

A Phenomenological Study of Women's Lived Experiences as Incest Survivors

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Abstract

Sexual violence against women remains a critical concern in Indonesia, and incest is among its most severe forms. Records from Komnas Perempuan indicate a high prevalence; in 2018, 1,210 incest cases were documented, with biological fathers and uncles frequently reported as perpetrators. Incest often results in profound psychological and social consequences, including stigma, ruptured trust, anxiety, depression, and prolonged trauma. This study examined the lived experiences of women who survived incest and the ways they rebuilt their lives following trauma. Grounded in Heideggerian interpretive phenomenology, the research explored survivors' meaning-making within their relational and sociocultural worlds. Two participants were recruited through purposive sampling. In-depth interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using interpretive thematic analysis. Ten interpretive findings were generated and organized into two overarching categories—experiences as victims and experiences as survivors—supported by eight core themes. The findings highlight complex struggles alongside emerging agency and resilience, informing survivor-centered recovery frameworks and trauma-informed community interventions.

Keywords: Interpretive phenomenology, women, survivors, incest.

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Introduction

Sexual violence against women remains a persistent and escalating concern in Indonesia, occurring across both public and private spheres (Noviani et al., [2018](#); Komnas Perempuan, [2024](#), Susanti, et.al, [2025](#)). National monitoring indicates that sexual violence is among the most frequently reported forms of violence against women, with a substantial proportion occurring within the personal or domestic sphere (National Commission on Violence Against Women, 14 May 2020). Official records further suggest that cases involve not only adult women but also adolescents and children, underscoring both the pervasiveness of the problem and the heightened vulnerability of younger populations (Setyawan, [2015](#)). Evidence from national monitoring systems has repeatedly highlighted the scale of the problem and the continuing rise in reported cases (CATAHU Komnas Perempuan, [2018](#); CATAHU Komnas Perempuan, [2019](#); CATAHU Komnas perempuan, [2024](#)).

Sexual violence may occur in the public sphere, where victims and perpetrators are not connected by kinship or intimate ties, or in the personal sphere, where violence is perpetrated by individuals in close relational proximity—such as family members, spouses, or intimate partners (Caesari & Subekti, [2022](#)).

Within the personal sphere, incest represents a particularly severe and complex form of sexual violence because it involves abuse committed by a person related by blood, or by someone positioned as a substitute caregiver within the family system (Komalasari & Paraniti, [2020](#)). Prior reports indicate that perpetrators frequently include biological fathers and other male relatives, such as uncles (CATAHU Komnas Perempuan, [2019](#)). National documentation has also shown that incest constitutes a substantial proportion of reported sexual violence; for example, in 2018, incest was recorded as one of the most frequently reported categories (1,210 cases), with biological fathers and uncles among the most commonly documented perpetrators (CATAHU Komnas Perempuan, [2018](#)). These patterns underscore that incest is not merely an individual crime but a relational violation embedded in family power dynamics and social silence, requiring approaches that can illuminate its lived meanings and consequences.

The psychological sequelae of childhood sexual abuse and incest can be profound and enduring. Survivors may face elevated risks of psychiatric disorders and maladaptive coping outcomes, including substance-related problems and other mental health difficulties (Faller, [2003](#)). Empirical work also suggests lasting impacts on identity development and relational functioning, including disruptions to attachment and trust within close relationships (Phillips & Daniluk, [2004](#); Allen, [2005](#)). In the context of incest, trauma may be intensified by betrayal within the family system and by barriers to disclosure—such as fear of not being believed, fear of humiliation, family pressure, and threats from perpetrators (Anindya et al., [2020](#)). Survivors may also internalize blame and experience moral and social stigma that undermines access to truth, justice, and recovery resources. In severe cases, trauma-related distress may be accompanied by suicidal ideation and heightened anxiety (Sulistyaningsih & Faturachman, [2002](#)).

At a broader level, gendered power relations and patriarchal norms can shape both vulnerability to sexual violence and the social responses that follow. Patriarchal constructions that position men as dominant and women as subordinate may normalize discrimination, marginalization, and coercion, thereby creating conditions in which violence against women is more likely to occur and less likely to be disclosed or effectively addressed (Darwin, [2005](#); Main et al., [2018](#); Rokhimah et al., [2014](#); Syafe'i, [2015](#)). Legal and policy frameworks also recognize that gender-based injustice—such as subordination, stereotyping, and marginalization—can contribute to violence against women (PERMA No. 3/2017, Article 5). Within such contexts, incest survivors may face compounded burdens: trauma from the abuse itself, alongside stigma, disbelief, and constrained pathways to support and recovery.

