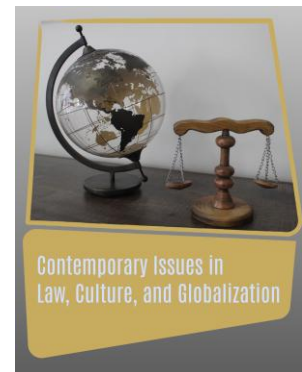




Cultural Values and Access to Justice Among Marginalized Communities

1. Saman. Kord*: Department of Cultural Studies, University of Tabriz, Tabriz, Iran. Email: saman.kord.crim@gmail.com (Corresponding Author)
2. Narges. Abbasi: Department of Criminal Law and Criminology, University of Tabriz, Tabriz, Iran

ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore how cultural values shape marginalized communities' perceptions, experiences, and practical pathways of access to justice in Tehran. This qualitative study was conducted using a conventional thematic analysis approach. Participants included 24 individuals from marginalized communities in Tehran who had direct or indirect experience with legal problems, administrative complaints, family disputes, labor conflicts, housing insecurity, or migration-related legal vulnerability. Participants were selected through purposive sampling followed by snowball sampling to ensure variation in gender, age, socioeconomic status, educational background, migration status, and type of justice-related experience. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews lasting 45–75 minutes. Interviews continued until theoretical saturation was achieved, with no substantial new codes emerging after the twenty-second interview and two additional interviews confirming saturation. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis framework. NVivo software was used to organize transcripts, manage coding, compare categories, and retrieve relevant quotations. Trustworthiness was enhanced through member checking, peer debriefing, prolonged engagement with the data, reflexive memo-writing, and audit-trail documentation. Analysis generated five main categories: justice as social dignity and moral recognition; shame, honor, and fear of public exposure; reliance on family, kinship, and informal mediation; institutional distance and bureaucratic alienation; and culturally responsive legal support as a bridge to formal justice. Participants described justice not only as legal remedy but also as respect, voice, social legitimacy, and protection from humiliation. Cultural norms sometimes encouraged patience, compromise, and family-based dispute resolution, but they also discouraged formal complaint when legal action was perceived as shameful, costly, dishonorable, or socially risky. The findings suggest that access to justice among marginalized communities is shaped by the interaction of cultural values, social hierarchy, institutional trust, economic hardship, and legal awareness. Justice systems that ignore cultural meanings may unintentionally reproduce exclusion. Culturally responsive legal aid, community-based legal literacy, respectful institutional communication, and participatory justice services are necessary to improve substantive access to justice.

Keywords: access to justice; cultural values; marginalized communities; legal consciousness; qualitative research; Tehran; legal aid; social justice

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Introduction

Access to justice has become one of the central concepts in contemporary socio-legal scholarship, human rights discourse, and development policy. It refers not merely to the formal right to enter courts, file claims, or obtain legal representation, but to the practical ability of individuals and groups to understand their rights, mobilize available remedies, receive fair treatment, and obtain outcomes that are socially meaningful and institutionally enforceable. The global importance of this issue is reflected in Sustainable Development Goal 16, which emphasizes peaceful and inclusive societies, effective institutions, and equal access to justice for all (United Nations, n.d.). The World Justice Project has similarly shown that legal problems are widespread across societies and that many individuals, particularly those in vulnerable or disadvantaged positions, do not obtain the help, protection, or resolution they need (World Justice Project, 2019). However, access to justice is not experienced uniformly. For marginalized communities, barriers to justice are not limited to cost, distance, delay, or lack of legal representation; they are also embedded in cultural expectations, social stigma, linguistic exclusion, gendered norms, institutional distrust, and unequal power relations.

The classical access-to-justice movement emphasized the gap between formal legal rights and the actual capacity of ordinary people to use legal institutions. Cappelletti and Garth (1978) argued that rights become meaningful only when individuals can effectively claim and enforce them. Galanter's (1974) influential distinction between "repeat players" and "one-shotters" further showed that legal systems often favor actors with greater resources, experience, institutional familiarity, and strategic capacity. From this perspective, marginalized communities are disadvantaged not only because they may lack money or legal knowledge, but also because they often encounter the legal system from structurally weaker positions. They may approach law only when problems have already escalated, when evidence is difficult to produce, when social support is limited, or when institutional actors treat them with suspicion rather than recognition.

