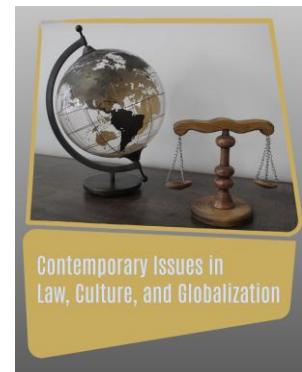




Legal Consciousness and Cultural Identity Among Migrant Communities: A Qualitative Study of Rights, Belonging, and Integration

1. Neda. Safari: Department of Cultural Studies, Shahid Beheshti University, Tehran, Iran
2. Pouya. Jalali*: Department of Public Law, Shahid Beheshti University, Tehran, Iran. Email: pouya.jalali.law@gmail.com (Corresponding Author)
3. Maryam. Ebrahimi: Department of Private Law, Shahid Beheshti University, Tehran, Iran

ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore how migrant communities in Tehran understand legal rights, negotiate cultural identity, and experience belonging and integration within everyday social, institutional, and cultural contexts. This qualitative study was conducted using a phenomenological-thematic design. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 24 adult migrants living in Tehran. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to capture variation in gender, age, length of residence, migration background, documentation status, education, and occupational experience. Interviews explored participants' experiences of legal awareness, encounters with administrative institutions, perceptions of rights and duties, cultural belonging, discrimination, community support, and integration strategies. Interviews continued until theoretical saturation was achieved. All interviews were audio-recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim, anonymized, and analyzed using thematic analysis. NVivo software was used to organize codes, compare categories, and develop themes. Credibility was enhanced through member checking, peer review, reflexive memoing, and repeated engagement with the data. Four main categories emerged from the analysis: legal consciousness as practical navigation of documentation and rights; conditional belonging and cultural identity negotiation; reliance on community networks and informal legal mediation; and integration as cautious participation in education, work, and urban life. Participants understood law less as an abstract system of rights and more as a lived structure shaping mobility, work, security, family stability, and public visibility. Cultural identity was experienced as both a source of dignity and a marker of difference, while integration was described as gradual, relational, and dependent on institutional recognition. Migrants' legal consciousness in Tehran was shaped by documentation status, institutional encounters, cultural memory, social stigma, and community-based forms of knowledge. The findings suggest that legal inclusion and cultural belonging are deeply interconnected and that integration policies should move beyond administrative regulation toward rights education, culturally responsive services, and accessible legal support.

Keywords: legal consciousness; migrant communities; cultural identity; belonging; integration; qualitative study

How to cite this article:

Safari, N., Jalali, P., & Ebrahimi, M. (2025). Legal Consciousness and Cultural Identity Among Migrant Communities: A Qualitative Study of Rights, Belonging, and Integration. *Contemporary Issues in Law, Culture, and Globalization*, 1(2), 22-32. <https://doi.org/10.61838/cilcg.1.2.3>

Introduction

Migration is not merely a demographic movement across borders; it is a legal, cultural, and existential transition through which individuals and families reinterpret rights, identity, belonging, and social membership. Migrants enter host societies not only as workers, students, refugees, or family members, but also as legal subjects who must understand, negotiate, and often endure complex systems of documentation, administrative categorization, rights recognition, and social boundary-making. In many host contexts, migrants' everyday lives are shaped by the interaction between formal law and informal social expectations: the right to work, access education, rent housing, seek healthcare, move through the city, report injustice, and imagine a stable future. These experiences form what socio-legal scholars describe as "legal consciousness," or the ways ordinary people perceive, interpret, use, avoid, and narrate law in daily life (Ewick & Silbey, 1998; Merry, 1990).

Legal consciousness studies have moved beyond a narrow focus on formal legal knowledge to examine law as a lived social phenomenon. Ewick and Silbey (1998) showed that people encounter legality through everyday narratives of compliance, strategic use, and resistance. Merry (1990) similarly demonstrated that legal consciousness emerges through social relationships, conflict, institutional encounters, and expectations of justice. In migration contexts, legal consciousness becomes especially significant because migrants' lives are frequently structured by documentation regimes, uncertain statuses, administrative discretion, and unequal access to rights. Recent scholarship has specifically argued that migrants' legal consciousness is shaped by individual background, relational networks, cultural dynamics, public discourse, and policy environments (Güdük et al., 2022). For migrants, law may be perceived simultaneously as protection, risk, opportunity, surveillance, and exclusion.

