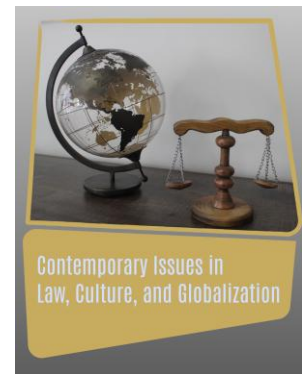




Cultural Narratives of Citizenship and Legal Inclusion in Globalized Societies

1. Hossein. Hashemi*: Department of Cultural Studies, University of Tehran, Tehran, Iran. Email: h.hashemi.ir@gmail.com (Corresponding Author)

ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore how residents of Tehran narrate citizenship, belonging, and legal inclusion within the cultural and institutional pressures of globalization. This qualitative study was conducted using semi-structured interviews with 24 participants living in Tehran, Iran. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to include individuals with diverse educational, occupational, gender, and migration-related backgrounds. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was achieved, with saturation reached after the twenty-first interview and confirmed through three additional interviews. The interviews focused on participants' perceptions of citizenship, legal recognition, cultural belonging, bureaucratic encounters, social inclusion, and transnational forms of identity. All interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed through thematic analysis using NVivo software. Coding was conducted in several stages, including open coding, category development, theme refinement, and interpretive comparison across participant narratives. Four main categories emerged from the analysis: citizenship as legal recognition and documentary visibility; cultural belonging as a condition of social acceptance; conditional inclusion through bureaucratic and institutional encounters; and transnational citizenship imaginaries shaped by mobility, media, education, and global comparison. Participants described citizenship not merely as a formal legal status but as an everyday experience shaped by access to documents, public services, social respect, cultural recognition, and perceived equality before institutions. Many participants emphasized a gap between formal citizenship and lived inclusion, particularly when legal rights were mediated by class, gender, ethnicity, migration background, or bureaucratic discretion. The findings suggest that citizenship in globalized societies is increasingly narrated as a layered, contested, and culturally mediated form of membership. Legal inclusion depends not only on formal status but also on institutional accessibility, cultural recognition, and the capacity of individuals to claim rights in everyday settings. Strengthening inclusive citizenship requires legal reforms, culturally sensitive public administration, and participatory mechanisms that recognize diverse narratives of belonging.

Keywords: Citizenship; Legal Inclusion; Cultural Narratives; Globalization; Belonging; Qualitative Research; Tehran.

How to cite this article:

Hashemi, H. (2025). Cultural Narratives of Citizenship and Legal Inclusion in Globalized Societies. *Contemporary Issues in Law, Culture, and Globalization*, 1(5), 1-11. <https://doi.org/10.61838/cilcg.1.5.1>

© 2025 the authors. This is an open access article under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0) License.

Introduction

Citizenship has historically been understood as a formal relationship between an individual and a sovereign state, organized around legal status, rights, duties, political participation, and national belonging. Classical theories of citizenship emphasized

the gradual institutionalization of civil, political, and social rights within the nation-state, with Marshall's formulation remaining one of the most influential accounts of citizenship as a rights-bearing status linked to membership in a political community (Marshall, 1950). Yet contemporary globalization has complicated this model. Migration, transnational communication, digital media, international human rights norms, cross-border education, global labor markets, and diasporic networks have weakened the assumption that citizenship is experienced only through the territorial nation-state. In globalized societies, individuals often live across multiple normative, cultural, and institutional fields. They may hold formal citizenship in one state while maintaining cultural, emotional, legal, or economic ties elsewhere. As a result, citizenship has become not only a legal category but also a narrative through which individuals interpret belonging, exclusion, recognition, dignity, and access to rights.

The sociological and legal literature increasingly treats citizenship as multidimensional. Bloemraad, Korteweg, and Yurdakul (2008) argue that citizenship includes legal status, rights, participation, and belonging, making it both a juridical and social phenomenon. This multidimensionality is especially important in culturally diverse and globalized settings, where formal membership may not guarantee social inclusion, and where people may experience legal recognition without cultural acceptance or cultural belonging without full legal protection. Brubaker (1992) demonstrated that citizenship regimes are historically shaped by national traditions and state projects, while Soysal (1994) argued that postnational forms of membership have emerged through international rights frameworks that increasingly protect persons beyond conventional national citizenship. These debates show that citizenship cannot be reduced to possession of a passport or national identity card; it is also an everyday experience of being recognized as a legitimate participant in social, legal, and political life.