More recent people-centered approaches have expanded the concept of access to justice beyond courts and litigation. Legal needs research has demonstrated that many people experience legal problems as ordinary life problems related to family, employment, housing, debt, migration, health, public services, discrimination, and violence (OECD & Open Society Foundations, 2019). Such problems are often not immediately understood as "legal" by those who experience them. Instead, they are interpreted through moral, social, cultural, and relational frameworks. For instance, a woman experiencing family conflict may describe the issue as a matter of honor, patience, or family preservation rather than a legal claim. A migrant worker facing wage theft may understand the problem as a matter of employer power, social dependency, or fear of retaliation rather than a labor-law violation. A low-income tenant may tolerate unsafe housing because complaint is perceived as socially risky, economically unrealistic, or institutionally useless. Therefore, understanding access to justice requires attention to legal consciousness: the ways people perceive, interpret, avoid, use, or resist law in everyday life.

Legal consciousness scholarship provides an important theoretical foundation for examining the relationship between cultural values and justice-seeking behavior. Ewick and Silbey (1998) conceptualized legality as part of everyday life, showing that people may stand "before the law," act "with the law," or move "against the law" depending on their social location and interpretive frameworks. Law is not simply an external institution; it becomes meaningful through narratives, expectations, fears, and social practices. Merry (1990, 2006) similarly demonstrated that legal meanings are translated through local cultural settings and that people often move between formal law, community norms, religious values, family expectations, and informal dispute-resolution mechanisms. These insights are particularly relevant for marginalized communities, whose experience of law is often mediated by social inequality, cultural norms, and unequal recognition.

Cultural values can both support and restrict access to justice. On one hand, values such as solidarity, family responsibility, respect for elders, communal mediation, patience, reconciliation, and moral obligation may provide accessible mechanisms for conflict resolution. Informal mediation may reduce costs, preserve relationships, and provide culturally familiar pathways for resolving disputes. On the other hand, the same values may suppress claims, silence vulnerable individuals, or discourage formal complaint. Norms of family honor may prevent women from reporting domestic violence or inheritance disputes. Expectations of obedience to elders may limit younger people's willingness to challenge unfair treatment. Fear of gossip may deter individuals from filing complaints in matters involving divorce, harassment, debt, or migration status. For marginalized communities, therefore, culture is neither simply a barrier nor a resource; it is a dynamic field through which justice is interpreted, negotiated, and sometimes denied.

A recognition-based understanding of justice is also necessary. Fraser (2009) argues that justice involves redistribution, recognition, and representation. In the context of marginalized communities, material barriers such as legal fees and transportation costs interact with symbolic barriers such as humiliation, disrespect, stereotyping, and exclusion from decision-making. Access to justice is incomplete when individuals can technically file a complaint but are treated as morally inferior, culturally backward, legally ignorant, or socially undeserving. Tyler (2006) further emphasizes that people's perceptions of procedural justice depend strongly on whether they feel heard, respected, and treated neutrally. Thus, the legitimacy of legal institutions depends not only on outcomes but also on the quality of interaction between institutional actors and justice seekers.

The Iranian urban context provides a significant setting for examining these dynamics. Tehran is a large and socially diverse metropolis in which economic inequality, internal migration, international migration, informal labor, gendered vulnerability, housing insecurity, and cultural diversity intersect. Marginalized communities in Tehran may include low-income residents, informal workers, Afghan migrants and refugees, women-headed households, ethnic and linguistic minorities, persons with disabilities, and individuals living in socially stigmatized conditions. For many of these groups, access to justice is shaped by a complex combination of legal awareness, documentation status, economic insecurity, cultural norms, family pressure, and institutional trust. Formal legal institutions may be geographically available, yet psychologically, linguistically, financially, and culturally distant.

