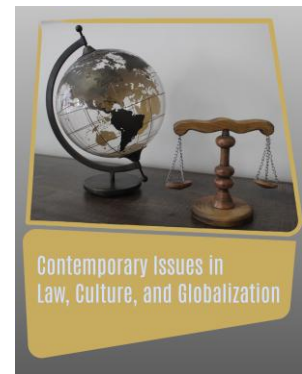




Cultural Mediation in Legal Disputes: Conflict Resolution Across Diverse Communities

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore how cultural mediation contributes to the resolution of legal disputes across diverse communities in Tehran by examining the experiences of mediators, legal practitioners, community actors, and disputing parties. This qualitative study used a conventional thematic analysis design. Participants were selected through purposive sampling from legal, social, and community-based mediation settings in Tehran. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 24 participants, including court-affiliated mediators, lawyers, social workers, community leaders, and individuals who had experienced culturally mediated legal disputes. Interviews continued until theoretical saturation was reached at the twenty-first interview, followed by three additional interviews to confirm saturation. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using Braun and Clarke's six-phase thematic analysis. NVivo software was used for coding, categorization, memo writing, and retrieval of thematic patterns. Trustworthiness was enhanced through member checking, peer review, prolonged engagement with the data, and maintenance of an audit trail. The analysis generated five main categories: cultural translation of legal meanings, trust-building and procedural legitimacy, negotiation between formal law and community norms, emotional de-escalation and relational repair, and structural limits of cultural mediation. Participants described cultural mediation as a process that translated not only language but also norms, expectations, honor concerns, family obligations, and community-based understandings of justice. While culturally informed mediation improved communication and reduced hostility, participants also emphasized risks related to power imbalance, gender inequality, informal pressure, and weak enforceability. Cultural mediation can strengthen access to justice in diverse urban communities when it is practiced within an ethical, rights-sensitive, and legally accountable framework. Its value lies in connecting formal legal procedures with lived cultural realities, but its effectiveness depends on mediator competence, institutional safeguards, and protection of vulnerable parties.

Keywords: cultural mediation; legal disputes; conflict resolution; legal pluralism; diverse communities; qualitative research; Tehran; alternative dispute resolution

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Introduction

Legal disputes are rarely limited to conflicts over rules, rights, and remedies. They are also conflicts over meanings, identities, moral expectations, family obligations, community norms, and culturally embedded understandings of justice. In

contemporary urban societies, courts and legal institutions increasingly encounter disputes shaped by cultural diversity, migration, religious commitments, ethnic identities, class differences, gender expectations, and competing forms of social authority. These conditions have intensified scholarly and practical interest in cultural mediation as a form of conflict resolution that attempts to connect formal legal procedures with the lived normative worlds of disputing parties. Cultural mediation is particularly important in plural societies where people may understand obligation, harm, apology, compensation, dignity, and reconciliation through different cultural frames.

The concept of cultural mediation is closely connected to legal pluralism. Legal pluralism challenges the assumption that state law is the only meaningful source of social regulation. Instead, it emphasizes that multiple normative orders may operate within the same social field, including state law, religious norms, customary practices, family expectations, professional rules, and community-based mechanisms of dispute settlement (Griffiths, 1986; Merry, 1988; Moore, 1973). In everyday life, individuals often move between these normative orders, drawing on whichever source of legitimacy appears most relevant, accessible, or persuasive. Thus, when a dispute reaches a legal institution, it may already have been shaped by informal negotiations, kinship obligations, neighborhood expectations, or community-based authority structures. Cultural mediation becomes important because it provides a communicative space in which these different normative orders can be acknowledged, interpreted, and negotiated without necessarily displacing formal law.

Mediation has long been regarded as a flexible alternative to adjudication because it emphasizes dialogue, participation, party autonomy, and mutually acceptable outcomes rather than imposed decisions. Classic mediation theory identifies the mediator as a neutral or impartial third party who assists disputants in clarifying interests, reducing misunderstanding, exploring options, and reaching voluntary agreement (Moore, 2014). However, culturally diverse disputes complicate this model. In intercultural contexts, parties may not share the same assumptions about direct speech, emotional expression, apology, authority, gender roles, family involvement, confidentiality, or the meaning of settlement. What one party perceives as respectful silence may be interpreted by another as evasiveness. What one party understands as compromise may be experienced by another as loss of honor or social standing. Therefore, cultural mediation requires more than procedural facilitation; it requires cultural interpretation, sensitivity to power, and an ability to identify hidden normative assumptions.

