



The Social Life of Human Rights Law: Local Legal Meanings and Evers Law: Local Legal Meanings and Everyday Practice

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore how human rights law is understood, translated, negotiated, and practiced in everyday social life among residents and rights-related practitioners in Tehran. This qualitative study used a conventional thematic design based on semi-structured interviews. Twenty-four participants from Tehran were selected through purposive maximum-variation sampling, including community members, legal practitioners, social workers, civil-society volunteers, and local administrative actors who had experience with rights-related issues in daily, professional, or community contexts. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was achieved. Interviews were conducted face-to-face, lasted 45–75 minutes, and focused on participants' understandings of human rights, encounters with legal institutions, informal rights practices, and the local meanings attached to dignity, justice, equality, and responsibility. Audio-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis with the assistance of NVivo software. Credibility was enhanced through member checking, peer review, prolonged engagement with the data, and an audit trail. Five main categories were identified: human rights as moral language before legal doctrine; translation of rights through family, workplace, and community relations; cautious rights claiming and strategic silence; institutional trust, procedural uncertainty, and legal distance; and everyday dignity as practical human rights. Participants rarely described human rights as abstract international law. Instead, they connected rights to respectful treatment, fair procedures, access to services, gendered expectations, employment relations, and ordinary experiences of being heard or ignored. Human rights language was used selectively, often shaped by perceived institutional responsiveness and social consequences. The findings show that human rights law gains social meaning through everyday interpretation, relational negotiation, and practical encounters with institutions. Local legal consciousness does not simply reproduce formal legal norms; rather, it transforms human rights into moral, social, and strategic vocabularies of dignity, fairness, and recognition. Strengthening human rights implementation therefore requires not only legal reform but also accessible procedures, public legal education, institutional accountability, and culturally meaningful forms of rights communication.

Keywords: human rights law; legal consciousness; everyday law; vernacularization; qualitative research; Tehran; local legal meanings; rights practice

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Introduction

Human rights law is commonly described through treaties, constitutions, courts, monitoring bodies, and formal institutional commitments. Yet the practical significance of human rights cannot be understood only by examining legal texts or international mechanisms. Human rights also have a social life: they circulate through conversations, bureaucratic encounters, family conflicts, workplace negotiations, media narratives, educational spaces, and local institutions. In everyday life, people may invoke human rights explicitly, translate them into moral claims about dignity and fairness, or avoid rights language altogether because it appears too formal, confrontational, risky, or distant from ordinary problems. Therefore, the study of human rights law requires attention not only to legal validity but also to meaning, use, interpretation, and practice.

Socio-legal scholarship has long argued that law is not confined to official institutions. Law is lived, narrated, resisted, normalized, and reinterpreted in ordinary social settings. Ewick and Silbey (1998) conceptualized legality as embedded in everyday life, showing that people encounter law not only as a formal system but also as a cultural frame through which they understand power, obligation, entitlement, and resistance. Similarly, Sarat and Kearns (1993) emphasized that law operates in routine domains such as family, work, school, and community relations. From this perspective, law is not merely a set of rules applied from above; it is also a repertoire of meanings through which people interpret their social position and negotiate their interactions with others.

This insight is particularly important for human rights law. Human rights are formally articulated in universal language, but they become meaningful only when translated into local social worlds. Merry (2006) demonstrated that international human rights norms are not simply transferred into local contexts; they are translated, adapted, and reframed by intermediaries who connect global legal concepts to familiar moral and cultural vocabularies. This process has often been described as vernacularization: the transformation of global rights discourse into language, practices, and claims that make sense within specific communities (Levitt & Merry, 2009). Vernacularization does not mean that universal rights disappear. Rather, it means that their force depends partly on how they are made intelligible, persuasive, and usable in local contexts.

The social life of human rights law is therefore shaped by the relationship between formal legality and local legal consciousness. Legal consciousness refers to the ways ordinary people understand, experience, and use law in their daily lives. Nielsen (2000) showed that people's interpretations of legal problems are shaped by social location, prior experiences, perceived institutional legitimacy, and the costs of making claims. Legal consciousness is not only knowledge of law; it includes emotions, expectations, trust, fear, skepticism, and practical judgment. A person may know that a right exists but still decide not to claim it because doing so may damage relationships, create stigma, invite retaliation, or seem institutionally futile. Conversely, a person may use rights language even without technical legal knowledge when they feel that dignity, fairness, or recognition has been violated.