Legal inclusion refers to the degree to which individuals and groups can access rights, institutions, remedies, protections, and public recognition under the law. It is closely connected to, but not identical with, formal citizenship. Some citizens may be legally included in principle but excluded in practice due to bureaucratic complexity, discrimination, limited legal literacy, economic inequality, gender norms, linguistic barriers, or cultural marginalization. Conversely, some non-citizens may gain partial inclusion through residence permits, education rights, labor protections, or humanitarian frameworks. Bosniak (2006) highlights this tension by arguing that the boundary between citizen and alien is not merely legal but also moral, political, and spatial. Benhabib (2004) similarly frames citizenship as a question of political membership and democratic legitimacy, asking how modern polities should incorporate strangers, migrants, refugees, and residents into systems of rights and participation. These perspectives are particularly relevant to globalized societies, where legal orders increasingly confront populations whose identities, affiliations, and claims exceed national categories.

Cultural narratives are central to this process. Citizenship is not only administered by the state; it is narrated by citizens, migrants, minorities, officials, families, media, and communities. Narratives define who is considered "one of us," who is perceived as deserving of rights, and whose claims are treated as legitimate. Yuval-Davis (2006) distinguishes belonging from the politics of belonging, emphasizing that belonging involves emotional attachment and social location, while the politics of belonging concerns boundary-making practices that decide who is included or excluded. This distinction is crucial for understanding citizenship in culturally plural societies. Individuals may legally belong to the state but feel socially excluded; they may participate economically but feel culturally invisible; or they may possess rights but lack confidence in legal institutions. In this sense, citizenship operates through stories of origin, loyalty, morality, contribution, dignity, and entitlement.

Globalization intensifies these narrative tensions. On the one hand, it expands imaginaries of citizenship through exposure to international rights discourse, comparative legal systems, global education, and digital cultures. Individuals increasingly compare their legal and social experiences with those of people in other societies. They may evaluate citizenship not only in terms of national identity but also through global ideas of equality, human rights, mobility, dignity, and voice. On the other

hand, globalization can produce defensive narratives of national belonging, cultural authenticity, and legal exclusion. As Sassen (2006) argues, globalization does not simply weaken the state; rather, it reconfigures state authority, territory, and rights. The state remains central in defining legal status, but its authority is increasingly shaped by global norms, economic pressures, migration flows, and transnational social expectations.

The concept of “acts of citizenship” further shifts attention from citizenship as status to citizenship as practice. Isin and Nielsen (2008) argue that citizenship is enacted when individuals make claims, challenge exclusion, and constitute themselves as political subjects. This perspective is important because legally marginalized groups often experience citizenship not as a stable possession but as a struggle for recognition. Everyday encounters with schools, courts, municipalities, employers, police, universities, hospitals, and administrative offices become sites where citizenship is either affirmed or denied. Ewick and Silbey (1998) similarly show that legality is experienced through everyday narratives, not only through formal legal texts. People understand law through stories of access, fear, delay, dignity, injustice, and negotiation. Therefore, studying cultural narratives of citizenship allows researchers to examine how individuals interpret legal inclusion in lived social contexts.

In globalized urban societies, citizenship is particularly complex because cities concentrate diversity, mobility, inequality, institutional encounters, and cultural negotiation. Urban residents often encounter multiple forms of difference in daily life, including class, ethnicity, gender, language, religion, migration history, education, and lifestyle. Tehran provides a meaningful context for examining these issues because it is a large metropolitan setting shaped by internal migration, educational mobility, socioeconomic differentiation, institutional centrality, and exposure to global cultural narratives through media, technology, and transnational family networks. In such a context, citizenship may be narrated not only through national identity but also through access to bureaucracy, equal treatment, social respect, opportunities for mobility, and comparison with legal systems elsewhere. Participants’ narratives can reveal how citizens understand inclusion, how they interpret barriers to rights, and how cultural expectations influence their sense of legal belonging.

