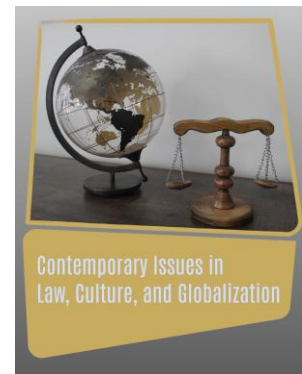




Legal Adaptation to Global Migration Flows: Institutional Responses and Social Challenges

1. Pegah. Yeganeh: Department of Public Law, Ferdowsi University of Mashhad, Mashhad, Iran

2. Hasan. Amiri*: Department of Public Law, Ferdowsi University of Mashhad, Mashhad, Iran. Email: hasan.amiri.publaw@gmail.com
(Corresponding Author)

ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore how legal and administrative institutions adapt to global migration flows and how such adaptations shape social challenges, rights access, and institutional practice in Tehran. A qualitative descriptive design was used. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 24 participants in Tehran, including legal practitioners, public-sector administrators, NGO and humanitarian workers, academic experts, and migrant-community advocates. Participants were selected through purposive and snowball sampling based on their professional or experiential engagement with migration-related legal and social issues. Interviews continued until theoretical saturation was achieved after the twenty-first interview, with three additional interviews conducted for confirmation. The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, anonymized, and analyzed using inductive thematic analysis supported by NVivo software. Trustworthiness was strengthened through member checking, peer debriefing, analytic memo writing, and maintenance of an audit trail. The analysis produced five main categories: reactive legal adaptation and administrative improvisation; documentation as the gateway to rights and vulnerability; fragmented institutional coordination; urban social challenges and public perceptions; and the tension between sovereignty, security, and human-rights protection. Participants described institutional responses as active but uneven, with frontline officials often relying on discretionary practices when formal legal frameworks were unclear or slow to respond. Documentation status emerged as the central mechanism through which migrants accessed or lost access to employment, education, housing, health care, and legal protection. The findings suggest that legal adaptation to migration flows requires more than policy revision; it depends on predictable procedures, inter-institutional coordination, rights-based implementation, and local social trust. In Tehran, institutional responses are shaped by the simultaneous pressures of humanitarian need, administrative capacity, public concern, and state sovereignty. A more integrated legal-social model is needed to reduce legal uncertainty, protect vulnerable migrants, and strengthen institutional legitimacy.

Keywords: global migration; legal adaptation; migration governance; institutional response; social challenges; qualitative research; Tehran; migrant rights

How to cite this article:

Yeganeh, P. & Amiri, H. (2025). Legal Adaptation to Global Migration Flows: Institutional Responses and Social Challenges. *Contemporary Issues in Law, Culture, and Globalization*, 1(6), 11-21. <https://doi.org/10.61838/cileg.1.6.2>

© 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

International migration has become one of the defining legal, institutional, and social questions of the contemporary world. Population movements are no longer adequately understood as exceptional episodes caused only by war, poverty, or political

collapse; rather, they are embedded in the ordinary functioning of globalization, labor markets, environmental disruption, demographic change, conflict, family formation, and transnational networks. The United Nations estimated that the number of international migrants reached 304 million in 2024, nearly double the 1990 figure, while UNHCR reported that 123.2 million people were forcibly displaced at the end of 2024 as a result of persecution, conflict, violence, human-rights violations, and events seriously disturbing public order (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs [UN DESA], 2025; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2025). These figures demonstrate that migration is not merely a demographic phenomenon but also a legal and institutional challenge requiring states to adapt their laws, administrative systems, and social policies to increasingly complex forms of mobility.

