



ISEJ EXPLAINER SERIES

Who Gets Believed?

Epistemic justice, narrative change, and why ISEJ measures both

Some injustices are done to people's bodies or property. Others are done to people as knowers when a survivor's account is discounted because of who she is, or when a community cannot even name what is happening to it because the concept has been withheld. Philosophers call this epistemic injustice, and it comes in two forms worth knowing by name.

- **Testimonial injustice:** a speaker's word is given less weight because of prejudice about their identity the sex worker whose report is not taken, the rural woman whose testimony needs a 'expert' to repeat it before it counts.
- **Hermeneutical injustice:** the collective vocabulary is missing. Before 'sexual harassment', 'economic abuse' or 'sextortion' had names, the experiences existed but victims could not make them intelligible, even to themselves. Whoever controls the concepts controls what can be claimed.

Law is a form of narrative. Statutes tell a story about who matters, whose harm is real, and who may speak. That is why legal gains are fragile wherever the surrounding narrative is hostile: a right that the culture refuses to narrate is a right waiting to be repealed.

From information transfer to authority transfer

Most civic education moves information: here is the law, here is your right. ISEJ's work moves authority: the point is not that communities know what the law says, but that they become recognised by courts, by parliaments, by their own neighbours, and by themselves as legitimate interpreters and contributors, with standing beyond their lived experience. A paralegal who can argue the statute has not just learned something; she has become someone the system must answer.

Why ISEJ measures narrative change

- **Narratives gate access.** ISEJ targets the master narratives that decide outcomes before any individual case is heard 'she provoked it', 'a married girl is settled', 'care is women's work' rather than treating each case as an isolated legal problem.
- **It is an outcome, not an ambience.** ISEJ monitors narrative shift as an expected, measured result of its work in how media frame an issue, how duty-bearers speak, and how communities describe their own entitlements because what is not measured is quietly dropped.
- **Culture is a legitimate battlefield.** Anti-rights movements invest in stories; so must rights movements. ISEJ embraces film, documentary, poetry and storytelling to expand imaginations and spark the conversations that curiosity opens and lectures close.

Where ISEJ stands

Narrative justice matters to us. Epistemic justice is ISEJ's founding wager: that the systemically disadvantaged are silenced not only as victims but as knowers, interpreters and contributors and that empowerment is the courage and confidence to take up those roles. Law reform without narrative change builds on sand. ISEJ does both, and measures both.

About ISEJ

The Institute for Sustainable Empowerment and Justice (ISEJ) is a Zimbabwe-registered Private Voluntary Organisation working at the intersection of law, public policy, gender equality, climate justice, public health and narrative change. ISEJ translates complex legal and policy frameworks into knowledge communities can use because access to the law should not depend on access to a lawyer.

Dignity · Rights · Transformation

Concepts of testimonial and hermeneutical injustice after Miranda Fricker, Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing (2007).