Previous research has extensively examined citizenship, migration, multiculturalism, and legal status, but fewer studies have focused on how ordinary people narrate the relationship between cultural belonging and legal inclusion in non-Western metropolitan settings. Much of the dominant literature has emerged from European and North American debates on immigration, multicultural policy, and naturalization (Bloemraad et al., 2008; Joppke, 2010). While this literature is highly valuable, it may not fully capture the everyday meanings of citizenship in societies where globalization is experienced through overlapping pressures of national identity, legal formalism, administrative complexity, cultural continuity, class mobility, and transnational comparison. A qualitative approach is therefore necessary to understand how people themselves interpret citizenship as lived experience rather than as a purely legal status.

The present study addresses this gap by exploring cultural narratives of citizenship and legal inclusion among residents of Tehran. It investigates how participants define citizenship, how they distinguish formal legal membership from lived inclusion, how cultural expectations shape recognition, and how globalization influences their understanding of rights and belonging. Rather than treating citizenship as a fixed legal category, the study approaches it as a narrative and institutional process through which people interpret their place within society. The study is guided by the following research question: How do residents of Tehran narrate citizenship and legal inclusion in the context of cultural diversity and globalization? By examining semi-structured interviews, the study contributes to debates on citizenship, legal consciousness, belonging, and globalization, while also offering practical implications for inclusive legal institutions and culturally responsive governance.

Methods and Materials

Study Design

This study employed a qualitative research design based on semi-structured interviews. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the aim was to explore participants' subjective meanings, interpretations, and lived experiences of citizenship and legal inclusion rather than to measure predetermined variables. The study was informed by an interpretivist paradigm, which assumes that social realities are constructed through interaction, language, institutional experience, and cultural meaning. Citizenship was therefore examined not only as a formal legal status but also as an everyday narrative through which people describe belonging, exclusion, recognition, and access to rights.

Participants and Sampling

The participants consisted of 24 residents of Tehran, Iran. Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants who could provide rich and diverse accounts of citizenship, legal inclusion, and cultural belonging. Inclusion criteria were: being 18 years of age or older, residing in Tehran for at least five years, willingness to participate in a semi-structured interview, and ability to discuss personal or observed experiences related to legal institutions, citizenship, rights, public services, or social belonging. The sample included participants from different gender groups, age ranges, educational levels, occupational backgrounds, and migration histories within Iran. This diversity was intended to capture variation in how citizenship is narrated across social positions.

Recruitment continued until theoretical saturation was achieved. Saturation was considered reached when additional interviews no longer generated substantially new codes or categories related to the research questions. In this study, saturation emerged after the twenty-first interview; however, three additional interviews were conducted to confirm the stability and adequacy of the thematic structure. The final sample therefore included 24 participants.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. This method was selected because it allowed the researcher to follow a consistent set of guiding questions while also giving participants freedom to elaborate on their own meanings, examples, and experiences. The interview guide included questions about participants' understanding of citizenship, experiences with legal and administrative institutions, perceptions of equality before the law, feelings of social belonging, cultural expectations of being a "good citizen," experiences of exclusion or recognition, and comparisons between local and global ideas of citizenship.

Sample interview questions included: "What does citizenship mean to you in everyday life?" "Can you describe a situation in which you felt legally included or excluded?" "How do cultural expectations influence who is seen as a full member of society?" "Do you think formal citizenship and real social belonging are the same?" and "Has exposure to global media, migration, education, or international comparison changed how you understand rights and citizenship?"

Interviews lasted between 45 and 75 minutes. All interviews were conducted in a private and comfortable setting selected by participants or through secure online communication when preferred. Before each interview, participants received information about the purpose of the study, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and their right to withdraw. Written or recorded informed consent was obtained. Interviews were audio-recorded with permission and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The analysis followed several stages: repeated reading of transcripts, generation of initial codes, identification of recurring patterns, clustering of codes into subcategories, development of main categories, and refinement of themes in relation to the research question. NVivo software was used to organize transcripts, manage codes, compare participant narratives, retrieve coded segments, and develop thematic matrices.