Legal adaptation to migration flows refers to the ways in which states, courts, public agencies, municipalities, and civil-society actors adjust legal categories, procedures, rights frameworks, and administrative practices in response to changing migration realities. This adaptation may take the form of legislative reform, temporary protection mechanisms, refugee registration systems, work-permit schemes, regularization programs, deportation procedures, local integration policies, or humanitarian exemptions. However, legal adaptation is rarely linear. Migration governance often develops through a combination of formal law, executive decision-making, administrative discretion, emergency measures, and informal institutional practice. As migration pressures intensify, the gap between written law and implemented law becomes especially significant. Boswell (2007) argues that migration policy must be understood not only through public political discourse but also through the organizational interests and practical routines of administrative systems. Similarly, Betts (2011) emphasizes that global migration governance is fragmented across multiple regimes, including refugee protection, labor mobility, human rights, development, security, and humanitarian response. Therefore, legal adaptation is best understood as a multi-level process shaped by both normative commitments and institutional constraints.

The legal governance of migration operates within a persistent tension between state sovereignty and human-rights protection. States claim the sovereign authority to regulate entry, residence, employment, and removal, yet they are also bound by international legal norms, including refugee protection, non-refoulement, due process, family unity, non-discrimination, and basic social rights. The 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol remain central instruments in refugee protection, particularly through the principle of non-refoulement, which prohibits returning refugees to territories where their life or freedom would be threatened (UNHCR, 2011). The Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, adopted in 2018, further reflects the international community's recognition that migration governance requires cooperation across borders and policy sectors, although it is non-binding (United Nations, 2018). Yet implementation remains uneven because international standards must be translated into national laws, bureaucratic procedures, and local institutional practices.

The increasing complexity of migration flows also challenges traditional legal categories. Migrants may move for mixed reasons, including economic hardship, family reunification, conflict, climate-related insecurity, education, persecution, or a combination of these factors. Legal systems, however, often rely on rigid categories such as refugee, asylum seeker, labor migrant, undocumented migrant, temporary resident, irregular entrant, or stateless person. These categories determine access to protection and services, but they may fail to capture the lived realities of people whose mobility is shaped by overlapping vulnerabilities. Menjivar and Abrego (2012) describe how immigration law can produce “legal violence” when restrictive or uncertain legal statuses structure everyday suffering, including fear, family separation, labor exploitation, and limited access to institutions. This insight is important because the consequences of legal adaptation are not confined to state institutions; they are experienced in ordinary social spaces such as workplaces, schools, neighborhoods, hospitals, housing markets, and courts.

Institutional responses to migration are especially important in urban contexts. Many migrants and refugees live not in camps but in cities, where they interact daily with local government offices, schools, employers, landlords, health-care providers, police, and informal community networks. UNHCR's Iran information indicates that in 2026 Iran hosted around 1.65 million forcibly displaced people of different documentation statuses, including approximately 770,000 refugees with Amayesh and Hoviat cards, and that 99% lived in urban areas rather than settlements. This urban reality makes Tehran a significant setting for examining legal adaptation because migration governance is encountered not only through national refugee policy but also through municipal services, neighborhood-level interactions, administrative documentation, employment regulation, legal aid, and social inclusion.

Iran has a long history of hosting Afghan and Iraqi refugees and migrants, and its legal relationship to refugee protection is shaped by both international and domestic frameworks. Iran acceded to the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1967 Protocol in 1976, with reservations relating to wage-earning employment, public relief, labor legislation and social security, and freedom of movement. These reservations are particularly relevant for understanding the institutional and social challenges associated with employment, welfare access, and mobility. In practice, Afghan migrants and refugees in Iran may occupy different documentation statuses, including recognized refugee status, temporary documentation, visa-based residence, expired documentation, or undocumented presence. Each status carries different consequences for access to education, health services, employment, legal protection, and administrative recognition. Thus, Tehran represents a complex legal-social field in which global migration flows intersect with national sovereignty, humanitarian obligations, urban governance, and public perceptions.

A central issue in migration governance is the institutional capacity to transform law into predictable and fair practice. Legal adaptation may appear progressive at the policy level but remain limited if implementation is fragmented across institutions. For example, one agency may prioritize border control, another may focus on documentation, another may provide education, while NGOs and humanitarian actors attempt to fill gaps in legal aid and social services. Without coordination, migrants may encounter contradictory rules, repeated documentation demands, unclear referral pathways, and discretionary decisions. Oomen (2021) shows that local authorities may adopt divergent legal strategies within multi-level migration governance, producing both innovation and legal uncertainty. This is relevant in Tehran because legal adaptation is not only a matter of national legislation; it also depends on how frontline actors interpret, negotiate, and apply rules in everyday administrative encounters.