Rationale for a Heideggerian phenomenological approach. Because incest occurs within intimate and familial worlds, survivors' experiences are shaped not only by traumatic events but also by their ongoing being-in-the-world—including relationships, cultural meanings, social stigma, and temporality (i.e., how the past is carried into the present and future). A Heideggerian interpretive phenomenology is therefore well suited to examining how survivors make sense of trauma and recovery as lived, contextual, and relational phenomena, rather than treating experience as isolated symptoms or decontextualized events (Willig, [2013](#)). This perspective enables a deeper understanding of how identity, trust, and future orientation are reconfigured through survivors' meaning-making within their broader life contexts.

Despite extensive literature documenting the harms of incest and childhood sexual abuse, less is known about how survivors reconstruct meaning, identity, and future orientation after leaving abusive environments, particularly in contexts where social stigma and patriarchal norms may constrain disclosure and help-seeking. Survivors may respond to trauma in heterogeneous ways: while some

experience debilitating long-term distress, others mobilize coping resources and forms of resistance, including advocacy and support for others who face similar violence (Lourdes Jarabe & Rayuwalhati, [2024](#)). Understanding this variation requires approaches that go beyond documenting symptoms toward interpreting how survivors make sense of trauma and recovery over time.

Accordingly, this study focuses on two women incest survivors who, after exiting repeated abuse, engaged in recovery- and advocacy-oriented actions, including humanitarian volunteering to prevent further violence. In this study, *victim* refers to women who remain in ongoing situations of repeated sexual violence, whereas *survivor* refers to women who have exited the abusive situation and are actively engaged in recovery and/or advocacy efforts (Alexenko et al., [2015](#)). The central research question guiding the study is: What are the experiences and processes through which women incest survivors rebuild their lives and transform from victimization to active survivorship? By illuminating the lived meanings of this transformation, the study aims to contribute nuanced insight into recovery trajectories, identity reconstruction, and the contextual conditions that support survivorship and resistance.

Method

Design

This study employed a qualitative approach using an interpretive phenomenological design to explore the lived meanings of incest survivorship among young women. Phenomenological research seeks to understand how individuals experience a phenomenon and how meaning is constituted through those experiences, attending to both what is lived and how it is interpreted (Creswell, [2007](#); Willig, [2013](#)).

The study was grounded in Heideggerian phenomenology, which holds that experience is always already situated within a person's being-in-the-world (*Dasein*) and cannot be separated from relational, cultural, historical, and existential contexts (Onwuatuegwu., [2022](#); Langdridge, [2007](#); Moran, [2000](#)). From this standpoint, description is inseparable from interpretation: accounts of lived experience are approached through a hermeneutic process in which meaning is clarified through iterative movement between parts of the text and the whole (i.e., the hermeneutic circle) (Elida & Guillen, [2019](#); Willig, [2013](#)). This philosophical orientation aligns with an interpretive paradigm in which multiple realities are understood as contextually and subjectively constructed through lived experience (Johnson., [2000](#))

Heideggerian interpretive phenomenology was selected because the research question required not only documenting what survivors experienced but also elucidating how they made sense of those experiences over time and within key relationships. In the context of repeated incest-related sexual violence, meaning-making is closely tied to shifts in identity, embodied emotional life, relational trust, and future orientation. An interpretive phenomenological design therefore provides an appropriate framework for understanding these processes with depth and contextual sensitivity, rather than treating experiences as decontextualized events (Elida & Guillen, [2019](#); Urcia, [2021](#)).

Consistent with this Heideggerian orientation, the study used interpretive thematic analysis to identify and articulate patterns of meaning across participants' narratives while preserving case-specific nuance. Themes were developed as interpretive accounts of lived meaning grounded in participants' language and situated within their sociocultural and relational worlds (Willig, [2013](#)). This design was therefore well suited to the study aim: to understand the lived meanings of survivorship among women who

experienced incest and how they interpret trauma and recovery within the broader contexts of their lives.

Participants

Two women who identified as survivors of incest were recruited through purposive sampling to obtain rich, information-dense accounts relevant to the phenomenon under study. Inclusion criteria were: (a) women aged 18–25 years; (b) experience of repeated incest-related sexual violence (i.e., occurring more than once over time); and (c) no longer being in the ongoing abusive situation at the time of participation (i.e., currently living as survivors). The sample was intentionally small, consistent with interpretive phenomenology's emphasis on depth and contextual understanding rather than statistical representativeness.