Human rights scholarship has also shown that the effects of rights depend on mobilization. Keck and Sikkink (1998) demonstrated that transnational advocacy networks can transform rights violations into political claims and mobilize pressure across borders. Risse, Ropp, and Sikkink (2013) further argued that human rights commitments become significant through processes of socialization, pressure, persuasion, and domestic institutionalization. Simmons (2009) similarly emphasized that international human rights law can matter domestically when it becomes available to citizens, courts, organizations, and political actors as a resource for claims-making. However, these macro-level analyses need to be complemented by micro-level studies of how rights are interpreted in everyday practice. Legal commitment does not automatically produce social recognition, and formal recognition does not always produce accessible remedies.

Anthropological studies of human rights have been especially important in bridging this gap. Goodale (2009) argued that anthropology contributes to human rights by examining how rights are produced, contested, and lived in actual social settings. Goodale and Merry (2007) similarly emphasized that human rights practice often differs from the idealized assumptions of legal doctrine. In practice, human rights may function as a language of aspiration, a strategy of advocacy, a moral vocabulary, an institutional procedure, or a contested symbol. Human rights discourse may empower marginalized groups, but it may also be selectively interpreted, bureaucratically narrowed, or socially resisted. The meaning of human rights is therefore neither fixed nor purely subjective; it emerges through interaction between global norms, state institutions, local moral orders, and everyday experiences.

The idea of “local legal meaning” is central to this study. Local meaning refers to how people define rights in relation to their lived circumstances. For some, human rights may mean freedom from violence, discrimination, humiliation, or arbitrary treatment. For others, rights may be understood through access to work, education, health services, family security, or respectful administrative procedures. Some participants may associate rights with courts and legal documents, while others may understand rights as moral limits on how people should treat one another. These meanings matter because they shape whether people recognize an experience as a rights issue, whether they consider legal action possible, and whether they use formal or informal strategies to respond.

In many social contexts, rights are practiced before they are legally named. A worker asking for respectful treatment from an employer, a woman negotiating decision-making power in the family, a citizen requesting fair treatment in an office, or a young person objecting to public humiliation may all be engaging in rights practice even when they do not explicitly use legal terminology. These everyday practices reveal the social dimension of human rights law. They show that rights are not only claimed in courts or international forums; they are also enacted through speech, silence, compromise, resistance, documentation, appeal, and mutual recognition.

At the same time, the everyday use of human rights is not always straightforward. Rights language may be perceived as powerful, but also risky. Participants in many socio-legal contexts may avoid legal language because it can be interpreted as confrontational or politically sensitive. They may prefer words such as respect, fairness, conscience, justice, or dignity. This does not mean that human rights are absent. Rather, rights may be socially present in translated form. As Merry (2010) noted in relation to legal culture, legal meanings are produced through historically and socially situated practices, not merely through formal rules. Human rights law must therefore be studied as a cultural and institutional process as much as a doctrinal system.

Tehran provides a valuable context for exploring these issues because it is a large urban environment where diverse social groups encounter formal institutions, professional organizations, family norms, employment relations, educational settings, and public bureaucracies. In such a context, human rights meanings may be shaped by education, gender, occupation, class position, legal knowledge, prior institutional experience, and exposure to media or civil-society discourse. The study of everyday human rights in Tehran can therefore illuminate how legal ideas travel through urban social life and how people transform formal norms into practical claims about dignity, fairness, and recognition.

Despite the growing literature on human rights localization, there remains a need for qualitative research that examines how ordinary actors and rights-related practitioners interpret human rights in daily practice. Much existing work focuses either on international institutions, advocacy organizations, courts, or state compliance. Less attention has been paid to the ordinary interpretive processes through which individuals decide whether a problem is a rights issue, how they speak about rights, and what strategies they use when rights appear violated. This gap is important because legal implementation depends not only on the existence of legal norms but also on social recognition, procedural accessibility, and institutional trust.

Accordingly, this study explores the social life of human rights law through local legal meanings and everyday practice among participants in Tehran. It asks: How do participants understand human rights in everyday life? How are human rights translated into local moral and social vocabularies? Under what conditions do people use, avoid, or reinterpret rights language? How do institutional experiences shape legal consciousness and rights practice? By answering these questions, the study contributes to socio-legal and human-rights scholarship by showing how human rights law is lived as a practical, relational, and culturally mediated phenomenon.

