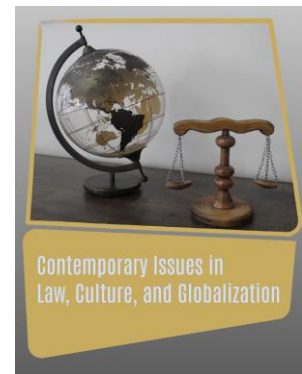




Community Perceptions of International Human Rights Law in Multicultural Contexts

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore how members of culturally diverse communities in Tehran perceive, interpret, and negotiate international human rights law in relation to local moral norms, social belonging, institutional trust, and everyday legal experience. This qualitative study was conducted using semi-structured interviews with 26 participants from multicultural communities in Tehran. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to include variation in gender, age, educational background, migration history, ethnic identity, and community role. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was achieved. Interviews focused on participants' awareness of international human rights law, perceived compatibility between human rights principles and local values, experiences of legal vulnerability, and the role of community mediators in translating rights discourse into everyday practice. All interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using thematic analysis. NVivo software was used to organize transcripts, manage codes, compare categories, and support theme development. The analysis generated four main categories: human rights as moral dignity rather than formal law; cultural negotiation between universal norms and local obligations; institutional mistrust and unequal access to rights; and community intermediaries as translators of legal meaning. Participants generally supported the ethical language of dignity, fairness, and protection, but many viewed international human rights law as distant, politically charged, or difficult to access. Human rights were most positively received when framed through familiar concepts such as justice, respect, family security, and protection from humiliation. However, tensions emerged around gender roles, minority recognition, migrant vulnerability, and distrust toward formal institutions. The findings suggest that international human rights law gains social meaning not merely through formal legal adoption but through community-level translation, trust-building, and culturally intelligible communication. In multicultural contexts, rights consciousness is shaped by the interaction between universal legal norms, local moral worlds, institutional credibility, and lived experiences of inclusion or exclusion.

Keywords: international human rights law; multiculturalism; legal consciousness; community perceptions; Tehran; qualitative research; vernacularization; legal vulnerability

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Introduction

International human rights law has become one of the most influential normative frameworks of the contemporary world. Since the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, human rights discourse has expanded from a set of post-war moral commitments into a dense body of international treaties, monitoring institutions, legal advocacy practices, and civil society movements (United Nations, 1948). The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights further consolidated the idea that individuals possess rights that are not merely dependent on national citizenship but are grounded in human dignity and protected through international legal standards (United Nations General Assembly, 1966a, 1966b). However, the social life of human rights is more complex than their formal recognition in international documents. Human rights principles are interpreted, accepted, resisted, reworked, and translated within specific social, cultural, religious, and political contexts. This makes community perception a central issue for understanding the practical legitimacy and everyday relevance of international human rights law.

The relationship between universal human rights and cultural diversity has long been debated in legal theory, anthropology, political philosophy, and socio-legal studies. Universalist approaches emphasize that human rights establish minimum standards of dignity, equality, and protection that apply to all persons regardless of nationality, culture, gender, religion, ethnicity, or legal status (Donnelly, 2013). From this perspective, the purpose of human rights law is precisely to protect individuals when local customs, state practices, or dominant social norms expose them to discrimination, exclusion, or violence. Yet critics of abstract universalism argue that rights discourse may appear distant, Western-centered, individualistic, or insufficiently attentive to local moral worlds when it is presented without cultural translation (An-Na'im, 1992; Cowan et al., 2001). This tension does not necessarily invalidate human rights; rather, it reveals that rights become socially meaningful only when communities understand how universal principles connect to their own experiences of justice, responsibility, family life, social order, and dignity.