The relationship between migration and legality is particularly complex where legal status is unstable, temporary, or partially recognized. Abrego (2011) found that undocumented Latino immigrants' legal consciousness was strongly shaped by fear, stigma, and limited claims-making. Menjívar and Abrego (2012) introduced the concept of "legal violence" to explain how immigration law may produce normalized forms of harm by restricting mobility, family stability, employment, education, and emotional well-being. Kubal (2013) further challenged binary distinctions between legality and illegality by proposing "semi-legality" as a concept for understanding ambiguous, shifting, and partial forms of migrant status. These perspectives are important because they show that migrants do not experience law only in courts or formal legal institutions; rather, law is embedded in employment relations, school enrollment, landlord negotiations, police encounters, health access, border memories, and daily calculations about visibility and safety.

Legal consciousness is also closely connected to cultural identity. Migration unsettles the relationship between self, community, language, memory, and place. Cultural identity is not a fixed possession transported unchanged from one country to another; it is continuously reconstructed through interaction with host institutions, majority society, ethnic communities, family expectations, and transnational attachments. Hall (1990) conceptualized cultural identity as dynamic, historically situated, and shaped by both continuity and difference. Phinney (1990) emphasized that ethnic identity involves self-identification, belonging, exploration, and commitment, particularly among minority groups. Berry's (1997) acculturation framework further demonstrated that migrants negotiate relationships with both heritage culture and host society, producing different orientations such as integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalization. In this sense, cultural identity is not separate from law; legal recognition, administrative classification, and access to citizenship-like rights may influence how migrants understand who they are and where they belong.

Belonging is a central concept linking legal consciousness and cultural identity. Yuval-Davis (2006) distinguishes between belonging as emotional attachment and the politics of belonging as the social and political processes through which boundaries

of membership are drawn. Migrants may feel socially attached to a city, workplace, neighborhood, or school while simultaneously being reminded that their membership is conditional. Anthias (2006, 2008) similarly argues that belonging must be understood through social location, transnational histories, gender, class, ethnicity, and other intersecting positions. For migrants, belonging may be experienced through everyday recognition—being treated respectfully, being addressed without suspicion, being able to speak one’s language, being accepted at work, or seeing one’s children succeed in school. Conversely, non-belonging may be produced by bureaucratic rejection, cultural stereotyping, racialization, labor exploitation, or the sense that rights exist only for others.

Integration is often discussed in policy terms, but qualitative research shows that integration is experienced as a deeply relational and uneven process. Ager and Strang (2008) proposed a widely used framework identifying domains such as employment, housing, education, health, social connections, language, cultural knowledge, safety, stability, rights, and citizenship. This framework is useful because it recognizes that integration is not reducible to cultural adaptation alone; it requires institutional access, social participation, legal security, and mutual recognition. Bloemraad (2006) also emphasized that incorporation depends not only on migrants’ individual efforts but also on state policies, civic institutions, and opportunity structures. In super-diverse urban environments, integration becomes even more complex because migrants differ by nationality, ethnicity, religion, class, gender, generation, legal status, and migration trajectory (Vertovec, 2007).

Tehran provides an important urban context for examining these issues. Iran has hosted one of the world’s most protracted refugee and migrant situations, particularly involving Afghan and Iraqi populations. In 2026, UNHCR estimated that approximately 1.65 million forcibly displaced people of different documentation statuses resided in Iran, including about 770,000 refugees with Amayesh or Hoviat cards, and reported that 99% of these populations lived in urban areas. This urban concentration makes cities such as Tehran central sites where rights, identity, and integration are negotiated in everyday life. Migrants in Tehran may encounter law through residence documentation, employment restrictions, education access, municipal regulations, healthcare services, police or administrative checks, rental contracts, and interactions with local communities. At the same time, they maintain cultural identities through language, kinship, religious practice, food, community associations, memories of origin, and transnational family relations.

Despite the significance of migrant communities in Iran, qualitative studies that connect legal consciousness, cultural identity, belonging, and integration remain limited. Much existing research on migration law focuses on formal policy, legal status, or humanitarian protection, while less attention has been given to migrants’ own narratives of how law is understood, felt, interpreted, and negotiated in daily life. Similarly, cultural identity research often examines acculturation or ethnic belonging without fully integrating the role of legal status and rights consciousness. This creates a conceptual gap: migrants’ sense of belonging cannot be understood without examining their legal consciousness, and legal consciousness cannot be fully understood without considering culture, identity, family, memory, and community networks.

