



# To Speak While Others are Silenced: Ethical Witnessing in Gaza under Genocidal Violence

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## Abstract

Armed conflict increasingly targets civilian populations and infrastructures, producing not only immediate destruction but also enduring social, psychological, and ethical consequences. Gaza represents a critical case of sustained violence, where civilians live under conditions of repeated bombardment, displacement, and structural deprivation. While research has documented the psychological impact of war, less attention has been paid to how survivors understand the ethical dimensions of witnessing during ongoing violence. This study examines how individuals in Gaza interpret the responsibilities, tensions, and dilemmas associated with speaking about their experiences. Grounded in a phenomenological and critical framework, the study draws on qualitative data from semi-structured interviews with 30 civilians. Data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis. Findings show that witnessing is not a neutral act of narration but an ethically complex and emotionally demanding practice. Six interrelated themes were identified, including moral responsibility toward the dead, fear of misinterpretation, and exhaustion from repeated narration. Testimony emerges as shaped by responsibility, circulation risks, and cumulative burden. The study highlights witnessing as a relational and ethically contested practice embedded in ongoing violence.

**Keywords** Gaza · Witnessing · Ethical dilemmas · Armed conflict · Trauma · Structural violence

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## Introduction

Contemporary analyses of large-scale violence have largely relied on legal and psychiatric frameworks, often overlooking how such violence is experienced, interpreted, and narrated by those directly affected (Summerfield, 2022, 2025). Addressing this gap requires attention to testimony, memory, and lived experience as central dimensions of war.

Armed conflict has intensified in frequency, geographic spread, and civilian impact during the past two decades (Patomäki, 2025). Contemporary wars are increasingly fought in densely populated areas, where military operations intersect with political fragmentation, occupation, siege, and humanitarian collapse (Kobayashi et al., 2025). This shift matters because the consequences of war now extend far beyond battlefield deaths. Hospitals, schools, housing, water systems, and energy networks are repeatedly damaged or destroyed, producing effects that spread through every part of social life and public health (Pomarede, 2025). In these settings, civilians are exposed not only to attacks but to prolonged insecurity, deprivation, and displacement (Downey, 2025). Urban warfare further erodes the distinction between military and civilian space, making violence an ordinary condition rather than an exceptional event (Skiba, 2024). War no longer appears only in moments of combat; it enters homes, streets, and institutions. Repeated bombardment, forced migration, loss of family members, and destruction of homes create social and psychological consequences that persist across generations (Spanu, 2023). Understanding contemporary war requires attention not only to casualties but also to the systematic destruction of the conditions that sustain civilian life.

Within this wider pattern, Gaza is one of the clearest contemporary cases of sustained mass violence against civilians (Nijim, 2025). For years, the Gaza Strip has been subjected to blockade conditions that restrict movement, resources, and economic life, turning deprivation into a permanent structure rather than a temporary crisis. Periodic military assaults have repeatedly destroyed civilian infrastructure and triggered waves of internal displacement (Hamamra et al., 2025). The most recent escalation has produced unprecedented destruction, including widespread damage to residential neighborhoods, health facilities, and educational institutions, alongside mass civilian casualties (Abuward et al., 2025). Describing these dynamics as “conflict” risks obscuring their cumulative and structural character. The issue is not only the scale of physical destruction in the present but the longer history of enclosure, attrition, and repeated infrastructural ruin that has shaped civilian life in Gaza. The case forces a harder question: when an entire population is subjected to recurring bombardment, blocked resources, and collapsing infrastructure, can this still be treated as an ordinary episode of war? A critical account therefore prioritizes direct language to describe systematic civilian destruction.

These conditions have generated growing legal and scholarly debate over whether these events should be classified as war crimes, crimes against humanity, or acts that may fall within the legal definition of genocide (Blatman & Goldberg, 2025; El-Affendi, 2024). These debates are not merely technical disputes over labels. They concern the protection of civilians, the responsibilities of states and international institutions, and the ability to document violence while military operations continue (Saleem & Akbar, 2025). International humanitarian law remains the main legal framework governing armed conflict. The Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols establish the principles of distinction, proportionality, and military necessity (Talha et al., 2025). Distinction requires parties to

separate civilians from combatants. Proportionality prohibits attacks expected to cause excessive civilian harm relative to the anticipated military advantage. Military necessity limits force to actions required for legitimate military objectives (Chalisey, 2025). Violations include deliberate attacks on civilians, destruction of infrastructure without military necessity, forced displacement, collective punishment, torture, and starvation. The Rome Statute codifies many of these acts and provides mechanisms for prosecution (Izydorczyk, 2024). Yet the persistence of such acts shows that legal norms often function more as statements of principle than as effective restraints, especially when enforcement depends on political power rather than consistent law (Jones, 2023).

