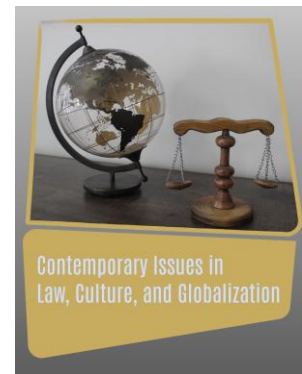




Transnational Families and Legal Complexity: Marriage, Custody, and Migration

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore how members of transnational families in Tehran experience and interpret legal complexity in relation to cross-border marriage, child custody, and migration-related family decision-making. This qualitative study was conducted using semi-structured interviews with 24 participants living in Tehran who had direct experience of transnational family life through international marriage, migration, cross-border separation, custody disputes, or family reunification processes. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, followed by snowball sampling to reach information-rich cases. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was achieved at the 21st interview, with three additional interviews conducted to confirm saturation. Interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent, transcribed verbatim, anonymized, and analyzed using thematic analysis. NVivo software was used to organize transcripts, develop initial codes, compare categories, retrieve coded segments, and construct final themes. Trustworthiness was enhanced through member checking, peer review, prolonged engagement with the data, and maintenance of an analytic audit trail. Analysis generated four main categories: legal fragmentation across jurisdictions, bureaucratic uncertainty in marriage and migration procedures, custody insecurity and parental role disruption, and informal family strategies for navigating legal ambiguity. Participants described transnational family life as a continuous negotiation between personal relationships, state regulations, cultural expectations, and institutional procedures. Marriage recognition, residence status, documentation, child travel permission, and custody enforcement were repeatedly identified as sources of stress. Participants also reported relying on informal networks, lawyers, relatives abroad, translators, and digital communication to compensate for limited institutional guidance. The findings indicate that transnational families encounter legal complexity not as an abstract procedural problem but as a lived condition shaping intimacy, parenting, belonging, and family security. Effective legal and social responses require coordinated institutional guidance, culturally sensitive family law services, accessible legal information, and child-centered mechanisms for resolving cross-border custody and migration-related disputes.

Keywords: Transnational families; legal complexity; marriage migration; custody disputes; family law; migration law

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Introduction

Transnational family life has become one of the most significant social and legal consequences of contemporary migration. Families increasingly form, separate, reunite, and reorganize across national borders, while state legal systems remain largely

organized around territorial jurisdiction, national citizenship, documentary status, and domestic family law. In such contexts, marriage, custody, and migration are not separate domains of regulation; rather, they intersect in ways that shape intimate life, parental authority, children's welfare, gender relations, and family belonging. The title of this study, *Transnational Families and Legal Complexity: Marriage, Custody, and Migration*, reflects this intersectional legal condition. The study focuses on how families living in Tehran experience the practical consequences of cross-border legal arrangements, especially when marriage recognition, residency status, child custody, and migration procedures become entangled.

The concept of the transnational family refers to family units whose members live across national borders while maintaining a sense of collective welfare, obligation, emotional connection, and shared identity. Bryceson and Vuorela (2002) described transnational families as families that live some or most of the time separated from one another but continue to create "familyhood" across borders. This definition is important because it shifts attention away from physical co-residence as the only marker of family life. In transnational contexts, familyhood may be sustained through remittances, digital communication, periodic visits, caregiving arrangements, legal sponsorship, emotional labor, and long-distance parenting. Levitt and Glick Schiller (2004) similarly argued that migrants often live within transnational social fields, meaning that their daily practices, identities, and obligations are simultaneously shaped by institutions and relationships located in more than one country. These insights are highly relevant to families whose marriages, children, and legal responsibilities are distributed across different legal systems.