Anthropological scholarship has shown that human rights are not simply transferred from global institutions to local communities in a linear manner. Merry (2006a) argues that international human rights norms often require translation into local justice frameworks before they can become practically useful. This process does not mean weakening rights; rather, it means making them understandable, actionable, and legitimate in everyday contexts. Similarly, Levitt and Merry (2009) use the concept of vernacularization to describe how global rights ideas are adapted into local languages, institutions, and moral vocabularies. Community actors, legal advocates, educators, religious figures, social workers, and civil society organizations often act as intermediaries who connect abstract international norms to lived social concerns. In multicultural contexts, this translation process is especially important because communities may differ in language, religious interpretation, migration experience, class position, and access to formal legal institutions.

The study of community perceptions is also closely linked to legal consciousness. Legal consciousness refers to the ways ordinary people understand, experience, narrate, and use law in everyday life (Ewick & Silbey, 1998). People do not encounter law only in courts or official documents; they encounter it through police interactions, migration procedures, employment relations, family disputes, school systems, media narratives, and informal community advice. As a result, people's perceptions of international human rights law may depend less on technical legal knowledge and more on whether they believe legal institutions are trustworthy, accessible, fair, and responsive. A person may affirm the moral value of human rights while simultaneously doubting that those rights can protect them in practice. This distinction between normative approval and institutional confidence is crucial for understanding human rights in multicultural societies.

Multicultural contexts intensify these questions because they bring multiple normative orders into contact. Individuals may simultaneously belong to national legal systems, religious communities, ethnic networks, migrant groups, family structures, professional institutions, and transnational social fields. Legal pluralism is not limited to formal coexistence between state and non-state law; it also appears in everyday negotiations between official norms and community expectations (Santos, 2002). A woman may interpret rights through both international equality discourse and familial duties. A migrant may understand rights as universal in principle but conditional in practice because of documentation status, language barriers, or fear of institutional exposure. A minority community member may view rights as a promise of recognition while also fearing that public rights claims could produce stigma or backlash. These examples show that perceptions of international human rights law are shaped by both cultural meaning and social position.

The multicultural setting of Tehran provides a significant context for examining these dynamics. As a large metropolitan city, Tehran includes long-term residents, internal migrants, ethnic and linguistic communities, Afghan migrants and refugees, religious minorities, students, workers, and professionals with different degrees of exposure to international discourse. The city is not multicultural only in demographic terms; it is multicultural because residents bring different moral vocabularies, legal expectations, migration histories, and forms of belonging into shared urban spaces. In such a context, international human rights law may be perceived in multiple and sometimes contradictory ways: as a universal language of dignity, as a foreign political discourse, as a legal instrument for protection, as an abstract ideal with little practical force, or as a contested framework requiring cultural interpretation.

Existing literature has examined the universalism–relativism debate, the anthropology of human rights, and the translation of global norms into local settings (An-Na'im, 1992; Cowan et al., 2001; Goodale, 2009; Merry, 2006a). However, more empirical work is needed on how ordinary community members, rather than only legal experts or activists, perceive international human rights law in multicultural urban contexts. Much of the human rights literature focuses on institutions, treaties, courts, and advocacy organizations, while everyday interpretations remain underexplored. This gap is important because the legitimacy of human rights law depends not only on formal ratification or expert interpretation but also on whether people recognize rights as relevant to their lived realities.

The present qualitative study addresses this gap by exploring community perceptions of international human rights law among participants from culturally diverse communities in Tehran. Rather than treating culture as a fixed obstacle to human rights, the study examines how participants actively negotiate, reinterpret, and evaluate rights discourse. The research is guided by the following question: How do members of multicultural communities perceive international human rights law in relation to local values, institutional trust, legal vulnerability, and everyday social experience? By focusing on perceptions, meanings, and narratives, the study contributes to socio-legal and human rights scholarship by showing how international norms are socially received, morally translated, and practically evaluated at the community level.

Methods and Materials

This study used a qualitative research design to explore community perceptions of international human rights law in multicultural contexts. A qualitative approach was appropriate because the purpose of the study was not to measure attitudes statistically but to understand how participants interpreted human rights concepts, connected them to lived experience, and negotiated tensions between international legal norms and local cultural expectations. The study was informed by interpretive qualitative inquiry, which assumes that social meanings are constructed through language, experience, and interaction (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Semi-structured interviews were selected as the sole data collection method because they allowed participants to describe personal interpretations, community narratives, and perceived legal vulnerabilities in depth while enabling the researcher to maintain consistency across interviews.

