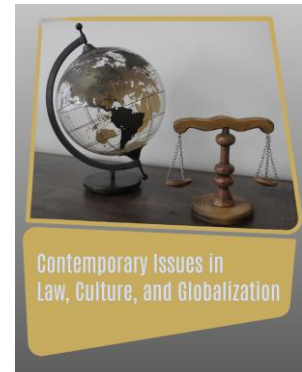




Human Rights Narratives in Culturally Diverse Legal Systems: A Qualitative Analysis

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore how legal professionals, civil-society actors, academics, and community intermediaries in Tehran narrate, interpret, and negotiate human rights within culturally diverse legal and social contexts. This qualitative study used an interpretive descriptive design. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 24 participants from Tehran, including legal practitioners, civil-society actors, academics, and community mediators working with culturally diverse populations. Participants were selected through purposive and snowball sampling to achieve maximum variation in professional role, gender, age, and experience. Interviews continued until theoretical saturation was reached after the twenty-second interview, followed by two confirmatory interviews. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using thematic analysis. NVivo software was used for data organization, coding, memo writing, and theme development. Trustworthiness was enhanced through member checking, peer debriefing, reflexive memoing, and an audit trail. Four main categories emerged from the analysis: human rights as a universal language of dignity, cultural translation and moral legitimacy, administrative vulnerability and unequal access to recognition, and negotiated belonging through everyday legal consciousness. Participants described human rights not only as formal legal guarantees but also as narratives shaped by family expectations, religious norms, migration status, class position, gender relations, and institutional accessibility. While some participants viewed human rights discourse as a necessary universal framework for protecting vulnerable groups, others emphasized that rights become socially effective only when translated into culturally meaningful and locally trusted forms. The findings indicate that human rights in culturally diverse legal systems are practiced through continuous negotiation between universal norms and local moral worlds. Effective rights protection requires culturally responsive legal communication, accessible institutions, community-based mediation, and participatory legal education without weakening the universal foundations of equality, dignity, and non-discrimination.

Keywords: human rights; legal pluralism; cultural diversity; legal consciousness; qualitative research; Tehran; legal identity; social belonging

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Introduction

Human rights have become one of the most influential normative languages for articulating dignity, equality, freedom, and protection from arbitrary power. Since the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the idea that all persons

possess rights by virtue of being human has shaped international law, constitutional discourse, civil-society advocacy, and everyday claims for justice. The Universal Declaration begins from the premise that human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights, while the Vienna Declaration later reaffirmed that human rights are universal, indivisible, interdependent, and interrelated (United Nations, 1948; OHCHR, 1993). These principles provide an important moral and legal foundation for protecting individuals and groups against discrimination, exclusion, violence, and unequal access to institutions. Yet the implementation of human rights never occurs in an abstract space. Rights are interpreted, translated, accepted, resisted, and negotiated within particular social, cultural, legal, religious, and political settings. Therefore, the study of human rights requires attention not only to formal legal texts but also to the narratives through which people make sense of rights in everyday life.

The relationship between universal human rights and cultural diversity has generated long-standing debate in legal theory, anthropology, political philosophy, and socio-legal studies. Universalist perspectives emphasize that certain rights must apply to all persons regardless of cultural, national, religious, or social background. From this view, cultural difference cannot justify practices that violate basic dignity, bodily integrity, equal protection, or freedom from discrimination. By contrast, critics of rigid universalism argue that human rights discourse can appear abstract, externally imposed, or insufficiently attentive to local histories and moral traditions. Donnelly's influential work on cultural relativism and universal human rights is particularly important because it rejects both extreme relativism and insensitive universalism, instead arguing for a form of universality that allows contextual interpretation while preserving the moral core of human rights (Donnelly, 1984, 2007). This middle position is especially relevant in culturally diverse legal systems, where rights claims are often filtered through community norms, religious commitments, family structures, migration experiences, language barriers, and unequal institutional power.