The study addressed a focused research question concerning how incest survivors make sense of traumatic experiences and navigate the transition from victimization to survivorship, including shifts in identity, relationships, and future orientation. Given this narrowly defined aim and highly specific participant group, sample adequacy was evaluated in terms of information power and analytic depth—that is, whether the interviews yielded sufficiently rich accounts to support credible interpretive thematic development. Across the two cases, themes showed substantial convergence while retaining individual nuances, indicating that the dataset was adequate to illuminate the phenomenon within this interpretive design.

The interview accounts provided sufficiently detailed narrative material to allow intensive within-case interpretation and careful comparison across cases, covering key experiential domains such as secrecy and disclosure, relational betrayal, coping and meaning reconstruction, and future reorientation. Thematic patterns demonstrated meaningful convergence across the two cases while preserving individual nuances and divergences, indicating that the dataset had adequate information power to support credible interpretive theme development within this design; accordingly, the findings are presented as analytic insights rather than statistical generalizations.

Subject Characteristics

The participants were two women of Nias ethnicity who identified as survivors of incest. Participant 1 was 25 years old and reported incest perpetrated by her uncle over approximately seven years. She was working as a freelancer at the time of the study. Participant 2 was 22 years old and reported incest perpetrated by her uncle over approximately five years. She was a final-year university student at the time of participation. Participant characteristics are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1

Participant Data

No	Name	Age	Ethnicity	Occupation	Duration as Survivor
1	FT	25	Nias	Freelance	7 years
2	MM	22	Nias	Student	5 years

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were prioritized throughout the study given the sensitive and potentially distressing nature of the topic. Safeguards included independent ethics review, an informed and voluntary

consent process, strict confidentiality, and a trauma-informed approach during and after interviews. Ethical approval was obtained from the Ethics Commission of the University of Surabaya (Ethical Clearance No. 345/KE/II/2024).

Informed consent and voluntariness

Participation was entirely voluntary. Before data collection, participants received clear information about the study's purpose, interview procedures, potential risks and benefits, confidentiality measures, and their rights as participants. Written informed consent was obtained. Participants were informed that they could decline to answer any question, pause the interview, or withdraw at any time without penalty, and that they could request that specific parts of their interview not be used in analysis or reporting.

Confidentiality and data protection

To protect privacy, identifying information was removed from transcripts and replaced with pseudonyms and non-identifying descriptors. Audio recordings, transcripts, and analytic documents were stored securely with access restricted to the research team. Any quotations included in the manuscript were reviewed to ensure that they contained no identifying details that could reveal participants' identities or locations.

Risk management and trauma-informed interviewing

Because discussing traumatic experiences may elicit distress, interviews were conducted using a trauma-informed stance emphasizing participant control, emotional safety, and sensitivity to signs of discomfort. If distress occurred, the interviewer offered options to pause, take a break, change topics, or terminate the interview. Participants were reminded of their right to withdraw at any point.

When needed, participants were offered a post-interview debriefing and provided with information about available psychological support services. The researcher was prepared to facilitate appropriate support in a clinically responsible manner (e.g., offering immediate supportive containment and referral to professional services when indicated), while recognizing clear boundaries between research and clinical intervention.

Data Collection

Data were generated through semi-structured, in-depth interviews guided by an interview protocol. Questions were open-ended and non-directive to encourage participants to describe their lived experiences in their own words and to allow unanticipated meanings to emerge (Willig, [2008](#)). Interviews focused on participants' meaning-making across their trajectories from incest-related sexual violence to survivorship and recovery, including key moments of disclosure, coping, relational changes, and identity reconstruction.

Consistent with an interpretive phenomenological orientation, the interviewer used prompts (e.g., "Can you tell me more about that?"; "What did that mean to you at the time?") to deepen accounts, attend to context, and clarify participants' intended meanings without imposing predetermined categories. With participants' consent, interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was addressed through strategies appropriate for interpretive qualitative research, prioritizing transparency of interpretation and close grounding in participants' accounts. Credibility was strengthened through prolonged engagement with the data via repeated readings and iterative theme refinement, ensuring that interpretations were continually checked against the full narrative context. An audit trail (e.g., analytic memos, coding decisions, theme revisions, and rationales) was maintained to document how interpretations developed over time and to enhance dependability.

Where appropriate, participants were re-contacted for clarification and factual checking of key narrative elements (e.g., timelines or intended meanings of specific events) after preliminary analysis, without requiring them to "endorse" the researcher's interpretations. Peer debriefing and consultation with experienced qualitative researchers were also conducted to critically examine emerging themes, consider alternative readings, and identify potential blind spots. Together, these strategies supported confirmability by demonstrating that analytic claims were warranted by the data rather than driven by unexamined assumptions.