Participants were recruited from multicultural communities in Tehran using purposive sampling. Inclusion criteria were: being at least 18 years old, residing in Tehran for at least one year, belonging to or working closely with a culturally diverse community, and being willing to participate in an audio-recorded interview. The sample included 26 participants. The sample size was determined by theoretical saturation, meaning that recruitment continued until no substantially new codes, categories, or conceptual insights emerged from additional interviews. The participants included community members, students, workers, migrants, local activists, educators, and individuals with experience in community-based mediation or support services. This diversity was intended to capture different forms of rights consciousness across gender, age, education, ethnic background, migration history, and community role.

Data were collected through individual semi-structured interviews. The interview guide included open-ended questions on participants' understanding of human rights, familiarity with international human rights law, perceived compatibility between human rights and local values, experiences of discrimination or legal vulnerability, trust in formal institutions, and the role of families, community leaders, media, schools, and civil society actors in shaping rights perceptions. Example questions included: "When you hear the term human rights, what does it mean to you?" "Do you think international human rights law is relevant to everyday life in your community?" "Are there situations where human rights ideas conflict with local cultural or religious expectations?" and "Who helps people understand or claim their rights in your community?" Probing questions were used to clarify meanings and elicit examples.

All interviews were conducted in a private and comfortable setting selected by the participant or through secure online communication when preferred. Interviews lasted between 45 and 75 minutes. Before each interview, participants received information about the purpose of the study, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and their right to withdraw at any stage. Written or recorded informed consent was obtained. Participants' names and identifying details were removed from transcripts and replaced with codes such as P01, P02, and P03. Given the sensitivity of discussing rights, minority status, migration, gender norms, and institutional trust, special attention was given to avoiding questions that could expose participants to social or legal risk.

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis following the general principles proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). First, interviews were transcribed verbatim and read repeatedly to achieve immersion in the data. Second, initial codes were generated line by line to capture meaningful units related to rights awareness, cultural interpretation, trust, vulnerability, and community mediation. Third, similar codes were grouped into broader categories. Fourth, categories were reviewed in relation to the full dataset to ensure that they accurately reflected participants' narratives. Fifth, themes were defined and named. NVivo software was used to organize transcripts, store analytic memos, compare codes across participant characteristics, and develop thematic maps.

To enhance trustworthiness, several strategies were used. Credibility was supported through prolonged engagement with the interview material, member checking with selected participants, and peer review of coding decisions. Dependability was supported by maintaining an audit trail that documented sampling decisions, interview guide revisions, coding development, and theme refinement. Confirmability was addressed through reflexive memo-writing, in which the researcher recorded assumptions, emotional responses, and interpretive decisions during analysis. Transferability was supported by providing thick descriptions of the research context, participant characteristics, and thematic findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Findings

In this illustrative sample, 26 participants from multicultural communities in Tehran took part in the study. Of these, 14 participants were women and 12 were men. Participants' ages ranged from 19 to 58 years. Six participants were aged 18–25, nine were aged 26–35, seven were aged 36–45, and four were older than 45. Regarding educational level, five participants had

completed secondary education or below, six held a high school diploma, nine held a bachelor's degree, and six had postgraduate education. In terms of self-identified community background, eight participants identified as Persian, five as Azerbaijani/Turkic, three as Kurdish, two as Arab, five as Afghan migrants or second-generation Afghan residents, and three as members of religious or ethno-religious minority communities. Eleven participants reported previous direct experience with legal or administrative procedures, including residency documentation, employment disputes, family legal matters, or discrimination complaints. This diversity enabled the study to capture varied perceptions of international human rights law across social location, community identity, and institutional experience.