Social challenges are equally central to legal adaptation. Migration may generate public concerns regarding employment competition, housing pressure, cultural difference, security, and access to public services. These concerns may be intensified by economic instability, media narratives, and political discourse. At the same time, migrants contribute to host societies through labor, entrepreneurship, cultural exchange, caregiving, and transnational economic networks. The social meaning of migration is therefore contested. Legal institutions must respond not only to the administrative question of "who may enter or remain" but also to the social question of how diverse populations can coexist under conditions of legal uncertainty and unequal access to resources. De Haas, Castles, and Miller (2020) argue that migration is deeply connected to broader processes of social transformation, making it insufficient to treat migrants as isolated objects of control. Instead, migration governance must address the structural conditions that produce mobility and the institutional arrangements that shape inclusion or exclusion.

Despite extensive scholarship on migration law and governance, there remains a need for context-specific qualitative research on how legal adaptation is understood by institutional and community actors in urban host settings. Quantitative migration data can show the scale of mobility, but qualitative inquiry can reveal how laws are interpreted, how administrative discretion operates, how service gaps are experienced, and how social tensions emerge. Semi-structured interviews are particularly valuable for examining these processes because they allow participants to describe institutional routines, legal

ambiguities, and everyday challenges in their own terms (Kallio et al., 2016). Thematic analysis also provides a flexible approach for identifying patterns across diverse stakeholder perspectives (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The present study therefore explores legal adaptation to global migration flows through the perspectives of participants in Tehran who engage with migration-related legal, administrative, humanitarian, academic, or community issues. The study asks: How do participants describe institutional responses to migration flows? What legal and social challenges emerge in the adaptation process? How do documentation, coordination, discretion, and public perception shape the everyday governance of migration? By addressing these questions, the study contributes to scholarship on migration governance, socio-legal adaptation, and urban institutional response. It also provides practical insights for policymakers, legal practitioners, municipalities, NGOs, and service providers seeking to develop more predictable, coordinated, and rights-sensitive responses to migration.

Methods and Materials

This study used a qualitative descriptive design to explore legal adaptation to global migration flows and the institutional and social challenges associated with migration governance in Tehran. A qualitative design was appropriate because the study aimed to understand meanings, interpretations, institutional experiences, and social processes rather than measure predetermined variables. The study was informed by an interpretive socio-legal perspective, which assumes that law is not only a formal system of rules but also a set of practices interpreted and enacted by institutions, professionals, and affected communities. The analysis followed inductive thematic analysis, allowing categories to emerge from the interview data while remaining sensitive to existing scholarship on migration governance, refugee protection, legal precarity, and institutional adaptation.

The participants were 24 individuals living or working in Tehran who had direct professional, institutional, academic, or community-based experience with migration-related legal and social issues. Purposive sampling was first used to identify information-rich participants, and snowball sampling was then applied to reach additional participants with relevant expertise. The final sample included 6 legal practitioners, 5 public or municipal administrators, 5 NGO or humanitarian-service workers, 4 academic or policy researchers, and 4 migrant-community advocates. Inclusion criteria were: being at least 18 years old, residing or working in Tehran, having at least one year of direct experience with migration-related legal, administrative, social-service, or community issues, and willingness to participate in an audio-recorded interview. Participants who had no direct knowledge of migration-related institutional or social challenges were excluded.