This study addresses that gap by exploring the lived experiences of migrant communities in Tehran. It asks how migrants understand their rights, how they interpret legal and administrative institutions, how cultural identity shapes their sense of belonging, and how they define integration in relation to security, dignity, participation, and future possibilities. By using semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis, the study provides an interpretive account of how migrants experience the intersection of law, culture, and urban life. The study contributes to socio-legal and migration scholarship by showing that legal consciousness among migrants is not simply a matter of knowing legal rules. Rather, it is a practical, emotional, cultural, and relational orientation toward institutions and society. It also contributes to integration debates by demonstrating that integration is not achieved only through adaptation by migrants, but also through recognition, fair treatment, rights accessibility, and inclusive institutional practices.

Methods and Materials

This study used a qualitative research design to explore legal consciousness, cultural identity, belonging, and integration among migrant communities in Tehran. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the study aimed to understand participants' lived experiences, meanings, interpretations, and narratives rather than measure predetermined variables. The study was informed by an interpretivist paradigm, which assumes that social reality is constructed through experience, language, interaction, and context. Semi-structured interviews were selected as the main data collection method because they allowed participants to describe personal experiences of law, identity, rights, discrimination, community relations, and integration in their own words.

The study followed principles of thematic analysis as described by Braun and Clarke (2006), allowing the researcher to identify patterns of meaning across the interview data while remaining attentive to individual differences and contextual detail. The reporting of the qualitative procedures was also guided by COREQ principles for transparency in interview-based qualitative research (Tong et al., 2007).

Participants were 24 adult migrants living in Tehran. They were selected using purposive sampling to ensure variation in gender, age, country of origin, length of residence, documentation status, education, occupation, and family situation. Inclusion criteria were: being 18 years or older; having migrated to Iran or being part of a migrant family; residing in Tehran for at least one year; and willingness to participate in an interview about legal, cultural, and social experiences. Participants who were unable to provide informed consent or who felt uncomfortable discussing migration-related experiences were excluded.

The final sample consisted of 24 participants, including 13 men and 11 women. Participants' ages ranged from 19 to 56 years. Fifteen participants were from Afghanistan, four from Iraq, two from Pakistan, two from Tajikistan, and one from Syria. Regarding length of residence in Tehran, five participants had lived in the city for 1–3 years, seven for 4–7 years, six for 8–15 years, and six for more than 15 years. In terms of education, six participants had primary or lower-secondary education, nine had upper-secondary education, six had university education, and three had vocational training. Participants were employed in construction, tailoring, domestic work, retail, translation, small business, informal services, and student roles. Theoretical saturation was reached after the twenty-second interview, when no substantially new themes emerged; two additional interviews were conducted to confirm the stability of the categories.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted in Tehran. Interviews lasted between 45 and 85 minutes. Depending on participants' preference and comfort, interviews were conducted in Persian or in a mutually understandable language variety. The interview guide included open-ended questions about participants' migration background, understanding of rights, experiences with documentation and administrative offices, access to education and work, encounters with discrimination or support, cultural identity, family and community life, sense of belonging, and hopes for the future.

Examples of interview questions included: "What does having rights mean to you in your everyday life?" "Can you describe an experience when you had to deal with an institution or legal document?" "How do you describe your cultural identity after living in Tehran?" "What makes you feel that you belong or do not belong?" and "What does integration mean from your perspective?" Probing questions were used to clarify meanings and elicit concrete examples. With participants' consent, interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed verbatim. Field notes were written after each interview to capture nonverbal observations, contextual details, and preliminary analytic reflections.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis. First, the researcher read the transcripts repeatedly to become familiar with the data. Second, initial codes were generated inductively from meaningful segments of text. Third, related codes were grouped into preliminary categories. Fourth, categories were reviewed in relation to the full dataset to ensure internal coherence and

distinction between themes. Fifth, themes were defined, named, and refined. Finally, findings were written with representative quotations to illustrate participants' meanings.

