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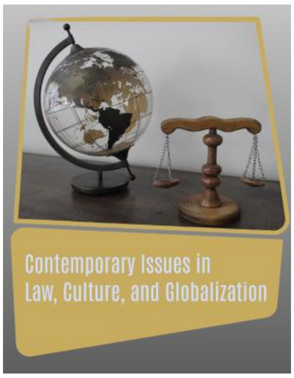

Transnational Migration and Legal Vulnerability Among Immigrant Communities

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore how immigrant communities living in Tehran experience, interpret, and manage legal vulnerability in the context of transnational migration, uncertain documentation, institutional access, and everyday social regulation. This qualitative study was conducted using a conventional qualitative design. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 24 immigrant participants residing in Tehran, selected through purposive sampling with maximum variation in gender, age, country of origin, duration of residence, employment condition, and documentation status. The sample included immigrants from Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, and Syria, with different legal statuses, including valid residence documents, refugee documentation, temporary registration documents, and undocumented status. 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 consent, transcribed verbatim, anonymized, and analyzed through thematic analysis using NVivo software. Credibility was strengthened through member checking, peer review, prolonged engagement with the data, and an audit trail. Analysis produced four main categories: unstable documentation and bureaucratic uncertainty; restricted access to justice and public services; labor exploitation and economic dependency; and social invisibility, stigma, and fear of institutional contact. Participants described legal vulnerability not only as the absence of formal status but also as a layered condition shaped by complex administrative procedures, dependence on employers or intermediaries, limited legal literacy, language barriers, fear of deportation, and discriminatory treatment in housing, employment, healthcare, and policing encounters. Legal insecurity affected family life, mobility, livelihood decisions, children's education, and willingness to seek institutional protection. The findings suggest that legal vulnerability among immigrant communities is produced through the interaction of migration status, administrative practices, social exclusion, and economic dependency. Legal protection for immigrants requires not only documentation reform but also accessible legal information, safe complaint mechanisms, anti-discrimination measures, and service pathways that do not expose vulnerable migrants to further risk.

Keywords: transnational migration; legal vulnerability; immigrant communities; undocumented migrants; access to justice; Tehran; qualitative research; legal status

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Introduction

Transnational migration has become one of the defining socio-legal phenomena of contemporary societies. Migration is no longer adequately understood as a single movement from one national territory to another; rather, it is increasingly shaped by continuing relations across borders, unstable residence trajectories, remittance obligations, family separation, digital communication, and legal regimes that classify migrants into shifting categories of legitimacy and exclusion. The International Organization for Migration's *World Migration Report 2024* emphasizes that migration is embedded in wider global transformations, including conflict, economic inequality, climate pressures, demographic change, labor-market demand, and geopolitical instability (IOM, 2024). In this context, immigrant communities often experience law not merely as a formal system of rights and duties, but as an everyday structure that determines whether they can work, rent housing, move freely, attend school, access healthcare, report abuse, or remain with their families.

Legal vulnerability refers to a condition in which people's exposure to harm is intensified by their uncertain, dependent, or excluded relationship to legal and administrative systems. For immigrants, vulnerability is closely connected to legal status, but it cannot be reduced to formal status alone. A documented migrant may remain vulnerable because of temporary residence, renewal procedures, employer dependency, language barriers, discriminatory enforcement, or lack of knowledge about legal remedies. Conversely, an undocumented migrant may develop informal strategies of survival, but these strategies often involve avoidance of institutions, acceptance of exploitation, and dependence on social networks or brokers. Socio-legal scholarship has shown that immigrant "illegality" is not a natural condition but is produced through laws, bureaucratic classifications, labor-market needs, border practices, and public discourse (De Genova, 2002; Menjívar & Kanstroom, 2014). This means that legal vulnerability must be studied as a relational and institutional process rather than as an individual defect.