Scholars of conflict resolution have shown that culture is not simply an external variable added to disputes. Rather, culture shapes how conflict is perceived, narrated, escalated, and resolved (Avruch, 1998; Lederach, 1995; LeBaron, 2003). Culture influences what counts as an injury, who is entitled to speak, whether emotion should be expressed openly, whether elders or family members should participate, and whether a dispute should end through legal compensation, apology, reconciliation, or restoration of social harmony. In this regard, cultural mediation may function as a bridge between legal rationality and social meaning. It allows legal disputes to be reframed in ways that are intelligible to parties whose expectations are shaped by different moral communities. Yet this bridging function is complex because cultural norms may support reconciliation and dignity in some cases while reproducing inequality, silence, or pressure in others.

The relationship between mediation and justice has therefore been debated. Supporters argue that mediation improves access to justice by reducing cost, delay, adversarial hostility, and procedural alienation. It may be especially valuable for parties who distrust formal legal institutions or who experience courts as linguistically, socially, or culturally distant. Mediation can create a participatory environment in which parties explain their experiences in their own terms and construct solutions that reflect relational, emotional, and practical needs (Bush & Folger, 2005; Menkel-Meadow, Love, Schneider, & Sternlight, 2018). From this perspective, cultural mediation can enhance procedural justice by making parties feel heard, respected, and included. Tyler's (2006) work on procedural justice suggests that people's acceptance of legal outcomes depends not only on material results but also on whether they perceive the process as fair, respectful, and legitimate.

Critics, however, caution that mediation can conceal power inequalities and privatize justice. Nader (1990) famously critiqued “harmony ideology,” arguing that informal dispute resolution may pressure weaker parties to accept compromise in the name of social peace. In culturally mediated disputes, this risk can be heightened when community norms are invoked to discourage legal claims, preserve family reputation, or silence vulnerable participants. For example, women, migrants, tenants, workers, or younger family members may face subtle or explicit pressure to accept outcomes that protect communal harmony more than individual rights. Galanter’s (1974) analysis of why repeat players often enjoy advantages in legal settings is also relevant: even in mediation, parties with greater resources, social authority, legal knowledge, or institutional familiarity may shape the process more effectively than those with less power.

For this reason, cultural mediation must be distinguished from uncritical cultural relativism. A rights-sensitive approach to mediation recognizes the value of cultural context while maintaining clear ethical boundaries. Cultural norms can help mediators understand the symbolic and relational dimensions of disputes, but they should not justify coercion, discrimination, violence, or denial of legal rights. Effective cultural mediation requires attention to both recognition and protection: recognition of cultural identity, language, and communal meaning; and protection of individual autonomy, legal equality, informed consent, and procedural fairness. This balance is particularly important in legal disputes where mediated agreements may affect property, family relations, employment, housing, inheritance, or personal security.

In globalized urban spaces such as Tehran, cultural mediation is especially relevant. Tehran is a dense metropolitan environment in which people from different regions, linguistic backgrounds, socioeconomic classes, professional communities, and migration histories interact within shared legal and administrative systems. Legal disputes in such settings often emerge at the intersection of formal law and informal social expectations. Family conflicts may involve religious and kinship norms; neighborhood disputes may be shaped by local reputation and collective responsibility; workplace disputes may include generational and class-based expectations; and migrant-related disputes may involve language barriers, documentation concerns, and distrust of institutions. Cultural mediation can assist by translating not only words but also expectations about respect, authority, responsibility, apology, and acceptable settlement.

Despite the growing practical relevance of cultural mediation, empirical research is needed to understand how it is experienced by those directly involved in legal disputes. Much of the literature discusses mediation normatively or theoretically, while fewer studies examine how mediators, lawyers, community actors, and disputants describe the actual process of culturally informed conflict resolution. Qualitative inquiry is especially suitable for this topic because it can capture meanings, narratives, tensions, and situated practices that are difficult to measure quantitatively. Semi-structured interviews allow participants to explain how they interpret cultural difference, how they manage conflicts between formal law and community norms, and how they evaluate the benefits and risks of mediation in legal disputes.