Previous studies have examined legal aid, court access, human rights, legal empowerment, and justice-sector reform, but fewer studies have explored how cultural values influence marginalized people's own interpretations of justice. Much access-to-justice research focuses on institutional barriers, legal service availability, and procedural reform. These are essential concerns, yet they may overlook the cultural and relational meanings through which people decide whether to name a problem as legal, seek help, remain silent, use informal mediation, or pursue formal remedies. This gap is important because justice interventions that ignore cultural meanings may fail even when formal services exist. A legal aid office, for example, may remain unused if potential users fear shame, mistrust confidentiality, do not understand legal terminology, or believe that public complaint violates family or community expectations.

Accordingly, this study explores how cultural values shape access to justice among marginalized communities in Tehran. It focuses on lived experiences rather than formal legal doctrine. The study asks how marginalized individuals define justice, what cultural values influence their justice-seeking decisions, what barriers they encounter when approaching formal institutions, and what forms of support they consider legitimate, respectful, and useful. By foregrounding participant narratives, the study contributes to socio-legal research on legal consciousness, cultural pluralism, procedural justice, and people-centered justice. It also offers practical implications for culturally responsive legal aid, community legal education, and institutional reform.

Methods and Materials

This study employed a qualitative research design using semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis. A qualitative approach was appropriate because the study aimed to explore participants' meanings, perceptions, cultural interpretations, and lived experiences of access to justice rather than to measure predetermined variables. The study was informed by socio-legal and interpretivist assumptions, according to which justice-seeking behavior is shaped by social context, cultural values, institutional experience, and subjective interpretation. Thematic analysis was selected because it provides a flexible but systematic method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns across qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The participants were 24 individuals from marginalized communities in Tehran. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, followed by snowball sampling. Inclusion criteria were: being at least 18 years old; residing in Tehran for at least one year; self-identifying as belonging to or working closely with a marginalized community; and having direct or indirect experience with legal, administrative, family, labor, housing, migration, or welfare-related justice problems. Exclusion criteria included unwillingness to provide informed consent, inability to participate in an interview, or emotional distress that made participation inappropriate.

The final sample included women-headed households, low-income residents, informal workers, Afghan migrants, persons with disabilities, ethnic or linguistic minority participants, and individuals who had used or attempted to use legal or administrative complaint mechanisms. The exact number of participants was determined by theoretical saturation. Saturation was reached after 22 interviews, when no major new themes emerged, and two additional interviews were conducted to confirm the stability of the categories. This sample size is consistent with qualitative interview research, where saturation often occurs within a moderate number of interviews depending on the scope and heterogeneity of the study (Guest et al., 2006).

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted in Tehran. The interviews lasted between 45 and 75 minutes. The interview guide included open-ended questions about participants' understanding of justice, experiences with legal or administrative problems, sources of help, cultural expectations surrounding complaint and dispute resolution, experiences with formal institutions, perceived barriers, and suggestions for improving access to justice. Sample questions included: "When you hear the word justice, what does it mean in your life?" "What do people in your family or community usually do when they face a serious dispute?" "Have cultural expectations ever influenced your decision to complain or remain silent?" "What makes legal institutions difficult or easy to approach?" and "What kind of support would help people like you seek justice?"

Interviews were conducted in Persian. When participants used local expressions or culturally specific terms, these were preserved in the initial transcripts and then translated conceptually for reporting in English. With participants' permission, interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. For participants who did not consent to audio-recording, detailed field notes were taken immediately during and after the interview. Ethical principles of voluntary participation, confidentiality, anonymity, and the right to withdraw were observed throughout the study. Pseudonyms or participant codes were used in all transcripts and reports.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis. First, all transcripts were read several times to develop familiarity with the data. Second, initial codes were generated inductively from meaningful segments of the transcripts. Third, similar codes were grouped into preliminary categories. Fourth, categories were reviewed against the full dataset to ensure internal coherence and distinctiveness. Fifth, final themes were defined, named, and supported by illustrative quotations. NVivo software was used to organize transcripts, manage codes, compare categories, and retrieve relevant text segments. The software supported systematic data management but did not replace researcher interpretation.