NVivo software was used to organize transcripts, manage codes, compare participants' narratives, retrieve coded segments, and develop thematic maps. The analysis combined inductive coding with sensitizing concepts from legal consciousness, cultural identity, belonging, and integration literature. Codes such as "fear of office," "documents as protection," "language and respect," "conditional acceptance," "community advice," "avoidance of complaint," "children's future," and "identity between two places" were gradually organized into four main categories.

Several strategies were used to enhance trustworthiness. Credibility was supported through prolonged engagement with the transcripts, member checking with selected participants, peer discussion of emerging themes, and the use of direct quotations. Transferability was strengthened by providing detailed descriptions of participants, setting, and context. Dependability was enhanced through an audit trail documenting decisions about sampling, coding, category development, and theme refinement. Confirmability was supported through reflexive memoing, in which the researcher recorded assumptions, emotional reactions, and interpretive decisions throughout the analytic process. These procedures were informed by Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

The study followed ethical principles for qualitative research with potentially vulnerable participants. Participants received information about the purpose of the study, voluntary participation, confidentiality, anonymity, and the right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Written or verbal informed consent was obtained before each interview. Pseudonyms and participant codes were used in transcripts and reporting. Identifying details such as exact workplace, neighborhood, institutional case, or family names were removed. Because migration status can be sensitive, participants were not required to disclose documentation details beyond what they voluntarily wished to discuss. Interview data were stored securely and accessed only by the research team.

Findings

The study included 24 migrant participants residing in Tehran. Of these, 13 participants were male and 11 were female. Participants ranged in age from 19 to 56 years, with six participants aged 18–29 years, nine aged 30–39 years, six aged 40–49 years, and three aged 50 years or older. Regarding country of origin, 15 participants were from Afghanistan, four from Iraq, two from Pakistan, two from Tajikistan, and one from Syria. Length of residence in Tehran varied: five participants had lived in Tehran for 1–3 years, seven for 4–7 years, six for 8–15 years, and six for more than 15 years. In terms of education, six participants had primary or lower-secondary education, nine had upper-secondary education, six had university education, and three had vocational training. Occupationally, participants worked in construction, tailoring, domestic work, retail, translation, food services, informal labor, small business, and student roles. Twelve participants were married, nine were single, and three were widowed or separated. This variation enabled the study to capture diverse experiences of legal consciousness, cultural identity, belonging, and integration among migrant communities in Tehran.

The first main category showed that participants understood law primarily through practical encounters with documents, offices, permits, schools, employers, landlords, and local authorities. For many participants, legal consciousness was not expressed through formal legal vocabulary but through everyday questions: "Can I work?" "Can my child go to school?" "Can I rent a house?" "Can I move without fear?" and "Will someone listen if I complain?" Participants often described documents as both protective and limiting. Having valid papers created a sense of temporary security, but it did not always produce full confidence in rights. One participant stated, "When my card is valid, I breathe more easily, but I still feel that everything can change with one decision" (P7, male, 38). Another participant explained, "For us, law means paper. If the paper is accepted, people treat you differently; if not, your words become weak" (P12, female, 31). Participants also reported that administrative

language and procedures were difficult to understand, especially for those with lower education or limited familiarity with institutional systems. Some participants relied on employers, relatives, or community members to interpret rules, complete forms, or explain renewal processes. This made legal knowledge relational rather than purely individual. Fear of making mistakes was common, particularly among participants with uncertain or temporary status. Several participants avoided reporting workplace abuse, unpaid wages, or housing problems because they believed that approaching formal institutions could expose them to further risk. As one participant noted, “Sometimes you know something is unfair, but you ask yourself: if I go and complain, will they help me, or will they ask first who I am and why I am here?” (P3, male, 42). This category demonstrates that migrants’ legal consciousness was shaped by a mixture of awareness, uncertainty, caution, and practical adaptation. Law was seen as necessary for security but also distant, changing, and difficult to access. Rights were meaningful when they could be translated into everyday protection, not merely when they existed as formal principles.