Scholars have therefore emphasized the gap between legal norms and their implementation. Although international law has developed elaborate rules, accountability remains selective and deeply shaped by geopolitical interests rather than universal principle (Bassiouni, 2023). In prolonged conflicts and occupation regimes, it is not enough to isolate individual violations; analysis must address the structures that make recurring violence possible (Ahmad et al., 2024). The concept of structural violence is essential here because it identifies social and political arrangements that systematically harm populations by restricting access to security, resources, and survival (Rodríguez-Gómez & Russell, 2022). In conflict settings, this can occur through blockades, economic restrictions, destruction of infrastructure, and limits on humanitarian assistance (Nijim, 2025; Tanous, 2022). Closely related is the concept of slow violence, which captures harm that unfolds gradually rather than through a single catastrophic event (Wakeham, 2022). Such violence may take the form of environmental degradation, prolonged deprivation, or the collapse of public health systems (Cunneen, 2025). In places marked by siege and displacement, slow violence and direct military assault reinforce one another and together shape everyday life (Doubt, 2026). This framework is crucial because it reveals how civilian destruction is often cumulative, normalized, and politically managed rather than accidental.

Psychological research has documented the effects of such conditions on civilian populations. Exposure to bombardment, displacement, bereavement, and chronic threat is associated with severe distress, including symptoms described as post-traumatic stress, depression, and anxiety (Aldabbour et al., 2024, 2025). Children and adolescents are especially vulnerable because violence becomes embedded during key developmental stages (Peltonen, 2025; Veronese & Castiglioni, 2015). Yet scholars also warn against reducing this suffering to individual pathology when the violence is ongoing rather than past (Zoromba et al., 2024). In such contexts, distress may be less a discrete disorder than a rational response to persistent danger and instability (Baines & Anyeko, 2022). This point matters because clinical language can depoliticize suffering by separating psychological injury from the structures that produce it. The study of war violence therefore cannot remain confined to law or psychiatry alone. It must also engage testimony, memory, and lived experience. Testimony has been examined across international law, sociology, political theory, trauma studies, and transitional justice because it provides a means through which survivors communicate violence that official institutions often fail to record adequately (Al-Natour et al., 2019; Eastmond, 2007; Khorram-Manesh & Burkle, 2023; Brants & Klep, 2013; Thorne, 2022; Wyles et al., 2023). In contexts of mass violence, survivors become witnesses not by choice but because survival itself imposes the burden of narration.

That burden creates profound ethical dilemmas. Survivors often experience tension between the obligation to speak and the pain of recounting traumatic events (Ndow, 2025).

Testimony may feel like a responsibility toward the dead or toward future generations who must know what happened (Elgabsi, 2024). At the same time, speaking can reopen grief, intensify exhaustion, and expose the limits of language itself. Accounts from Gaza show that witnessing often emerges from survival rather than personal choice (Negi, 2025; Ihmoud, 2025). Those who remain alive may feel compelled to speak for relatives, neighbors, and community members who were killed and can no longer testify (Abudayya, 2025 a). Yet this role is marked by uncertainty: survivors may doubt whether language can capture such devastation or whether anyone can legitimately represent another's suffering (Procter, 2024). The ethical problem deepens when testimony circulates through media, humanitarian documentation, and academic research (Allouzi, 2025). Survivors often fear that their words will be shortened, removed from context, or absorbed into narratives they did not choose (Björkdahl et al., 2026). Repeated retelling can also produce fatigue and depletion rather than relief, as participants from Gaza have described (Abuward et al., 2025). In such cases, silence may function not as avoidance but as protection (Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2003). Witnessing therefore demands ethical responsibility not only from those who speak but also from those who listen, interpret, and circulate these accounts (Krämer, 2023).

The paper is structured as follows: the theoretical background outlines key perspectives on witnessing, followed by the methodology, results, and discussion.

## Theoretical Background

The present study is grounded in phenomenological approaches to lived experience and in critical scholarship on knowledge production under colonial and geopolitical power relations.

At the same time, testimony in Gaza cannot be understood apart from the broader political and historical conditions in which it is produced. Experiences of violence are shaped by prolonged occupation and restrictions on movement, resources, and political autonomy (Diab et al., 2023). Decolonial scholarship shows that knowledge about conflict is often produced within unequal global systems, where institutions outside affected communities, such as international media, humanitarian agencies, and academic networks, shape how suffering is interpreted and circulated (Magalhães Teixeira, 2025; Barter & Sumlut, 2023). These conditions influence which voices are heard, how testimonies are framed, and how narratives are absorbed into wider geopolitical debates. A critical approach must therefore examine not only what survivors say but also the structures through which their testimony travels. In this sense, testimony functions at once as personal narrative, documentation of violence, and resistance to epistemic marginalization. Combining phenomenology with critical analysis makes it possible to treat witnessing as both an ethical practice rooted in lived experience and a social process shaped by power, memory, and political interpretation (Till & Robinson, 2025).

## The Study

This study examines the ethical dimensions of witnessing among people living in Gaza during ongoing genocidal violence (Cavazzoni et al., 2025). Drawing on qualitative testimonies from survivors, it explores how participants describe the responsibilities, tensions, and dilemmas involved in speaking about war. Using reflexive thematic analysis, the study

identifies recurring patterns in how survivors reflect not only on violent events but on the act of witnessing itself (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The analysis focuses on how participants understand the moral implications of speaking, representing others, and addressing external audiences beyond Gaza (Bringedal Houge, 2023).