Trustworthiness was enhanced using the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility was strengthened through member checking with selected participants, peer debriefing, and repeated

engagement with transcripts. Transferability was supported through thick description of the research context, participants, and categories. Dependability was addressed through documentation of coding decisions, interview procedures, and analytic memos. Confirmability was enhanced through reflexive notes in which the researcher recorded assumptions, possible biases, and interpretive decisions. Reporting was guided by the principles of transparent qualitative reporting, including attention to study context, participants, data collection, analysis, and interpretation (Tong et al., 2007).

Findings

The study included 24 participants from marginalized communities in Tehran. Of these, 14 participants were women and 10 were men. Participants' ages ranged from 21 to 62 years. In terms of age distribution, 6 participants were between 18 and 29 years old, 9 were between 30 and 44 years old, 6 were between 45 and 59 years old, and 3 were 60 years old or above. Regarding marital status, 12 participants were married, 6 were single, 4 were divorced or separated, and 2 were widowed. Educationally, 5 participants had primary or lower-secondary education, 9 had completed high school or diploma-level education, 7 had associate or bachelor's degrees, and 3 had postgraduate education. In terms of social position, 6 participants were low-income residents, 5 were informal workers, 4 were Afghan migrants, 4 were women-headed household members, 3 were persons with disabilities or caregivers of persons with disabilities, and 2 identified as ethnic or linguistic minority participants. The most frequently reported justice-related problems included labor and wage disputes ($n = 6$), family or marital disputes ($n = 5$), housing and tenancy problems ($n = 4$), documentation or migration-related issues ($n = 4$), welfare and administrative complaints ($n = 3$), and discrimination or disrespect in institutional encounters ($n = 2$).

The first main category showed that participants understood justice not only as a legal outcome but also as social dignity, moral recognition, and respectful treatment. Many participants described justice as being "heard," "not humiliated," and "treated like a human being." This finding suggests that for marginalized communities, the experience of justice begins before formal legal judgment; it begins in the first encounter with police officers, court clerks, municipal staff, welfare offices, employers, landlords, or community authorities. Participants repeatedly stated that even when they did not receive their preferred outcome, respectful explanation and serious attention made them feel less excluded. One participant stated, "For me, justice is not only that they give me my right. First, they should listen to me without looking at my clothes or my accent" (P7, woman, 38). Another participant explained, "Sometimes you enter an office and you already feel guilty, even before saying anything. If they speak respectfully, you feel maybe this place is also for people like us" (P13, man, 46). This category included three subthemes: justice as being heard, justice as protection from humiliation, and justice as equal moral worth. Participants' narratives indicated that dignity was central to whether they perceived legal institutions as accessible or alienating.

The second category concerned the role of shame, honor, and fear of public exposure in discouraging formal justice-seeking. Participants reported that certain legal problems, particularly family conflict, domestic violence, divorce, inheritance disputes, debt, harassment, and migration-related vulnerability, were surrounded by intense social sensitivity. In these cases, the decision to complain was not made individually; it was shaped by family reputation, fear of gossip, concern about children's future, and the possibility of being blamed by relatives or neighbors. Several women explained that they delayed seeking legal help because formal complaint could be interpreted as disloyalty to family. One participant said, "In our family, going to court means you have destroyed the family's name. They ask why you could not tolerate it quietly" (P3, woman, 34). Another participant noted, "The problem was not only the law. The problem was that everyone would know. After that, they judge you more than they judge the person who harmed you" (P18, woman, 41). Men also described shame, especially in relation to debt, unemployment, and inability to provide for family members. This category demonstrates that cultural norms may transform legal action into a socially risky act, especially for those who already have weak social protection.

The third category showed that participants frequently used informal networks before approaching formal legal institutions. Family elders, religious figures, trusted neighbors, local shopkeepers, employers, community leaders, and acquaintances with legal knowledge were often consulted as first-line sources of advice. Participants described these informal pathways as more accessible, less expensive, more familiar, and less frightening than courts or administrative offices. One participant stated, “Before court, we go to someone respected. Maybe an uncle, maybe a local elder. Court is the last step, because after court the relationship is finished” (P10, man, 52). Another explained, “When I had a problem with the landlord, I first asked a neighbor who knew both of us. I did not know what the law says, but I knew who could talk in a way he would accept” (P15, woman, 29). However, participants also recognized the limits of informal mediation. Informal mechanisms could reproduce power inequalities, pressure vulnerable individuals to compromise, or prioritize family reputation over individual rights. This category included the subthemes of informal mediation as cultural familiarity, informal networks as legal translation, and informal resolution as pressure to compromise. The findings suggest that informal justice pathways are ambivalent: they may expand practical access to help but may also weaken rights protection when power is unequal.

