



Migration, Legal Identity, and Social Belonging: A Qualitative Study of Transnational Communities

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore how members of transnational communities in Tehran interpret legal identity, negotiate belonging, and experience inclusion or exclusion across everyday institutional and social settings. A qualitative research design was used. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 24 participants from transnational communities living in Tehran. Participants included migrants, refugees, return migrants, and members of mixed-background families who had direct experience with cross-border mobility, legal documentation, and belonging in more than one national or cultural context. Participants were selected through purposive and snowball sampling. Interviews continued until theoretical saturation was reached at the twenty-first interview, with three additional interviews conducted to confirm the stability of the categories. Interviews were audio-recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim, anonymized, and analyzed through thematic analysis using NVivo software. Credibility was enhanced through member checking, peer review, and iterative comparison of codes and categories. Four main categories were identified: legal identity as conditional recognition, bureaucratic encounters and everyday uncertainty, transnational belonging and divided attachment, and social inclusion through relational recognition. Participants described legal documents not merely as administrative tools but as symbolic markers of social worth, security, mobility, and access to rights. Unstable or ambiguous legal status produced anxiety, restricted participation, and intensified dependence on informal networks. At the same time, participants maintained emotional, familial, linguistic, and digital ties across borders, producing layered forms of belonging that were neither fully national nor fully diasporic. The findings suggest that legal identity is a central mechanism through which transnational communities experience social belonging. Belonging was shaped not only by citizenship or residence status but also by institutional treatment, public recognition, language, family networks, and everyday interpersonal encounters. Legal and social inclusion therefore require policies that move beyond documentation control toward rights-based, culturally responsive, and socially integrative approaches.

Keywords: migration; legal identity; social belonging; transnational communities; citizenship; qualitative research; Tehran; legal recognition

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Introduction

Migration is one of the defining social, legal, and political phenomena of contemporary globalization. International mobility has transformed the relationship between individuals, nation-states, families, labor markets, and cultural communities. Whereas

classical theories of migration often treated movement as a one-directional transition from a country of origin to a country of settlement, contemporary migration scholarship increasingly emphasizes mobility as a transnational, relational, and legally mediated process. Migrants may live in one country while maintaining emotional, economic, political, religious, linguistic, and familial ties with another. As a result, identity and belonging are no longer adequately explained through a single national frame. The lives of migrants, refugees, return migrants, and cross-border families are shaped by multiple legal systems, overlapping cultural attachments, and unequal forms of recognition. The Age of Migration literature conceptualizes migration as a central force in globalization that reconfigures both states and societies, while transnational migration theory emphasizes that migrants often participate simultaneously in social fields spanning more than one national context (Castles et al., 2020; Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004).

The concept of transnational communities is particularly important for understanding how migration reshapes legal identity and belonging. Portes, Guarnizo, and Landolt (1999) argued that transnationalism refers to sustained cross-border practices through which migrants create social, economic, and political connections linking places of origin and settlement. Levitt and Glick Schiller (2004) further developed the idea of transnational social fields, emphasizing that migrants may be embedded in networks of relationships, institutions, and meanings that cross state borders. This perspective challenges assimilationist assumptions that migrants gradually detach from origin societies and become incorporated only into host societies. Instead, transnational migrants may develop simultaneous attachments, obligations, and identities. These attachments can become a resource for resilience and cultural continuity, but they may also intensify legal vulnerability when state institutions insist on fixed, singular, and territorially bounded categories of membership.

Legal identity is central to this tension. In migration contexts, legal identity refers not only to name, nationality, passport, residence permit, refugee documentation, or citizenship status, but also to the broader institutional recognition through which a person becomes visible as a rights-bearing subject. Legal status determines access to education, employment, health care, housing, mobility, family reunification, and political participation. It also shapes everyday interactions with employers, schools, police, landlords, banks, welfare agencies, and border authorities. Brubaker's analysis of citizenship shows that national membership historically functions as a mechanism of social closure, defining who is inside and who remains outside the political community (Brubaker, 1992). Bauböck (1994) similarly argued that migration challenges the traditional connection between citizenship, territory, and rights. These debates remain highly relevant because many migrants live in states where they participate socially and economically but are not fully recognized as members of the legal-political community.