One of the most influential concepts in this field is Menjívar's notion of "liminal legality," which describes how migrants may live for prolonged periods in an intermediate condition between legality and illegality (Menjívar, 2006). Liminal legality is especially useful for understanding immigrant communities whose documentation is temporary, conditional, renewable, or unclear. Such migrants may possess documents that allow partial access to services, yet remain uncertain about long-term residence, work authorization, mobility, family reunification, or protection from removal. Later research has expanded this insight by showing that legal status stratification affects economic incorporation, family life, health, political participation, and belonging (Abrego, 2011; Goldring & Landolt, 2013; Kubal, 2013). Legal status is therefore not only an administrative label; it is a social location that structures access to opportunities and exposure to risk.

Legal vulnerability is particularly important in relation to access to justice. Access to justice includes more than formal access to courts; it also includes legal awareness, affordability, language accessibility, trust in institutions, safety in reporting harm, and the availability of remedies that can be used without retaliation (Storgaard, 2023). For immigrant communities, the gap between formal rights and practical access may be wide. Migrants may avoid police, labor offices, courts, hospitals, or schools because they fear detection, deportation, discrimination, loss of employment, or financial costs. Studies on migrant legal consciousness show that immigrants' understanding of law is shaped by personal experience, social networks, cultural expectations, institutional encounters, and public discourse (Güdük, 2022). In practice, this means that migrants may learn the law through stories of fear, warning, rumor, and selective experience rather than through formal legal education.

The Iranian context provides an important setting for examining these issues. Iran has hosted forcibly displaced people, especially Afghans and Iraqis, for several decades. UNHCR reports that Iran continues to host large refugee and displaced populations, including Afghans and Iraqis with different documentation statuses, and that most such populations live in urban settings rather than camps (UNHCR, 2025, 2026). Current UNHCR information also notes that Iran hosts refugees with

Amayesh and Hoviat cards, alongside large numbers of people with other or undocumented statuses; this diversity of documentation is directly relevant to socio-legal vulnerability because access to services, movement, employment, and protection may vary across status categories.

Tehran is a particularly significant urban site for studying immigrant legal vulnerability because it concentrates employment opportunities, informal labor markets, educational institutions, healthcare facilities, legal offices, public administration, and diverse immigrant networks. Urban residence can create opportunities for anonymity, income generation, and social mobility, but it can also intensify vulnerability through expensive housing, precarious work, policing, documentation checks, and competitive access to public services. UNHCR's reporting that the overwhelming majority of forcibly displaced populations in Iran reside in urban areas supports the importance of studying urban rather than exclusively camp-based migrant experiences (UNHCR, 2026).

The relationship between migration status and service access has been widely documented in studies of migrant healthcare, education, employment, and legal protection. In Iran, research on Afghan immigrants and refugees has examined ethico-legal questions surrounding access to healthcare and has shown that legal interpretation, documentation, and institutional practice influence migrants' practical access to health services (Khoramabadi et al., 2023). Other recent research on healthcare access for migrants in Iran identifies legal status, financial constraints, and cultural or administrative barriers as major challenges (Ghiasi et al., 2025). These studies are important because they show that legal vulnerability is not limited to courtroom settings; it enters ordinary life through hospitals, schools, workplaces, rental agreements, and administrative encounters.

The concept of transnational migration further complicates legal vulnerability. Immigrants may remain emotionally, economically, and legally connected to their countries of origin while trying to build security in the host society. They may send remittances, support relatives, maintain cross-border marriages, plan return, or fear return because of insecurity, poverty, persecution, or family fragmentation. These transnational obligations can make legal vulnerability more severe. For example, a migrant who is unable to regularize status may still be responsible for family members across borders, while limited legal rights in the host country reduce their ability to earn, travel, or reunite with family. Transnational ties may also produce legal ambiguity when documents, identity records, marriage certificates, birth certificates, or educational credentials from the country of origin are not recognized or are difficult to translate, authenticate, or update.