The exact sample size was determined by theoretical saturation. Saturation was reached after 21 interviews, when no substantially new categories emerged from the data. Three further interviews were conducted to confirm the stability of the categories and deepen interpretation. The final sample size of 24 was considered sufficient for the scope of the study because the participants represented multiple institutional and community positions relevant to migration governance.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. An interview guide was developed based on the research objectives and a review of literature on migration governance, legal adaptation, refugee protection, documentation, institutional coordination, and social integration. The interview guide included open-ended questions such as: “How have legal and administrative institutions responded to recent migration flows?” “What are the main legal challenges faced by migrants and institutions?” “How does documentation status affect access to rights and services?” “What forms of coordination exist between legal, municipal, humanitarian, and community actors?” and “What social challenges are most visible in Tehran in relation to migration?”

Interviews were conducted in Persian in a private and convenient setting chosen by the participant or through secure online communication when in-person participation was not possible. Each interview lasted between 45 and 80 minutes. With participant consent, all interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Field notes were written after each interview

to record contextual impressions, emerging codes, and reflexive observations. All identifying information was removed from transcripts, and participants were assigned codes from P1 to P24.

Data were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis supported by NVivo software. First, the researchers read the transcripts several times to become familiar with the data. Second, initial codes were generated line by line, focusing on references to legal uncertainty, institutional response, documentation, access to services, discretionary decision-making, social tensions, and rights protection. Third, related codes were grouped into preliminary categories. Fourth, the categories were reviewed against the full dataset to ensure that they accurately reflected participants' accounts. Fifth, the final categories were defined, named, and organized into an interpretive structure. NVivo software was used to organize transcripts, manage codes, compare categories, and retrieve relevant quotations.

Trustworthiness was addressed through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was strengthened through member checking with selected participants, peer discussion of the coding framework, and comparison of interpretations across participant groups. Transferability was supported by providing detailed descriptions of the research context, participants, and categories. Dependability was enhanced through an audit trail documenting sampling decisions, coding revisions, and category development. Confirmability was supported through reflexive memo writing and preservation of analytic notes to reduce the influence of researcher assumptions.

Participation was voluntary, and all participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the interview process, their right to withdraw, and the measures taken to protect confidentiality. Written or recorded informed consent was obtained before each interview. No real names, institutional identifiers, or sensitive personal details were included in the analysis. Audio files and transcripts were stored securely and were accessible only to the research team. Because migration status and institutional practice can involve sensitive legal and social issues, special care was taken to anonymize quotations and avoid details that could identify participants or third parties.

Findings

A total of 24 participants took part in the study. Of these, 13 participants were men (54.2%) and 11 were women (45.8%). The age distribution included 6 participants aged 25–34 years (25.0%), 9 participants aged 35–44 years (37.5%), 6 participants aged 45–54 years (25.0%), and 3 participants aged 55 years or older (12.5%). Regarding educational background, 5 participants held a bachelor's degree (20.8%), 12 held a master's degree (50.0%), 4 held a doctoral degree (16.7%), and 3 had professional legal or administrative qualifications in addition to university education (12.5%). In terms of professional role, 6 participants were legal practitioners (25.0%), 5 were public or municipal administrators (20.8%), 5 were NGO or humanitarian-service workers (20.8%), 4 were academic or policy researchers (16.7%), and 4 were migrant-community advocates (16.7%). Participants' experience with migration-related issues ranged from 1 to 15 years; 5 participants had 1–3 years of experience (20.8%), 10 had 4–7 years (41.7%), and 9 had 8 years or more (37.5%).

The first main category concerned the reactive nature of legal and administrative adaptation. Participants generally agreed that institutions had not remained passive in the face of migration flows; however, they described responses as frequently delayed, partial, and dependent on administrative improvisation rather than comprehensive legal planning. Legal practitioners emphasized that formal legal frameworks often lagged behind changing migration realities, especially when migrants moved between different statuses or when temporary documents expired. Public administrators described the need to “solve cases” even when formal instructions were incomplete. One legal practitioner explained, “The law gives us categories, but real cases do not always arrive in those categories. A person may be a worker, a father, an asylum seeker, undocumented, and vulnerable at the same time” (P3). Participants stated that frontline officials often relied on circulars, informal guidance, or discretionary judgment when formal procedures were unclear. While this flexibility sometimes helped prevent immediate harm, it also

produced inconsistency. A municipal participant noted, “Two people with similar problems may receive different answers depending on which office they enter and which employee handles the file” (P11). This category shows that institutional adaptation existed, but it was often reactive, fragmented, and dependent on individual interpretation.