Culturally diverse legal systems are rarely governed by a single normative order. Rather, they are characterized by overlapping forms of legal and moral authority. Legal pluralism refers to the coexistence of multiple normative systems within the same social field, including state law, religious norms, customary practices, professional regulations, community-based mediation, bureaucratic procedures, and informal social expectations (Merry, 1988; Tamanaha, 2008). In such contexts, individuals may encounter law not only in courts and statutes but also in municipal offices, schools, workplaces, family negotiations, local associations, religious institutions, and migration-related administrative procedures. Merry described legal pluralism as central to rethinking the relationship between law and society, while Tamanaha emphasized that plural legal orders are not exceptional but historically and socially common. This perspective is crucial for understanding human rights narratives because people often evaluate rights through the practical question of which authority recognizes them, which institution protects them, and which community considers their claim legitimate.

The concept of legal consciousness further deepens this analysis by shifting attention from formal legality to everyday meaning-making. Ewick and Silbey (1998) argue that ordinary people experience law through recurring cultural schemas: law may be imagined as majestic and distant, as a game to be strategically used, or as an oppressive force to be resisted. These forms of legal consciousness help explain why the same human-rights norm may be understood differently by different actors. For one participant, the right to equality may represent a universal shield against discrimination; for another, it may appear as a disruptive language that challenges family or community authority; for a third, it may be an inaccessible promise because institutions are too costly, bureaucratic, or socially intimidating. Human rights are therefore not only legal entitlements; they are also narrative resources through which people describe harm, justify claims, interpret belonging, and imagine justice. A qualitative approach is particularly appropriate for examining these processes because interviews can reveal the meanings, tensions, and interpretive strategies that quantitative indicators often miss.

Anthropological scholarship on human rights has shown that rights become socially meaningful through processes of translation and vernacularization. Merry's work on gender violence and local justice demonstrates that international human

rights norms are rarely adopted unchanged; rather, they are translated into local moral vocabularies by activists, lawyers, community leaders, and institutional intermediaries (Merry, 2006). Vernacularization does not simply dilute universal norms. It can make rights more intelligible and persuasive by connecting them to locally respected concepts such as dignity, justice, responsibility, compassion, fairness, or protection of the vulnerable. However, translation also carries risks. Rights may be narrowed, selectively applied, depoliticized, or subordinated to dominant cultural interpretations. Therefore, the central analytical issue is not whether human rights are universal or cultural, but how universal norms move through cultural systems, who controls their translation, and whose experiences are included or excluded in that process.

The politics of recognition is also relevant to human rights in diverse legal systems. Taylor (1994) argues that recognition is not merely symbolic; misrecognition can become a form of harm when individuals or groups are socially devalued. Kymlicka (1995) similarly argues that minority rights and cultural membership can be compatible with liberal equality when they protect individuals' capacity for meaningful participation rather than entrench domination. These perspectives show that human rights law must address both individual equality and collective belonging. In practice, many rights conflicts arise because individuals are located within multiple identities at once: they may be citizens, migrants, members of ethnic or linguistic minorities, women, workers, students, religious believers, or members of families with strong cultural expectations. Legal systems must therefore protect individuals from coercion while also recognizing the importance of cultural identity and community membership.

Tehran provides a significant urban context for examining these dynamics. As a large metropolitan center, Tehran brings together people with different ethnic, linguistic, class, migration, professional, and religious backgrounds. Iran also hosts large displaced and migrant populations, especially Afghans, and UNHCR reports that most forcibly displaced people in Iran live in urban areas rather than camps or settlements (UNHCR, 2026). Urban life can intensify rights negotiations because individuals encounter state institutions, employment markets, education systems, housing pressures, policing practices, family expectations, and community networks simultaneously. For migrants, refugees, internal migrants, women, ethnic minorities, and economically marginalized groups, rights may depend not only on formal law but also on documentation, language competence, social networks, institutional trust, and the perceived legitimacy of legal claims.

Despite a rich body of scholarship on human rights, legal pluralism, multiculturalism, and legal consciousness, there remains a need for qualitative studies that examine how rights are narrated by actors working within culturally diverse legal environments. Many studies focus on international legal frameworks or constitutional doctrine, while fewer explore how people who mediate between formal institutions and everyday communities understand the practical meaning of rights. Legal professionals, civil-society workers, academics, and community intermediaries occupy a particularly important position because they often translate rights language between institutions and communities. Their narratives can reveal how rights are framed, legitimized, contested, and operationalized in practice.