Despite growing scholarship on immigrant legal status, legal consciousness, and migrant vulnerability, there remains a need for qualitative research that examines how immigrants themselves describe legal vulnerability in everyday life. Quantitative indicators can identify disparities in employment, education, health, or documentation, but they often cannot capture how migrants interpret bureaucratic uncertainty, decide whether to approach institutions, negotiate with employers, or protect family members from legal exposure. Qualitative interviews are especially suitable for this topic because legal vulnerability is lived through narrative, memory, fear, silence, and practical decision-making. Semi-structured interviews allow participants to describe not only what barriers exist, but also how those barriers are understood, anticipated, and managed.

Accordingly, this study explores transnational migration and legal vulnerability among immigrant communities residing in Tehran. The study focuses on four interrelated questions: How do immigrants experience legal uncertainty in everyday life? How does documentation status shape access to justice and public services? What strategies do immigrants use to manage institutional risk, labor exploitation, and social exclusion? How do transnational obligations and family responsibilities intensify or reshape legal vulnerability? By addressing these questions, the study contributes to socio-legal migration scholarship and provides policy-relevant insights into how law can either reproduce vulnerability or support protection, inclusion, and human dignity.

Methods and Materials

This study used a qualitative research design to explore immigrant communities' lived experiences of legal vulnerability in Tehran. A qualitative approach was selected because the research objective required an in-depth understanding of meanings, perceptions, institutional encounters, and everyday strategies rather than measurement of predetermined variables. The study was informed by socio-legal perspectives on legal consciousness, liminal legality, and access to justice. Data were collected exclusively through semi-structured interviews, allowing participants to narrate their experiences while enabling the researcher to probe key issues across interviews. Semi-structured interviewing is appropriate when researchers require both comparability across participants and flexibility to explore personal experiences in depth (Kallio et al., 2016). The study was reported in accordance with the principles of qualitative transparency and reflexivity recommended in COREQ (Tong et al., 2007).

Participants were 24 adult immigrants living in Tehran. Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants with diverse experiences in terms of gender, age, country of origin, length of residence in Iran, employment situation, family status, and documentation status. Maximum variation sampling was applied to capture differences between documented, temporarily documented, and undocumented migrants. Inclusion criteria were: being 18 years of age or older, being born outside Iran, having lived in Tehran for at least six months, and having direct experience with legal or administrative issues related to migration, employment, housing, education, healthcare, or access to justice. Individuals who were unable to provide informed consent or who felt that participation could place them at immediate risk were not included.

The final sample consisted of 13 men and 11 women. Participants' ages ranged from 19 to 56 years. Eighteen participants were from Afghanistan, three from Iraq, two from Pakistan, and one from Syria. Regarding documentation status, eight participants held refugee-related documentation, five held passport- or visa-based residence documents, six held temporary registration or census-related documents, and five described themselves as undocumented at the time of interview. Interviews continued until theoretical saturation was reached. Saturation was observed after 21 interviews, when no substantially new categories emerged from the data; three additional interviews were conducted to confirm the adequacy and stability of the thematic structure. This sample size is consistent with qualitative research in which saturation commonly depends on the scope of the research question, sample heterogeneity, and depth of data rather than numerical representativeness (Guest et al., 2006; Hennink & Kaiser, 2022).

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted in private and safe locations selected according to participant preference. Some interviews were conducted in community settings, while others were conducted online or by phone when participants considered this safer or more convenient. The interview guide included questions about migration history, documentation status, encounters with public institutions, experiences with employment and housing, access to healthcare and education, knowledge of legal rights, experiences of discrimination, strategies for avoiding risk, and continuing ties with the country of origin. Examples of interview questions included: "Can you describe a time when your legal status affected your daily life?", "What happens when you need help from an official institution?", "How do you decide whether it is safe to complain or ask for legal support?", and "How do responsibilities toward family members across borders affect your decisions here?"