The analysis combined inductive and interpretive coding. In the first stage, codes were developed directly from participants' language and experiences. In the second stage, these codes were organized around broader analytical concepts such as legal recognition, cultural belonging, bureaucratic vulnerability, conditional inclusion, and transnational comparison. To enhance trustworthiness, coding decisions were reviewed repeatedly, contradictory cases were examined, and selected coded segments were compared across demographic groups. Reflexive notes were also maintained throughout analysis to document emerging interpretations and reduce the risk of imposing preconceived assumptions on the data.

Ethical considerations were observed throughout the study. Participants' names and identifying details were removed from transcripts. Pseudonyms or participant codes were used in all reports. Interview files and transcripts were stored securely, and only the research team had access to the data. Because the topic involved potentially sensitive experiences of exclusion, legal frustration, or institutional distrust, participants were reminded that they could decline to answer any question.

Findings

A total of 24 participants from Tehran took part in the study. The sample included 13 women (54.2%) and 11 men (45.8%). Participants' ages ranged from 22 to 58 years. Six participants (25.0%) were between 22 and 30 years old, eight participants (33.3%) were between 31 and 40 years old, six participants (25.0%) were between 41 and 50 years old, and four participants (16.7%) were older than 50 years. Regarding education, five participants (20.8%) held a diploma or associate degree, nine participants (37.5%) held a bachelor's degree, seven participants (29.2%) held a master's degree, and three participants (12.5%) held a doctoral or professional degree. In terms of occupational status, seven participants (29.2%) were employed in private-sector occupations, five participants (20.8%) were public-sector employees, four participants (16.7%) were self-employed, three participants (12.5%) were university students, three participants (12.5%) were homemakers, and two participants (8.3%) were unemployed at the time of interview. Fourteen participants (58.3%) were born in Tehran, while ten participants (41.7%) had migrated to Tehran from other provinces. This demographic diversity provided a broad range of narratives about citizenship, cultural belonging, and legal inclusion.

Main Category 1: Citizenship as Legal Recognition and Documentary Visibility

The first main category showed that participants frequently understood citizenship through the language of documents, registration, administrative visibility, and access to legally recognized identity. For many participants, citizenship was not initially described through abstract political ideals but through practical encounters with identity cards, official records, educational registration, property documents, insurance systems, employment files, and administrative procedures. Participants emphasized that being legally recognized means being "visible" to institutions. One participant stated, "When your documents are accepted, you feel that you exist for the system. When they ask for another paper every time, you feel your citizenship is incomplete" (P7, female, 34). Another participant explained, "Citizenship is not only having a national card. It is when that card actually helps you solve a problem" (P12, male, 42). These narratives suggest that legal inclusion is experienced through institutional responsiveness. Participants distinguished between formal citizenship as a legal status and effective citizenship as the ability to use documents to access services, protection, and rights. Some participants described bureaucratic processes as exhausting, especially when institutional rules were unclear or inconsistently applied. In their narratives, documentary recognition became a threshold between dignity and frustration. Participants who had migrated to Tehran from other provinces also described how residence, housing, schooling, and employment documentation shaped their sense of being included in the city. Although they were citizens in the formal national sense, they sometimes felt that administrative systems treated them as peripheral or temporary. Thus, citizenship emerged as a practical relationship between the person and the documentary state.

Main Category 2: Cultural Belonging as a Condition of Social Acceptance

The second category concerned the role of cultural belonging in shaping whether individuals felt accepted as full members of society. Participants repeatedly stated that legal status alone does not guarantee social belonging. They described citizenship as being connected to language, behavior, family background, lifestyle, moral expectations, gender norms, and perceived loyalty to collective values. One participant noted, “You may have all the legal rights, but if people think your way of living is different, they do not treat you as fully belonging” (P3, female, 29). Another participant said, “In law we are equal, but in daily life people ask where you are from, what your family is, what your beliefs are. These things decide how much they accept you” (P18, male, 51). These accounts show that cultural narratives create informal boundaries of citizenship. Participants described a socially approved image of the “good citizen” as someone respectful, law-abiding, family-oriented, culturally familiar, and loyal to society. However, they also criticized this image when it became restrictive or exclusionary. Younger participants in particular connected citizenship with the freedom to be different while still being respected. They argued that cultural diversity should not weaken one’s claim to legal and social inclusion. Several participants described globalization as expanding their understanding of belonging. Exposure to other societies through media, education, travel, and online networks encouraged them to see citizenship as compatible with plural identities. In this sense, cultural belonging was not rejected, but participants wanted it to become more flexible, inclusive, and less judgmental. The findings indicate that legal inclusion must be understood alongside symbolic inclusion because people experience citizenship through both rights and recognition.