The second category focused on documentation status as the central mechanism through which migrants gained or lost access to rights, services, and institutional recognition. Participants repeatedly described documentation as a “key” that opened or closed access to education, employment, housing contracts, health care, banking, legal complaints, and administrative protection. NGO workers stated that migrants without valid or recognized documents were often reluctant to approach institutions even when they had legitimate claims. A humanitarian worker explained, “For many families, the first question is not whether they have a right; the first question is whether they dare to appear in an office” (P8). Migrant-community advocates emphasized that documentation uncertainty created fear and dependency. One participant stated, “When your card is expired or not accepted, every ordinary action becomes risky: renting a room, registering a child, going to work, even reporting abuse” (P19). Legal practitioners also highlighted that documentation did not only affect migrants; it shaped institutional behavior because officials were often unsure which services could legally be provided to people in different statuses. Thus, documentation functioned as both an administrative tool and a source of vulnerability. The findings suggest that legal adaptation must address not only the existence of documentation systems but also their clarity, renewal procedures, recognition across institutions, and consequences for everyday life.

The third category involved weak coordination between institutions responsible for migration-related issues. Participants described migration governance as distributed across national agencies, municipal offices, courts, police, schools, health centers, employers, NGOs, and international organizations. However, they reported that these actors did not always share information, responsibilities, or referral pathways effectively. One public administrator stated, “Each institution sees only one part of the migrant’s life. One office sees the document, another sees the child’s education, another sees the workplace, and another sees security. But the person lives all these problems together” (P6). NGO participants described frequent duplication of services in some areas and serious gaps in others. They also stated that NGOs sometimes acted as intermediaries because migrants trusted them more than formal institutions. A social-service worker noted, “We often translate the institution to the migrant and the migrant to the institution” (P14). Participants viewed coordination failure as a major reason why legal adaptation did not become effective social protection. They called for integrated referral systems, shared legal guidance, inter-agency protocols, and regular dialogue between government bodies and civil-society organizations.

The fourth category concerned the social challenges associated with migration in Tehran. Participants identified housing insecurity, informal labor, school registration problems, neighborhood tension, discrimination, and negative public narratives as major challenges. They emphasized that legal uncertainty often became social vulnerability because migrants with unstable status were more likely to accept low wages, overcrowded housing, and informal work arrangements. A migrant-community advocate explained, “The problem is not only the document. The problem is what happens after the document is questioned: the employer pays less, the landlord asks for more, and the family becomes silent” (P22). Participants also described public perceptions as ambivalent. Some Tehran residents were viewed as sympathetic, especially toward families and children, while others associated migration with job competition, cultural difference, or insecurity. An academic participant stated, “When economic pressure increases, migrants become visible as competitors, even when they are also victims of the same economic pressure” (P17). This category shows that institutional adaptation cannot succeed if social inclusion is ignored. Legal procedures, labor regulation, housing policy, education access, and public communication are interconnected dimensions of migration governance.

The fifth category reflected the normative tension between state sovereignty, public security, and human-rights protection. Participants recognized that every state has legitimate interests in border management, documentation, labor-market regulation, and public order. However, they also argued that enforcement-oriented approaches could increase vulnerability when they were not balanced with humanitarian safeguards and due process. A legal participant stated, “Control is necessary, but control without clear protection becomes fear. People disappear from institutions, and then the state knows less, not more” (P4). NGO workers emphasized that migrants in vulnerable situations needed safe channels to report exploitation, violence, unpaid wages, or child protection concerns without fear that seeking help would expose them to removal. A public-sector participant similarly noted, “If the only language of the system is enforcement, people avoid the system. A rights-based approach is not against order; it can make order more realistic” (P10). Participants therefore supported a model of legal adaptation that combines sovereignty with predictability, procedural fairness, non-discrimination, and protection of basic rights. This category suggests that the legitimacy of migration governance depends on whether institutions can balance control with humane and legally consistent treatment.