The first main category showed that participants often understood human rights less as a technical body of international law and more as a moral language of dignity, respect, and protection from humiliation. Many participants had limited familiarity with specific treaties or legal mechanisms, but they associated human rights with fairness, being treated as a person, freedom from insult, and protection against arbitrary treatment. For several participants, the phrase “international human rights law” sounded distant and institutional, whereas “human dignity” felt more understandable and emotionally meaningful. One participant stated, “When you say international law, I think of governments and politics, but when you say human rights, I think of not being humiliated because of who you are” (P07). Another participant explained, “People here may not know the articles and conventions, but they understand when someone is treated unjustly. They call it oppression or disrespect, not necessarily human rights” (P12). This category suggests that rights consciousness existed even where formal legal literacy was limited. Participants translated human rights into locally recognizable moral terms such as justice, respect, honor, security, and humane treatment. However, the gap between moral approval and legal knowledge was significant. Several participants believed that human rights were “good words” but did not know how such rights could be claimed, enforced, or protected in practice.

The second main category concerned the negotiation between universal human rights principles and local cultural, religious, and familial expectations. Participants rarely rejected human rights as a whole; rather, they distinguished between rights they considered compatible with local values and rights they perceived as controversial or culturally sensitive. Rights related to protection from violence, access to education, respect for minorities, and fair treatment of migrants were generally viewed positively. However, participants expressed more ambivalence regarding gender roles, family authority, individual autonomy, and public criticism of cultural traditions. One participant noted, “Some rights are easy to accept because every religion and culture says people should not be abused. But some rights are discussed as if family and tradition have no value, and then people resist” (P04). Another participant said, “I do not think human rights should erase culture. It should protect people inside culture, especially those who have less power” (P18). These narratives show that participants did not perceive culture and human rights as simple opposites. Instead, they evaluated rights through a relational lens, asking whether rights discourse could protect vulnerable people while still respecting social bonds. For some participants, international human rights law became acceptable when it was framed through shared ethical concepts, but it became suspect when presented as external judgment or cultural superiority.

The third main category revealed that participants' perceptions of international human rights law were strongly shaped by trust or mistrust toward formal institutions. Participants often distinguished between believing in rights and believing that institutions would protect those rights. Migrant participants and members of minority communities were particularly likely to describe rights as conditional, fragile, or dependent on social status. One participant stated, “On paper, maybe everyone has rights, but in real life some people are afraid to even ask. If you do not have the right documents or the right connections, you stay silent” (P21). Another participant explained, “People do not complain because they think nothing will change, or worse, they may create problems for themselves” (P09). Participants described barriers such as lack of legal information, cost of legal

advice, fear of administrative consequences, language differences, social stigma, and uncertainty about complaint mechanisms. This finding indicates that international human rights law may be normatively admired but practically perceived as inaccessible. Rights were not viewed only as legal entitlements; they were experienced through power relations, documentation status, class position, and institutional credibility. For many participants, the problem was not disagreement with human rights principles but doubt about whether those principles could be mobilized safely and effectively.

The fourth main category highlighted the role of community intermediaries in translating human rights language into practical and culturally intelligible forms. Participants frequently mentioned teachers, lawyers, social workers, religiously trusted figures, local activists, educated family members, migrant support networks, and experienced community elders as people who helped others understand their rights. These intermediaries did not merely transmit legal information; they interpreted it, softened its political tone, connected it to local values, and advised people on whether and how to act. One participant said, “People trust someone who speaks their language and understands their situation. A law written far away becomes useful only when someone explains what it means for your problem” (P16). Another participant observed, “Sometimes the same right is rejected if it comes from television or politics, but accepted if a teacher explains it as respect and justice” (P23). This category shows that human rights vernacularization occurs through relational trust. Participants were more receptive to human rights norms when they were communicated by socially credible actors who could bridge international legal concepts and community moral frameworks. However, the influence of intermediaries was uneven. In some communities, intermediaries expanded rights awareness; in others, they filtered rights claims through conservative interpretations or discouraged public complaints to preserve social harmony.