Each interview lasted between 45 and 80 minutes. Interviews were audio-recorded after receiving informed consent. When participants did not feel comfortable being recorded, detailed notes were taken with their permission. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and anonymized. Identifying information such as names, workplaces, addresses, and specific administrative cases was removed. Participants were assigned codes from P1 to P24. The researcher maintained field notes after each interview to record contextual observations, emotional tone, emerging analytic ideas, and reflexive reflections.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The analysis followed an iterative process involving familiarization with transcripts, initial coding, development of categories, review of emerging themes, definition and naming of final categories, and production of the analytic narrative (Braun & Clarke, 2006). NVivo software was used to organize transcripts, assign codes, compare coding across participants, retrieve quotations, and develop hierarchical coding structures. Analysis began with open coding of the first six interviews. Codes were then compared, refined, and grouped into preliminary categories. As additional interviews were analyzed, categories were revised to reflect recurring patterns and differences across documentation status, gender, nationality, and length of residence.

To enhance credibility, selected interpretations were discussed with several participants through member checking. Peer debriefing was conducted with two qualitative researchers familiar with migration and socio-legal research. Dependability was supported through an audit trail documenting coding decisions, category development, and analytic revisions. Confirmability was strengthened through reflexive memo writing, especially regarding the researcher's assumptions about migration, law, vulnerability, and institutional trust. Transferability was supported by providing detailed descriptions of the study context, participants, sampling strategy, and categories. These strategies are consistent with established trustworthiness criteria in qualitative inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Because the study involved potentially vulnerable immigrant participants, ethical sensitivity was central to all stages of the research. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained before each interview. Participants were informed that they could refuse to answer any question or withdraw at any time without consequence. No legal advice was provided during interviews, and participants were not asked to disclose information that could expose them to legal risk. All data were anonymized and stored securely. Particular attention was paid to undocumented participants, whose fear of institutional exposure could affect their willingness to participate. The study avoided collecting unnecessary identifying details and used broad demographic categories to protect confidentiality.

Findings

The study included 24 immigrant participants residing in Tehran. Thirteen participants were men (54.2%) and eleven were women (45.8%). In terms of age, four participants were 18–24 years old (16.7%), eight were 25–34 years old (33.3%), seven were 35–44 years old (29.2%), and five were 45 years or older (20.8%). Regarding country of origin, 18 participants were from Afghanistan (75.0%), three from Iraq (12.5%), two from Pakistan (8.3%), and one from Syria (4.2%). Six participants had lived in Iran for less than two years (25.0%), seven for two to five years (29.2%), six for six to ten years (25.0%), and five for more than ten years (20.8%). Documentation status varied: eight participants had refugee-related documents (33.3%), five had passport- or visa-based residence documents (20.8%), six had temporary registration or census-related documents (25.0%), and five were undocumented (20.8%). Employment status also differed: nine participants worked in informal manual or service jobs (37.5%), five were self-employed or worked in small family businesses (20.8%), four were domestic or care workers (16.7%), three were unemployed (12.5%), and three were students or trainees (12.5%).

The first category concerned unstable documentation and bureaucratic uncertainty. Participants described legal status as a fragile and changing condition rather than a stable entitlement. Even those with documents often felt insecure because their residence depended on renewal deadlines, administrative changes, fees, employer cooperation, or unclear instructions. Several participants stated that they did not fully understand what their documents permitted or prohibited. Temporary status produced a constant sense of waiting, in which family decisions, employment choices, housing arrangements, and children's education were delayed. One participant explained, "I have a paper, but I do not know what it really protects. Every year I wait to see if they renew it. I cannot plan my life with a date that may end" (P7, Afghan man, 34). Another participant stated, "When the rules change, nobody explains them to us clearly. We hear from neighbors, from Telegram groups, from people in offices. Sometimes every person says something different" (P12, Afghan woman, 29). Bureaucratic uncertainty also created dependence on intermediaries who charged money for translation, form completion, renewal appointments, or informal guidance. Participants described this dependency as stressful because a mistake in paperwork could affect residence, work, or access to services.