The problem becomes sharper when legal status is temporary, unclear, or unstable. Menjívar's concept of "liminal legality" demonstrates how migrants may live for years in a legally ambiguous condition that is neither fully documented nor fully undocumented, neither included nor entirely excluded (Menjívar, 2006). Such legal ambiguity is not only a formal condition; it is also an emotional and social experience. It can produce fear, hesitation, dependency, silence, and restricted life planning. Migrants may avoid claiming rights because they are uncertain whether visibility will protect or endanger them. In this sense, legal identity does not operate only through statutes and documents; it is lived through waiting rooms, renewal procedures, employer demands, police encounters, school registration, rental contracts, and the repeated need to prove one's legitimacy.

The relationship between legal identity and social belonging has been widely discussed in citizenship, integration, and migration studies. Belonging is more than formal membership. 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 constructed. Belonging involves feeling at home, being recognized by others, participating in collective life, and being able to imagine a future in a place. However, the politics of belonging determines who is accepted as "one of us," who is tolerated conditionally, and who is marked as foreign regardless of length of residence. Anthias (2008) further argues

that belonging is shaped by translocational positionality, meaning that identity is formed through intersecting social locations such as gender, class, ethnicity, nationality, legal status, generation, and migration history. Thus, migrants' belonging cannot be understood through legal status alone; it emerges at the intersection of documents, social relations, cultural narratives, and everyday recognition.

Integration literature similarly emphasizes that inclusion is multidimensional. Ager and Strang (2008) identify employment, housing, education, health, social connection, rights, citizenship, language, culture, safety, and stability as important domains of integration. Their framework is useful because it connects legal and structural conditions with everyday social relationships. For transnational communities, however, integration should not be interpreted as the disappearance of cross-border belonging. Rather, the relevant question is how migrants can participate meaningfully in the host society while maintaining legitimate ties to other places. A participant may feel attached to Tehran, Kabul, Baghdad, Istanbul, London, or another city simultaneously. Such layered belonging is not necessarily a failure of integration; it may be a normal outcome of transnational life.

The Iranian context provides a significant setting for studying these issues. Iran has hosted large displaced and migrant populations, especially from Afghanistan and Iraq, for decades. UNHCR reports that in 2026 around 1.65 million forcibly displaced people of different documentation statuses resided in Iran, including approximately 770,000 refugees with Amayesh or Hoviat cards, and that most displaced populations live in urban areas rather than camps. Tehran, as the country's largest urban center, functions as a space where legal status, informal work, family networks, language, cultural similarity, religious affiliation, urban anonymity, and institutional surveillance intersect. It is therefore an important site for examining how transnational communities experience legal identity and social belonging in everyday life.

Despite the growing literature on migration, citizenship, integration, and transnationalism, there remains a need for qualitative research that links legal identity to lived experiences of belonging in urban non-Western contexts. Much migration research has focused on European and North American receiving societies, while fewer qualitative studies examine how migrants in Middle Eastern urban settings interpret legal recognition, social acceptance, and transnational attachment. Tehran is particularly relevant because it includes long-established migrant populations, newly displaced individuals, return migrants, students, informal workers, cross-border traders, and families whose lives extend across national boundaries. The city offers opportunities for employment, education, and social connection, yet it can also reproduce uncertainty through documentation rules, labor restrictions, housing barriers, and public narratives of foreignness.

The present study addresses this gap by exploring the lived experiences of transnational communities in Tehran. It asks how participants understand legal identity, how they experience documentation and institutional recognition, how they negotiate belonging across multiple social fields, and how everyday relationships either strengthen or weaken their sense of inclusion. By using semi-structured interviews, the study gives analytical priority to participants' own accounts of law, identity, and belonging. Rather than treating law as an abstract system, it examines law as lived, interpreted, and emotionally experienced. This approach contributes to migration and socio-legal scholarship by showing how legal identity becomes meaningful through everyday encounters and how social belonging is produced through the interaction of formal status, institutional treatment, family memory, language, labor, and recognition.

Methods and Materials

This study employed a qualitative research design using semi-structured interviews. A qualitative approach was appropriate because the objective was to explore participants' meanings, interpretations, and lived experiences rather than to measure predetermined variables. The study focused on members of transnational communities living in Tehran who had direct experience with migration, cross-border family ties, legal documentation, residence status, or social belonging across more than one national or cultural context.