Discussion

This study explored legal adaptation to global migration flows through the perspectives of legal, administrative, humanitarian, academic, and community actors in Tehran. The findings showed that institutional responses to migration were active but often reactive, fragmented, and shaped by discretionary practice. Five main categories were identified: reactive legal adaptation and administrative improvisation; documentation as the gateway to rights and vulnerability; fragmented institutional coordination; urban social challenges and public perceptions; and the tension between sovereignty, security, and human-rights protection. Together, these findings indicate that migration governance is not only a matter of formal law but also a process of institutional interpretation, administrative coordination, and social negotiation. This aligns with socio-legal approaches that view law as a living system enacted through institutions, professional routines, and everyday encounters rather than as a purely textual structure.

The first finding, concerning reactive legal adaptation, is consistent with Boswell’s (2007) argument that migration policy is shaped by administrative systems and organizational interests as much as by formal political commitments. Participants described institutions as responding to migration pressures through circulars, temporary procedures, and frontline discretion. This suggests that legal adaptation often occurs in the space between legislation and implementation. Such adaptation may be necessary in rapidly changing migration contexts, but it can also generate unpredictability. When rules are unclear, migrants and officials may both become dependent on informal interpretation. This finding also supports Betts’s (2011) analysis of migration governance as a fragmented field distributed across multiple regimes and actors. In Tehran, participants described migration-related decision-making as spread across legal, municipal, welfare, educational, labor, and security institutions. The result was not institutional absence but institutional plurality without sufficient coordination.

The second finding, documentation as the gateway to rights and vulnerability, strongly aligns with Menjívar and Abrego’s (2012) concept of legal violence. Participants explained that documentation status shaped nearly every dimension of migrants’ lives, including work, housing, schooling, health care, legal complaints, and willingness to approach institutions. This does not mean that documentation is unimportant; on the contrary, documentation is necessary for legal recognition and administrative planning. However, when documentation categories are unstable, inconsistently recognized, or difficult to renew, they may produce legal precarity. The findings show that vulnerability is not only caused by lack of resources but also by uncertain legal status. A migrant with expired or unrecognized documents may avoid institutions even when facing exploitation or abuse. This supports broader migration scholarship showing that insecure status can structure everyday life by limiting mobility, voice, and access to protection (De Genova, 2002; Menjívar & Abrego, 2012).

The third finding, fragmented institutional coordination, reflects a major challenge in contemporary migration governance. Participants described migrants' lives as integrated but institutions as divided. This finding is consistent with Oomen's (2021) analysis of local divergence in multi-level migration governance, where different authorities may adopt distinct legal and practical strategies. In Tehran, fragmentation appeared in unclear referral pathways, uneven recognition of documents, limited data-sharing, and reliance on NGOs as intermediaries. While civil-society mediation can reduce harm, it may also indicate weaknesses in formal institutional design. If migrants depend on NGOs to interpret rules, access services, or negotiate with offices, the legal system may become less transparent. Effective legal adaptation therefore requires not only new laws but also operational mechanisms: inter-agency protocols, shared definitions, training for frontline staff, and accessible complaint systems.

The fourth finding, regarding urban social challenges and public perceptions, shows that migration law cannot be separated from local social conditions. Tehran, like many large cities, is a space where migration is experienced through labor markets, housing arrangements, schools, health centers, and neighborhoods. Participants described migrants as vulnerable to informal labor, overcrowded housing, discrimination, and public suspicion, especially during economic pressure. This finding aligns with De Haas et al. (2020), who argue that migration is part of wider social transformation and should not be reduced to border control. It also reflects the urban reality documented by UNHCR in Iran, where most forcibly displaced people live in urban settings rather than camps (UNHCR, 2026). Migration governance in such settings requires local capacity, social communication, and inclusive service planning. Legal status alone cannot produce integration if social institutions remain inaccessible or if public narratives frame migrants primarily as threats or competitors.