Data Analysis

Data analysis began with systematic organization. All interview recordings were transcribed verbatim, anonymized, and compiled with field notes to ensure completeness and traceability (Poerwandari, [2011](#)). Consistent with a Heideggerian interpretive phenomenological orientation, interpretive thematic analysis was used to illuminate participants' lived meanings of incest survivorship as situated within relational, temporal, and sociocultural contexts. In this approach, themes were treated as interpretive patterns of meaning (rather than merely topics) generated through iterative movement between parts of the text and the whole narrative (i.e., the hermeneutic circle).

The analytic process proceeded through several interlinked phases. First, the researcher conducted repeated, immersive readings of each transcript to develop a holistic understanding of each participant's account and narrative structure. Second, meaning units were identified by marking segments that captured salient experiential meanings (e.g., emotions, embodied responses, shifts in self-understanding, relational dynamics, and coping trajectories). Third, meaning units were coded interpretively, attending not only to explicit content but also to implied meanings, tensions, and contextual cues, while remaining closely grounded in participants' language. Fourth, codes were clustered into candidate themes by identifying convergent patterns of meaning across accounts while preserving case-specific nuances. Fifth, themes were refined through iterative comparison within and across transcripts, continually checking coherence, boundaries, and interpretive adequacy. This refinement involved returning to the full transcripts to ensure that each theme remained faithful to participants' accounts and that interpretations were warranted by the data. Finally, themes were defined and named, supported by analytic memos documenting interpretive decisions and clarifying how each theme captured participants' lived meanings of survivorship, agency, and identity reconstruction over time.

The unit of analysis was the lived experience of women who survived incest, with particular attention to meaning-making processes across time (e.g., prior to disclosure, during crisis, and during rebuilding) and within key relationships (e.g., family, partners, and community). To strengthen analytic rigor within an interpretive paradigm, credibility was supported through reflexive memoing and maintenance of an audit trail detailing coding decisions, theme development, and revisions. Rather than emphasizing inter-coder

“reliability” as a primarily positivist criterion, consistency was approached through transparent documentation and critical reflection on interpretive choices. When peer debriefing was used, emerging themes and alternative readings were discussed with a knowledgeable colleague/supervisor to challenge premature conclusions and strengthen interpretive plausibility.

Researcher Reflexivity

In interpretive phenomenological research, reflexivity is essential because the researcher is not a neutral observer but an active interpreter of participants’ accounts. Accordingly, the researcher engaged in ongoing reflexive practice to make explicit how prior assumptions, theoretical sensibilities, and positionality might shape the analytic process. Throughout data collection and analysis, the researcher maintained a reflexive journal and analytic memos to document initial impressions, emotional responses, emerging interpretations, and the rationale for coding and theme refinement. This reflexive record enhanced transparency and supported repeated returns to the data to evaluate whether interpretations were warranted by participants’ narratives.

To strengthen credibility, the researcher conducted peer debriefing with colleagues/supervisors experienced in qualitative and trauma-informed research. These discussions were used to interrogate alternative interpretations, identify potential blind spots, and challenge premature thematic conclusions. Rather than aiming for “objectivity” in a positivist sense, the study prioritized interpretive rigor through reflexive awareness, careful grounding of analytic claims in participants’ accounts, and clear documentation of analytic decisions supporting credible and well-founded findings.

Results

Ten interpretive findings were generated. These are presented as two overarching thematic categories supported by eight core themes, complemented by two cross-cutting interpretive findings that operate across categories. The findings are organized around two broad meaning domains: (1) Experiences as victims of incest-related sexual violence and (2) Experiences as survivors.

Experiences as Victims

In this study, victimhood refers to a phase in which participants remained situated within repeated abuse and experienced profound powerlessness in relation to the perpetrator and the surrounding environment. The category Experiences as Victims comprises four interrelated themes: Disappointment, Frightened, Feeling helpless, and No escape.

Experiences as Survivors

In this study, survivorship refers to a phase in which participants had exited the abusive situation and began actively negotiating the consequences of trauma, including efforts toward safety, recovery, and rebuilding life projects. The category Experiences as Survivors comprises four interrelated themes: Caring for others, Daring to speak up, Life must go on, and Recovery from trauma.

Across both categories, the eight themes should be understood as interpretive patterns of meaning that recur at multiple points in participants’ narratives rather than as linear, one-time events. Two additional findings are reported as cross-cutting because they connect and shape how the themes are lived and made sense of across the trajectory from victimization to survivorship. The sections below elaborate each theme and clarify relationships among themes within and across categories.

Experiences as Victims

Disappointment

The sexual violence experienced by FT can be understood as attachment trauma. Attachment trauma occurs within relationships characterized by emotional bonds and a degree of dependence (Allen, 2005). The perpetrator was her mother's older sibling, who had a close relationship with FT and her parents. FT's parents, who lived in Nias, permitted FT and her younger siblings to live with their uncle in Surabaya, with the understanding that he would cover living and educational expenses.