Marriage is one of the central sites through which transnational legal complexity emerges. International and cross-border marriages are often governed by overlapping rules concerning civil registration, religious recognition, nationality, spousal sponsorship, residence permits, divorce, maintenance, inheritance, and family reunification. Kofman (2004) noted that family-related migration has historically been less visible than labor migration in migration research, despite its importance in shaping mobility, settlement, and integration. More recent scholarship has shown that marriage migration is never only a private family matter; it is also a legal and political process through which states define legitimate family life, regulate access to residence, and evaluate the authenticity of intimate relationships. Bonjour and de Hart (2013) showed how family migration policies may construct normative ideas of the "proper" marriage and "proper" spouse, often reproducing gendered and cultural assumptions. Such scholarship suggests that transnational families must not only maintain intimate bonds but also prove those bonds to state institutions.

The legal complexity of transnational marriage is intensified when couples encounter differences between the legal systems of the country of origin, country of residence, and destination country. A marriage recognized in one jurisdiction may require additional certification, translation, legalization, or registration in another. Couples may face delays related to embassy procedures, residence applications, income requirements, background checks, or documentary inconsistencies. These processes may produce uncertainty about whether a spouse can travel, reside, work, or access family rights. For families in Tehran with relatives or spouses abroad, such uncertainty can become a central feature of everyday life. Legal complexity is therefore not only a matter of legal doctrine; it becomes a lived experience of waiting, anxiety, financial burden, and relational strain.

Custody and parental responsibility introduce another layer of difficulty. When parents and children are located in different countries, or when one parent seeks to migrate with a child, questions arise concerning consent, guardianship, travel permission, residence, child welfare, and enforcement of custody decisions. International legal instruments such as the 1980 Hague Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction and the 1996 Hague Convention on Jurisdiction, Applicable Law, Recognition, Enforcement and Co-operation in Respect of Parental Responsibility and Measures for the Protection of Children were developed to address cross-border child protection and parental responsibility issues. However, families' ability to benefit from such instruments depends on state participation, institutional capacity, legal awareness, and access to legal

representation. In practice, many parents experience cross-border custody not as a clearly regulated process but as a fragmented legal terrain in which different authorities provide partial, inconsistent, or difficult-to-understand guidance.

The principle of the best interests of the child is central to international child rights law. Article 3 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child provides that the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration in all actions concerning children. In transnational family disputes, however, determining the child's best interests may be complicated by competing legal systems, parental migration aspirations, cultural expectations of caregiving, economic necessity, and children's emotional attachments to more than one place. Mazzucato and Schans (2011) argued that research on transnational families and child well-being must attend to complex care arrangements and avoid assuming that geographical separation automatically means family breakdown. Similarly, Carling, Menjivar, and Schmalzbauer (2012) identified gender, care arrangements, legislation, class, communication, and moralities as central themes in the study of transnational parenthood. These dimensions indicate that custody and parenting disputes are shaped not only by law but also by social norms, economic inequality, gendered responsibility, and moral judgments about "good" parenting.

Migration law can also transform family relations by assigning different legal statuses to different members of the same family. Some family members may hold citizenship, permanent residence, temporary residence, student visas, work permits, asylum status, or no secure status, while others may remain in the country of origin. Menjivar and Abrego (2012) used the concept of "legal violence" to explain how immigration law may produce cumulative harm in everyday life, especially for families with precarious status. Menjivar and Lakhani (2016) further showed that immigration law can transform migrants' identities, behaviors, and social relations through regularization processes. Although these studies focus mainly on immigrant experiences in the United States, their conceptual relevance extends to transnational families more broadly: migration law does not merely regulate movement; it reorganizes family possibilities, obligations, and emotional life.

From a socio-legal perspective, law is not encountered only in courts or official documents. It is interpreted, negotiated, avoided, and mobilized in everyday life. Ewick and Silbey (1998) argued that legal consciousness involves the ways ordinary people understand and engage with law in daily practice. This perspective is especially useful for studying transnational families because many legal decisions are made outside formal litigation. Families decide whether to register a marriage, consult a lawyer, apply for residence, allow a child to travel, accept informal custody arrangements, or negotiate with relatives abroad. These decisions are shaped by knowledge, fear, trust, cost, language, gender roles, and prior experiences with state institutions. Legal complexity is therefore experienced through both formal rules and informal interpretations.