Accordingly, the present study explores cultural mediation in legal disputes across diverse communities in Tehran. It focuses on how participants understand the role of cultural mediation, what strategies are used to resolve disputes, how cultural norms interact with legal procedures, and what limitations arise in practice. The study contributes to socio-legal scholarship by connecting legal pluralism, mediation theory, procedural justice, and cultural conflict resolution through empirical qualitative data. It also offers practical insights for legal institutions, mediators, and policymakers seeking to strengthen culturally responsive and rights-based dispute resolution.

Methods and Materials

This study employed a qualitative research design using thematic analysis. A qualitative approach was selected because the purpose of the study was to explore participants’ lived experiences, interpretations, and practical understandings of cultural mediation in legal disputes. Rather than testing predetermined hypotheses, the study sought to generate an in-depth account of

how cultural meanings, legal expectations, and community norms interact in mediation processes. Thematic analysis was appropriate because it enables systematic identification, organization, and interpretation of patterns across interview data while preserving participants' own accounts and meanings (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The participants consisted of 24 individuals from Tehran who had direct experience with culturally mediated legal disputes. Purposive sampling was used to recruit information-rich participants with relevant professional or personal experience. The final sample included six court-affiliated mediators, five lawyers, four social workers or NGO-based dispute-resolution practitioners, four community or religious leaders involved in informal mediation, and five individuals who had participated in mediation as disputing parties. Participants were between 27 and 64 years of age. Inclusion criteria were: residence or professional activity in Tehran, direct experience with legal or quasi-legal disputes involving cultural or community-based dimensions, willingness to participate in an interview, and ability to provide informed consent. Individuals who had no direct experience with mediation or who were involved in ongoing cases where participation could create legal risk were excluded.

Theoretical saturation guided the final sample size. Saturation was reached after 21 interviews, when no substantially new codes or categories emerged from the data. Three additional interviews were conducted to confirm the stability and adequacy of the emerging themes. The final sample of 24 participants was considered sufficient because it provided diversity across professional roles, dispute types, and community contexts while allowing detailed qualitative analysis.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews were selected because they allowed the researcher to explore common topics across participants while also permitting flexibility to follow emerging issues in each interview. The interview guide included questions about participants' experiences with mediation, the role of cultural norms in legal disputes, communication barriers, mediator strategies, perceptions of fairness, power imbalance, trust in formal legal institutions, and the relationship between mediated agreements and formal law. Sample interview questions included: "How do cultural expectations influence the way parties describe their dispute?", "What role does the mediator play when legal rules and community norms conflict?", "What makes culturally mediated settlements acceptable to parties?", and "What risks or limitations have you observed in cultural mediation?"

Interviews were conducted in private settings selected to ensure confidentiality and participant comfort. Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 75 minutes. With participants' permission, interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed verbatim. Field notes were written after each interview to document contextual observations, nonverbal elements, preliminary interpretations, and analytic reflections. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was reached and confirmed.

Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's six-phase thematic analysis. First, the researcher became familiar with the data through repeated reading of transcripts and field notes. Second, initial codes were generated inductively from meaningful segments of the data. Third, codes were grouped into potential themes based on conceptual similarity and relevance to the research objective. Fourth, the themes were reviewed against the coded data and the full dataset to ensure coherence and distinctiveness. Fifth, themes were defined and named to reflect their central analytic meaning. Sixth, the final report was produced by integrating thematic interpretation with representative participant quotations.

NVivo software was used to organize the qualitative data. The software supported transcript management, open coding, code comparison, memo writing, and retrieval of coded excerpts. Coding began with line-by-line reading of the transcripts and gradually moved toward higher-level categorization. The analysis combined inductive coding with sensitizing concepts from legal pluralism, mediation theory, and procedural justice. However, final categories were grounded in the interview data rather than imposed in advance.