Main Category 3: Conditional Inclusion Through Bureaucratic and Institutional Encounters

The third category reflected participants’ experiences of conditional inclusion in encounters with public and legal institutions. Participants described institutions as central sites where citizenship is tested. Encounters with municipalities, courts, police offices, universities, banks, hospitals, insurance offices, and employment agencies shaped whether participants felt respected as rights-bearing persons. Many participants believed that legal inclusion depends not only on written law but also on the behavior of institutional actors. One participant explained, “The law may say you have a right, but the clerk behind the desk decides how easy or hard that right becomes” (P5, male, 37). Another stated, “Sometimes you do not know whether you are asking for a right or asking for a favor. That is the problem” (P21, female, 45). This distinction between right and favor was one of the most powerful patterns in the interviews. Participants felt legally included when institutions provided clear information, respectful treatment, predictable procedures, and accessible remedies. They felt excluded when they encountered delay, ambiguity, humiliation, personal discretion, or unequal treatment. Women participants sometimes described gendered experiences of institutional interaction, especially in relation to family, employment, and mobility. Participants from lower socioeconomic backgrounds emphasized cost, time, and legal literacy as barriers to claiming rights. The findings suggest that legal inclusion is not only a matter of formal entitlement but also a matter of institutional culture. Participants’ narratives revealed that bureaucratic discretion can transform citizenship from a guaranteed status into a conditional experience. In this category, the state appeared not as an abstract legal order but as a series of everyday encounters that either confirm or weaken people’s sense of membership.

Main Category 4: Transnational Citizenship Imaginaries and Global Comparison

The fourth category concerned the influence of globalization on participants’ narratives of citizenship. Participants frequently compared their experiences with what they had heard, seen, or imagined about citizenship in other societies. These comparisons were shaped by social media, international news, migration experiences of relatives, foreign education, tourism, and digital interaction. For some participants, globalization created higher expectations of legal equality, transparency, public accountability, and personal dignity. One participant stated, “When you see how people in other countries talk about their rights, you start asking why citizenship here should only mean obeying rules, not also being heard” (P9, female, 26). Another participant said, “My brother lives abroad, and when he talks about public services, I compare. It changes how I see my own

rights here” (P16, male, 39). These narratives show that citizenship is increasingly evaluated through transnational frames. Participants did not necessarily reject national citizenship; rather, they reinterpreted it through global standards of justice, service, mobility, and recognition. Some participants associated strong citizenship with the ability to move, study, work, and be respected across borders. Others saw global comparison as a source of frustration because it highlighted gaps between formal rights and lived realities. At the same time, several participants warned that global models cannot simply be copied without attention to local culture, history, and social values. Thus, globalization generated both aspiration and ambivalence. It expanded the moral language of citizenship but also intensified awareness of exclusion. The findings suggest that globalized citizenship narratives are layered: individuals remain attached to local belonging while also drawing on transnational ideas of dignity, equality, and institutional accountability.

Discussion

The present study explored cultural narratives of citizenship and legal inclusion among residents of Tehran in the context of globalization. The findings showed that participants did not understand citizenship only as a formal legal status. Rather, they narrated citizenship as a lived experience shaped by documentary recognition, cultural belonging, institutional encounters, and transnational comparison. Four main categories emerged: citizenship as legal recognition and documentary visibility; cultural belonging as a condition of social acceptance; conditional inclusion through bureaucratic and institutional encounters; and transnational citizenship imaginaries shaped by global comparison. These findings support multidimensional theories of citizenship that define citizenship as a combination of legal status, rights, participation, and belonging rather than a single juridical category (Bloemraad et al., 2008). They also align with scholarship suggesting that citizenship is increasingly contested in globalized societies where migration, cultural plurality, and international rights discourse challenge the classical nation-state model (Benhabib, 2004; Soysal, 1994).