The fifth finding highlights the enduring tension between sovereignty, security, and human-rights protection. Participants did not deny the legitimacy of state control; rather, they criticized control when it lacked predictability, proportionality, or safeguards. This finding is consistent with Gammeltoft-Hansen's (2011) argument that migration control cannot be separated from legal responsibility. When states exercise authority over migration, they also carry obligations regarding protection and access to procedures. The participants' emphasis on safe reporting channels, due process, and non-discrimination reflects the broader logic of refugee and human-rights law, including the principle of non-refoulement. Iran's accession to the 1951 Refugee Convention and 1967 Protocol, while accompanied by reservations, provides an important legal background for these debates. The findings suggest that rights-based governance should not be viewed as the opposite of institutional order. Instead, predictable procedures and basic protections may increase institutional trust and improve the state's ability to manage migration effectively.

An important contribution of this study is that it connects macro-level migration governance with micro-level institutional practice. Global migration flows are often discussed through statistics, treaties, border policies, and geopolitical crises. However, the findings show that legal adaptation becomes meaningful in everyday institutional encounters: whether a document is accepted, whether a child is registered in school, whether a worker can report unpaid wages, whether a family can access health care, and whether an NGO can refer a case to a responsible office. This supports socio-legal scholarship emphasizing that law's effects are produced through implementation and interpretation. Legal adaptation is therefore not complete when a rule is written; it becomes effective only when institutions can apply it consistently and when affected persons can understand and use it.

The findings also show that migration governance must be understood as both a legal and social process. Legal uncertainty can increase social marginalization, and social hostility can undermine legal inclusion. For example, documentation problems may push migrants into informal labor, while negative public perceptions may reduce political support for inclusive policies. Conversely, institutional clarity may reduce fear, improve service access, and support more realistic public communication.

This means that migration policy should not be divided into separate legal and social tracks. Documentation, labor inspection, schooling, health access, housing standards, legal aid, and anti-discrimination measures should be treated as interconnected components of adaptation.

The Tehran context gives the study particular relevance. Iran's long-standing role as a host country for Afghan refugees and migrants creates institutional experience, but prolonged migration also produces fatigue, resource strain, and public debate. Participants' accounts suggest that institutions have developed practical knowledge over time, yet this knowledge is not always consolidated into transparent and coordinated systems. This is an important finding because host states with long migration histories may still face adaptation challenges when migration flows change in scale, composition, or political meaning. Legal adaptation must therefore be continuous rather than episodic. It should include mechanisms for policy learning, stakeholder consultation, local implementation review, and protection-sensitive enforcement.

From a theoretical perspective, the study supports the idea that migration law is a site of negotiated governance. Sovereignty, humanitarian obligation, administrative capacity, and social cohesion are not abstract principles; they are negotiated through daily decisions. The findings challenge purely enforcement-based models by showing that excessive fear may reduce institutional visibility and weaken governance. At the same time, they challenge purely normative models by showing that rights protection must be operationalized through documents, offices, budgets, trained personnel, and referral systems. A balanced model of legal adaptation should therefore combine legal certainty, procedural fairness, administrative capacity, and social inclusion.

This study has several limitations. First, the research was conducted only in Tehran, and the findings may not fully represent migration governance in other Iranian cities, border provinces, rural areas, or refugee settlements. Second, although the sample included diverse professional and community perspectives, it was limited to 24 participants and cannot represent all institutional actors or migrant groups. Third, the study relied on semi-structured interviews, which means that the findings reflect participants' perceptions and experiences rather than direct observation of institutional procedures. Fourth, because migration status and institutional practice are sensitive issues, some participants may have avoided discussing politically sensitive details or may have presented their institutions in a cautious manner. Finally, the study was cross-sectional and therefore could not examine how legal adaptation changes over time.