The second category reflected participants’ experiences of cultural identity as dynamic, negotiated, and sometimes contested. Participants described themselves as living between cultural continuity and social adaptation. Many emphasized pride in their heritage language, religious practices, food, family values, and memories of their country of origin. At the same time, they described the need to adapt their speech, clothing, behavior, and public presentation in Tehran to avoid being marked as “foreign” or “different.” One female participant said, “At home, I am completely myself. Outside, I measure my words. I think about my accent, my clothes, even how loudly I speak” (P15, female, 27). For participants who had lived in Tehran for many years, belonging was especially complex. They felt emotionally attached to the city but were not always socially recognized as part of it. A young participant who had grown up in Tehran explained, “I know the streets here better than the city where my parents were born, but still people ask me, ‘When will you go back?’ I don’t know where ‘back’ is for me” (P9, male, 22). Participants frequently described belonging as conditional: they could belong as workers, neighbors, classmates, or customers, but not always as equal members of society. Cultural identity was also shaped by intergenerational differences. Parents often wanted children to preserve heritage language and customs, while younger participants sought broader social acceptance through education, friendships, and urban cultural participation. Some families viewed cultural preservation as protection against loss, while younger participants sometimes experienced it as pressure. However, most participants did not frame integration as abandoning heritage culture. Instead, they described an ideal of being able to “keep our roots and live respectfully here” (P4, female, 46). This category shows that cultural identity among migrants was not a simple opposition between origin and host society. Rather, identity was produced through daily negotiations of visibility, respect, adaptation, memory, and recognition. Participants wanted to be accepted without having to erase their cultural background.

The third category revealed the central role of community networks in shaping migrants’ legal consciousness and integration experiences. Participants frequently relied on relatives, friends, ethnic community members, religious networks, employers, and more experienced migrants for information about documents, jobs, housing, schools, healthcare, and administrative procedures. Community networks functioned as informal legal and social infrastructures. They helped participants interpret rules, avoid risks, find trustworthy contacts, and decide whether to approach formal institutions. One participant said, “Before going anywhere official, I ask people from our community. Someone always knows what happened last year, what paper they asked for, which office is better, who can explain it” (P18, male, 35). For newly arrived migrants, these networks were crucial for survival and orientation. For long-term residents, they provided emotional belonging and practical protection. However, reliance on informal networks also had limitations. Information could be incomplete, outdated, contradictory, or influenced by fear. Some participants described situations in which incorrect advice caused delays, financial loss, or avoidance of rights. One participant noted, “Sometimes people scare each other. One person has a bad experience, and then everyone says, ‘Don’t go, don’t ask, don’t sign.’ Maybe there is a solution, but we don’t know” (P21, female, 40). Community mediation also extended

to conflicts. Participants often preferred resolving disputes through elders, relatives, employers, or respected community figures rather than formal legal channels. This was especially common in workplace wage disputes, family conflicts, and rental disagreements. While informal mediation could reduce cost and fear, it could also reinforce power imbalances, particularly for women, younger migrants, and workers dependent on employers. A female participant explained, “When there is a problem, they say solve it inside the community. But sometimes inside the community also there is pressure, and women cannot speak freely” (P11, female, 34). This category indicates that legal consciousness among migrants was socially distributed. Participants’ understanding of rights was often mediated through community knowledge, collective memory, and informal authority. Community networks supported integration, but they could not replace accessible, trustworthy, and culturally responsive formal institutions.

The fourth category showed that participants understood integration not as complete assimilation but as the ability to participate safely and respectfully in work, education, neighborhood life, and the future of their children. Employment was central to integration, but many participants described work as insecure, informal, physically demanding, or dependent on personal connections. Legal status affected the quality of work available, the ability to negotiate wages, and confidence in responding to exploitation. One participant stated, “If you have no strong paper, you accept harder work and less money. You tell yourself, at least I have work” (P2, male, 44). Education was described as one of the strongest pathways to belonging, especially for children and younger migrants. Parents associated schooling with dignity, language learning, social mobility, and hope. A mother explained, “When my daughter goes to school, I feel we are not invisible. She learns, she has friends, she dreams. That is integration for me” (P6, female, 39). However, participants also noted barriers related to documentation, cost, discrimination, and uncertainty about future opportunities. Urban life in Tehran offered both anonymity and possibility. Some participants felt that the size and diversity of Tehran allowed them to work, study, and build relationships more easily than smaller cities. Others felt that urban life intensified competition, housing insecurity, and social distance. Belonging was often experienced through small acts of recognition: a respectful employer, a supportive teacher, a neighbor who invited them to a ceremony, or a shopkeeper who knew their name. Conversely, exclusion was experienced through insults, accent-based ridicule, suspicion, and reminders that they were temporary. Participants therefore practiced “cautious participation”: they tried to integrate, but with careful attention to risk, reputation, documentation, and social boundaries. One participant summarized this tension: “We want to be part of society, but we also learn not to expect too much. You participate, but you keep your heart ready for rejection” (P20, male, 29). This category demonstrates that integration was understood as a gradual, conditional, and relational process. Participants did not define integration as losing cultural identity; rather, they defined it as secure participation with dignity, rights, and recognition.

