and adaptive resilience. These results demonstrate that inclusion remains incomplete when institutional practices fail to ensure dignity, recognition, and meaningful participation, despite the presence of formal policies. The study addresses limitations in previous research by moving beyond policy evaluation and revealing the deeper meanings individuals attach to their interactions with public institutions. This contribution provides a more holistic understanding of inclusion as a lived experience, which is essential for developing more responsive and human-centered public service systems. Future research can expand this work by exploring variations across service sectors, social contexts, and policy interventions to further strengthen the integration between lived experience and equitable policy design.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

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

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