Future research should compare legal adaptation across multiple cities and provinces to identify differences between urban centers, border regions, and areas with different levels of institutional capacity. Longitudinal studies are also needed to examine how migrants move through different legal statuses over time and how documentation changes affect employment, education, health, and family life. Future studies could include larger samples of migrants themselves, especially women, children, undocumented migrants, employers, teachers, and frontline administrative staff. Comparative research between Iran and other major migrant-hosting countries would also be valuable for identifying shared governance challenges and context-specific solutions. Mixed-methods designs could combine qualitative interviews with policy analysis, administrative data, and service-access indicators.

Practical reforms should focus on creating clearer and more coordinated legal-social pathways for migrants and institutions. A one-stop referral system could help migrants access legal information, documentation guidance, education support, health referrals, labor complaint mechanisms, and protection services in a more predictable way. Frontline officials should receive regular training on migration law, documentation categories, non-discrimination, child protection, and referral procedures. Institutions should develop shared protocols so that documents are recognized consistently across offices. Safe reporting channels are needed for migrants facing exploitation, violence, unpaid wages, or housing abuse. Public communication strategies should also reduce misinformation and emphasize social cohesion, legal order, and shared community interests.

Conclusion

This study examined legal adaptation to global migration flows by exploring institutional responses and social challenges in Tehran. The findings showed that legal adaptation is a complex and ongoing process shaped by administrative practice, documentation systems, institutional coordination, urban social pressures, and the tension between sovereignty and rights protection. Participants described institutions as responsive but often reactive and fragmented. Documentation status emerged as the central mechanism determining access to rights and services, while weak coordination between agencies created uncertainty for both migrants and officials. Social challenges, including labor exploitation, housing insecurity, discrimination, and negative public perceptions, further complicated legal adaptation.

The study concludes that effective migration governance requires more than restrictive control or temporary administrative solutions. It requires predictable legal procedures, coordinated institutions, accessible documentation systems, safe reporting mechanisms, and rights-sensitive local implementation. In urban host settings such as Tehran, migration governance must be treated as a legal, administrative, and social project. A balanced approach can protect vulnerable migrants while also strengthening institutional legitimacy, public trust, and social order.

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

- Betts, A. (2011). *Global migration governance*. Oxford University Press.
- Boswell, C. (2007). Theorizing migration policy: Is there a third way? *International Migration Review*, 41(1), 75–100.
- Boswell, C. (2007). Migration control in Europe after 9/11: Explaining the absence of securitization. *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 45(3), 589–610.

- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- De Genova, N. P. (2002). Migrant “illegality” and deportability in everyday life. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 31, 419–447. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.anthro.31.040402.085432>
- De Haas, H., Castles, S., & Miller, M. J. (2020). *The age of migration: International population movements in the modern world* (6th ed.). Red Globe Press.
- Gammeltoft-Hansen, T. (2011). *Access to asylum: International refugee law and the globalisation of migration control*. Cambridge University Press.
- Geddes, A., & Scholten, P. (2016). *The politics of migration and immigration in Europe* (2nd ed.). SAGE.
- 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>
- Hollifield, J. F., Martin, P. L., & Orrenius, P. M. (Eds.). (2014). *Controlling immigration: A global perspective* (3rd ed.). Stanford University Press.
- International Organization for Migration. (2024). *World migration report 2024*. International Organization for Migration.
- 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>
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. SAGE.
- Menjívar, C., & Abrego, L. J. (2012). Legal violence: Immigration law and the lives of Central American immigrants. *American Journal of Sociology*, 117(5), 1380–1421. <https://doi.org/10.1086/663575>
- Oomen, B. (2021). Strategies of divergence: Local authorities, law, and discretionary spaces in migration governance. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 34(4), 3608–3628.
- Sassen, S. (1998). *Globalization and its discontents: Essays on the new mobility of people and money*. New Press.
- United Nations. (2018). *Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration*. United Nations.
- United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. (2025). *International migrant stock 2024: Key facts and figures*. United Nations.
- United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (2011). *The 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol*. UNHCR.
- United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (2025). *Global trends: Forced displacement in 2024*. UNHCR.
- United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (2026). *Refugees in Iran*. UNHCR Iran.