Accordingly, the present study explores human rights narratives in culturally diverse legal systems through a qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews with participants in Tehran. The study asks: How do participants describe the meaning of human rights in culturally diverse legal settings? What tensions do they identify between universal rights and local cultural norms? How do legal and community actors translate rights claims into socially legitimate forms? What institutional barriers affect access to rights and legal recognition? By answering these questions, the study contributes to socio-legal scholarship by showing that human rights are not merely enforced from above but are narrated, negotiated, and practiced through everyday interactions between law, culture, identity, and belonging.

Methods and Materials

This study used a qualitative interpretive design to explore how human rights are narrated, interpreted, and negotiated in culturally diverse legal systems. A qualitative approach was selected because the research aim concerned meaning-making,

lived interpretation, institutional experience, and the social construction of rights rather than measurement of predetermined variables. The study was informed by socio-legal theory, legal pluralism, and legal consciousness scholarship. Reporting was guided by the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research, which provides a 32-item checklist for transparent reporting of interview-based qualitative studies (Tong et al., 2007).

Participants were recruited from Tehran using purposive and snowball sampling. Maximum variation was sought in relation to gender, age, professional role, years of experience, and type of engagement with culturally diverse communities. The final sample included 24 participants: eight legal professionals, including lawyers and legal-aid consultants; six civil-society or human-rights educators; five academics or researchers in law, sociology, anthropology, or public policy; and five community mediators, interpreters, or cultural intermediaries who had experience working with migrants, minorities, or socially marginalized groups. Inclusion criteria were: residence or professional activity in Tehran, at least three years of relevant legal, academic, civil-society, or community-based experience, and direct familiarity with rights-related issues in culturally diverse contexts. Participants who had no direct experience with rights-related legal or community work were excluded.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews only. Interviews were conducted between February and June 2026. The semi-structured format allowed the researcher to maintain consistency across interviews while giving participants space to develop their own narratives. The interview guide included questions such as: “How do you understand the meaning of human rights in culturally diverse legal settings?”, “Can you describe a situation in which cultural norms and human rights claims came into tension?”, “How do people make rights claims more acceptable or legitimate in local communities?”, “What barriers prevent individuals from accessing rights protection?”, and “What kinds of legal or social practices help people feel recognized and included?” Interviews lasted between 45 and 80 minutes. All interviews were conducted in Persian, audio-recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim. Field notes were written after each interview to document contextual observations and preliminary analytical reflections.

Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was reached. Saturation was considered achieved when new interviews no longer generated substantially new codes or conceptual insights relevant to the research questions. Initial saturation was reached after 22 interviews; two additional interviews were conducted to confirm the stability and adequacy of the emerging categories. This approach is consistent with qualitative saturation principles, which emphasize the point at which additional data collection no longer contributes meaningful new analytical understanding (Saunders et al., 2018).

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The analysis followed Braun and Clarke’s six-phase process: familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006). NVivo software was used to organize transcripts, assign codes, retrieve coded segments, compare patterns across participant groups, and write analytical memos. Coding was primarily inductive, allowing categories to emerge from participants’ accounts, but it was also sensitized by concepts from legal pluralism, legal consciousness, recognition theory, and human-rights vernacularization. Initial codes included “rights as dignity,” “foreignness of rights language,” “family/community pressure,” “documentation barriers,” “institutional distrust,” “translation of rights,” “informal mediation,” “gendered vulnerability,” “legal identity,” and “belonging through recognition.” Codes were gradually grouped into broader categories through constant comparison across transcripts.