Several strategies were used to enhance the trustworthiness of the study. Credibility was strengthened through prolonged engagement with the data, member checking with selected participants, and peer review of emerging themes. Dependability

was supported through documentation of the analytic process, including coding decisions, memos, and theme development. Confirmability was enhanced through reflexive memo writing, which helped identify the researcher's assumptions and reduce interpretive bias. Transferability was supported by providing detailed descriptions of participants, research context, data collection procedures, and thematic findings. The study also followed ethical principles of informed consent, confidentiality, voluntary participation, and anonymization of participant identities. Ethical approval should be reported as follows: "The study was approved by [Name of Ethics Committee], approval code [Code]."

Findings

The study included 24 participants from Tehran. In terms of gender, 13 participants were women and 11 were men. The age distribution was as follows: six participants were between 25 and 34 years old, eight were between 35 and 44 years old, seven were between 45 and 54 years old, and three were 55 years old or older. Regarding participant role, six participants were court-affiliated mediators, five were lawyers, four were social workers or NGO-based practitioners, four were community or religious leaders, and five were disputing parties who had experienced mediation in family, neighborhood, workplace, tenancy, or community-related disputes. In terms of educational background, four participants held a diploma or associate degree, seven held a bachelor's degree, nine held a master's degree, and four held a doctoral or professional legal degree. The participants' mediation experience varied from direct involvement in one mediated dispute to more than 15 years of professional mediation-related practice.

The first main category was cultural translation of legal meanings. Participants repeatedly emphasized that cultural mediation involved more than translating language; it required translating legal concepts into culturally meaningful terms and translating community-based expectations into forms understandable within legal procedures. Mediators explained that parties often entered disputes with different understandings of responsibility, apology, honor, respect, and compensation. In many cases, the legal issue appeared simple on paper, but the underlying conflict involved moral injury or perceived disrespect. One mediator stated, "The file may say property damage, but when people sit in the room, they talk about humiliation, family reputation, or being ignored by someone older." Lawyers similarly noted that legal categories such as contract breach, custody disagreement, inheritance conflict, or workplace complaint did not fully capture the cultural narratives surrounding the dispute. A community mediator explained, "Sometimes I have to tell one side what the law says and tell the other side what the silence of the family means. Both are part of the conflict." This category shows that cultural mediation works as an interpretive process in which mediators help parties move between legal language and culturally embedded meanings. Participants believed that this translation reduced misunderstanding and made settlement more realistic because parties felt that their social and emotional concerns were recognized rather than dismissed as legally irrelevant.

The second main category was trust-building and procedural legitimacy. Participants described trust as a central condition for successful cultural mediation, particularly when parties had low confidence in formal legal institutions or feared that legal procedures would not understand their social context. Disputing parties reported that they were more willing to speak openly when the mediator understood their cultural background, communication style, and community pressures. One participant who had experienced a family-related dispute said, "In court I felt I had to speak like a stranger to my own problem, but in mediation I could explain why this issue was painful for my family." Mediators stated that trust was created through respectful listening, balanced attention to both parties, careful use of culturally appropriate language, and transparency about the limits of mediation. Lawyers also noted that when parties perceived the mediation process as fair, they were more likely to accept outcomes even if they did not receive everything they wanted. A lawyer explained, "People accept compromise when they believe the process did not insult them." This finding suggests that cultural mediation strengthens procedural legitimacy by giving parties a sense

of voice, recognition, and respectful treatment. However, participants also stressed that trust should not depend only on personal charisma or community authority; it must be supported by clear procedures, confidentiality, neutrality, and informed consent.

The third main category was negotiation between formal law and community norms. Participants explained that many legal disputes involved overlapping normative expectations. Formal law provided official rights and procedures, while family, religious, ethnic, neighborhood, or occupational norms shaped what parties considered morally acceptable. Mediators often had to manage tensions between these orders. For example, in inheritance disputes, participants described situations where statutory entitlement conflicted with family expectations about gender, age, or caregiving. In neighborhood disputes, legal rights over property or noise were sometimes negotiated alongside expectations of neighborly tolerance and public respect. One community leader stated, “If we only speak about law, the parties say the law does not know our situation. If we only speak about custom, one side may lose their rights. The mediator must keep both in the room.” This finding indicates that cultural mediation does not simply replace law with custom; rather, it creates a space where parties can negotiate between legal rights and social obligations. Professional mediators emphasized that formal law must remain the boundary of acceptable settlement. One mediator explained, “Culture helps us understand the path to agreement, but it cannot be used to force someone to give up a right.” This category highlights the importance of legally informed mediation that respects cultural meaning while preventing informal norms from overriding basic rights and protections.