FT expressed deep disappointment toward the perpetrator, who should have been a protector for her, given his role as a substitute caregiver. This is reflected in the following statements repeated by FT:

"I thought he was the closest person to me..." (2_FT).

"The perpetrator is my closest person, the person I respect the most, supposedly. But in reality, he became someone who cut the deepest wound in my life." (4_FT).

A clear power imbalance also shaped FT's experience, reflected in the following statements:

"I mean, I was relying on him. I live in Surabaya, far from my parents, so it's getting worse." (3_FT).

"I don't have a father anymore, and my younger siblings are still small. The only parent I have is my mom. Then he can do anything with the power that he has." (6_FT).

"...because the perpetrator has positional power." (15_FT).

MM likewise described being deeply hurt and disappointed by her uncle's inhumane treatment. This disappointment was intensified because she had held positive expectations of her uncle, who was also a religious figure. MM stated:

"About the pain I experienced at the time of the incident, there is no word other than heartache and disappointment. I was hurt because of his inhumane treatment." (2_MM)

"I was very disappointed because his behavior was far from exemplary. I also expected him to be a father figure who could protect me because he was my uncle; moreover, he was also one of the religious leaders." (3_MM).

"It felt like a nightmare, because my uncle raped me over and over again." (4_MM).

"When I was invited to Surabaya, I thought he was a good uncle who thought about my future, but he had other goals." (5_MM).

Frightened

FT described intense fear during the assaults:

"When I was forced by my uncle to serve his depraved intentions, I was very afraid. I couldn't fight back because he was stronger." (1a_FT).

"The first time I rebelled and tried to scream, but then I went silent because I was afraid and he threatened me with a knife." (1b_FT).

MM reported being afraid and helpless each time the perpetrator assaulted her, often preceded by verbal threats:

“Once, when I came home from school, my uncle tried to rape me again. He drove me around in his car and then pulled over in a quiet place. I tried to rebel... but my mouth was covered, and he threatened to drop me off on the highway and leave me there. I was scared, and finally I just obeyed his will.”

(6a_MM).

“I was threatened several times, and I was forced to remain silent, for fear of being killed by my uncle.”

(6b_MM).

“Once he took out a knife and put it around my neck to threaten me to follow his wishes. I wanted to scream but I couldn’t; I was so scared.” (8_MM).

Feeling helpless

FT and MM described threats that left them feeling helpless and unable to resist. FT stated:

“When I was being raped, he threatened me: ‘Watch out if you talk, I will chop up your family.’” (5_FT).

“I think there are many other victims who are in the same situation as me, but they have not been able to speak up because they are afraid of the threats made by the perpetrator.” (15_FT).

MM similarly noted:

“At that time, I was afraid to tell my sister FT that I was raped by my uncle, because he threatened to kill me every time if I told her what happened.” (7_MM).

Both participants also described a lack of social support during their most vulnerable periods. FT reported:

“At that time, there was no one I could talk to, because no one believed what I was saying.” (7_FT).

“When I was in the second year of high school, I told his wife, but instead of defending me, she blamed me and said that I was her husband’s mistress.” (9_FT).

“...even my mom at that time didn’t agree when I reported it (to the police), because he is my uncle...” (13_FT).

“...two weeks before I reported it to the police, I talked to my mom and my mom didn’t agree with my actions...” (13_FT).

“My older brother actually defended the perpetrator. The father I could usually rely on had also passed away. So, at that time I felt that no one could help me.” (15_FT).

“In reality, this is difficult for the general public to accept. Even in my experience, my family and my relatives didn’t believe what had happened to me during those years and what the perpetrator had done.” (15_FT).

MM added:

“My uncle also told me that people would not believe me if I told them, because he is a respected figure in the community.” (9_MM).

No escape

Both FT and MM described suicide attempts as a perceived “way out,” alongside repeated failed attempts to escape:

“In those few years, I attempted suicide twice because I had no way out and no hope, but I didn’t die that time.” (10_FT).

“When I was desperate... one night I took headache medicine—dozens of them—just so I could die.” (11_MM).

“I also tried to run away several times but was caught by his family and was beaten by the perpetrator’s biological son.” (10_FT).

Experiences as Survivors

Caring for others

FT described efforts to protect siblings and other potential victims within the perpetrator’s orbit:

“There were many things I felt at that time that I cannot describe in words, where I had to protect the people around me, especially the women in his circle. I protected them from afar while taking care of myself.” (11_FT).