Trustworthiness was enhanced through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, following Lincoln and Guba’s qualitative criteria (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility was supported through member checking with six participants, peer debriefing with two qualitative researchers, and repeated comparison between codes and original transcripts. Transferability was supported by detailed description of the study context, participant characteristics, and analytical categories. Dependability was strengthened through an audit trail documenting recruitment, interview procedures, coding decisions, theme

revisions, and memo development. Confirmability was enhanced through reflexive memoing, in which the researcher recorded assumptions, interpretive decisions, and possible biases during analysis.

Participants received information about the study aims, voluntary participation, confidentiality, audio-recording, and their right to withdraw at any stage before final data analysis. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants. Identifying information was removed from transcripts, and participants were assigned codes from P1 to P24. Audio files and transcripts were stored securely and accessed only by the research team. Because the topic involved potentially sensitive legal and social experiences, participants were not asked to disclose names of clients, institutions, or third parties.

Findings

The study included 24 participants from Tehran. Thirteen participants were women and eleven were men. In terms of age, six participants were 25–34 years old, nine were 35–44 years old, six were 45–54 years old, and three were 55 years or older. Regarding professional role, eight participants were legal professionals, six were civil-society or human-rights educators, five were academics or researchers, and five were community mediators, interpreters, or cultural intermediaries. With respect to education, four participants held a bachelor's degree, twelve held a master's degree, and eight held a doctoral or professional legal degree. Participants' professional experience ranged from 3 to 24 years: four had 3–5 years of experience, eight had 6–10 years, seven had 11–15 years, and five had more than 16 years. Thematic analysis generated four main categories: human rights as a universal language of dignity, cultural translation and moral legitimacy, administrative vulnerability and unequal access to recognition, and negotiated belonging through everyday legal consciousness.

Human rights as a universal language of dignity. Participants frequently described human rights as a moral language that allowed vulnerable persons to name harm, claim dignity, and challenge unequal treatment. For many participants, the value of human rights was not limited to formal legal enforceability; it also lay in giving people a vocabulary to say that certain forms of humiliation, exclusion, and coercion were unacceptable. A legal-aid participant explained, “When a person says, ‘I have a right,’ sometimes this is the first time they speak from a position of dignity, not shame” (P4). Similarly, an academic participant stated, “Human rights create a minimum language. People may disagree about culture, but they usually understand pain, dignity, and unfairness” (P11). Participants emphasized that rights language was especially important for women, migrants, undocumented workers, children, and marginalized ethnic or linguistic groups because it challenged the normalization of exclusion. However, they also noted that abstract references to international rights instruments were often ineffective unless connected to concrete experiences such as access to education, fair treatment in administrative offices, protection from violence, or equal respect in family and workplace settings.

Cultural translation and moral legitimacy. The second category concerned the translation of human rights into culturally meaningful terms. Participants repeatedly argued that rights claims became more persuasive when framed through locally respected concepts such as justice, dignity, responsibility, protection of the vulnerable, fairness before God, or ethical treatment of guests and neighbors. One community mediator noted, “If I begin with the words ‘international human rights,’ some people become defensive. But if I speak about dignity, fairness, and not humiliating a person, the conversation opens” (P17). A civil-society educator similarly stated, “The same right can be accepted or rejected depending on the language used. Translation is not only linguistic; it is moral and cultural” (P9). Participants did not view cultural translation as simple compromise. Rather, they described it as a strategic practice that could reduce resistance while preserving the substance of rights. At the same time, several participants warned that appeals to culture could be misused to silence vulnerable individuals, especially women, migrants, and younger family members. As one lawyer said, “Culture can protect belonging, but it can also become a wall. The question is who uses culture and whose voice is missing” (P2).

Administrative vulnerability and unequal access to recognition. The third category showed that participants understood human rights violations not only as dramatic abuses but also as ordinary administrative exclusions. Participants described documentation problems, unclear procedures, high legal costs, language barriers, fear of authorities, lack of legal literacy, and inconsistent institutional behavior as major obstacles to rights protection. These barriers were especially significant for migrants, refugees, informal workers, and people without strong social networks. One participant working with migrant families explained, “For some people, the problem starts before court. It starts at the counter, when they do not know which paper is missing or how to ask without fear” (P20). Another participant stated, “Legal recognition is not only a document; it is the feeling that an office will hear you as a person” (P6). Participants emphasized that culturally diverse populations may formally possess rights while practically lacking access to them. This gap between legal entitlement and institutional accessibility was described as one of the most persistent sources of vulnerability. Participants also linked administrative exclusion to social belonging, arguing that people who repeatedly experience bureaucratic rejection may internalize the belief that they are not fully part of the legal community.