Methods and Materials

This study used a qualitative research design based on semi-structured interviews. A qualitative approach was appropriate because the aim was not to measure attitudes statistically but to understand how participants interpreted human rights law, attached meaning to rights in daily life, and described their experiences of rights practice in social and institutional settings. The study was informed by socio-legal theory, legal consciousness scholarship, and anthropological approaches to human rights localization. Consistent with qualitative inquiry, the research focused on participants' meanings, narratives, interpretations, and lived experiences rather than predetermined variables (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The participants were 24 individuals living or working in Tehran. Purposive maximum-variation sampling was used to include people with different forms of exposure to rights-related issues. The sample included community residents, lawyers and legal consultants, social workers, civil-society volunteers, educators, and local administrative actors. Inclusion criteria were: age 18 years or older, residence or professional activity in Tehran for at least three years, willingness to participate in an interview, and ability to discuss experiences or observations related to rights, justice, dignity, legal institutions, or everyday disputes. Individuals were excluded if they were unwilling to be audio-recorded or unable to provide informed consent.

Sampling continued until theoretical saturation was achieved. Saturation was reached after 21 interviews, when no substantially new categories emerged from the data. Three additional interviews were conducted to confirm the stability and depth of the emerging themes. The final sample consisted of 24 participants.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. The interview guide included open-ended questions about participants' understandings of human rights, experiences of fairness or unfairness in everyday life, use or avoidance of legal language, encounters with formal institutions, informal conflict resolution, and perceptions of dignity, equality, justice, and responsibility. Examples of interview questions included: "What does the phrase human rights mean to you in everyday life?", "Can you describe a situation in which you felt that someone's rights were respected or violated?", "How do people around you usually respond when they feel treated unfairly?", and "What makes a person decide to use legal language or remain silent?"

All interviews were conducted in Persian in a quiet and private setting selected by the participant. Interviews lasted between 45 and 75 minutes. With participants' permission, interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed verbatim. Field notes were written after each interview to document contextual observations, non-verbal emphases, and initial analytic impressions. Data collection and preliminary analysis occurred simultaneously so that later interviews could explore emerging concepts in greater depth.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The analysis followed a systematic process of familiarization, initial coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report (Braun & Clarke, 2006). NVivo software was used to organize transcripts, manage codes, compare categories, and retrieve relevant excerpts. Coding began inductively, allowing categories to emerge from participants' narratives. In the next stage, codes were compared with the study's conceptual framework, particularly legal consciousness, vernacularization, and everyday legality.

The analysis proceeded in several steps. First, all transcripts were read repeatedly to gain an overall understanding of the data. Second, meaningful units related to rights, law, dignity, institutions, silence, claim-making, and everyday justice were coded. Third, similar codes were grouped into subcategories. Fourth, subcategories were organized into broader main categories. Fifth, the research team reviewed the themes to ensure internal coherence, distinction between categories, and grounding in the interview data. Finally, representative quotations were selected to illustrate each category.

Several strategies were used to enhance trustworthiness. Credibility was strengthened through prolonged engagement with the data, member checking with selected participants, and peer debriefing. Dependability was supported by maintaining an audit trail, including interview guides, coding notes, theme-development memos, and analytic decisions. Confirmability was enhanced through reflexive memo-writing, which helped identify the researcher's assumptions and reduce interpretive bias. Transferability was supported by providing detailed descriptions of the study context, participants, sampling strategy, and analytic process. These strategies were consistent with established criteria for qualitative rigor (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Tong et al., 2007).

Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and their right to withdraw at any stage without consequence. Written informed consent was obtained before each interview. Participants' names and identifying details were removed from transcripts and replaced with codes. Audio files and transcripts were stored securely and were accessible only to the research team. Quotations used in the findings section were anonymized to protect participants' identities.

Findings

The demographic characteristics of the participants showed considerable variation in gender, age, education, and social role. Of the 24 participants, 13 were women and 11 were men. Participants' ages ranged from 22 to 57 years. In terms of education, 3 participants had a high-school diploma, 7 held a bachelor's degree, 10 held a master's degree, and 4 held a doctoral or professional degree. Regarding occupational or social role, 7 participants were community residents with no formal legal occupation, 4 were lawyers or legal consultants, 4 were social workers or counselors, 3 were civil-society or community volunteers, 3 were educators, and 3 were local administrative or service-sector employees. All participants lived or worked in Tehran and reported direct or indirect experience with issues related to rights, justice, dignity, legal institutions, or everyday disputes.

The first main category showed that participants often understood human rights less as formal international law and more as a moral language of dignity, respect, and humane treatment. For many participants, the phrase "human rights" first evoked ordinary expectations: not being humiliated, being listened to, receiving fair treatment, and being recognized as a person with value. Legal terminology appeared later, usually when participants discussed courts, official complaints, employment problems, or discrimination. This suggests that human rights meanings entered everyday life through moral experience before doctrinal knowledge. One participant stated, "When I hear human rights, I do not first think about articles and conventions. I think about whether a person is treated with respect when they have no power" (P7, female, 34). Another participant explained, "For ordinary people, rights means that your voice counts. Maybe they do not know the legal word, but they know when they are ignored" (P15, male, 42). In this category, rights were described as a practical moral boundary that should limit humiliation, arbitrary treatment, and social exclusion.