The sample consisted of 24 participants. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling and then through snowball sampling, as some participants introduced other eligible individuals from their networks. Inclusion criteria were: being 18 years of age or older, currently residing in Tehran, having personal or family experience of transnational migration, and being willing to participate in a recorded interview. Participants included documented migrants, refugees, undocumented or irregular migrants, return migrants, naturalized individuals, and members of mixed-nationality families. The sample was designed to include variation in gender, age, length of residence, educational level, and legal status.

The final sample included 13 men and 11 women. Participants ranged in age from 19 to 56 years. In terms of educational level, 6 participants had primary or lower-secondary education, 8 had high-school diplomas, 7 had university degrees, and 3 had postgraduate education. Regarding legal status, 9 participants held refugee or temporary protection documentation, 5 held residence permits, 4 reported irregular or undocumented status, 3 were return migrants with prior long-term residence abroad, and 3 were members of mixed-nationality families. Length of residence in Tehran ranged from 1 year to more than 25 years. To protect confidentiality, participants were identified by codes such as P01, P02, and P03.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. An interview guide was developed based on the study objectives and relevant literature on transnationalism, legal identity, citizenship, and belonging. The guide included open-ended questions such as: “How do you describe your legal identity in Tehran?”, “What role do documents play in your daily life?”, “Can you describe an experience in which you felt accepted or excluded?”, “How do you maintain connections with people or places outside Iran?”, and “What does belonging mean to you?”

Interviews were conducted in quiet and private locations chosen by participants, including community centers, workplaces after working hours, university spaces, and private homes. Some interviews were conducted online when participants preferred greater privacy. Each interview lasted between 45 and 90 minutes. Interviews were audio-recorded after informed consent was obtained. Field notes were written immediately after each interview to document contextual observations, emotional tone, and emerging analytical ideas. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was reached. Saturation was observed after the twenty-first interview, when no substantially new codes or categories emerged. Three additional interviews were conducted to confirm and refine the categories.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The analysis followed an iterative process of familiarization, initial coding, category construction, theme development, review, definition, and reporting. First, all transcripts were read several times to gain an overall understanding of participants’ narratives. Second, meaningful units related to legal identity, documentation, belonging, exclusion, institutional encounters, and transnational ties were coded. Third, similar codes were grouped into broader categories. Fourth, categories were compared across participants to identify recurring patterns and differences. Fifth, the final themes were reviewed in relation to the full dataset to ensure that they represented participants’ accounts accurately.

NVivo software was used to organize transcripts, codes, categories, memos, and participant quotations. The software supported systematic data management but did not replace researcher interpretation. Coding was conducted inductively, while theoretical sensitivity was informed by scholarship on transnational social fields, citizenship, liminal legality, and belonging. Thematic analysis was selected because it offers a flexible and rigorous approach for identifying patterned meaning across qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Trustworthiness was enhanced through several strategies. Credibility was supported through member checking with selected participants, peer review of codes, and repeated engagement with the transcripts. Dependability was strengthened by maintaining an audit trail of coding decisions and analytical memos. Confirmability was supported by reflexive memo writing to identify researcher assumptions. Transferability was addressed through thick description of the study context, participants, and findings. These strategies are consistent with qualitative criteria for trustworthiness proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985).

Findings

The demographic characteristics of the participants showed variation in gender, age, education, migration history, and legal status. Of the 24 participants, 13 were men and 11 were women. Seven participants were aged 18–29 years, 9 were aged 30–39 years, 5 were aged 40–49 years, and 3 were aged 50 years or older. Regarding education, 6 participants had primary or lower-secondary education, 8 had completed high school, 7 held bachelor's degrees, and 3 had postgraduate degrees. In terms of legal status, 9 participants had refugee or temporary protection documentation, 5 had residence permits, 4 described themselves as undocumented or irregular, 3 were return migrants, and 3 belonged to mixed-nationality families. The duration of residence in Tehran varied: 5 participants had lived in Tehran for less than 5 years, 8 for 5–10 years, 6 for 11–20 years, and 5 for more than 20 years. This diversity allowed the study to examine how legal identity and belonging were experienced across different stages and forms of transnational life.