The study has three aims. First, it identifies the main ethical themes that emerge in survivors' reflections on witnessing during ongoing violence. Second, it examines how survivors negotiate responsibilities linked to testimony, including representation, consent, misinterpretation, and emotional exhaustion. Third, it contributes to scholarship on ethical witnessing by locating these narratives within wider debates on violence, knowledge production, and the circulation of testimony in conflict settings (Campbell et al., 2023). The guiding question is: how do survivors in Gaza describe and interpret the ethical responsibilities and dilemmas of witnessing during ongoing genocidal violence? By focusing on survivors' reflections on testimony, the study seeks to deepen understanding of the moral terrain in which witnessing takes place under extreme violence.

Existing research has conceptualized witnessing as a relational and politically situated practice shaped by power, memory, and narrative constraints (e.g., Baines & Anyeko, 2022; Björkdahl et al., 2026; Campbell et al., 2019).

## Methods

Phenomenology examines how individuals experience, interpret, and assign meaning to events in everyday life rather than reducing behavior to external causal explanation alone (Gilks, 2025; Narozhna, 2022). In the context of war, this perspective is especially useful because testimony is not a simple record of facts. Survivors interpret what they witnessed, reflect on their position as witnesses, and confront ethical questions about whether to speak, remain silent, or represent the dead (Lumineau & Keller, 2025). The phenomenological lens is therefore central to this study because witnessing involves perception, memory, reflection, and moral evaluation. Survivors do not merely describe violence; they also assess their responsibility in narrating it and consider the consequences of doing so. Questions about whether one can speak for others, whether language can convey suffering, or whether testimony may be distorted are all part of the lived experience of witnessing itself (Van der Heiden, 2022).

## Participants and Sampling Strategy

This study was conducted during the ongoing genocidal violence in the Gaza Strip and adopted a purposive, context-sensitive sampling strategy grounded in phenomenological and critical qualitative research traditions. The objective was not to achieve statistical representativeness but to identify participants capable of offering rich, reflective accounts of the ethical complexities of witnessing under conditions of sustained violence. A total of 30 participants were included in the study. All participants were civilians residing in Gaza during the ongoing military assault and were therefore experiencing violence as a continuous and structuring condition of everyday life rather than as a past or isolated event.

Participant selection followed clearly defined inclusion criteria to ensure coherence with the epistemological and ethical positioning of the study. Individuals were eligible if they had

direct, first-hand exposure to war-related events, including bombardment, forced displacement, destruction of homes, or the loss of family members and close others. In addition, participants were required to occupy a position of lived witnessing, understood not simply as exposure to violence but as being placed—through survival—within situations requiring interpretation, narration, and ethical reflection on what had occurred. These included exposure to bombardment, displacement, loss of relatives, and the need to communicate these experiences to external audiences. A further criterion concerned the capacity and willingness to engage in reflective narration, particularly with regard to the moral, relational, and existential dimensions of speaking about violence. This refers not only to participation in the study but to the ability to reflect on the ethical and relational implications of testimony. At the same time, careful attention was paid to the safety and well-being of participants, and individuals whose participation would have posed immediate psychological or physical risk were not included. Risk was assessed through preliminary conversations with participants and local collaborators.

Sampling was conducted through a snowball approach initiated via trusted community and professional networks. These included local psychosocial workers, educators, and community actors previously engaged in humanitarian and support activities. This strategy was not only necessitated by the logistical constraints of ongoing conflict, displacement, and infrastructural collapse, but also aligned with a decolonial commitment to relational trust and the avoidance of extractive recruitment practices. Participants were recruited through interpersonal connections, allowing the research process to unfold within existing social relations rather than through impersonal or externally imposed mechanisms. The resulting sample included men and women from diverse civilian backgrounds, including students, educators, and displaced individuals, allowing for variation in lived experience while maintaining a shared condition of exposure to structural and direct violence.

This approach prioritizes relational trust but may underrepresent individuals outside these networks.

## Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews designed to elicit participants' lived experiences and their reflections on the ethical dimensions of witnessing. Interviews were conducted in Arabic, the native language of both participants and Palestinian members of the research team, in order to preserve linguistic nuance, cultural meaning, and emotional depth. Given the conditions of ongoing violence, interviews were conducted flexibly, using a combination of in-person and remote modalities depending on feasibility, safety, and participants' circumstances.

The interview process was guided by open-ended questions that encouraged participants to reflect not only on what they had experienced but on how they understood the act of witnessing itself. Particular attention was given to participants' interpretations of speaking and silence, their perceived responsibilities toward others, including those who had been killed, and their concerns regarding how their testimonies might be received, interpreted, or misused by external audiences. The flexible and responsive design of the interviews allowed participants to guide the depth and direction of disclosure, recognizing the emotional demands associated with recounting traumatic experiences and the ethical importance of maintaining participant agency throughout the research process.

## Ethical Considerations

The study received ethical approval from the Institutional Review Board at An-Najah National University. Ethical practice was approached as an ongoing and relational responsibility rather than a procedural requirement. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to participation, with clear communication regarding the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and the right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Given the context of ongoing violence, consent procedures were adapted to ensure comprehension and feasibility under conditions of instability.