Despite the growing literature on transnational families, important gaps remain. Much scholarship has examined transnational motherhood, care chains, remittances, and migrant integration, but fewer studies have examined how ordinary families experience the intersection of marriage law, custody regulation, and migration procedures in non-Western urban contexts. Tehran provides a significant setting for such inquiry because it is a major metropolitan center in which families may have links to Europe, North America, the Gulf states, Turkey, Australia, and neighboring countries. These connections produce diverse experiences of marriage migration, student migration, labor mobility, family reunification, and cross-border parenting. Yet the legal experiences of such families are often underrepresented in international socio-legal research.

This study therefore addresses the following research question: How do members of transnational families in Tehran experience legal complexity in matters of marriage, custody, and migration? The study aims to identify the main forms of legal complexity encountered by these families, examine how such complexity affects family relationships and parental decision-making, and explore the strategies families use to navigate uncertain legal environments. By focusing on lived experiences, the study contributes to socio-legal understandings of transnational family life and offers practical implications for legal counseling, family services, migration support, and child-centered policy.

Methods and Materials

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the lived experiences of transnational families dealing with legal complexity in relation to marriage, custody, and migration. A qualitative approach was selected because the study sought to understand meanings, interpretations, emotions, and practical strategies rather than measure predefined variables. The research was guided by an interpretive socio-legal perspective, which views law as both an institutional system and an everyday social experience. This perspective was appropriate because participants' accounts involved not only formal legal rules but also uncertainty, documentation practices, family negotiations, institutional encounters, and informal interpretations of legal obligations.

Participants were selected from Tehran using purposive sampling. Inclusion criteria were: being at least 18 years old; residing in Tehran at the time of interview; having direct experience with a transnational family arrangement; and having encountered legal or administrative issues related to international marriage, divorce, custody, child travel, family reunification, residence status, or migration decision-making. Participants included individuals in cross-border marriages, divorced or separated parents with children abroad or with foreign-resident spouses, adult children of transnational families, and family members who had supported relatives through migration or custody procedures. Snowball sampling was also used, as some participants introduced others with relevant experiences. The final sample consisted of 24 participants. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was reached; saturation was observed at the 21st interview, when no substantially new categories emerged, and three additional interviews were conducted to confirm the stability of the thematic structure. The sample included 15 women and 9 men. Participants ranged in age from 26 to 58 years, with a mean age of 39.7 years. In terms of marital status, 10 were married, 7 were divorced or separated, 4 were remarried, and 3 were single adult family members involved in transnational family decision-making.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. The interview guide included open-ended questions about participants' family migration history, marriage or divorce experiences, custody or child-related concerns, encounters with legal and administrative institutions, documentation processes, emotional consequences of legal uncertainty, and strategies used to manage cross-border family problems. Sample interview questions included: "Can you describe the main legal or administrative difficulties your family faced because of migration?" "How did cross-border marriage or separation affect your family relationships?" "What challenges did you experience regarding children, custody, or travel permission?" and "What sources of legal information or support did you rely on?" Interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes. All interviews were conducted in Persian, audio-recorded with informed consent, transcribed verbatim, and translated into English only for manuscript preparation where necessary. Participants were assigned codes such as P1, P2, and P3 to protect anonymity.

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis following the general procedures proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). First, the researchers familiarized themselves with the data by repeatedly reading the transcripts and writing analytic memos. Second, initial codes were generated inductively from meaningful segments of text. Third, codes were grouped into potential categories based on conceptual similarity and recurrence across participants. Fourth, categories were reviewed against the full dataset to ensure that they accurately represented participants' accounts. Fifth, the final themes were named and defined. Sixth, the findings were written with illustrative quotations. NVivo software was used to organize transcripts, code data, retrieve coded segments, compare cases, and document analytic decisions.