The first main category was legal identity as conditional recognition. Participants repeatedly described legal documents as more than administrative papers; they viewed them as signs of visibility, dignity, and permission to exist in public space. For those with temporary or renewable documentation, legal identity was experienced as conditional because recognition depended on periodic renewal, changing regulations, and institutional discretion. Participants explained that a document could open access to work, school, health care, rental housing, or travel, but it could also remind them that their acceptance was incomplete. One participant stated, “When I hold my card, I feel I have a name in the system, but not a full place in society” (P07). Another participant said, “My document says I can stay, but it does not say I belong” (P12). Participants with irregular status expressed deeper insecurity, explaining that the absence of recognized papers made ordinary activities risky. For them, legal identity was not an abstract concept but a daily boundary between visibility and fear. The category shows that legal identity shaped participants' self-understanding, access to rights, and perception of social worth.

The second category concerned bureaucratic encounters and everyday uncertainty. Participants described repeated interactions with administrative offices, employers, schools, landlords, banks, and public authorities. These encounters often produced confusion because rules were perceived as unclear, inconsistent, or dependent on individual officials. Participants stated that they had to carry documents constantly, explain their background repeatedly, and anticipate possible rejection. One participant explained, “Every office asks for one more paper. Sometimes the rule is not written anywhere, but you still have to obey it” (P04). Another said, “The hardest part is not one big problem; it is the small uncertainty every day” (P18). This uncertainty affected future planning. Participants hesitated to invest in education, business, marriage, or housing because their status could change or because they were unsure whether institutions would accept their documents. Bureaucracy therefore became a lived experience of temporariness. Even documented participants described feeling that their lives were suspended by renewal dates, institutional queues, and the possibility of administrative refusal.

The third category was transnational belonging and divided attachment. Participants did not describe belonging as limited to one nation or city. Instead, many expressed layered attachments to Tehran, their country of origin, relatives abroad, digital communities, and imagined futures elsewhere. Some participants felt emotionally attached to Tehran because they had studied, worked, married, or raised children there, while still maintaining strong memories and obligations connected to another homeland. One participant stated, “My childhood is there, my work is here, and my family is in different countries. I cannot put my belonging in one place” (P09). Another participant explained, “When people ask where I am from, I answer differently depending on who is asking” (P16). Digital communication intensified this transnational belonging, allowing participants to participate in family ceremonies, political conversations, religious events, and economic decisions across borders. However, divided attachment also created emotional tension. Participants sometimes felt that they were considered foreign in Tehran and distant from their place of origin. Belonging was therefore experienced as multiple, relational, and sometimes incomplete.

The fourth category was social inclusion through relational recognition. Participants emphasized that belonging was strongly shaped by everyday social relations. Respectful neighbors, supportive teachers, fair employers, classmates, local shopkeepers, and friends could reduce the emotional weight of legal exclusion. In contrast, discriminatory language, suspicion, jokes about nationality, and public labeling intensified feelings of non-belonging. One participant said, “A teacher who called my son by his name, not by his nationality, changed how he felt about school” (P03). Another participant noted, “Sometimes one respectful employer gives you more belonging than many documents” (P20). Participants described language, accent, clothing, and surname as markers through which others identified them as outsiders. However, repeated positive interaction could weaken these boundaries. The findings suggest that legal belonging and social belonging interact but are not identical. Legal documents mattered deeply, but participants also needed interpersonal recognition, cultural respect, and ordinary acceptance in daily life. Social inclusion was therefore produced through both formal rights and informal relationships.

Discussion

The present study explored how members of transnational communities in Tehran experience legal identity and social belonging. The findings showed that participants interpreted legal identity as a form of conditional recognition, experienced bureaucratic encounters as sources of everyday uncertainty, negotiated layered forms of transnational belonging, and relied on relational recognition to create social inclusion. Together, these findings demonstrate that legal identity is not merely a technical administrative category. It is a lived social condition that shapes how migrants understand themselves, how they are treated by institutions, and whether they can imagine a secure future in the city. This supports socio-legal approaches that conceptualize law as lived through everyday practices rather than only through formal statutes. It also aligns with migration scholarship showing that citizenship and legal status function as mechanisms of inclusion, exclusion, hierarchy, and social closure (Brubaker, 1992; Menjívar, 2006).