Discussion

This study explored legal consciousness and cultural identity among migrant communities in Tehran, focusing on how migrants understand rights, belonging, and integration in everyday life. The findings showed that participants’ legal consciousness was practical, relational, and emotionally charged. Law was not experienced mainly as a formal system of rules but as an everyday structure governing documents, mobility, work, education, housing, safety, and visibility. Participants interpreted their rights through concrete encounters with institutions and social actors, including administrative offices, employers, landlords, schools, and community networks. This finding is consistent with socio-legal theories that conceptualize legal consciousness as the way ordinary people experience and construct legality in daily life rather than merely as knowledge of formal law (Ewick & Silbey, 1998; Merry, 1990). It also aligns with migration-specific legal consciousness research showing that migrants’ understandings of rights are shaped by legal status, fear, stigma, administrative complexity, and social vulnerability (Abrego, 2011; Güdük et al., 2022).

The first main finding indicated that documentation was central to participants' sense of legal security. Participants often equated rights with papers, permits, cards, or institutional recognition. Documentation provided partial protection, but it did not always produce confidence in stable rights. This reflects Kubal's (2013) concept of semi-legality, which emphasizes that migrant status is often ambiguous, partial, and shifting rather than simply legal or illegal. The participants' narratives also resonate with Menjivar and Abrego's (2012) concept of legal violence, particularly in the way uncertainty can shape work, family life, emotional security, and willingness to claim rights. Although participants did not always use legal terminology, they demonstrated a sophisticated practical awareness of how law operates unevenly across institutions. Their avoidance of complaints in cases of exploitation or unfair treatment suggests that rights are not meaningful unless migrants perceive institutions as accessible, safe, and responsive. This supports Abrego's (2011) argument that fear and stigma can suppress claims-making among migrants even when grievances are recognized.

The second main finding showed that cultural identity and belonging were deeply intertwined with legal and social recognition. Participants did not describe identity as fixed or singular; instead, they negotiated identity across home, workplace, school, neighborhood, and public spaces. This finding is consistent with Hall's (1990) view of cultural identity as historically situated, hybrid, and continuously produced through difference and continuity. Participants' desire to preserve heritage culture while participating in Tehran's social life also aligns with Berry's (1997) integration orientation, in which individuals maintain cultural identity while seeking meaningful participation in the wider society. However, the findings also complicate acculturation theory by showing that integration is not determined only by migrants' preferences. Participants' ability to integrate depended on whether the host environment allowed recognition without forced erasure. This supports Yuval-Davis's (2006) distinction between belonging as emotional attachment and the politics of belonging as boundary-making. Migrants may feel attached to Tehran, but social interactions and institutional categories may still position them as outsiders.

The third main finding concerned the role of community networks and informal legal mediation. Participants relied heavily on relatives, ethnic networks, experienced migrants, religious ties, and trusted intermediaries to interpret legal procedures and manage everyday risks. This finding is consistent with research emphasizing the relational dimension of legal consciousness. Migrants rarely encounter law as isolated individuals; instead, their understanding of legality is shaped through stories, warnings, advice, collective memory, and shared experiences (Güdük et al., 2022; Kubal, 2013). Community networks provided emotional support and practical knowledge, especially for those who distrusted formal institutions or lacked linguistic and bureaucratic confidence. However, the findings also showed that informal networks could reproduce misinformation, fear, and internal inequalities. This is important because community-based support may compensate for institutional inaccessibility, but it may also limit rights-claiming when migrants rely exclusively on informal mediation. The finding therefore suggests that legal empowerment efforts should work with community networks while also strengthening direct access to formal rights information and legal assistance.