The second category was restricted access to justice and public services. Participants reported that documentation status shaped their willingness and ability to approach institutions such as police stations, courts, hospitals, schools, municipal offices, and labor-related authorities. Even when they believed they had been wronged, many avoided formal complaint mechanisms because they feared exposure, humiliation, deportation, or retaliation. A participant who had experienced unpaid wages stated, “The employer knew I would not complain. He said, ‘Where will you go? Who will listen to you?’ I stayed silent because I was afraid the complaint would become a problem for myself” (P4, Afghan man, 41). Women participants described additional barriers, including dependency on male relatives, fear of public visibility, and concern that reporting domestic or workplace abuse would damage family security. One woman said, “Sometimes the law feels far away. It exists, but not for people like us. Before asking for help, we ask: will this make our situation worse?” (P18, Iraqi woman, 38). Participants also described difficulties in healthcare access, school registration, rental contracts, and banking services, particularly when documents were expired, temporary, or not recognized by service providers. Legal vulnerability therefore appeared not only in formal legal disputes but also in ordinary administrative encounters.

The third category concerned labor exploitation and economic dependency. Many participants worked in informal labor markets where written contracts, insurance, stable wages, and complaint mechanisms were absent. Legal uncertainty made workers dependent on employers who could threaten dismissal, wage withholding, or reporting to authorities. Participants described accepting long working hours, unsafe conditions, and lower pay because legal insecurity reduced their bargaining power. One participant stated, “If you have no strong document, your hands are tied. You work more, you speak less. Even when they pay late, you say thank you because you need the job” (P2, Pakistani man, 27). Economic dependency was intensified by transnational obligations. Several participants sent money to relatives in their country of origin or supported family members who remained in insecure conditions. This responsibility made them less willing to challenge exploitation. As one participant explained, “My mother and sisters depend on what I send. If I lose work, they lose food. So I accept things I know are unfair” (P15, Afghan man, 32). Women in domestic and care work described vulnerability inside private homes, where isolation, informality, and fear of losing income limited their ability to resist mistreatment. Thus, legal vulnerability operated through economic pressure and transnational family responsibility.

The fourth category was social invisibility, stigma, and fear of institutional contact. Participants described strategies of remaining unnoticed in public spaces, avoiding unnecessary travel, limiting interaction with officials, and teaching children to be cautious about identity and documentation. Fear was not limited to undocumented participants; even documented migrants worried about discrimination, verbal insult, sudden document checks, or being treated as temporary outsiders. One participant said, “You learn to make yourself small. You do not argue in the street, you do not ask too many questions, you do not show anger. You think maybe one small problem can become a legal problem” (P9, Afghan woman, 44). Stigma also affected belonging. Participants reported being associated with poverty, criminality, or cultural inferiority, which made them feel socially excluded even after many years of residence. A young participant who had grown up in Iran stated, “I speak like others, I studied here, my friends are here, but when they ask about papers, suddenly I am foreign again” (P21, Afghan woman, 22). This category shows that legal vulnerability is not only administrative; it is also emotional and relational. Fear, shame, and invisibility shaped how participants used the city, interacted with neighbors, sought services, and imagined their future.

Discussion

This study explored how immigrant communities living in Tehran experience and manage legal vulnerability in the context of transnational migration. The findings showed that legal vulnerability was produced through four interconnected processes:

unstable documentation and bureaucratic uncertainty; restricted access to justice and public services; labor exploitation and economic dependency; and social invisibility, stigma, and fear of institutional contact. These findings support socio-legal theories arguing that migrant vulnerability is not simply a consequence of individual migration decisions, but is shaped by legal classifications, administrative practices, labor-market structures, and public narratives (De Genova, 2002; Menjívar & Kanstroom, 2014). The participants' accounts showed that immigration status operated as a structuring condition that influenced everyday decisions about work, housing, education, healthcare, complaint-making, and family planning.