Trustworthiness was addressed through credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Credibility was enhanced through member checking with selected participants, who reviewed summaries of the findings and confirmed that the interpretations reflected their experiences. Peer debriefing was conducted with two researchers familiar with qualitative legal and migration studies. Dependability was supported by maintaining an audit trail of coding decisions, category

development, and theme refinement. Confirmability was strengthened through reflexive memo-writing to identify assumptions about law, family, gender, and migration. Transferability was supported by providing detailed descriptions of the participants, setting, and analytic categories so that readers can assess relevance to other contexts. Ethical principles included voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality, the right to withdraw, and careful anonymization of personal and family details.

Findings

The demographic characteristics of participants showed diversity in gender, marital status, migration connection, and type of legal issue. Of the 24 participants, 15 were women and 9 were men. Ten participants were currently married, 7 were divorced or separated, 4 were remarried, and 3 were single adult family members who had been directly involved in transnational family legal processes. Regarding education, 5 participants had a diploma or associate degree, 11 held a bachelor's degree, 6 held a master's degree, and 2 held doctoral or professional degrees. In terms of transnational family connection, 8 participants had spouses living abroad, 6 had children living or studying outside Iran, 5 had experienced cross-border divorce or custody conflict, and 5 had been involved in family reunification or documentation procedures for relatives. The countries most frequently mentioned in family trajectories were Turkey, Germany, Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia, and the United Arab Emirates. Analysis of the interviews generated four main categories: legal fragmentation across jurisdictions, bureaucratic uncertainty in marriage and migration procedures, custody insecurity and parental role disruption, and informal family strategies for navigating legal ambiguity.

Legal fragmentation across jurisdictions was the first major category. Participants repeatedly described difficulty understanding which country's law applied to marriage registration, divorce recognition, custody, inheritance, residence, or child travel. For many participants, the problem was not simply that legal rules were strict but that they were distributed across multiple institutions and countries. A marriage could be religiously valid, socially accepted, and emotionally meaningful, while still requiring additional civil registration, certified translation, embassy verification, or foreign recognition. Similarly, a divorce or custody decision obtained in one country did not automatically resolve practical questions in another. One participant explained, "In Iran they told me one thing, but the embassy asked for another document. My husband's lawyer abroad said something completely different. I felt that my marriage existed in one office and did not exist in another" (P6, female, 34). Another participant stated, "When my daughter was with her mother in Europe, I did not know whether my rights as a father were based on Iranian law, their law, or the agreement we wrote ourselves. Every answer depended on who I asked" (P14, male, 42). This category shows that families experienced legal complexity as fragmentation: rules were not absent, but they were scattered, layered, and difficult to reconcile.

Bureaucratic uncertainty in marriage and migration procedures was the second major category. Participants described migration-related family processes as slow, document-heavy, and emotionally exhausting. Spousal visa applications, family reunification files, child travel documents, translated marriage certificates, financial evidence, and proof of relationship authenticity were frequently mentioned. Several participants reported that bureaucratic delay changed the emotional meaning of marriage. Marriage became not only a relationship but also a file to be evaluated by state authorities. A participant whose spouse lived in Canada stated, "After the wedding, everyone asked when we would start our life. But our life was in the embassy queue. We had photos, chats, tickets, everything, but still we had to prove that we were a real couple" (P3, female, 29). Another participant said, "The hardest part was not collecting documents; it was not knowing whether the documents were enough. Every month we waited, our families started questioning the marriage" (P9, male, 37). Participants also described the financial costs of translation, legal consultation, travel, and repeated administrative visits. This uncertainty produced relational tension, especially when one spouse believed the other was not doing enough to accelerate the process. Bureaucracy therefore entered intimate life as a source of suspicion, blame, and fatigue.