The fourth main finding showed that participants understood integration as cautious participation in work, education, neighborhood life, and future planning. Integration was not described as assimilation or cultural disappearance. Rather, it meant the ability to live with dignity, educate children, work without exploitation, interact respectfully with neighbors, and participate in city life without constant fear of rejection. This finding strongly aligns with Ager and Strang's (2008) conceptual framework, which identifies employment, housing, education, health, social connections, language, safety, stability, rights, and citizenship as key domains of integration. Participants' emphasis on children's schooling also supports integration scholarship showing that education functions as both a practical and symbolic pathway to social membership. However, the findings suggest that integration remains incomplete when participation is conditional on silence, invisibility, or acceptance of unequal treatment.

Bloemraad's (2006) work is relevant here because it shows that incorporation depends not only on migrants' effort but also on institutional opportunity structures, civic recognition, and policy environments.

Overall, the study contributes to socio-legal and migration scholarship by showing that legal consciousness, cultural identity, and integration are mutually constitutive. Migrants' legal consciousness shapes how they participate in society, but their cultural identity and belonging also shape how they interpret law. For example, participants' decisions about whether to complain, ask questions, or approach institutions were influenced not only by documentation status but also by dignity, family reputation, community advice, gender expectations, and fear of being culturally marked. This supports intersectional approaches to belonging, particularly Anthias's (2008) argument that identity and belonging must be understood through social location and translocational positioning. Migrants' experiences in Tehran were shaped by nationality, gender, class, education, language, occupation, family role, and length of residence. Therefore, policies that address migrants as a homogeneous group may fail to capture the diversity of their legal needs and integration pathways.

The findings also have implications for understanding urban belonging. Tehran appeared in participants' narratives as a place of opportunity and vulnerability. The city offered work, education, anonymity, social networks, and future possibilities, but it also exposed migrants to housing insecurity, informal labor, administrative uncertainty, and social stigma. This duality reflects Vertovec's (2007) argument that contemporary urban diversity involves complex combinations of legal statuses, migration histories, social positions, and cultural identities. In such contexts, integration cannot be reduced to language learning or cultural adaptation. It must include institutional fairness, anti-discrimination practices, rights education, accessible documentation procedures, and recognition of migrants' contributions to urban life.

This study has several limitations. First, the sample was limited to 24 participants living in Tehran; therefore, the findings cannot be generalized to all migrant communities in Iran or other host societies. Migrants living in smaller cities, border provinces, rural areas, refugee settlements, or different socioeconomic conditions may experience legal consciousness and belonging differently. Second, the study relied on self-reported interview data, which may be influenced by memory, fear, selective disclosure, or social desirability. Because legal and migration status can be sensitive, some participants may have avoided discussing certain experiences in detail. Third, although the sample included diversity in gender, age, country of origin, and length of residence, some groups remained underrepresented, including highly educated migrants, undocumented migrants who were unwilling to participate, and second-generation youth. Finally, the study examined migrants' perspectives but did not include interviews with policymakers, legal service providers, teachers, employers, or local residents, whose views could provide a broader institutional understanding.

Future research should examine legal consciousness and cultural identity among migrant communities in multiple Iranian cities and compare experiences across different legal statuses, generations, genders, occupational groups, and national backgrounds. Longitudinal studies would be valuable for understanding how legal consciousness changes over time as migrants experience documentation renewal, employment transitions, children's education, marriage, citizenship-related aspirations, or possible return migration. Future studies could also focus specifically on migrant women, youth, informal workers, students, or families with mixed documentation statuses. Comparative research between Tehran and other metropolitan contexts would help clarify how urban scale, labor markets, local institutions, and community networks shape integration. In addition, mixed-methods studies could combine qualitative interviews with surveys to examine the relationship between perceived rights, discrimination, institutional trust, cultural identity, and social participation.

The findings suggest the need for accessible, culturally responsive legal information services for migrant communities. Rights education should be provided in clear language and through trusted community channels, including schools, local organizations, religious centers, and migrant associations. Administrative procedures related to documentation, education,

work, and housing should be made more transparent and easier to navigate. Legal aid and mediation services should be designed to reduce fear and encourage safe reporting of exploitation, unpaid wages, discrimination, and abuse. Schools and workplaces can play a major role in integration by promoting respectful interaction, preventing stigma, and recognizing cultural diversity. Community networks should be engaged as partners, but formal institutions must remain directly accessible so that migrants are not dependent only on informal advice. Finally, integration policies should emphasize dignity, rights, participation, and mutual recognition rather than expecting migrants to adapt without institutional support.