Negotiated belonging through everyday legal consciousness. The fourth category concerned the everyday strategies through which individuals and intermediaries negotiate belonging within plural legal and cultural environments. Participants described rights practice as a process that often moves between formal law, family negotiation, community mediation, religious or moral reasoning, and administrative problem-solving. A community interpreter stated, “People do not always go directly to law. They first ask: who can speak for me, who will understand my situation, who will not shame me?” (P22). A civil-society participant added, “Belonging happens when the person sees that the law is not only a threat or a closed door, but something that can listen” (P13). Participants explained that trusted intermediaries—lawyers, teachers, social workers, interpreters, community elders, and NGO educators—often help transform rights from distant legal language into practical pathways. These intermediaries help people understand documents, prepare claims, reduce fear, and negotiate between family or community expectations and formal legal protections. However, participants also cautioned that informal mediation should not replace enforceable rights, especially in cases involving violence, coercion, or severe discrimination. The most effective practices were described as those that combined legal protection with cultural competence, institutional accessibility, and respect for the person’s social identity.

Discussion

This study explored how human rights are narrated in culturally diverse legal systems through interviews with legal professionals, civil-society actors, academics, and community intermediaries in Tehran. The findings show that participants understood human rights as both universal and situated: universal because they protect dignity, equality, and non-discrimination; situated because they become meaningful only through cultural language, institutional access, and everyday social relationships. Four categories emerged: human rights as a universal language of dignity, cultural translation and moral legitimacy, administrative vulnerability and unequal access to recognition, and negotiated belonging through everyday legal consciousness. Together, these categories indicate that human rights are not merely legal norms written in international instruments. They are also social narratives through which individuals interpret harm, seek recognition, challenge exclusion, and negotiate their place within overlapping legal and cultural orders. This finding aligns with socio-legal approaches that view law as a lived and socially interpreted phenomenon rather than only a formal system of rules (Ewick & Silbey, 1998; Merry, 1988; Tamanaha, 2008).

The first category, human rights as a universal language of dignity, shows that participants valued rights discourse because it gives vulnerable people a legitimate vocabulary for naming injustice. This finding supports the foundational human-rights claim that dignity and equality are not dependent on nationality, culture, gender, status, or social position (United Nations,

1948; OHCHR, 1993). Participants' narratives suggest that rights language can transform experiences of shame or silence into claims of dignity. This is consistent with Donnelly's argument that universal human rights remain necessary because they establish minimum standards for protecting persons against severe social and political vulnerability (Donnelly, 1984, 2007). However, the findings also complicate a purely formal interpretation of universality. Participants did not describe rights as effective simply because they exist in legal texts. Rather, rights became powerful when connected to concrete harms such as humiliation, exclusion from services, denial of documents, discrimination in workplaces, or family-based coercion. Therefore, universality in practice requires more than abstract legal recognition; it requires social intelligibility and institutional responsiveness.

The second category, cultural translation and moral legitimacy, aligns closely with Merry's theory of vernacularization. Participants repeatedly argued that human rights become persuasive when translated into locally meaningful moral vocabularies such as fairness, dignity, responsibility, protection, and justice. This supports Merry's finding that international norms often gain local force through intermediaries who translate them into culturally resonant terms (Merry, 2006). The present study extends this insight by showing that translation is not only linguistic but also relational and strategic. Participants were concerned with how rights claims are heard, who presents them, and whether they are framed as attacks on culture or as protections of human dignity within culture. This also corresponds with An-Na'im's cross-cultural approach to human rights, which emphasizes internal cultural dialogue and legitimacy rather than external imposition (An-Na'im, 1990). At the same time, the findings show the ambivalence of culture. Culture can provide ethical resources for recognition and solidarity, but it can also be used to justify hierarchy, silence, or exclusion. This supports Donnelly's warning that cultural variation cannot justify violations of core rights, even though cultural context matters for implementation (Donnelly, 1984).