The first finding, legal identity as conditional recognition, is consistent with theories of citizenship and legal membership. Participants viewed documents as markers of recognition, but many experienced that recognition as partial, temporary, or revocable. This finding aligns with Brubaker’s argument that citizenship defines the boundaries of political membership and with Bauböck’s claim that migration challenges the territorial model of citizenship (Bauböck, 1994; Brubaker, 1992). The participants’ accounts also support Soysal’s argument that modern states may extend certain rights to non-citizens while still preserving important boundaries between citizens and migrants (Soysal, 1994). In this study, legal identity did not simply determine whether participants had rights; it shaped the quality of their social visibility. Participants with temporary documents described themselves as recognized enough to be controlled but not always recognized enough to belong. This finding contributes to the literature by showing that legal identity has symbolic and emotional dimensions. It affects dignity, confidence, and the ability to appear in public without fear.

The second finding, bureaucratic encounters and everyday uncertainty, strongly aligns with Menjívar’s concept of liminal legality. Participants described uncertainty not only among those without documentation but also among those whose legal status required renewal or interpretation by institutions. This suggests that legal insecurity exists on a continuum rather than as a simple documented-undocumented binary. Liminal legality becomes visible in ordinary situations: school registration, work contracts, housing agreements, bank procedures, and identity checks. The findings also correspond with Ager and Strang’s integration framework, which identifies rights, access, social connection, and structural barriers as central to integration (Ager & Strang, 2008). In the present study, bureaucratic uncertainty restricted access to these domains and weakened participants’ capacity to plan their lives. Even when participants were legally present, unstable recognition made them cautious about long-term decisions. This finding highlights the need to examine administrative systems as lived environments that can either stabilize or destabilize migrant belonging.

The third finding, transnational belonging and divided attachment, supports transnational migration theory. Participants did not define belonging through exclusive attachment to one national community. Instead, they described multiple attachments distributed across Tehran, origin countries, family networks, digital communication spaces, and imagined future destinations. This directly reflects Levitt and Glick Schiller's concept of transnational social fields, in which migrants maintain simultaneous relationships across borders (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004). It also corresponds with Portes et al.'s understanding of transnationalism as sustained cross-border social practices (Portes et al., 1999). The finding challenges integration models that treat continued attachment to origin societies as a sign of failed incorporation. For many participants, transnational ties provided emotional support, economic resources, family continuity, and moral identity. However, these ties also produced ambivalence. Participants could feel "not fully here" and "no longer fully there." This dual displacement suggests that belonging should be studied as a dynamic and multi-sited experience rather than as a fixed national identity.

The fourth finding, social inclusion through relational recognition, aligns with theories of belonging that emphasize emotional attachment, social location, and boundary-making. Yuval-Davis (2006) argues that belonging involves emotional attachment but is shaped by the politics of belonging, through which communities define who is accepted. The present findings show that this politics of belonging occurs not only at the level of state policy but also in classrooms, workplaces, neighborhoods, and everyday speech. Participants' experiences of being named respectfully, trusted by employers, included by classmates, or accepted by neighbors strengthened belonging even when legal status remained limited. Conversely, discriminatory language and public suspicion weakened belonging even when participants had documents. Anthias's concept of translocational positionality is useful here because participants' experiences were shaped by intersecting factors such as legal status, nationality, accent, gender, class, education, and length of residence (Anthias, 2008). Thus, social belonging cannot be reduced to law, but it also cannot be separated from law. Legal identity and relational recognition work together to produce inclusion or exclusion.

Overall, the findings suggest that legal identity operates as both a formal and affective structure of belonging. Formal documentation determines access to rights and institutions, while affective recognition determines whether individuals feel respected, trusted, and socially accepted. This supports Bloemraad's work on citizenship and incorporation, which emphasizes that membership is shaped by institutions, policies, and collective narratives, not merely by individual adaptation (Bloemraad, 2006). It also supports broader citizenship scholarship arguing that immigrant incorporation is shaped by the interaction between state policy, civil society, and migrant agency (Bloemraad et al., 2008). In this study, participants were not passive subjects of legal categories. They actively negotiated identity, built networks, interpreted institutional behavior, maintained cross-border relationships, and created forms of belonging within constraint. Their agency, however, was unequally distributed because uncertain legal status limited the risks they could take.

The Tehran context deepens these theoretical debates by showing how transnational belonging is produced in an urban environment where long-term displacement, labor migration, family settlement, and documentation uncertainty coexist. The findings are consistent with UNHCR reporting that displaced populations in Iran are overwhelmingly urban, meaning that belonging is negotiated through everyday city life rather than only through camps or formal humanitarian settings. Tehran provides employment, education, anonymity, cultural proximity, and social networks, yet it also exposes migrants to legal uncertainty, institutional inconsistency, and social labeling. This dual character of the city is important. Urban life can soften boundaries through repeated interaction, but it can also intensify exclusion when access to housing, work, schooling, or services depends on documents that remain temporary or contested.