Particular care was taken to minimize potential harm. Participants were not required to answer any question they found distressing and were able to pause or terminate the interview at any stage. A licensed clinical psychologist within the research team was available to provide immediate support in cases where participation elicited emotional distress. Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained through the removal or alteration of identifying details, and participants are referred to using general descriptors in all reporting. The research team remained attentive to the ethical risks associated with working with testimony in contexts of ongoing violence, including the potential for retraumatization, emotional exhaustion, and the circulation of participants' words beyond their control.

## Data Analysis

All interviews were transcribed verbatim in Arabic and subsequently translated into English by bilingual members of the research team with expertise in qualitative research and translation. Translation was treated as an interpretive process rather than a purely technical task. To preserve meaning, tone, and cultural nuance, selected excerpts were back-translated into Arabic and discussed collaboratively among team members to resolve discrepancies and ensure fidelity to participants' intended meanings.

Data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis as articulated by Braun and Clarke (2021), situated within a phenomenological and critical epistemological framework. This approach was selected because it allows for the identification of patterns of meaning while recognizing that themes are not discovered but actively constructed through the interpretive engagement of the researcher. The analysis began with an extended phase of immersion in the data, during which transcripts were read and reread to develop a deep familiarity with participants' narratives, including their emotional, relational, and ethical dimensions.

Initial coding was conducted inductively, focusing closely on participants' language and expressions. Codes were generated to capture meanings related to witnessing, responsibility, representation, and the tensions surrounding speech and silence. Rather than imposing predefined categories, coding remained grounded in the data, allowing themes to emerge through iterative engagement. Codes were then examined for patterns and grouped into broader thematic configurations that reflected shared meanings across participants' accounts.

The development of themes involved an ongoing process of refinement, comparison, and reinterpretation. Themes were conceptualized as interpretive constructs that captured recurring patterns while remaining sensitive to variation, contradiction, and complexity. Throughout this process, the research team engaged in regular reflexive discussions to examine assumptions, challenge interpretations, and ensure coherence between the data and analytic claims. Particular attention was given to situating participants' accounts within the

broader socio-political context of ongoing violence, recognizing that experiences of witnessing are inseparable from the structural conditions in which they occur.

In line with the principles of reflexive thematic analysis, analytic rigor was not pursued through interrater reliability or statistical measures of agreement such as Cohen's kappa. Such approaches are grounded in a positivist epistemology that assumes a fixed meaning within the data and are therefore incompatible with the interpretive and reflexive orientation of this study. Instead, rigor was ensured through prolonged engagement with the data, transparency in analytic decision-making, collaborative reflexivity within the research team, and sustained attention to the alignment between participants' narratives and the interpretations developed.

## Positionality Statement

The research process was shaped by the positionalities of the authors, whose perspectives are situated within unequal global and geopolitical structures of knowledge production. Guido Veronese is a European scholar trained within Western psychological traditions who has critically engaged with their limitations, particularly in contexts marked by colonial violence and structural oppression. His work reflects an ongoing effort to interrogate and revise dominant psychological frameworks, moving toward approaches that foreground collective suffering, historical context, and political responsibility.

Fayez Mahamid and Bilal Hamamra are Palestinian scholars working within and alongside communities directly affected by occupation and war. Their positionality is not external to the phenomenon under study but deeply embedded within it, shaping both access to participants and the interpretive framework through which data are understood. Their proximity to the lived realities of violence brings essential epistemic insight while also requiring continuous negotiation of emotional, ethical, and professional boundaries.

The collaboration among authors located differently within global systems of power required sustained reflexivity, particularly regarding the risks of epistemic extraction, unequal academic visibility, and the translation of lived experience into forms recognizable within international academic discourse. This study adopts a decolonial stance that recognizes how knowledge about conflict is often produced, mediated, and legitimized through institutions external to the communities most affected. Rather than claiming neutrality, the research acknowledges that all interpretation is situated and that the production of knowledge in this context is inherently political. The aim is not to speak for participants but to engage in a process of interpretation that remains accountable to their narratives while resisting their reduction to decontextualized data.

## Results

The analysis of the interview data using reflexive thematic analysis revealed six primary themes that capture the ethical dimensions of witnessing under ongoing violence. These themes reflect how participants understand the moral responsibilities, emotional burdens, and relational tensions involved in speaking about their experiences. First, *The Moral Weight of Speaking While Others Are Silenced*. Second, *Fear of Being Misunderstood or*

**Table 1** Thematic overview of ethical dimensions shaping witnessing practices among participants in Gaza

Theme	Core Meaning	Ethical Dimension
Moral weight of speaking	Speaking as burden tied to survival	Responsibility toward the dead
Fear of misuse	Testimony may be distorted	Loss of control over meaning
Speaking without consent	Narrating others' suffering	Representation without permission
Exhaustion of repetition	Testimony as draining labor	Harm of repeated narration
Ethical demands on readers	Responsibility shifts to audience	Duty of attentive reception
Refusal of voyeurism	Rejecting trauma consumption	Limits of visibility

*Misused*. Third, *Writing and Speaking Without Consent of the Dead*. Fourth, *Exhaustion from Repeating Trauma*. Fifth, *Ethical Demands Placed on the Reader*. Sixth, *Refusal of Voyeurism and Trauma Consumption*. These themes illustrate that witnessing is not experienced as a neutral act of narration but as an ethically complex and emotionally demanding practice shaped by loss, responsibility, and the conditions in which testimony is produced and received (See Table 1).