The fourth main category was emotional de-escalation and relational repair. Participants reported that culturally mediated legal disputes often involved strong emotions, including anger, shame, fear, resentment, and anxiety about social reputation. Mediation was considered effective when it helped parties move from accusation to explanation and from humiliation to acknowledgment. Participants described apology, respectful address, involvement of trusted elders, and symbolic gestures as important tools for reducing hostility. One disputing party stated, “The money was important, but what changed the meeting was when he said in front of everyone that he had spoken badly about me. After that, settlement became possible.” Mediators explained that in some cultural contexts, direct legal argument escalated conflict because it made parties feel publicly attacked. A mediator noted, “Sometimes before discussing payment or documents, I need to lower the emotional temperature. Otherwise, every legal sentence becomes another insult.” This category demonstrates that cultural mediation often addresses the relational dimension of legal disputes. The goal is not always restoration of close relationships, but at minimum the reduction of hostility so that parties can reach a workable agreement. Participants believed that emotional de-escalation was especially important in disputes where parties would continue to interact, such as family, workplace, neighborhood, and community disputes.

The fifth main category was structural limits and ethical risks of cultural mediation. Although participants generally valued culturally informed mediation, they also identified important limitations. The most frequently mentioned risks were power imbalance, informal pressure, gender inequality, lack of enforceability, and confusion between voluntary agreement and social coercion. Several participants warned that community-based authority can sometimes silence weaker parties. One social worker explained, “When a young woman says yes in front of elders, we must ask whether it is her decision or the only safe answer.” Lawyers emphasized that mediated settlements may become problematic when parties do not fully understand their legal rights before agreeing. Some participants also noted that mediators may unintentionally reproduce stereotypes if they treat culture as fixed or assume that all members of a community share the same values. A lawyer stated, “Culture is useful only if it helps us hear the person better. It becomes dangerous when it tells us what the person must want.” These findings show that cultural mediation requires ethical safeguards, professional training, and legal accountability. Participants argued that mediators must be able to identify coercion, protect confidentiality, refer cases involving violence or severe inequality to appropriate legal mechanisms, and ensure that parties understand the legal consequences of settlement.

Discussion

The present study explored cultural mediation in legal disputes across diverse communities in Tehran. The findings showed that cultural mediation operates as a complex process of translation, trust-building, normative negotiation, emotional de-escalation, and ethical boundary management. Participants did not describe mediation as merely a faster or less formal alternative to court. Rather, they understood it as a space in which legal claims are interpreted through cultural meanings and social relationships. This finding aligns with legal pluralism scholarship, which argues that social life is regulated by multiple overlapping normative orders rather than by state law alone (Griffiths, 1986; Merry, 1988; Moore, 1973). In culturally diverse disputes, formal legal categories may identify the official issue, but they often fail to capture the symbolic, relational, and moral dimensions of conflict. The study therefore supports the view that effective dispute resolution requires attention to both legal structure and social meaning.

The first finding concerned cultural translation of legal meanings. Participants emphasized that legal disputes often contain hidden cultural narratives about respect, honor, family obligation, apology, and social standing. This finding is consistent with Avruch's (1998) argument that culture shapes how parties define conflict, interpret behavior, and imagine acceptable solutions. It also reflects Lederach's (1995) view that conflict transformation across cultures requires sensitivity to local meanings and relational contexts. In the present study, mediators acted as interpreters between legal language and lived experience. This role is particularly important because formal legal procedures often abstract disputes into categories such as breach, liability, custody, ownership, or compensation. While such categories are necessary for legal decision-making, they may not be sufficient for settlement when parties experience the dispute as a moral or relational injury. Cultural mediation helps reveal these underlying meanings and makes it possible to design agreements that respond not only to legal claims but also to recognition, dignity, and symbolic repair.