The first finding, unstable documentation and bureaucratic uncertainty, is consistent with Menjívar's (2006) concept of liminal legality. Participants did not describe legal status as a clear division between legal and illegal presence; rather, they described a continuum of partial, temporary, renewable, or unclear statuses. This confirms prior scholarship showing that migrants may live for years in legal ambiguity, with documents that provide limited access but not durable security (Goldring & Landolt, 2013; Kubal, 2013). In the Tehran context, different documentation statuses created differentiated access to work, services, and institutional recognition. This aligns with current UNHCR reporting on Iran, which distinguishes among refugees with Amayesh or Hoviat cards, undocumented Afghans, and other forcibly displaced people with different documentation statuses (UNHCR, 2025, 2026).

The second finding, restricted access to justice and public services, supports research on migrant legal consciousness. Participants' willingness to use institutions depended not only on formal eligibility but also on fear, trust, perceived safety, cost, language capacity, and previous encounters with officials. This is consistent with Güdük's (2022) review, which shows that migrants' legal consciousness is shaped by individual characteristics, social relationships, cultural meanings, and public policy environments. The findings also align with access-to-justice research emphasizing that formal rights are insufficient when individuals cannot safely mobilize those rights (Storgaard, 2023). For undocumented or temporarily documented migrants, complaint-making may appear risky because it can expose the complainant to administrative scrutiny. Therefore, legal vulnerability becomes self-reinforcing: those most in need of protection may be least able to request it.

The third finding, labor exploitation and economic dependency, confirms previous socio-legal research showing that precarious legal status weakens workers' bargaining power and increases dependence on employers. De Genova (2002) argued that migrant "illegality" is historically and politically produced in ways that make deportability central to labor discipline. Participants in this study described precisely this dynamic: employers could delay wages, avoid contracts, or impose unsafe conditions because migrants feared losing employment or being reported. The findings also extend this argument by showing how transnational obligations intensify exploitation. Migrants supporting relatives across borders may tolerate unfair conditions because their income is connected to family survival elsewhere. This supports transnational migration theory, which emphasizes that migrants' decisions are embedded in cross-border family economies, moral obligations, and long-term mobility projects (Levitt & Jaworsky, 2007).

The fourth finding, social invisibility, stigma, and fear of institutional contact, demonstrates that legal vulnerability also has emotional and symbolic dimensions. Participants did not experience vulnerability only when interacting with courts or administrative offices; they experienced it in streets, workplaces, schools, rental markets, and neighborhoods. This finding is consistent with research on undocumented migrants' legal consciousness, which shows that fear and stigma can become barriers to claims-making and participation (Abrego, 2011). The accounts of participants who had lived in Iran for many years also show that long-term residence does not automatically produce belonging when legal status remains unstable. This supports Saavedra's (2023) finding that legal status is not the only determinant of belonging, but it remains a powerful factor shaping whether migrants feel recognized as members of society.

The findings also correspond with research on migrant access to healthcare and services in Iran. Khoramabadi et al. (2023) argue that Iranian health law can be interpreted in ways that support access to healthcare for Afghan immigrants and refugees, yet practical access remains shaped by documentation and institutional interpretation. Similarly, Ghiasi et al. (2025) identify legal status, financial barriers, and cultural differences as key obstacles to healthcare access for migrants in Iran. Participants in the present study described service access as uncertain and inconsistent, especially when documents were expired, temporary, or not understood by service providers. This suggests that inclusive legal principles must be accompanied by clear administrative guidance, staff training, and complaint mechanisms that migrants can use without fear.

A central contribution of this study is its demonstration that legal vulnerability is cumulative. Documentation problems affected employment; employment exploitation affected housing stability; housing instability affected children's education; fear of institutions affected access to justice; and transnational obligations made migrants more likely to tolerate risk. These processes did not operate separately. Rather, they formed a chain of vulnerability in which uncertainty in one domain transferred into others. This finding supports structural theories of vulnerability that view vulnerability as produced through institutional arrangements rather than as an inherent characteristic of particular populations (Fineman, 2008; MacDowell, 2018). Immigrants were not vulnerable simply because they were migrants; they became vulnerable when legal and administrative systems made protection conditional, unclear, costly, or risky.