“...After the rape incident, I thought that if it continues like this, many people will become his victims—especially those who don’t know and are easily lured.” (12_FT).

“I feel sorry for the other kids. My third sibling was also abused, but not as badly as me, because I didn’t leave them alone there. So, if I couldn’t be with them, that’s when they would be abused.” (13_FT).

Daring to speak up

FT described deciding to report the case to authorities despite opposition from family members, including a younger sibling who viewed the perpetrator as a “hero” for supporting their education. FT stated:

“So, I decided that I would report...” (13_FT).

“Then I told my mom... whether she agrees or disagrees... I will still report...” (13_FT).

“I was able to report him because I couldn’t bear seeing more and more victims. Seeing my surroundings, I dared to report him to the police, and the case was handled immediately. I am very relieved because at least, as long as he is behind bars, no one else will be victimized.” (14_FT).

FT also expressed a desire to speak publicly to support other victims:

“I really hope that I can speak up in public and media spaces or in forums for the protection of children and women. I want what happened to me to help many victims out there become strong, speak up, and no longer be afraid.” (17_FT).

“In other words, I motivate myself to get rid of that kind of fear. And in the future, I will be able to speak up in public spaces.” (19_FT).

“Well, I hope that in the future I can speak up in public spaces... maybe it’s not only me who is experiencing this situation; maybe there are many other people who are—they just don’t know how to speak up yet.” (22_FT).

FT also called for stricter law enforcement:

"I strongly support law enforcement in this case or similar cases being more assertive and implementing laws that truly deter perpetrators. I really hope the castration law is implemented in handling this case. I think this is very effective..." (21_FT).

"So, my hope is that in the future this will be handled seriously by law enforcers... because sometimes this is considered trivial. This needs to be handled seriously..." (24_FT).

"...I also hope that law enforcers can take this seriously." (24_FT).

MM similarly advocated for fair law enforcement and support for victims:

"For the protection of women, I hope there is firmness in the law in protecting women—at least that perpetrators are punished in accordance with what they did to the victim." (12_MM).

"Do not accept bribes from perpetrators. If bribes can make up for their mistakes, then can the victim recover (physically, psychologically, mentally) with money? ... Perpetrators must receive punishment commensurate with their actions, so there must be fair law enforcement." (13_MM).

MM also shared prevention-oriented messages for peers on campus, framed as preventive measures:

"Preventive measures can start with ourselves... the first person who can help during an incident is yourself... be strong (physically, mentally, spiritually)."

"Some preventive measures that may help prevent incidents:

Don't be easily fooled by sweet promises; first ask what the purpose is.

Don't be afraid of the perpetrator's threats...

Build connections...

Don't be afraid to tell the truth to the police or women's protection services...

Write down every incident if possible—document and record it—so that if one day you report it, you have strong evidence." (14_MM).

Life must go on

Both FT and MM described efforts to pursue delayed educational goals to achieve independence and support their families:

"After that there was a foundation that accommodated us... we were offered to go to college. I didn't waste any more time... because I had always wanted to continue my studies, which had been interrupted." (16_FT).

"Fortunately, I finished college with the scholarship." (26_FT).

"I am very grateful; finally I can continue my dream to go to college again." (15a_MM).

"When I was able to go to college again, I began to think that I still had hope to get up and live life." (15b_MM).

FT also described ongoing responsibilities and work:

"Alright, it's all in the past. Now I just want to focus on how I'm going to manage today and tomorrow, since I'm also responsible for the family."

"I live in a boarding house with my sister, and now I work at a wedding gallery... sometimes I also take freelance work... doing photography or whatever else I can get, as long as it's halal." (26_FT).

"The important thing is that I can still work and help pay for my younger siblings—and still be able to actively help victims like me."

"Fortunately, I have finished college with the scholarship. My other sister is just finishing this semester; she will also finish her studies soon." (26_FT).

Recovery from trauma

At the time of the interviews, FT and MM described improved well-being and a sense of reclaiming their lives. FT stated:

"I am grateful... I didn't expect to get through all my dark times, and I don't want to be overshadowed by those bad memories anymore." (27a_FT)

"If you think about it, it's impossible for me to be like this now. I'm no longer overshadowed by guilt and feelings of worthlessness... I've thrown away those bad memories." (27b_FT).

"I'm starting to open my heart to men again... just dating for now. I don't know if there will be anyone who will become my life partner in the future... but there are some who seem to really care about me." (27c_FT).