Conclusion

This qualitative study examined legal consciousness and cultural identity among migrant communities in Tehran, focusing on rights, belonging, and integration. The findings showed that migrants' understanding of law was shaped by documentation, institutional encounters, community advice, fear, hope, and practical experience. Participants did not experience law as an abstract system but as a daily condition affecting work, education, housing, mobility, safety, and dignity. Cultural identity was negotiated between heritage preservation and adaptation to urban life, while belonging was experienced as conditional and dependent on recognition by institutions and society. Community networks provided important support but could not replace accessible formal rights protection. Integration was understood as cautious participation in work, education, neighborhood relations, and future-making, rather than assimilation or cultural loss. The study concludes that legal consciousness, cultural identity, and integration are deeply interconnected. Meaningful integration requires not only migrants' adaptation but also institutional fairness, reliable rights information, protection from discrimination, and social recognition of migrants as members of urban life.

Acknowledgments

We would like to express our appreciation and gratitude to all those who helped us carrying out this study.

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.

Funding

This research was carried out independently with personal funding and without the financial support of any governmental or private institution or organization.

References

- Abrego, L. J. (2011). Legal consciousness of undocumented Latinos: Fear and stigma as barriers to claims-making for first- and 1.5-generation immigrants. *Law & Society Review*, 45(2), 337–370. DOI: 10.1111/j.1540-5893.2011.00435.x
- Ager, A., & Strang, A. (2008). Understanding integration: A conceptual framework. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 21(2), 166–191. DOI: 10.1093/jrs/fen016
- Anthias, F. (2006). Belongings in a globalising and unequal world: Rethinking translocations. In N. Yuval-Davis, K. Kannabiran, & U. M. Vieten (Eds.), *The situated politics of belonging* (pp. 17–31). Sage.
- Anthias, F. (2008). Thinking through the lens of translocational positionality: An intersectionality frame for understanding identity and belonging. *Translocations: Migration and Social Change*, 4(1), 5–20.
- Berry, J. W. (1997). Immigration, acculturation, and adaptation. *Applied Psychology: An International Review*, 46(1), 5–34. DOI: 10.1111/j.1464-0597.1997.tb01087.x
- Bloemraad, I. (2006). *Becoming a citizen: Incorporating immigrants and refugees in the United States and Canada*. University of California Press.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. DOI: 10.1191/1478088706qp063oa
- Ewick, P., & Silbey, S. S. (1998). *The common place of law: Stories from everyday life*. University of Chicago Press.
- Güdük, A., Desmet, E., & Wets, J. (2022). Legal consciousness and migration: Towards a research agenda. *International Journal of Law in Context*, 18(3), 273–292. DOI: 10.1017/S1744552322000185
- Guest, G., Bunce, A., & Johnson, L. (2006). How many interviews are enough? An experiment with data saturation and variability. *Field Methods*, 18(1), 59–82. DOI: 10.1177/1525822X05279903
- Hall, S. (1990). Cultural identity and diaspora. In J. Rutherford (Ed.), *Identity: Community, culture, difference* (pp. 222–237). Lawrence & Wishart.
- Kubal, A. (2013). Conceptualizing semi-legality in migration research. *Law & Society Review*, 47(3), 555–587. DOI: 10.1111/lasr.12031
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Sage.
- Menjívar, C., & Abrego, L. J. (2012). Legal violence: Immigration law and the lives of Central American immigrants. *American Journal of Sociology*, 117(5), 1380–1421. DOI: 10.1086/663575
- Merry, S. E. (1990). *Getting justice and getting even: Legal consciousness among working-class Americans*. University of Chicago Press.
- Phinney, J. S. (1990). Ethnic identity in adolescents and adults: Review of research. *Psychological Bulletin*, 108(3), 499–514. DOI: 10.1037/0033-2909.108.3.499
- Tong, A., Sainsbury, P., & Craig, J. (2007). Consolidated criteria for reporting qualitative research: A 32-item checklist for interviews and focus groups. *International Journal for Quality in Health Care*, 19(6), 349–357. DOI: 10.1093/intqhc/mzm042
- UNHCR. (2026). *Refugees in Iran*. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.
- Vertovec, S. (2007). Super-diversity and its implications. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 30(6), 1024–1054. DOI: 10.1080/01419870701599465
- Yuval-Davis, N. (2006). Belonging and the politics of belonging. *Patterns of Prejudice*, 40(3), 197–214. DOI: 10.1080/00313220600769331