The third category, administrative vulnerability and unequal access to recognition, indicates that human rights barriers often appear in ordinary bureaucratic encounters. Participants described documentation requirements, language barriers, legal costs, unclear procedures, fear of authorities, and institutional inconsistency as major obstacles. This finding contributes to legal pluralism scholarship by showing that rights are shaped not only by courts or legislation but also by administrative routines and street-level interactions. Legal recognition is therefore both formal and experiential: people need documents, but they also need to feel that institutions will hear them as legitimate rights-bearing persons. This finding is particularly important in urban contexts where diverse populations interact with multiple institutions. UNHCR's reporting that displaced populations in Iran overwhelmingly live in urban settings reinforces the importance of studying rights access in everyday urban institutions rather than only in exceptional humanitarian spaces (UNHCR, 2026). The findings also align with recognition theory. Taylor (1994) argues that misrecognition can harm identity and social participation; similarly, participants in this study described administrative rejection as a form of social exclusion that can make people feel that they do not fully belong to the legal community.

The fourth category, negotiated belonging through everyday legal consciousness, shows that individuals rarely approach human rights through formal law alone. Instead, participants described a layered process involving family negotiation, community mediation, religious or moral reasoning, legal advice, institutional navigation, and informal support networks. This strongly aligns with Ewick and Silbey's concept of legal consciousness, which shows that people experience law through everyday stories, strategies, and interpretations (Ewick & Silbey, 1998). The findings also support legal pluralism theory by showing that people move between multiple normative systems when seeking protection or recognition (Merry, 1988; Tamanaha, 2008). Trusted intermediaries were central in these narratives. Lawyers, educators, interpreters, social workers, and community mediators helped people translate rights into practical steps and reduce fear of institutions. However, participants were careful not to romanticize informal mediation. They emphasized that mediation is helpful only when it supports, rather

than replaces, enforceable rights. This distinction is essential because informal processes may reproduce power imbalances if vulnerable individuals are pressured to accept silence, compromise, or reconciliation in situations involving violence or discrimination.

Overall, the findings suggest that culturally diverse legal systems require a dual commitment: preserving universal rights standards while improving the cultural and institutional pathways through which people can understand and claim those rights. The study supports Kymlicka's argument that cultural recognition and individual rights need not be contradictory when group-sensitive policies enhance equal participation rather than entrench domination (Kymlicka, 1995). It also supports Taylor's view that recognition is a condition of dignity and social inclusion (Taylor, 1994). Human rights implementation should therefore be understood as a communicative, institutional, and relational process. Legal norms must be accompanied by accessible procedures, rights education, culturally competent legal services, translation support, and participatory spaces where minority and migrant voices are heard. In this sense, the study contributes to human-rights scholarship by demonstrating that rights narratives are not secondary to law; they are part of how law becomes socially meaningful.

Conclusion

This qualitative study examined human rights narratives in culturally diverse legal systems through interviews with 24 participants in Tehran. The findings demonstrate that human rights are understood not only as legal norms but also as moral, cultural, and institutional narratives. Participants viewed rights as a universal language of dignity, yet they emphasized that rights become socially effective only when translated into culturally meaningful and institutionally accessible forms. Cultural translation was described as necessary for legitimacy, but also risky when culture is used to justify exclusion or silence vulnerable groups. Administrative barriers, documentation problems, legal costs, language difficulties, and institutional distrust were central to participants' accounts of unequal access to recognition. The study also showed that everyday legal consciousness is shaped through negotiation among formal law, community norms, family expectations, and trusted intermediaries. The central conclusion is that human rights protection in culturally diverse legal systems requires both normative firmness and contextual sensitivity. Universal principles of dignity, equality, and non-discrimination must remain intact, but institutions must improve the ways people understand, access, and trust those principles. Rights become meaningful when individuals are not only formally protected but also socially recognized as legitimate members of the legal community.

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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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