Custody insecurity and parental role disruption was the third major category. Parents with children across borders reported intense anxiety about travel permission, schooling, residence, visitation, and the possibility of losing daily contact with their children. Custody was not experienced only as a legal status but as a practical question of access: Who can take the child to another country? Who can authorize passports, school enrollment, or medical decisions? What happens if one parent refuses consent? A divorced mother explained, “My son wanted to continue school abroad, but his father used the permission issue to control everything. It was not only about law; it became a way to punish me” (P11, female, 40). A father whose child lived with the mother outside Iran stated, “Video calls are not custody. I could see my child on the screen, but I could not decide anything important. I felt like a guest in my own child’s life” (P18, male, 45). Participants emphasized that children often became emotionally burdened by legal conflict. Some children had to move between languages, schools, and households, while others were prevented from visiting one parent because of unresolved documentation or distrust between adults. This category indicates that cross-border custody disputes can disrupt parental identity, weaken everyday caregiving, and place children at the center of unresolved legal and emotional conflicts.

Informal family strategies for navigating legal ambiguity was the fourth major category. Because participants often found formal systems confusing or inaccessible, they relied on informal strategies to manage legal complexity. These included consulting relatives abroad, using social media groups, asking acquaintances with similar experiences, contacting multiple lawyers, translating documents through trusted offices, negotiating family agreements, and maintaining digital archives of documents and communication. One participant said, “The most useful information did not come from an office. It came from another woman who had gone through the same visa process. She told me exactly which documents they might question” (P2, female, 31). Another participant stated, “We made our own written agreement about our daughter’s visits because going to court in two countries was impossible for us. It was not perfect, but it reduced the fighting” (P20, male, 39). Some participants described these informal strategies as empowering, while others saw them as risky because advice from non-specialists could be inaccurate. Families also used digital tools to maintain evidence of communication, financial support, caregiving involvement, and parental consent. Informal legal navigation thus became a form of everyday legal consciousness: participants interpreted, translated, and managed legal uncertainty through social networks, personal experience, and practical improvisation.

Discussion

The present study explored how members of transnational families in Tehran experience legal complexity in relation to marriage, custody, and migration. The findings revealed four main categories: legal fragmentation across jurisdictions, bureaucratic uncertainty in marriage and migration procedures, custody insecurity and parental role disruption, and informal family strategies for navigating legal ambiguity. Together, these categories show that transnational family law is not encountered as a single coherent system. Rather, it is experienced as a layered field of overlapping rules, documents, institutions, expectations, and negotiations. This finding is consistent with socio-legal perspectives that view law as embedded in everyday life rather than confined to formal institutions (Ewick & Silbey, 1998). Participants did not describe themselves as passive subjects of law; instead, they actively interpreted legal messages, compared institutional advice, negotiated with relatives, searched for information, and developed practical strategies for survival within uncertainty.

The first finding, legal fragmentation across jurisdictions, indicates that transnational families frequently encounter uncertainty about which legal system governs their family relationships. Marriage, divorce, custody, residence, and child travel may each be regulated by different authorities, and participants often struggled to reconcile domestic law, foreign law, embassy procedures, and informal family agreements. This finding aligns with Levitt and Glick Schiller’s (2004) argument that migrants live within transnational social fields shaped by institutions and relationships across more than one nation-state. However, the

present study extends this perspective by showing that transnational social fields are also transnational legal fields. Families do not simply maintain emotional or economic ties across borders; they must also translate those ties into legally recognizable forms. The finding also supports Bryceson and Vuorela's (2002) concept of familyhood across borders, while demonstrating that familyhood must often be proven, registered, authenticated, or defended before institutions.

The second finding, bureaucratic uncertainty in marriage and migration procedures, shows how administrative processes can reshape intimate relationships. Participants experienced visa applications, marriage documentation, and family reunification procedures as emotionally intrusive because they required couples to prove the authenticity, continuity, and legitimacy of their relationship. This finding is consistent with Bonjour and de Hart's (2013) analysis of family migration policy, which shows that states often construct normative models of proper marriage and evaluate migrant families against these assumptions. In the present study, participants felt that their marriages were transformed into documentary files. Photographs, messages, travel records, financial evidence, and translated certificates became part of the legal performance of intimacy. This process created stress not only because of procedural delay but also because state suspicion entered the emotional space of the couple. Marriage became both a personal commitment and an administrative burden.