The fourth category captured participants’ experiences of distance from formal legal and administrative institutions. This distance was economic, linguistic, cultural, procedural, and emotional. Participants described legal institutions as expensive, time-consuming, difficult to understand, and socially intimidating. Several participants stated that they did not know where to go, what documents were required, how to write a complaint, or whether their problem was legally recognizable. Afghan migrant participants and low-literacy participants reported particular difficulty with paperwork, terminology, and fear of documentation checks. One participant explained, “The paper they ask for is always more than what you have. If one document is missing, they speak as if you are lying” (P6, Afghan migrant man, 31). Another participant stated, “The words are difficult. Even when they explain, it is like another language. You need someone who knows the system” (P21, woman, 57). Participants also associated formal institutions with waiting, uncertainty, and unequal treatment. For some, the cost of transportation, photocopying, legal consultation, lost workdays, and repeated visits made justice practically inaccessible. This category included the subthemes of legal language as exclusion, paperwork and documentation barriers, cost and time burden, and mistrust of institutional neutrality.

The fifth category reflected participants’ suggestions for improving access to justice. Participants emphasized the need for culturally responsive legal support that combines legal knowledge with respect, confidentiality, plain language, and community trust. They did not reject formal justice; rather, they wanted formal justice to become more understandable, less humiliating, and more responsive to social realities. Participants recommended community-based legal education, free or low-cost legal consultation, mobile legal aid services, female legal advisors for women’s issues, multilingual support for migrants, disability-accessible complaint procedures, and trained mediators who understand both law and local culture. One participant said, “If someone from the same community explains the law, people trust it more. They need to know that asking for rights is not shameful” (P12, woman, 36). Another stated, “We need a place where they explain simply: what is your right, what paper you need, what will happen next. Fear comes from not knowing” (P20, man, 44). This category suggests that culturally responsive access to justice does not mean replacing formal law with informal norms. Rather, it means translating rights into forms that marginalized people can understand, trust, and use without losing dignity or social protection.

Discussion

This study explored how cultural values shape access to justice among marginalized communities in Tehran. The findings indicated that access to justice is not merely a matter of formal institutional availability but a culturally mediated process shaped by dignity, shame, family expectations, informal mediation, bureaucratic distance, and the need for culturally responsive legal support. The first main category showed that participants understood justice as social dignity and moral recognition. This result

aligns with socio-legal theories that conceptualize justice as lived experience rather than only institutional procedure. Ewick and Silbey (1998) argue that legality is embedded in everyday narratives and social interactions, meaning that individuals encounter law not only in courts but also in ordinary moments of classification, recognition, silence, and resistance. Participants' emphasis on being heard and not humiliated also supports Tyler's (2006) procedural justice theory, which suggests that perceived fairness depends strongly on voice, neutrality, respect, and trustworthy treatment. For marginalized communities, respectful treatment may be especially important because legal encounters often reproduce broader social hierarchies. Therefore, when participants described justice as "being treated like a human being," they were not using emotional language outside the legal domain; rather, they were identifying recognition as a core component of substantive justice. This finding is also consistent with Fraser's (2009) argument that justice requires recognition as well as redistribution and representation. In this study, marginalization was experienced not only as lack of money or legal knowledge but also as symbolic exclusion from institutions that were perceived as belonging to more powerful citizens.