### First Theme: The Moral Weight of Speaking while Others are Silenced

For many Gazans, witnessing is not experienced as a voluntary act but as a moral burden imposed by survival itself. Survivors repeatedly express discomfort with speaking while others—friends, family members, neighbors—have been killed and can no longer testify. The ability to speak becomes ethically troubling, tied to guilt and responsibility rather than empowerment. A Gazan student articulated this tension clearly, saying, “*Sometimes I hesitate to speak because I know there are voices that were louder and braver than mine, and they are gone now.*” Her words reveal how testimony is shadowed by absence, shaped by awareness of those who cannot speak. Similarly, a displaced woman described this burden, noting, “*When I tell what happened, I feel like I am standing in place of people who should be here instead of me.*” Speaking here is framed as substitution rather than expression. Another civilian reflected on this responsibility starkly, stating, “*I did not choose to be a witness. I am one because I am still alive, and that feels like a heavy role.*” Through these accounts, witnessing emerges as an obligation tied to survival, not a position of authority or clarity.

This moral weight also shapes how survivors choose their words, often producing hesitation, restraint, and self-questioning. Gazans describe fearing that their testimony may be insufficient, inaccurate, or unworthy of representing collective suffering. A Gazan teacher explained this anxiety, saying, “*I worry that my words will never be enough for those who died. No sentence can carry what they went through.*” His words expose the perceived inadequacy of language when speaking on behalf of the silenced. A young woman echoed this concern, stating, “*Every time I speak, I ask myself if I am doing justice to those who cannot tell their stories.*” Witnessing becomes a continuous ethical negotiation rather than a completed act. Another displaced civilian reflected on the emotional toll of this responsibility, noting, “*Speaking keeps them present, but it also reminds me that I am the one left to carry their pain.*” Through these testimonies, the ethics of witnessing begin with unease rather

than certainty. Speaking is not experienced as liberation but as a morally charged act shaped by loss, responsibility, and the enduring presence of silenced voices.

### **Second Theme: Fear of being Misunderstood or Misused**

For many Gazans, the act of witnessing is accompanied by deep anxiety about how their words will be received, circulated, and repurposed beyond their control. Survivors describe fear not only of speaking, but of what happens after speech leaves their bodies and enters unfamiliar interpretive spaces. A Gazan student articulated this concern clearly, saying, *“I am afraid of how my words travel once they leave me; they can be twisted, shortened, or used to prove something I never meant, and then my pain becomes someone else’s argument.”* Her words reveal how testimony risks being transformed into evidence detached from lived intent. Similarly, a displaced woman reflected on selective listening, noting, *“When I speak, I worry that people will hear only what fits their beliefs, not what I am actually saying, and my story will be simplified into something safe for them.”* This fear exposes the gap between speaking and being heard. Another civilian expressed similar hesitation, stating, *“I hesitate before sharing anything because I know stories from Gaza are often taken out of context, reposted without care, and turned into symbols that erase the person who lived them.”* Through these accounts, witnessing appears fraught with the risk of distortion rather than recognition.

This fear of misuse also reshapes the emotional aftermath of speaking, leaving survivors feeling exposed and vulnerable long after testimony is given. Gazans describe how once their words circulate, they lose ownership over them, intensifying feelings of dispossession. A young woman described this exposure, saying, *“Sometimes I feel exposed after speaking, as if my words are no longer mine, moving freely among strangers who judge them, analyze them, and consume them without knowing what they cost me.”* Her testimony highlights the emotional cost of public witnessing. A Gazan teacher emphasized the ethical responsibility of readers, stating, *“I want people to listen carefully, not quickly, because fast reading turns our suffering into headlines, and I am afraid my life will be reduced to a sentence someone scrolls past.”* This reflects resistance to the consumption of trauma as information. Another displaced civilian articulated the pain of misinterpretation, noting, *“When my testimony is misunderstood, it feels like being wounded again, because the pain I trusted others with comes back to me distorted, distant, and stripped of the truth I tried to protect.”* Through these testimonies, fear of misunderstanding emerges as a central ethical tension, revealing how witnessing under extreme violence carries risks that extend far beyond the moment of speech.

### **Third Theme: Writing and Speaking without Consent of the Dead**

For many Gazans, witnessing involves speaking on behalf of those who were killed, a role that carries profound ethical tension. Survivors describe narrating experiences that are not solely their own, aware that the dead cannot consent to how their lives or deaths are represented. A Gazan student articulated this discomfort clearly, saying, *“When I talk about my friend who was killed, I always wonder if I am allowed to speak for him, because he is not here to correct me or choose how his story should be told.”* Her words expose the unease of proxy testimony. Similarly, a displaced woman reflected on this responsibility, noting,

*"I mention my sister's death, but I fear using her pain in my words, as if I am borrowing something sacred without permission."* Speaking becomes an act shadowed by moral doubt. Another civilian expressed this tension starkly, stating, *"I tell stories of people who cannot object anymore, and that scares me, because I don't want to turn their suffering into something that belongs to my voice alone."* Through these accounts, witnessing emerges as ethically burdened by the absence of consent.