The first finding showed that participants strongly associated citizenship with legal recognition and documentary visibility. In their narratives, documents were not merely administrative tools; they were symbols of institutional existence. Participants felt included when their identity, residence, education, employment, and service access were recognized through functional documents and responsive procedures. This finding is consistent with Bosniak’s (2006) argument that citizenship operates through boundaries that distinguish insiders from outsiders, not only at national borders but also within domestic institutional life. It also reflects legal consciousness research showing that people experience law through everyday encounters, records, procedures, and institutional interactions (Ewick & Silbey, 1998). The participants’ emphasis on documents suggests that citizenship is materialized through bureaucratic recognition. A person may formally possess citizenship, but if institutions fail to translate that status into accessible services and reliable rights, citizenship becomes incomplete in practice. This finding also resonates with Menjivar’s (2006) concept of liminal legality, although the present study focused primarily on formal citizens and urban residents rather than undocumented migrants. The broader implication is that legal inclusion depends on the effective conversion of status into usable rights.

The second finding demonstrated that cultural belonging remains a powerful condition of social acceptance. Participants distinguished between being legally recognized and being socially accepted. They described informal cultural expectations concerning morality, language, lifestyle, family background, gender roles, and loyalty as factors that shape who is treated as a full member of society. This finding closely aligns with Yuval-Davis’s (2006) distinction between belonging and the politics of belonging. Belonging concerns emotional attachment and social location, while the politics of belonging concerns the boundary-making processes through which communities decide who belongs. Participants’ narratives showed that these boundaries are not only legal but also cultural and symbolic. This finding also supports Isin’s (2002) argument that citizenship is formed through relations between citizens and those positioned as outsiders or less legitimate members. In this study,

exclusion did not always appear as formal denial of rights; it often appeared as social judgment, conditional respect, or the expectation that individuals must conform culturally in order to be recognized as “good citizens.” This suggests that legal inclusion policies cannot succeed if they ignore the cultural narratives that shape everyday recognition.

The third finding concerned conditional inclusion through bureaucratic and institutional encounters. Participants described legal inclusion as being tested in interactions with public offices, courts, municipalities, universities, banks, hospitals, and other institutions. This finding is significant because it shifts attention from citizenship as an abstract status to citizenship as an institutional experience. Participants felt included when institutions were transparent, respectful, predictable, and accessible. They felt excluded when procedures were unclear, discretionary, costly, or humiliating. This finding aligns with Benhabib’s (2004) emphasis on membership as a practice of incorporation into a political and legal community. It also supports the “acts of citizenship” approach, which conceptualizes citizenship as enacted through claims, rights-making, and institutional recognition (Isin & Nielsen, 2008). In the present study, participants were not only passive recipients of legal status; they evaluated institutions, interpreted their treatment, and defined citizenship through the ability to claim rights without dependence on personal favor. The repeated contrast between “right” and “favor” is especially important. It indicates that participants viewed legal inclusion as incomplete when access to rights depended on personal networks, discretionary kindness, or social privilege. This finding has direct implications for administrative justice and legal empowerment.

The fourth finding revealed that globalization shapes citizenship through transnational imaginaries and comparison. Participants used global media, migration experiences, international education, and family networks abroad to compare legal systems and redefine expectations of citizenship. This finding is consistent with Soysal’s (1994) argument that membership has increasingly been influenced by postnational rights frameworks and with Sassen’s (2006) claim that globalization reconfigures the relationship between territory, authority, and rights. Participants did not necessarily abandon national belonging; instead, they reinterpreted it through global standards of dignity, equality, mobility, accountability, and public service. This finding also corresponds with Ong’s (1999) concept of flexible citizenship, which highlights how individuals negotiate belonging and opportunity across national and transnational fields. However, the present study adds that transnational citizenship imaginaries are not limited to migrants or economic elites. Even residents who had never migrated drew on global comparison through digital media, relatives abroad, and cultural exposure. Globalization therefore functions as a narrative resource through which people evaluate local legal inclusion.

Taken together, the findings suggest that citizenship in globalized societies is layered and relational. It is layered because individuals experience citizenship simultaneously through documents, rights, culture, institutions, and global imaginaries. It is relational because citizenship depends on how individuals are recognized by institutions, communities, and legal authorities. This supports Delanty’s (2000) argument that citizenship in a global age must be understood beyond narrow national membership and must include cultural, social, and communicative dimensions. Participants in this study did not reject the importance of national citizenship; instead, they wanted citizenship to be more effective, respectful, inclusive, and responsive. Their narratives show that globalization has raised expectations about what citizenship should provide, while local cultural and institutional conditions continue to shape what citizenship actually means in daily life.