MM also described reductions in trauma triggers:

"I used to be afraid every time I saw a man wearing a sarong... the perpetrator wore a sarong every day. So, it was like the trauma just popped up. But now I'm not traumatized like that anymore." (I a_MM)

"I have also been traumatized every time I read the news or hear about a rape victim... it feels like that bitter experience should not happen again and no other woman should experience it again." (I b_MM)

Discussion

Incest constitutes a form of familial sexual abuse in which the victim and perpetrator are related by blood or occupy family-like caregiving roles. In many cases, the perpetrator is a relative who functions as a substitute parental figure—such as an uncle—thereby intensifying betrayal and power asymmetry (Komalasari & Paraniti, 2020). Prior literature indicates that incest can produce complex psychological and social consequences, including disrupted trust within the family system, difficulty trusting others, prolonged trauma reactions, anxiety and depressive symptoms, and ongoing threats from perpetrators within unequal power relations (Komalasari & Paraniti, 2020). The present findings reinforce these concerns and extend understanding by illuminating how survivors interpret and live through these dynamics over time.

Using a Heideggerian interpretive lens, the eight themes identified in this study should be understood as patterns of lived meaning rather than discrete events. The findings point to two overarching experiential domains. During the *victim* phase, participants described meanings characterized by Disappointment, Frightened, Feeling helpless, and No escape. These themes reflect not only fear and suffering but also a profound disturbance in participants' being-with-others and their sense of safety in the world. Disappointment signaled the collapse of expected protection within the family; Frightened and Feeling helpless conveyed the lived reality of coercion and constraint; and No escape captured an experiential

horizon in which future possibilities felt foreclosed. Taken together, these themes depict a world narrowed by threat and powerlessness.

In contrast, the *survivor* phase was marked by Caring for others, Daring to speak up, Life must go on, and Recovery from trauma. Importantly, these themes do not imply a simple “before–after” shift; rather, they represent an evolving process in which agency and meaning were gradually reclaimed. Daring to speak up reflects movement from silence to voice—an act that is simultaneously psychological (reclaiming self-definition) and social (challenging stigma and secrecy). Caring for others suggests that survivorship may become relationally oriented: participants’ suffering was not only endured but also interpreted as a basis for solidarity and protective action. Life must go on reflects a future-directed reorientation—efforts to rebuild life projects and restore continuity after disruption. Finally, Recovery from trauma highlights the ongoing work of healing, including managing residual trauma responses while reconstructing identity and relationships.

Much existing research on sexual violence foregrounds symptom burden and adverse outcomes and may underemphasize how survivors actively negotiate recovery and agency. By presenting both victim and survivor meaning-domains, this study contributes a more process-oriented account of survivorship. The findings align with evidence that women exposed to violence may experience difficulty mastering their environments, challenges in interpersonal relationships, constrained social development, guilt, and diminished well-being (Anderson, [2001](#); Ansara & Hindin, [2011](#); Fischbach & Herbert, [1997](#); Frank & Rodowski, [1999](#); Marcus, [1994](#); Suhita et al., [2021](#)). At the same time, the survivor themes support conceptualizations of survivorship as involving reclaimed voice, agency, and engagement in recovery-oriented actions, including disclosure and help-seeking (Delker et al., [2020](#)).

Survivor narratives in this study also resonate with the resilience literature. Resilience refers to the capacity to adapt and rebound in the face of stressors and trauma (Lynch, S. M., et al., n.d; Main et al., [2018](#)). Here, resilience was reflected in participants’ persistence in pursuing education and work opportunities, reconstructing future goals, speaking up, and protecting others. These findings are consistent with evidence that resilience can facilitate adaptive coping among survivors of violence and may be strengthened through supportive relationships, effective coping habits, constructive self-talk, experiences of competence, and peer support with others who share similar experiences (Kusristanti et al., [2020](#); Susanti et al., [2023](#)). In addition, motivational resources and self-compassion have been identified as important in trauma recovery, particularly as survivors move away from self-blame and toward acceptance (Soehardiman et al., [2024](#)).

Cultural and social contexts remain central to meaning-making among incest survivors in Indonesia. Patriarchal norms, cultures of silence, limited sexuality education, and disclosure taboos may contribute to risk and underreporting, while also shaping stigma and survivors’ perceived options for safety and support (Nur Wafiq Azizih & Douzat Wibowo, [2023](#); Gea et al., [2025](#)). From a Heideggerian perspective, these sociocultural conditions form part of the “world” within which survivors interpret their experiences and attempt to rebuild their lives. Accordingly, interventions should address not only individual symptoms but also relational safety, social validation, and structural barriers to disclosure and recovery.

Overall, research on women incest survivors can inform more trauma-informed and survivor-centered supports. The present findings suggest the importance of interventions that target: (a) relational betrayal and trust reconstruction; (b) empowerment and safe pathways for disclosure; (c) restoration of future-oriented life projects (education and work); and (d) community and institutional responses that reduce stigma and strengthen protection. These insights can guide psychosocial services and prevention efforts that are sensitive to both the psychological aftermath of incest and the broader sociocultural constraints that survivors must navigate.