The second finding related to trust-building and procedural legitimacy. Participants indicated that parties were more willing to engage in mediation when they felt heard, respected, and culturally understood. This finding supports Tyler's (2006) procedural justice theory, which emphasizes that individuals are more likely to accept legal outcomes when they perceive procedures as fair, respectful, and participatory. It also aligns with Bush and Folger's (2005) transformative mediation approach, which highlights empowerment and recognition as central values in mediation. In culturally diverse disputes, procedural legitimacy depends not only on neutrality but also on communicative accessibility. Parties may distrust a process that ignores their language, social expectations, or cultural experiences. However, the findings also indicate that trust must be institutionally supported. If trust depends only on the mediator's personal reputation or community authority, mediation may become vulnerable to bias, favoritism, or informal pressure. Therefore, cultural competence should be combined with clear procedural safeguards.

The third finding showed that cultural mediation involves negotiation between formal law and community norms. This finding directly reflects the central insight of legal pluralism: individuals often live under multiple normative systems simultaneously (Merry, 1988; Moore, 1973). Participants described disputes in which statutory rights, religious expectations, family duties, neighborhood customs, and community reputation interacted. Cultural mediation was effective when it allowed these normative orders to be discussed openly without allowing informal norms to erase legal protections. This result is consistent with Menkel-Meadow et al. (2018), who argue that appropriate dispute resolution should move beyond adversarial legalism while still maintaining fairness and accountability. The finding also supports Merry's (1990) work on legal consciousness, which shows that ordinary people interpret law through everyday social relations and moral expectations. In the current study, parties did not simply choose between law and culture; they negotiated their dispute through both. This suggests that mediators require legal literacy as well as cultural competence, because they must know when cultural accommodation is appropriate and when legal rights must set firm boundaries.

The fourth finding concerned emotional de-escalation and relational repair. Participants described mediation as useful because it allowed parties to express anger, shame, disappointment, and fear in a controlled environment. This finding aligns with mediation theory, which identifies communication repair, reframing, and interest exploration as central mediator functions (Moore, 2014). It also corresponds with LeBaron's (2003) argument that cultural conflict resolution must attend to symbolic gestures, identity, face-saving, and relational meaning. In many disputes reported by participants, settlement became possible only after acknowledgment, apology, or respectful communication occurred. This suggests that legal disputes cannot always be resolved through material exchange alone. In family, neighborhood, workplace, and community conflicts, parties may continue to share social space after the dispute. Therefore, emotional de-escalation becomes a practical requirement for sustainable agreement. However, relational repair should not be confused with forced reconciliation. The mediator must ensure that apology, forgiveness, or compromise is voluntary rather than demanded by community pressure.

The fifth finding identified structural limits and ethical risks. Participants warned that cultural mediation may reproduce inequality when powerful family members, employers, elders, landlords, or community authorities dominate the process. This concern is consistent with Nader's (1990) critique of harmony ideology, which argues that informal dispute resolution may pressure weaker parties to sacrifice rights for the sake of social peace. It also resonates with Galanter's (1974) analysis of structural advantage in legal processes. Although Galanter focused on litigation, the same concern applies to mediation: parties with more resources, confidence, social authority, or legal knowledge may shape outcomes more effectively. The present study adds that cultural language can sometimes intensify this inequality. For example, appeals to family honor, communal reputation, or respect for elders may make refusal difficult for vulnerable participants. Therefore, cultural mediation should include screening for coercion, private sessions where appropriate, legal information, referral mechanisms, and special protections for parties at risk.

Overall, the study suggests that cultural mediation is most effective when practiced as rights-sensitive cultural interpretation rather than informal compromise at any cost. This distinction is crucial. Cultural mediation should not be understood as replacing formal law with community norms. Instead, it should be understood as a structured process that makes legal communication culturally meaningful while keeping legal rights and ethical safeguards intact. This interpretation aligns with contemporary socio-legal approaches that view law as embedded in social relations but also recognize the importance of institutional protections (Merry, 1988; Menkel-Meadow et al., 2018). In practice, mediators must manage a dual responsibility: they must respect cultural identity and social meaning while preventing coercion, discrimination, and rights violations. The findings indicate that this dual responsibility is difficult but necessary.