Discussion

The first finding showed that participants commonly perceived human rights as a language of moral dignity rather than as a technical system of international law. This result aligns with socio-legal scholarship emphasizing that ordinary people often encounter law through everyday narratives, moral judgments, and practical experiences rather than through formal legal doctrine (Ewick & Silbey, 1998). Participants’ limited knowledge of specific international instruments did not mean that they lacked rights consciousness. Instead, they expressed rights through familiar moral categories such as dignity, justice, respect, and protection from humiliation. This supports Merry’s (2006a) argument that human rights become meaningful when translated into local moral vocabularies. Donnelly (2013) similarly argues that the universality of human rights does not require identical cultural language everywhere; rather, universal rights can be justified and interpreted through diverse ethical traditions. The findings therefore suggest that community acceptance of international human rights law may depend less on technical legal education alone and more on the ability to connect legal principles to already meaningful concepts of humane treatment and social justice. At the same time, the gap between moral support and legal knowledge is important. If people view human rights as admirable but abstract, they may not know how to use rights language when facing discrimination, exclusion, or institutional abuse.

The second finding concerned cultural negotiation between universal norms and local obligations. Participants did not present culture and human rights as completely incompatible; instead, they evaluated rights through the question of whether rights discourse could protect vulnerable persons without dismissing family, religion, and community belonging. This finding is consistent with cross-cultural human rights scholarship, which rejects simplistic oppositions between universalism and relativism (An-Na’im, 1992; Cowan et al., 2001). Rather than treating culture as a fixed barrier, participants described culture as a field of interpretation, contestation, and moral reasoning. This supports Goodale’s (2009) view that human rights are socially produced and interpreted through lived cultural worlds. The finding also aligns with Levitt and Merry’s (2009) concept of vernacularization, because participants were more likely to accept human rights when they were framed in terms of

protection, dignity, justice, and responsible social relations. However, ambivalence around gender roles, family authority, and individual autonomy suggests that some areas of human rights discourse remain contested. These tensions should not be interpreted as simple rejection of rights but as evidence that human rights communication must engage with local normative concerns while maintaining clear protection for individuals who are vulnerable within those norms.

The third finding showed that institutional mistrust and unequal access strongly shaped perceptions of rights. Participants distinguished between the existence of rights in principle and the ability to claim rights in practice. This distinction is central to socio-legal research because legal consciousness is shaped by perceived institutional accessibility, fairness, and risk (Ewick & Silbey, 1998). For migrants, minorities, and socially vulnerable groups, rights may be experienced as conditional despite universal legal language. This finding is also consistent with Fraser's (2008) argument that justice requires not only formal recognition but also participatory parity, meaning that individuals must have real social and institutional conditions for making claims. When participants feared complaint procedures, lacked legal information, or believed that institutions would not respond fairly, international human rights law appeared distant and weak. This result suggests that the legitimacy of human rights law depends on institutional trust. Human rights education alone is insufficient if people do not believe that legal and administrative systems will protect them safely. Therefore, legal vulnerability should be understood as both a knowledge problem and a power problem. Communities may know that rights exist but still avoid claiming them because of fear, cost, stigma, documentation issues, or previous negative experiences.

The fourth finding highlighted community intermediaries as translators of legal meaning. Participants described teachers, lawyers, social workers, activists, family members, religiously credible figures, and community elders as key actors who explain rights in practical terms. This finding strongly supports Merry's (2006b) argument that intermediaries occupy the "middle" between transnational human rights systems and local social worlds. Human rights norms do not simply arrive in communities as self-evident principles; they are interpreted by actors who possess social credibility, linguistic competence, cultural knowledge, and practical experience. Levitt and Merry (2009) similarly show that vernacularization involves both adaptation and selective translation. The present findings add that trust is a decisive condition of translation. Participants were more receptive when rights were explained by someone who understood their cultural background and everyday problems. However, the role of intermediaries was not automatically emancipatory. Some intermediaries may expand rights awareness, while others may restrict claims to avoid conflict or preserve community hierarchy. This shows that community-based rights translation must be critically examined. Effective human rights practice should support intermediaries who can connect international standards to local realities without diluting core protections for equality, dignity, and non-discrimination.