The findings have important implications for legal policy. First, documentation systems should be predictable, transparent, and accessible. Migrants need clear information about renewal procedures, rights, obligations, and consequences of expired or temporary documents. Second, access to justice should be separated from immigration enforcement to the greatest extent possible, especially in cases involving wage theft, violence, housing abuse, or denial of essential services. Third, service providers should receive training on recognized documentation forms and non-discrimination obligations. Fourth, community-based legal information programs can reduce reliance on informal brokers and rumors. Finally, policies should recognize that transnational family responsibility is not peripheral to legal vulnerability; it shapes migrants' economic decisions and their willingness to endure exploitation.

This study has several limitations. First, the findings are based on 24 immigrant participants living in Tehran and cannot be generalized statistically to all immigrant communities in Iran or other countries. Second, because legal vulnerability is a sensitive topic, some participants may have avoided discussing experiences involving undocumented status, informal work, police contact, or exploitation. Third, the sample included several national groups, but Afghan participants formed the majority, reflecting the demographic importance of Afghan migration in Iran; therefore, the experiences of smaller immigrant groups may require further focused study. Fourth, the study relied on self-reported narratives and did not include interviews with legal professionals, employers, public officials, or service providers. Finally, although member checking and peer review strengthened credibility, the interpretation of qualitative data remains shaped by the researcher's analytic perspective.

Future research should examine legal vulnerability among specific subgroups of immigrants, including undocumented women, migrant children, second-generation youth, elderly migrants, and workers in highly informal sectors. Comparative studies across Iranian cities such as Tehran, Mashhad, Qom, Isfahan, and Shiraz could show how local institutions and labor markets shape different forms of vulnerability. Longitudinal qualitative research would be especially valuable for understanding how legal status changes over time and how migrants move between documentation categories. Future studies should also include service providers, lawyers, labor inspectors, healthcare workers, school administrators, and civil society organizations to compare institutional perspectives with migrant narratives. Mixed-methods research could combine qualitative interviews with survey data to measure the prevalence of barriers identified in this study.

Practical interventions should prioritize safe, accessible, and multilingual legal information for immigrant communities. Community centers, legal clinics, schools, healthcare facilities, and civil society organizations can provide guidance on documentation, labor rights, rental agreements, school registration, healthcare access, and complaint pathways. Public institutions should create safe reporting mechanisms for migrants who experience wage theft, violence, discrimination, or service denial, regardless of documentation status. Training programs for frontline staff can reduce inconsistent treatment and improve recognition of different migration documents. Policymakers should also support cooperation between legal aid providers, migrant community leaders, NGOs, and public agencies to ensure that vulnerable migrants are not forced to choose between seeking protection and avoiding institutional risk.

Conclusion

This qualitative study showed that transnational migration and legal vulnerability among immigrant communities in Tehran are shaped by unstable documentation, restricted access to justice and services, labor exploitation, economic dependency, social stigma, and fear of institutional contact. Participants experienced law not only as a formal system but as an everyday condition affecting work, housing, education, healthcare, family life, and belonging. The study demonstrates that legal vulnerability is cumulative and relational: uncertainty in documentation can produce dependency in labor markets, avoidance of institutions, restricted access to services, and emotional insecurity. Addressing this vulnerability requires more than formal recognition of rights. It requires transparent documentation procedures, safe access to justice, anti-discrimination protections, labor enforcement, legal literacy programs, and service systems that protect migrants without increasing their exposure to harm. In societies shaped by transnational migration, legal inclusion is not only a matter of migration management but also a matter of justice, dignity, and social cohesion.

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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 adheried 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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