The findings also have implications for mediator training. Participants' accounts suggest that cultural competence cannot be reduced to knowledge of fixed cultural traits. Culture is dynamic, internally diverse, and shaped by class, gender, generation, migration history, education, religion, and personal experience. This supports Avruch's (1998) critique of simplistic cultural models and LeBaron's (2003) emphasis on intercultural capacity. Mediators should therefore be trained to ask culturally sensitive questions rather than rely on assumptions. They should explore how each party understands the conflict, what social pressures exist, who has authority, what outcomes are meaningful, and whether consent is genuinely voluntary. Training should also include power analysis, trauma-informed communication, legal rights awareness, and ethical decision-making.

The study contributes to the literature by showing how cultural mediation functions in a diverse urban legal context. Previous scholarship has examined mediation, legal pluralism, and cultural conflict resolution separately; this study connects them empirically by showing how mediators and parties navigate the intersection of law, culture, and community. The findings demonstrate that culturally informed mediation can improve communication, legitimacy, and settlement durability, but only

when it is embedded in professional standards and legal accountability. Without safeguards, mediation may become a mechanism for informal pressure. With safeguards, it can become a meaningful tool for access to justice in plural societies.

This study has several limitations. First, the sample was limited to 24 participants from Tehran, and the findings may not fully represent cultural mediation practices in other cities, rural areas, or legal systems. Second, the study relied on self-reported interview data, which may be influenced by memory, personal interpretation, professional role, or social desirability. Third, because the study examined different types of disputes together, including family, neighborhood, workplace, tenancy, and community disputes, it did not provide a detailed comparison of mediation dynamics across each dispute type. Fourth, the study did not include direct observation of mediation sessions, which could have provided richer insight into actual communication patterns, power relations, and mediator interventions. Finally, culturally sensitive disputes are often difficult to discuss openly, and some participants may have avoided describing cases involving coercion, gender inequality, or legal vulnerability.

Future research should examine cultural mediation across different regions and communities to compare how local norms, institutional structures, and legal cultures shape mediation practices. Comparative studies between Tehran and other Iranian cities could clarify whether the findings reflect broader national patterns or specific features of metropolitan legal life. Future studies could also focus on particular dispute types, such as family disputes, inheritance conflicts, migrant-related disputes, labor disputes, or neighborhood conflicts. Observational research on mediation sessions would be especially valuable because it could capture real-time interaction, nonverbal communication, mediator strategies, and subtle forms of pressure. Longitudinal studies could examine whether culturally mediated agreements remain stable over time and whether parties continue to perceive them as fair after implementation. Further research should also investigate the experiences of vulnerable groups, including women, migrants, low-income disputants, and individuals with limited legal literacy.

Legal institutions and mediation centers should develop culturally responsive mediation frameworks that combine cultural sensitivity with rights-based safeguards. Mediators should receive specialized training in intercultural communication, legal pluralism, procedural justice, power imbalance, gender sensitivity, and ethical risk assessment. Mediation programs should ensure that parties understand their legal rights before settlement and should provide access to independent legal advice when needed. Screening mechanisms should be established to identify cases involving violence, coercion, severe inequality, or inability to provide informed consent. Mediation centers should also create clear documentation procedures so that agreements are understandable, voluntary, and legally appropriate. Finally, collaboration between courts, lawyers, social workers, community organizations, and trained mediators can improve access to justice while preventing informal community pressure from replacing legal protection.

Conclusion

This study explored cultural mediation in legal disputes across diverse communities in Tehran. The findings showed that cultural mediation is not merely a procedural alternative to litigation but a socially embedded process of meaning-making, trust-building, normative negotiation, emotional de-escalation, and ethical judgment. Participants described cultural mediation as valuable because it helps translate legal issues into culturally meaningful language, increases parties' sense of procedural fairness, and supports settlements that address relational and emotional dimensions of conflict. At the same time, the study revealed important risks, including power imbalance, informal pressure, gender inequality, and weak enforceability.

The central conclusion is that cultural mediation can enhance access to justice only when it is practiced within a legally informed and rights-sensitive framework. Culture can help mediators understand parties' expectations, values, and social realities, but it should never be used to justify coercion or denial of rights. Effective cultural mediation requires mediators who are competent in both legal procedure and intercultural communication. It also requires institutional safeguards that protect autonomy, confidentiality, informed consent, and equality between parties. In plural and globalized urban societies, cultural

mediation offers an important pathway for resolving legal disputes in ways that are both socially meaningful and legally responsible.

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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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