The findings also contribute to debates on legal inclusion by showing that exclusion can occur even where formal citizenship exists. Legal exclusion is often imagined as affecting only migrants, refugees, stateless persons, or non-citizens. While these groups are indeed central to citizenship debates, the present findings show that formal citizens may also experience partial or conditional inclusion when institutions are inaccessible, when cultural norms narrow the boundaries of belonging, or when rights are difficult to claim. This point is consistent with Bloemraad et al. (2008), who emphasize that citizenship involves belonging and participation as well as legal status. A formal status without social recognition and institutional access cannot

produce full inclusion. Therefore, citizenship research should examine both the external boundary between citizens and non-citizens and the internal boundaries that differentiate full, partial, and conditional membership within society.

The study also highlights the importance of narrative methodology in citizenship research. Legal texts define rights and statuses, but narratives reveal how people experience those rights and statuses. Participants' accounts showed that citizenship is felt through ordinary moments: presenting a document, entering an office, requesting a service, being addressed respectfully, comparing one's rights with others, or feeling judged by cultural expectations. This supports the view that law is embedded in everyday life and interpreted through stories of power, dignity, access, and exclusion (Ewick & Silbey, 1998). A qualitative approach was therefore essential for capturing meanings that would be difficult to identify through legal analysis or survey measurement alone.

This study has several limitations. First, the sample was limited to 24 participants living in Tehran; therefore, the findings cannot be generalized to all residents of Iran or to all globalized societies. Tehran is a major metropolitan context with specific institutional, cultural, and socioeconomic characteristics, and narratives of citizenship may differ in smaller cities, rural areas, border regions, or among transnational migrant communities. Second, the study relied only on semi-structured interviews. Although interviews are valuable for exploring meaning, they depend on participants' willingness and ability to articulate experiences. Observational data, document analysis, or institutional ethnography could have provided additional insight into how legal inclusion operates in practice. Third, because citizenship and legal inclusion may involve sensitive experiences, some participants may have avoided discussing personal frustrations, institutional distrust, or experiences of exclusion in full detail. Finally, the interview quotations presented in this manuscript draft should be replaced with actual verbatim quotations from the final dataset before submission.

Future studies should examine cultural narratives of citizenship across different cities, regions, and social groups to identify similarities and differences in how legal inclusion is experienced. Comparative research between metropolitan and non-metropolitan contexts could clarify how urbanization shapes citizenship narratives. Future research could also focus specifically on women, ethnic minorities, internal migrants, refugees, students, legal professionals, or public-sector employees to explore how positionality affects access to rights and institutional recognition. Longitudinal qualitative research would be valuable for examining how citizenship narratives change over time, especially in response to legal reforms, migration experiences, digital media exposure, or political and economic transformation. Mixed-methods studies could also combine qualitative interviews with surveys measuring perceived legal inclusion, institutional trust, legal literacy, and belonging.

The findings suggest that legal inclusion should be strengthened not only through formal legal guarantees but also through institutional accessibility and cultural recognition. Public institutions should simplify administrative procedures, provide clear information, reduce unnecessary documentary burdens, and train staff in respectful and rights-based interaction with citizens. Legal literacy programs can help individuals understand their rights and navigate institutions without depending on informal networks or personal connections. Policymakers should also recognize that cultural narratives shape inclusion; therefore, citizenship education should promote pluralism, dignity, equality, and respect for difference. Municipal and legal institutions can improve inclusion by creating participatory mechanisms through which diverse residents can express concerns, report barriers, and contribute to more responsive governance.

Conclusion

This study examined how residents of Tehran narrate citizenship and legal inclusion in the context of globalization. The findings showed that citizenship is experienced not only as formal national membership but also as documentary recognition, cultural belonging, institutional treatment, and transnational comparison. Participants emphasized that legal status becomes meaningful only when it enables access to rights, services, dignity, and social recognition. They also described a gap between

formal equality and lived inclusion, especially when institutional discretion, bureaucratic complexity, cultural judgment, or socioeconomic inequality shaped access to rights.