This ethical tension deepens as survivors struggle to balance remembrance with restraint, unsure how much can or should be said. Gazans describe constantly negotiating the limits of narration, fearing both silence and overexposure. A Gazan teacher explained this balance, saying, *"I feel responsible for remembering the dead, but I also fear crossing a line by explaining their pain in ways they never chose."* His words frame testimony as a moral tightrope. A young woman echoed this concern, stating, *"Sometimes I stop myself mid-sentence, thinking this is not my pain to explain fully, even though silence feels like another kind of betrayal."* The conflict between speaking and withholding becomes central. Another displaced civilian reflected on this dilemma, noting, *"I carry their stories, but I don't know how to carry them correctly. Every word feels like it could either honor them or harm them."* Through these testimonies, speaking without the consent of the dead emerges as one of the most complex ethical dimensions of witnessing, where survivors must navigate remembrance without appropriation and testimony without violation.

#### **Fourth Theme: Exhaustion from Repeating Trauma**

For many Gazans, witnessing becomes exhausting not because the story changes, but because it must be repeated again and again. Survivors describe how retelling traumatic experiences drains emotional and physical energy, turning testimony into a form of labor that reopens wounds. A Gazan student described this exhaustion clearly, saying, *"Every time someone asks me to explain what happened, I feel like I am being pulled back into the moment again, and my body reacts as if the bombing is happening all over."* Her words show how narration retriggers trauma. Similarly, a displaced woman reflected on the toll of repetition, noting, *"I tell the same story to journalists, doctors, and relatives, and each time it costs me something I cannot recover afterward."* Testimony here is experienced as depletion rather than release. Another civilian expressed this fatigue starkly, stating, *"People think speaking helps healing, but sometimes speaking just makes the pain louder and more exhausting."* Through these accounts, repetition emerges as a source of harm rather than relief.

This exhaustion also produces resistance to speaking, as survivors begin to protect themselves through silence or withdrawal. Gazans describe feeling worn down by the expectation to constantly explain their suffering to others. A Gazan teacher articulated this resistance, saying, *"I am tired of repeating my pain for people who listen once and then move on with their lives."* His words reveal the imbalance between speaker and listener. A young woman echoed this fatigue, stating, *"Each time I repeat what happened, I lose a part of myself, so sometimes I choose silence to survive."* Silence becomes a protective strategy rather than avoidance. Another displaced civilian reflected on the cumulative effect of repeated witnessing, noting, *"Retelling the trauma does not empty it out; it piles it higher inside me."* Through these testimonies, exhaustion from repetition emerges as a central ethical concern.

Witnessing, while necessary, exacts a cost that survivors carry alone, revealing the limits of how much trauma can be asked to be spoken without causing further harm.

### **Fifth Theme: Ethical Demands Placed on the Reader**

Gazan survivors do not frame witnessing as a one-sided act; instead, they articulate clear ethical expectations toward those who read or listen to their testimonies. Speaking is accompanied by an insistence that readers engage responsibly rather than passively. A Gazan student expressed this demand clearly, saying, *“If you read my words, I want you to pause and stay with them, not skim them quickly and move on, because these words come from real fear and real loss.”* Her words position reading as a moral act rather than casual consumption. Similarly, a displaced woman emphasized accountability, noting, *“I am not speaking to be pitied. I am speaking so that my pain is recognized as real and not treated like another story people forget.”* Recognition, rather than sympathy, becomes the ethical requirement. Another civilian articulated this expectation starkly, stating, *“When people read our stories without responsibility, it feels like they are watching suffering without standing inside its meaning.”* Through these accounts, reading is framed as an ethical encounter that demands attentiveness and seriousness.

These ethical demands also reflect survivors’ frustration with detached or superficial engagement. Gazans describe how careless reading reproduces harm by minimizing or neutralizing suffering. A Gazan teacher explained this concern, saying, *“I want readers to understand that reading our trauma carries responsibility; once you know, you cannot pretend ignorance or neutrality.”* His words assign moral consequence to knowledge. A young woman echoed this sentiment, stating, *“If someone reads my testimony and feels nothing, then my words have been consumed, not understood.”* Emotional detachment is thus framed as ethical failure. Another displaced civilian articulated the boundary clearly, noting, *“Do not read our stories as information. Read them as lives that are still being lived and still being harmed.”* Through these testimonies, survivors relocate ethics from the speaker to the reader, insisting that witnessing only becomes meaningful when readers accept responsibility for how they receive, interpret, and carry trauma forward.