The study also contributes to the discussion of postnational and transnational citizenship. Sassen (1996) argued that globalization has transformed the relationship between sovereignty, rights, and territory, while Soysal (1994) argued that rights

for migrants increasingly challenge traditional citizenship models. The present findings show that, despite such transformations, national legal categories continue to structure daily life powerfully. Participants' transnational networks did not eliminate dependence on state documents. Rather, they lived in the tension between cross-border social realities and territorially organized legal systems. This tension is one of the central findings of the study. Transnational communities may live beyond the nation-state socially, but they remain deeply governed by the nation-state legally.

The findings have implications for migration governance and social policy. Policies that focus only on border control or documentation management may fail to address the social and emotional dimensions of legal identity. Participants needed stable procedures, clear information, respectful institutional treatment, and pathways to secure status. They also needed recognition in schools, workplaces, neighborhoods, and public discourse. Integration policy should therefore combine legal stability with relational inclusion. This means that documentation systems, service providers, employers, educators, and local communities all play roles in shaping whether transnational migrants experience belonging. A rights-based and culturally responsive approach would recognize that legal identity is not only a matter of state control but also a foundation for social participation, dignity, and urban cohesion.

This study has several limitations. First, the sample was limited to 24 participants living in Tehran, and the findings may not represent the experiences of transnational communities in other Iranian cities or rural areas. Second, participants were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling, which may have increased access to rich narratives but may also have excluded more isolated individuals. Third, because legal status can be sensitive, some participants may have avoided sharing full details about documentation, employment, or institutional encounters. Fourth, the study relied on self-reported narratives, which reflect participants' memories, interpretations, and emotional meanings rather than independently verified legal histories. Finally, the study focused on adult participants; the experiences of children, adolescents, and older migrants may differ and require separate investigation.

Future research should examine legal identity and belonging among different transnational groups across multiple Iranian cities in order to compare urban contexts, institutional practices, and community networks. Longitudinal qualitative studies would be valuable for understanding how belonging changes over time as legal status, family formation, employment, education, and cross-border ties develop. Future studies should also focus specifically on second-generation migrants, mixed-nationality families, women migrants, undocumented workers, and students, because each group may experience legal identity differently. Comparative research between Tehran and other major migrant-receiving cities in the region could further clarify how national legal systems and urban cultures shape transnational belonging. Mixed-methods research may also be useful for combining narrative depth with broader patterns of access to education, work, housing, and health services.

Practitioners and policymakers should recognize that legal documentation is not merely an administrative issue but a central condition of social belonging, dignity, and psychological security. Institutions that interact with migrants should provide clear information, consistent procedures, multilingual guidance, and respectful treatment. Schools, employers, health centers, and local organizations should receive training on the needs and rights of transnational communities. Community-based programs can promote social connection by creating spaces where migrants and host-society members interact beyond stereotypes and legal labels. Legal aid, documentation support, counseling, and referral services should be strengthened, especially for individuals with temporary or uncertain status. Finally, public communication should avoid stigmatizing language and instead emphasize shared urban life, social contribution, and human dignity.

Conclusion

This qualitative study explored how members of transnational communities in Tehran understand legal identity and social belonging. The findings showed that legal identity was experienced as conditional recognition, bureaucratic encounters

produced everyday uncertainty, belonging was shaped by layered transnational attachments, and social inclusion depended heavily on relational recognition. Participants' narratives revealed that documents were not only tools of administration but also symbols of dignity, visibility, security, and social worth. At the same time, belonging could not be reduced to formal status; it was also created through language, friendship, work, education, neighborhood interaction, family ties, and emotional attachment.

The study contributes to migration and socio-legal scholarship by showing how legal identity is lived in everyday urban life. It demonstrates that transnational communities negotiate belonging across multiple social fields while remaining deeply affected by national legal categories. The findings suggest that inclusive migration governance must combine legal stability with social recognition. Policies that provide clearer pathways to documentation, reduce administrative uncertainty, and promote respectful institutional treatment can strengthen both individual well-being and urban cohesion. Ultimately, belonging emerges where legal recognition and social acceptance reinforce one another.

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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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