The third finding, custody insecurity and parental role disruption, highlights the vulnerability of children and parents in cross-border family disputes. Participants described uncertainty regarding child travel permission, residence, school enrollment, visitation, and parental decision-making. These findings align with Carling et al. (2012), who identified legislation, care arrangements, communication, gender, class, and moralities as central themes in transnational parenthood. The present study confirms that transnational parenting is not simply a matter of emotional distance; it is also shaped by legal authority and institutional recognition. A parent may remain emotionally committed but lose practical influence over schooling, residence, health care, or daily routines when the child lives under another jurisdiction. This finding is also consistent with Mazzucato and Schans (2011), who argued that child well-being in transnational families must be studied through complex care arrangements rather than simplistic assumptions about separation. Participants' accounts suggest that children's welfare depends not only on whether parents live together but also on whether legal systems provide stable, child-centered pathways for maintaining meaningful relationships with both parents.

The custody findings also relate to international child protection principles. The Convention on the Rights of the Child emphasizes the best interests of the child as a primary consideration in actions concerning children. In the context of transnational families, however, the best interests principle becomes difficult to operationalize when parents disagree, legal systems differ, and migration opportunities are unevenly distributed. One parent may view migration as essential for the child's education and future, while the other may experience it as separation or loss of parental authority. This tension demonstrates the need for legal processes that distinguish between parental conflict and child welfare. It also suggests that custody decisions in transnational families require sensitivity to language, schooling, emotional bonds, cultural continuity, economic security, and the child's right to maintain meaningful family relationships. International instruments such as the 1980 Hague Child Abduction Convention and the 1996 Hague Child Protection Convention provide important frameworks, but participants' experiences show that ordinary families may still lack accessible guidance about how such frameworks apply to their specific circumstances.

The fourth finding, informal family strategies for navigating legal ambiguity, demonstrates that transnational families develop practical forms of legal agency. Participants relied on relatives abroad, social media groups, lawyers, translators, acquaintances, and digital documentation to compensate for fragmented institutional guidance. This finding supports Ewick and Silbey's (1998) concept of legal consciousness, as participants engaged with law through everyday interpretations and informal practices. It also resonates with Menjívar and Lakhani's (2016) argument that immigration law transforms behavior,

identity, and social relations. In the present study, participants learned to behave strategically: they saved conversations, collected proof of caregiving, organized documents, sought multiple legal opinions, and adjusted family decisions according to anticipated institutional requirements. These strategies show resilience, but they also reveal institutional gaps. When families must depend heavily on informal networks, the risk of misinformation, unequal access, and emotional exploitation increases.

Gender emerged across all categories, although it was not treated as a separate theme. Women often described marriage migration procedures, custody disputes, and family expectations as placing them under intensified scrutiny. Some women felt pressured to maintain the marriage because migration processes had already consumed family resources, while others reported that custody or travel permission could be used as leverage after marital conflict. This aligns with Parreñas's (2005) work on gendered transnational family responsibilities and with broader scholarship showing that migration and care are deeply gendered. Men also described emotional loss and parental marginalization, particularly when children lived abroad with mothers. The findings therefore suggest that transnational legal complexity can produce different vulnerabilities for mothers and fathers. Mothers may face control through documentation, permission, and moral judgment, while fathers may experience reduced caregiving roles when distance and foreign legal systems limit daily involvement. Both forms of vulnerability deserve careful attention.

The findings further show that legal complexity is cumulative. Participants rarely faced only one problem. A marriage recognition issue could affect residence status; residence delay could increase marital tension; marital conflict could trigger custody insecurity; custody disagreement could affect child travel; and child travel restrictions could reshape migration plans. This cumulative character resembles Menjivar and Abrego's (2012) concept of legal violence, although the present study does not use the term to suggest identical conditions. Rather, it shows that law can produce harm through ordinary administrative processes when families experience prolonged uncertainty, unequal access to expertise, and lack of coordination between institutions. Legal complexity becomes harmful when it is repetitive, emotionally costly, financially burdensome, and difficult to resolve.