The second main category showed that shame, honor, and fear of public exposure often discouraged formal justice-seeking. This finding is consistent with Merry's (2006) analysis of the translation of rights into local justice, where human rights and formal legal claims must pass through local cultural frameworks before they become socially actionable. Participants did not necessarily reject legal rights; rather, they feared the social consequences of claiming those rights. This was particularly evident in disputes involving family conflict, domestic violence, divorce, debt, and migration-related vulnerability. In such cases, law was not experienced as an isolated institutional path but as a public act that could reshape the person's family status, reputation, and social relationships. This finding supports legal consciousness research showing that people often avoid law not because they are passive or ignorant, but because the social cost of mobilizing law may be high (Ewick & Silbey, 1998; Merry, 1990). It also complicates conventional access-to-justice models that focus primarily on legal service availability. A court, legal aid center, or complaint office may be physically accessible, but if using it produces shame, stigma, or family retaliation, practical access remains restricted. For women and other socially vulnerable participants, cultural expectations of patience, silence, and family preservation sometimes operated as informal mechanisms of legal exclusion. For men, shame was often connected to debt, unemployment, and failure to fulfill expected provider roles. Thus, gendered and class-based cultural expectations shaped both the type of legal problems participants disclosed and the pathways they considered acceptable.

The third main category revealed that family, kinship, and informal mediation were frequently used before formal legal institutions. This finding aligns with legal pluralism scholarship, which emphasizes that people often navigate multiple normative orders, including state law, religious norms, family authority, community expectations, and informal dispute-resolution practices (Merry, 1988; Tamanaha, 2008). Participants' reliance on elders, neighbors, community figures, and trusted intermediaries demonstrates that access to justice often begins outside the state. Informal pathways may be valuable because they are familiar, inexpensive, relational, and culturally legitimate. They may also provide forms of practical legal translation for individuals who do not understand formal procedures. This supports people-centered justice perspectives, which recognize that many legal problems are resolved, abandoned, or transformed outside courts (OECD & Open Society Foundations, 2019; World Justice Project, 2019). However, the study also found that informal mediation could reproduce inequality. When the weaker party was pressured to compromise for the sake of family honor, neighborhood peace, or economic dependence, informal justice became a mechanism of containment rather than empowerment. This ambivalence is central to culturally grounded access-to-justice research. Informal networks should not be romanticized as inherently humane, nor dismissed as legally irrelevant. They are important sites where rights are interpreted, negotiated, diluted, or activated.

The fourth main category identified institutional distance and bureaucratic alienation as major barriers to justice. Participants described legal and administrative institutions as difficult to understand, costly to approach, and emotionally intimidating. This

finding is consistent with Galanter's (1974) argument that legal systems often advantage repeat players who possess resources, expertise, and institutional familiarity. Marginalized individuals, by contrast, often appear as "one-shotters" who lack legal literacy, documentation, time, money, and confidence. Cappelletti and Garth's (1978) access-to-justice framework also remains relevant because participants' narratives showed that formal rights are insufficient without affordable procedures, legal assistance, and institutional responsiveness. The OECD and Open Society Foundations (2019) similarly emphasize that people's legal needs must be understood from the perspective of everyday problems and actual pathways to resolution. In this study, bureaucracy functioned not only as an administrative process but also as a cultural and symbolic boundary. Legal language, paperwork, repeated referrals, and unexplained delays communicated to participants that the system was not designed for them. This was especially visible among migrants, low-literacy participants, informal workers, and persons with disabilities. For these groups, documentation requirements and procedural complexity created cumulative disadvantage. Even when participants had valid claims, they often lacked the institutional competence required to pursue them effectively.

The fifth main category showed that participants viewed culturally responsive legal support as a bridge between marginalized communities and formal justice. This finding supports UNDP's rights-based approach to access to justice, which emphasizes that disadvantaged groups require not only legal institutions but also practical support, empowerment, legal awareness, and services adapted to their needs (UNDP, 2004). Participants' suggestions—plain-language legal guidance, trusted community-based advisors, confidentiality, low-cost consultation, women-sensitive services, migrant support, and disability-accessible procedures—are consistent with contemporary people-centered justice approaches. Importantly, participants did not call for replacing formal legal rights with cultural norms. Instead, they wanted rights to be translated into socially intelligible and institutionally usable forms. This distinction is crucial. Culturally responsive justice does not mean accepting harmful practices in the name of culture. Rather, it means recognizing that legal empowerment requires communication, trust, dignity, and contextual understanding. Merry's (2006) concept of translation is useful here: rights become meaningful when they are interpreted through local language, symbols, and social relationships while retaining their protective function. Therefore, legal aid providers and justice institutions should not treat culture as an obstacle to be removed, but as a field of meaning that must be engaged critically and ethically.