### **Sixth Theme: Refusal of Voyeurism and Trauma Consumption**

Gazan survivors repeatedly reject forms of witnessing that transform their suffering into spectacle or emotional consumption. They express discomfort with being watched, shared, or circulated as images and stories detached from responsibility. A Gazan student articulated this refusal clearly, saying, *“Sometimes it feels like people are watching our pain from a distance, collecting our stories as proof or shock, without thinking about how exposed and unprotected we feel when our trauma becomes public.”* Her words expose the violence of spectatorship. Similarly, a displaced woman reflected on this discomfort, noting, *“I don’t want my suffering to become something people look at and then close, like a video or a picture that ends while our lives continue.”* This statement resists the closure offered by consumption. Another civilian expressed this boundary starkly, stating, *“When our pain is shared without care, it feels like being stripped again, this time by those who claim to be listening.”* Through these accounts, voyeurism is named as a secondary harm that accompanies witnessing without ethics.

This refusal also marks an insistence on boundaries, where survivors reclaim control over how and why their trauma is seen. Gazans emphasize that witnessing must not reproduce violence by turning pain into content. A Gazan teacher articulated this insistence, saying, *“I want people to understand that our trauma is not material to be consumed; it is something that demands responsibility, restraint, and respect.”* His words reposition witnessing as an ethical obligation. A young woman echoed this concern, stating, *“I share my story so people understand, not so they feel moved for a moment and then forget while I continue living inside the damage.”* This highlights the imbalance between reader and survivor. Another displaced civilian drew a clear line, noting, *“If my story is read only to feel something and not to change anything, then I would rather keep it to myself.”* Through these testimonies, survivors assert an ethics of refusal, rejecting voyeuristic engagement and demanding forms of witnessing that honor lived trauma without consuming it.

## Discussion

### Witnessing as Ethical Practice

The findings show that witnessing during ongoing genocidal violence in Gaza is not experienced as simple narration but as an ethically difficult practice shaped by responsibility, uncertainty, and emotional strain (Schippert et al., 2025; Gholami, 2025). Participants do not speak about testimony as a neutral recounting of events. They describe it as a moral act burdened by loss, by the deaths of others, and by concern over what speaking does to memory, dignity, and survival. A central theme is that witnessing emerges from survival itself. Many participants express discomfort with speaking while others who lived through similar violence were killed and can no longer testify. In this sense, testimony is inseparable from absence. Survivors often portray themselves as occupying an unwanted position in which remaining alive creates an obligation to preserve what might otherwise disappear (Herman, 2023). Research on genocide and mass violence has described similar forms of narrative responsibility, where testimony becomes tied to relationships with the dead and to the work of sustaining memory (Cody & Stover, 2023; Halilovich, 2022). Yet participants also question whether their words can represent the scale of what was lost. Their hesitation shows that witnessing is not a completed act of disclosure but an ongoing struggle over language, responsibility, and the limits of representation (Givoni, 2014; Speth, 2025; Stone & Woods, 2023). This aligns with recent calls to move beyond neutrality and address forms of professional implication in contexts of mass violence (Tommasi et al., 2026).

### Risks of Circulation and Representation

Participants also describe testimony as vulnerable once it leaves the immediate context in which it is spoken. They worry that their words may be shortened, taken out of context, or absorbed into narratives that do not reflect what they meant to communicate (Charles, 2026). This concern is not secondary. It shapes how participants decide what to say, how far to go, and whether speaking is worth the risk. Their accounts show that testimony does not end at the moment of narration. It enters wider communicative spaces structured by media logics, political debate, and institutional agendas that can alter meaning and detach testi-

mony from the speaker's intention (Irwanto et al., 2025). Scholarship on the circulation of trauma narratives has shown that stories from conflict zones often pass through several layers of mediation, where they may gain visibility but also become symbolic material serving purposes far from those of the original witness (Björkdahl et al., 2026). Participants appear acutely aware of this danger. They understand that public testimony can be received by audiences whose political assumptions or cultural frameworks differ sharply from their own (Lingaas, 2024). The fear of misinterpretation therefore reflects more than anxiety about being misunderstood. It reveals how testimony is shaped by unequal interpretive environments in which survivors lose control over how their experiences are framed, read, and used (Chouliaraki & Al-Ghazzi, 2022).

### **Burden of Repetition and Silence**

A further ethical difficulty concerns speaking about those who were killed. Participants frequently refer to relatives, friends, and neighbors whose deaths they witnessed, yet many also question their right to narrate experiences that were not solely their own (Alexander, 2023; Voth, 2014). The dead cannot confirm, correct, or refuse what is said about them. As a result, testimony becomes ethically divided between remembrance and restraint. Research on genocide and political violence has long noted that survivors often become proxy witnesses, recounting the suffering of others because those others are no longer present to speak for themselves (Singh & Lu, 2025). The present findings support that view but also show the discomfort attached to it. Participants do not speak as though representation were straightforward or unquestionably justified. Some describe deliberately stopping themselves, withholding detail, or refusing to elaborate when they feel they are moving too far into another person's pain. In such moments, silence is not withdrawal but respect (Baines & Anyeko, 2022). This matters because it shows that witnessing is shaped not only by the need to preserve memory but also by the recognition that memory can become intrusive when narrated without limits. Survivors therefore navigate a difficult balance: they seek to prevent the disappearance of the dead while remaining alert to the possibility that testimony may overstep the boundaries of what they can rightfully claim to represent.