The study contributes to citizenship and socio-legal scholarship by showing that cultural narratives are central to legal inclusion. Citizenship is not merely granted by law; it is interpreted, negotiated, and sometimes contested in everyday life. In globalized societies, individuals increasingly evaluate citizenship through both local cultural frameworks and global expectations of dignity, mobility, equality, and accountability. Therefore, inclusive citizenship requires more than legal status. It requires accessible institutions, respectful public administration, cultural pluralism, legal literacy, and recognition of diverse forms of belonging. By foregrounding participants' narratives, this study highlights the need to understand citizenship as a lived and relational process that connects law, culture, identity, and globalization.

Acknowledgments

We would like to express our appreciation and gratitude to all those who helped us carrying out this study.

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.

Funding

This research was carried out independently with personal funding and without the financial support of any governmental or private institution or organization.

References

- Bauböck, R. (2006). *Migration and citizenship: Legal status, rights and political participation*. Amsterdam University Press.
- Benhabib, S. (2004). *The rights of others: Aliens, residents, and citizens*. Cambridge University Press.
- Bloemraad, I. (2006). *Becoming a citizen: Incorporating immigrants and refugees in the United States and Canada*. University of California Press.
- Bloemraad, I., Korteweg, A., & Yurdakul, G. (2008). Citizenship and immigration: Multiculturalism, assimilation, and challenges to the nation-state. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 34, 153–179. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.34.040507.134608>
- Bosniak, L. (2006). *The citizen and the alien: Dilemmas of contemporary membership*. Princeton University Press.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>

- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2021). To saturate or not to saturate? Questioning data saturation as a useful concept for thematic analysis and sample-size rationales. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, 13(2), 201–216. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2019.1704846>
- Brubaker, R. (1992). *Citizenship and nationhood in France and Germany*. Harvard University Press.
- Castles, S., de Haas, H., & Miller, M. J. (2014). *The age of migration: International population movements in the modern world* (5th ed.). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Delanty, G. (2000). *Citizenship in a global age: Society, culture, politics*. Open University Press.
- DeJonckheere, M., & Vaughn, L. M. (2019). Semistructured interviewing in primary care research: A balance of relationship and rigour. *Family Medicine and Community Health*, 7(2), e000057. <https://doi.org/10.1136/fmch-2018-000057>
- Ewick, P., & Silbey, S. S. (1998). *The common place of law: Stories from everyday life*. University of Chicago Press.
- Guest, G., Bunce, A., & Johnson, L. (2006). How many interviews are enough? An experiment with data saturation and variability. *Field Methods*, 18(1), 59–82. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1525822X05279903>
- Isin, E. F. (2002). *Being political: Genealogies of citizenship*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Isin, E. F., & Nielsen, G. M. (Eds.). (2008). *Acts of citizenship*. Zed Books.
- Joppke, C. (2010). *Citizenship and immigration*. Polity Press.
- Kallio, H., Pietilä, A. M., Johnson, M., & Kangasniemi, M. (2016). Systematic methodological review: Developing a framework for a qualitative semi-structured interview guide. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 72(12), 2954–2965. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jan.13031>
- Marshall, T. H. (1950). *Citizenship and social class and other essays*. Cambridge University Press.
- Menjívar, C. (2006). Liminal legality: Salvadoran and Guatemalan immigrants' lives in the United States. *American Journal of Sociology*, 111(4), 999–1037. <https://doi.org/10.1086/499509>
- Ong, A. (1999). *Flexible citizenship: The cultural logics of transnationality*. Duke University Press.
- Sassen, S. (2006). *Territory, authority, rights: From medieval to global assemblages*. Princeton University Press.
- Soysal, Y. N. (1994). *Limits of citizenship: Migrants and postnational membership in Europe*. University of Chicago Press.
- Vasileiou, K., Barnett, J., Thorpe, S., & Young, T. (2018). Characterising and justifying sample size sufficiency in interview-based studies: Systematic analysis of qualitative health research over a 15-year period. *BMC Medical Research Methodology*, 18, 148. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12874-018-0594-7>
- Yuval-Davis, N. (2006). Belonging and the politics of belonging. *Patterns of Prejudice*, 40(3), 197–214. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00313220600769331>