Overall, the findings indicate that cultural values influence access to justice at several stages: naming a problem, deciding whether it is legitimate to complain, choosing between informal and formal pathways, interpreting institutional behavior, and evaluating outcomes. This study contributes to access-to-justice literature by showing that marginalized communities experience justice as a combination of legal remedy, social respect, moral legitimacy, and cultural safety. It also contributes to legal consciousness research by demonstrating how people move between silence, mediation, avoidance, and formal complaint depending on their social position and cultural environment. The findings suggest that justice-sector reform should move beyond a narrow focus on court efficiency and include community legal literacy, culturally competent legal aid, procedural simplification, institutional respect, and participatory service design.

This study has several limitations. First, the study was conducted only in Tehran; therefore, the findings may not fully reflect the experiences of marginalized communities in rural areas, smaller cities, border provinces, or regions with different ethnic, linguistic, and institutional conditions. Second, the sample size was appropriate for qualitative saturation, but it was not intended to produce statistically generalizable findings. Third, the study relied on self-reported interview data, and participants' narratives may have been influenced by memory, emotional distress, fear of disclosure, or reluctance to discuss sensitive legal experiences. Fourth, because the study focused on marginalized community members, it did not systematically compare their narratives with the perspectives of judges, lawyers, police officers, court staff, welfare officials, or policymakers. Finally,

cultural values were analyzed through participants' accounts, but culture is dynamic and internally diverse; therefore, the findings should not be interpreted as fixed descriptions of any community.

Future research should examine access to justice among marginalized communities across different Iranian cities and regions to identify similarities and differences in cultural, institutional, and socioeconomic barriers. Comparative studies could explore how gender, migration status, disability, ethnicity, legal documentation, and income level intersect in shaping justice-seeking behavior. Longitudinal qualitative studies would also be valuable for understanding how legal problems develop over time and how individuals move between informal mediation, administrative complaint, legal aid, and formal courts. Future research could include the perspectives of legal professionals, social workers, community mediators, and institutional actors to compare community experiences with service-provider assumptions. Mixed-methods studies may also be useful for measuring the prevalence of the themes identified in this study among larger populations.

Justice institutions and legal aid organizations should develop culturally responsive services that reduce fear, shame, and procedural confusion among marginalized communities. Legal information should be provided in plain language and through trusted community settings such as neighborhood centers, welfare offices, schools, migrant-support organizations, disability associations, and women's support centers. Legal aid providers should receive training in cultural competence, trauma-informed communication, gender sensitivity, disability inclusion, and respectful interaction with low-literacy and migrant populations. Institutions should simplify complaint procedures, reduce unnecessary documentation burdens, provide confidential consultation, and create referral pathways between informal community support and formal legal remedies. Community legal education should emphasize that claiming rights is not dishonorable and that justice-seeking can be compatible with dignity, family protection, and social responsibility.

Conclusion

This study examined the role of cultural values in shaping access to justice among marginalized communities in Tehran. The findings demonstrated that justice is experienced not only as a legal process but also as a matter of dignity, recognition, social legitimacy, and protection from humiliation. Participants' narratives showed that cultural values may support access to justice by encouraging mediation, solidarity, and community assistance, but they may also restrict access by producing shame, fear of exposure, family pressure, and silence. Formal institutions were often perceived as distant, complex, costly, and intimidating, especially by migrants, low-income participants, informal workers, women in vulnerable family situations, and individuals with limited legal literacy.

The study highlights the need to move beyond a purely institutional understanding of access to justice. Courts, complaint offices, and legal rights are necessary but insufficient when marginalized individuals cannot understand procedures, trust institutions, afford the process, or pursue claims without social harm. Culturally responsive legal support can bridge this gap by translating rights into accessible language, building trust through community-based services, protecting confidentiality, and ensuring respectful treatment. Improving access to justice therefore requires both structural reform and cultural understanding. Justice systems must become not only legally available but also socially meaningful, procedurally understandable, and respectful of the lived realities of marginalized communities.

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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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