### **Ethics of Reception**

Participants also emphasize the cumulative burden of repeated narration. Many describe being asked to tell their stories to journalists, researchers, aid workers, and members of the public, often more than once and often under conditions in which violence remains ongoing (Ajour, 2025). Each retelling demands a return to scenes of bombardment, displacement, injury, and loss. Participants do not describe this repetition as healing. More often, they describe it as exhausting, depleting, and emotionally destabilizing (Fashina, 2025). This supports research showing that repeated testimony can impose a heavy burden even when documentation is necessary for legal record, public awareness, or humanitarian advocacy (Stewart, 2026; Ingerslev, 2024). In this study, narration appears not as therapeutic release but as labor required to keep violence visible to others. Several participants suggest that each retelling reactivates aspects of the original experience rather than diminishing its force (Gashi, 2026). Under such conditions, silence can function as a form of self-protection rather than denial. Some participants describe choosing not to speak in particular settings

because they fear the emotional effects of further narration. Their silence does not signal forgetfulness or indifference. It marks an attempt to preserve psychological boundaries in environments where demands for testimony are constant and often insensitive to the cost of speaking (Courtois, 2012; Zedan, 2025).

Finally, participants insist that witnessing is not only the burden of those who speak but also an ethical demand placed on those who receive testimony. They expect listeners, readers, and interpreters to engage carefully rather than consume their stories as fleeting content (Delker et al., 2020). This insistence is significant because it shifts attention from expression alone to reception. Testimony becomes meaningful not simply when it is voiced but when it is met with attention, seriousness, and recognition (Lipari, 2014). Participants reject forms of engagement that turn suffering into spectacle or emotional material for distant audiences (Divon & Eriksson Krutrök, 2025; Gumusboga, 2026). They express discomfort with stories and images circulated primarily for impact, stripped of context or treated as objects of observation rather than as accounts of ongoing lives. This concern echoes critiques of humanitarian media that warn against spectatorship detached from responsibility (Fassin, 2008). Participants do not ask for pity. They ask for recognition, meaning acknowledgment of what happened and of the lives still shaped by it. Taken together, the findings show that witnessing is a relational and ethically contested practice structured by ties to the dead, by fear of misrepresentation, by the burden of repetition, and by the conduct of audiences who receive these accounts (Puvimanasinghe et al., 2015; Hamamra et al., 2025; Matar, 2025).

Beyond procedural and deontological considerations, these findings point to an irreducibly moral dimension of psychological practice. Participants do not frame witnessing only in terms of ethical guidelines, but as a matter of responsibility, complicity, and consequence. In this sense, the study extends current ethical frameworks by foregrounding what psychologists ought to do under conditions of ongoing violence, where neutrality itself becomes ethically charged.

Several limitations shape the interpretation of this study. The findings are based on qualitative testimonies produced during ongoing violence, so they reflect specific experiences at a particular moment and do not represent the full range of perspectives in Gaza. The analysis identifies recurring ethical concerns rather than claiming generalizability. In addition, testimony is a reflective form of narration shaped by memory, interpretation, emotion, and the circumstances in which accounts are shared. These narratives should therefore be understood as lived interpretations of violence, not exhaustive or fixed records of events. A further limitation concerns mediation and analytical framing: testimonies from conflict zones often pass through processes of translation, selection, and interpretation, and although the analysis remained closely grounded in participants' words, researcher interpretation cannot be fully removed from qualitative work. Finally, the conditions of ongoing war imposed practical and ethical constraints on data collection. Insecurity, displacement, and uncertainty limited opportunities for prolonged engagement or follow-up, meaning the study captures ethical tensions as they emerged under immediate conditions of violence rather than how survivors may reinterpret them over longer periods.

## Conclusion

This study examined how survivors living under ongoing genocidal violence understand the ethical responsibilities and dilemmas of witnessing. The findings show that testimony is not experienced as simple recounting but as a practice shaped by relationships, obligations, and moral uncertainty. Survivors describe witnessing in relation to those who were killed, the risks of speaking in wider communicative spaces, the burden of repeated narration, and the responsibilities of those who receive their words. Testimony is therefore relational: it links survivors to the dead, to communities still living through violence, and to distant audiences who encounter these accounts through media, research, and public discourse. The study also shows that survivors locate their suffering within collective histories and social ties rather than as an isolated individual condition, which underscores the importance of community in how violence is endured and narrated.

These findings suggest that responses to violence cannot rely only on individualized models of trauma. Community-based practices of care, solidarity, shared storytelling, and remembrance matter because they redistribute the burden of testimony and create spaces in which suffering can be articulated collectively rather than carried alone (Atallah & Jamei, 2025; Veronese & Kagee, 2025). Survivors' accounts also make clear that mental health cannot be separated from the structural conditions shaping everyday life, including displacement, destroyed infrastructure, and the denial of safety and stability. Efforts to support well-being must therefore address both emotional suffering and the political conditions that produce it (Diab et al, 2018; Veronese et al., 2021). Witnessing, then, is not only the documentation of suffering but part of a struggle to preserve dignity, memory, and social life under systematic violence. By foregrounding these ethical dimensions, the study points to the need for research, policy, and community practice that support survivors while confronting the structures that continue to harm them.

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## Declarations

**Competing interests** The authors declare no competing interests.

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