The findings have several implications. First, legal information for transnational families should be integrated rather than fragmented. Families need guidance that explains how marriage registration, migration status, custody, travel permission, and documentation interact. Second, family courts, migration offices, embassies, and legal aid providers should recognize that transnational family issues often involve multiple legal domains at once. Third, child-centered procedures are essential in cross-border custody and migration cases. Children should not be treated merely as dependents in adult migration files or as objects of parental control. Fourth, culturally sensitive counseling and mediation could reduce conflict before disputes escalate into litigation across jurisdictions. Finally, legal services should account for the emotional consequences of prolonged uncertainty, especially for families separated by borders.

Limitations: This study has several limitations. First, the sample was limited to 24 participants residing in Tehran, which restricts transferability to other cities, rural areas, or diaspora communities abroad. Second, the study relied on self-reported experiences, and legal documents or court files were not systematically analyzed alongside interviews. Third, participants represented diverse transnational trajectories, which enriched the data but also limited the possibility of comparing one specific migration destination or legal system in depth. Fourth, because the topic involved sensitive family conflicts, some participants may have withheld details about divorce, custody, or immigration status. Finally, the study examined family members' perceptions of legal complexity rather than the perspectives of judges, lawyers, embassy officials, or migration officers.

Suggestions for future research: Future studies should compare the experiences of transnational families across multiple Iranian cities and among Iranian diaspora communities abroad. Comparative research could examine how families experience different destination countries and how specific legal systems shape marriage recognition, custody enforcement, and family

reunification. Future research should also include the voices of children and adolescents in transnational custody and migration arrangements, with appropriate ethical safeguards. Longitudinal studies would be valuable for understanding how legal uncertainty changes over time, especially before and after visa decisions, divorce proceedings, custody agreements, or relocation. In addition, mixed-method research combining interviews with legal document analysis could provide a more complete picture of how formal legal rules are translated into everyday family practice.

Suggestions for practice: Legal and social service providers should develop integrated guidance for transnational families that explains the relationship between marriage documentation, migration procedures, custody rights, and child travel requirements. Family lawyers and counselors should work collaboratively in cases where legal uncertainty is producing marital conflict or parenting distress. Mediation services should be adapted for cross-border families, especially where parents need practical agreements about visitation, digital contact, schooling, and travel consent. Institutions should provide clear checklists, accessible language, reliable referral pathways, and culturally sensitive support. Special attention should be given to children's emotional security and continuity of care, ensuring that legal procedures do not intensify conflict or turn children into instruments of negotiation between adults.

Conclusion

This study examined legal complexity in transnational families in Tehran, focusing on marriage, custody, and migration. The findings show that transnational families experience law as a fragmented and emotionally consequential field that shapes intimate relationships, parental authority, child welfare, and migration possibilities. Participants encountered difficulties in reconciling legal rules across jurisdictions, managing documentation and bureaucratic delay, maintaining parental roles across borders, and finding reliable guidance. At the same time, families developed informal strategies to navigate uncertainty, including reliance on social networks, legal consultation, digital documentation, and negotiated family agreements.

The study contributes to socio-legal and migration scholarship by showing that legal complexity is not only a technical issue of jurisdiction or procedure. It is a lived condition that enters family communication, marital trust, parenting identity, and children's everyday security. Transnational families require more than formal legal rules; they require accessible, coordinated, culturally informed, and child-centered institutional support. Policies and practices that address marriage, custody, and migration separately may fail to capture the interconnected nature of transnational family life. A more integrated approach is needed to reduce uncertainty, protect children's interests, and support families whose relationships and responsibilities extend across national borders.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adhered in conducting and writing this article.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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