Overall, the findings suggest that community perceptions of international human rights law are shaped by a fourfold interaction between moral meaning, cultural negotiation, institutional trust, and relational mediation. Human rights were most meaningful to participants when they were presented not as abstract external rules but as protections connected to lived experiences of respect, safety, fairness, and social belonging. This supports the broader anthropological view that human rights are not merely legal texts but social practices that become real through interpretation, advocacy, and institutional response (Goodale, 2009; Merry, 2006a). The findings also show that multicultural contexts require a nuanced approach. Cultural diversity does not necessarily weaken human rights; it creates multiple pathways through which rights can be interpreted. However, diversity also exposes inequalities in whose voices are heard, whose claims are believed, and whose rights are practically protected. In this sense, international human rights law in multicultural settings must be understood as both universal and situated: universal in its commitment to dignity and equality, but situated in the ways people understand, trust, and use it.

This study has several limitations. First, the sample was limited to 26 participants from Tehran; therefore, the findings cannot be generalized to all multicultural communities in Iran or other national contexts. Second, the study relied only on semi-

structured interviews, which provided rich narrative data but did not include observation, document analysis, or focus groups. Third, because human rights, migration, minority identity, and institutional trust are sensitive topics, some participants may have moderated their responses or avoided discussing certain experiences openly. Fourth, the study focused on perceptions rather than legal outcomes, so it did not examine whether participants' rights claims were formally successful. Finally, the diversity of the sample was useful for exploring multiple perspectives, but it also limited the depth with which each specific community background could be analyzed.

Future research should examine community perceptions of international human rights law in other cities and compare urban, semi-urban, and rural contexts. Comparative studies could explore how rights discourse is interpreted differently among migrants, ethnic minorities, religious minorities, women, youth, and legal professionals. Future studies may also combine interviews with participant observation, media analysis, and institutional case studies to examine how rights language circulates across families, schools, courts, civil society organizations, and digital platforms. Longitudinal research would be useful for understanding how rights perceptions change after legal education, community advocacy, migration experiences, or exposure to discrimination. Researchers could also investigate the role of specific intermediaries, such as teachers, lawyers, social workers, religious leaders, and community activists, in shaping rights awareness and legal empowerment.

Practically, the findings suggest that human rights education in multicultural contexts should avoid abstract, technical, or externally imposed language. Educational programs should connect international human rights principles to locally meaningful concepts such as dignity, justice, respect, safety, and protection from humiliation. Legal information should be provided in accessible language and, where necessary, in multiple languages. Community-based intermediaries should be trained to explain rights accurately while remaining sensitive to cultural and social realities. Institutions should also strengthen confidential, affordable, and safe complaint mechanisms so that vulnerable groups can seek help without fear of retaliation or stigma. Finally, human rights practice should focus not only on awareness but also on trust-building, because people are unlikely to claim rights unless they believe institutions will respond fairly and safely.

Conclusion

This study explored community perceptions of international human rights law in multicultural contexts in Tehran. The findings indicate that participants generally valued the moral principles of human rights, especially dignity, fairness, respect, and protection from harm. However, international human rights law was often perceived as distant, abstract, or politically charged unless translated into familiar moral and cultural language. Participants negotiated rights through local obligations, family expectations, religious values, migration experiences, and institutional trust. The study showed that rights consciousness is not only a matter of legal knowledge but also a matter of social belonging, vulnerability, and credibility. Community intermediaries played an important role in making rights understandable and usable, but their influence depended on trust, interpretation, and social position. The study concludes that international human rights law becomes meaningful in multicultural societies when universal principles are communicated through culturally intelligible language, supported by trustworthy institutions, and connected to the everyday experiences of diverse communities.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adhered in conducting and writing this article.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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