Cross-cutting interpretive findings

Beyond the eight core themes, two cross-cutting findings connected and shaped meaning across both categories. First, relational betrayal and trust reconstruction functioned as an underlying thread: abuse within a familial relationship fractured basic expectations of protection and credibility, reverberating into later relationships, disclosure decisions, and participants' sense of safety in the social world. Survivorship was marked not only by symptom reduction but also by the gradual rebuilding of trust—often through selective relationships, validation from supportive others, and engagement in advocacy-oriented roles that restored agency. Second, temporality and future-oriented life projects operated as a central axis of recovery: participants' accounts show how traumatic past experiences continued to intrude upon the present, whereas survivorship involved reclaiming a livable future through education and work plans, purposeful activities, and commitments to prevent harm to others. In this sense, the movement from victimization to survivorship can be understood as a reopening of possibilities—where the future was no longer experienced as closed (“no escape”) but reimaged through “life must go on” and ongoing recovery work.

Clinical and policy implications

Clinically, services for incest survivors should implement a trauma-informed pathway that prioritizes immediate safety assessment, stabilization, and staged care (e.g., crisis support and psychoeducation, followed by evidence-based trauma-focused therapy when appropriate), with clear referral linkages to mental health providers, medical care, legal aid, and safe housing as needed. Schools and universities should establish confidential disclosure SOPs specifying: safe entry points (e.g., counselor or psychologist), documentation procedures, risk screening (including ongoing contact with the perpetrator), mandatory reporting obligations (where applicable), and rapid referral to external protection and clinical services—while ensuring survivor choice and minimizing repeated retelling. Community services (e.g., women's organizations, local social services, and victim support units) can strengthen recovery by offering peer support groups, case management, and practical assistance (education continuation, financial support, and employment guidance) aligned with survivors' future-oriented life projects. At the policy level, coordinated multisector protocols are needed so survivors experience a single, integrated pathway across health, education, social services, and law enforcement, thereby reducing fragmentation and secondary victimization. Finally, prevention efforts should include culturally sensitive sexuality education and community awareness initiatives to address stigma and silence, promote early help-seeking, and strengthen protective responses.

Limitations

Several limitations should be noted. First, the small sample (two participants) limits transferability; however, the study was designed for phenomenological depth rather than representativeness. Access to incest survivors is inherently challenging because cases are often hidden or unreported, and participation

may be constrained by trauma, shame, family pressure, and fear of stigma. Accordingly, the findings should be interpreted as an in-depth account of two cases rather than a comprehensive representation of incest survivorship.

Second, the sensitivity of the topic posed methodological constraints. Interviews were conducted carefully to reduce retraumatization; therefore, not all aspects of participants' experiences could be explored exhaustively. Power dynamics, safety considerations, and the interview setting may also have influenced participants' comfort and the extent of disclosure.

Third, as with interpretive qualitative research more broadly, interpretive bias remains possible because analysis is shaped by the researcher's positioning and theoretical lens. Although reflexive practices and peer debriefing were used to enhance credibility, the interpretations should be understood as well-grounded yet not value-free readings of the data. This study offers initial interpretive insights into survivorship and recovery among women incest survivors; further research with larger and more diverse samples across regions and cultural contexts is needed to broaden and deepen understanding.

Conclusion

This study suggests that the lived experiences of women incest survivors can be understood within two overarching meaning domains: (1) experiences as victims of incest-related sexual violence and (2) experiences as survivors. Across these domains, eight themes were identified: Disappointment, Frightened, Feeling helpless, No escape, Caring for others, Daring to speak up, Life must go on, and Recovery from trauma. Together, these themes depict a trajectory of meaning-making in which trauma disrupts trust, agency, and future orientation, whereas survivorship involves the gradual reclamation of voice, relational engagement, and future-directed life projects.

The findings are not intended for statistical generalization. Rather, they offer in-depth interpretive insights that may support awareness, understanding, and trauma-informed practices for assisting women affected by incest and other forms of sexual violence. Future research would benefit from longitudinal or multi-method designs to capture shifts in meaning-making and recovery over time and to examine survivorship across more diverse contexts.

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Trigger Warning

This article discusses sexual violence, which may be distressing or triggering for some readers.

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Ethical statement

The study followed the guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki & Five principles for research ethics American Psychological Association (2002)

Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all persons involved in the study.

Conflicts of Interest

On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

Data availability

Data can be provided upon request to the first author.

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