The second category concerned the translation of human rights into familiar social relations. Participants did not usually separate rights from family obligations, workplace hierarchy, neighborhood relations, or community expectations. Instead, they interpreted rights through relational contexts. In family life, rights were connected to decision-making, respect between generations, gender expectations, and privacy. In workplaces, rights were associated with wages, dignity, job security, and

respectful communication. In community settings, rights were linked to access to services, fair treatment in offices, and being able to speak without fear of embarrassment. A participant noted, “In the family, people may not say ‘my human right,’ but they say, ‘I also have dignity’ or ‘my opinion matters’” (P3, female, 29). A legal consultant similarly observed, “Most clients translate rights into very concrete matters: salary, documents, custody, housing, insults, or administrative delay. They come with a life problem, not a legal theory” (P11, male, 39). This category indicates that human rights become socially meaningful when connected to practical situations and culturally recognizable vocabularies.

The third category revealed that participants used rights language selectively. While some viewed human rights discourse as empowering, many described caution, hesitation, or strategic silence. Participants explained that openly claiming rights could be interpreted as confrontational, disrespectful, or socially costly, especially in hierarchical relationships such as family, employment, or administrative settings. Silence was not always a sign of ignorance; it was often a calculated response to perceived risks. One participant stated, “Sometimes you know you have a right, but you ask yourself what will happen after you say it. Maybe the cost becomes heavier than the problem itself” (P18, female, 37). Another participant said, “People choose softer words. Instead of saying ‘this is my right,’ they say, ‘please be fair’ or ‘please consider my situation’” (P5, male, 31). This theme shows that legal consciousness includes strategic judgment. Participants moved between rights talk, moral appeal, negotiation, and silence depending on power relations and expected consequences.

The fourth category concerned participants’ perceptions of legal and administrative institutions. Many participants distinguished between the existence of rights and the accessibility of remedies. They believed that legal recognition was important, but they also emphasized procedural complexity, time, cost, uncertainty, and unequal access to knowledge. For these participants, human rights law felt distant when procedures were unclear or when institutional actors appeared unresponsive. A social worker explained, “People lose trust when they do not understand the path. They may have a right, but they do not know where to go, what to write, or who will take them seriously” (P20, female, 45). A community resident stated, “The law may exist, but for many people it is like a building with many doors and no sign” (P9, male, 50). This category demonstrates that institutional experience strongly shapes whether rights are perceived as real, symbolic, or unreachable. Participants connected rights effectiveness to respectful procedure, clarity, affordability, and responsiveness.

The fifth category showed that participants often practiced human rights through everyday acts of dignity, recognition, and informal problem-solving. Rather than limiting rights practice to courts or formal complaints, participants described daily behaviors such as documenting unfair treatment, asking for explanations, supporting vulnerable people, educating family members, mediating conflicts, and insisting on respectful communication. These practices were modest but meaningful. They represented a practical form of human rights enactment. One participant said, “Maybe I cannot change the whole system, but in my workplace I can refuse to insult someone or ignore their complaint. That is also human rights” (P16, male, 46). Another participant explained, “For me, defending rights starts from small things: listening, not humiliating, helping someone understand what options they have” (P22, female, 33). This category suggests that human rights law becomes socially alive when translated into everyday practices of dignity, care, accountability, and mutual recognition.

Discussion

This study explored the social life of human rights law by examining how participants in Tehran understood, translated, negotiated, and practiced human rights in everyday contexts. The findings showed that participants rarely approached human rights primarily as abstract international law. Instead, they interpreted rights through moral language, relational responsibilities, institutional experiences, and practical judgments about voice, dignity, fairness, and risk. Five main categories were identified: human rights as moral language before legal doctrine; translation of rights through family, workplace, and community relations; cautious rights claiming and strategic silence; institutional trust, procedural uncertainty, and legal distance; and everyday

dignity as practical human rights. Together, these categories suggest that human rights law becomes meaningful not only through formal recognition but also through local interpretation and everyday social practice.

The first finding showed that participants understood human rights mainly as a moral vocabulary of dignity and respectful treatment before associating it with formal law. This aligns with Ewick and Silbey's (1998) argument that legality is embedded in ordinary narratives and everyday interpretations. People do not encounter law only as doctrine; they encounter it as a framework for making sense of power, fairness, responsibility, and harm. The participants' emphasis on dignity also corresponds with Goodale's (2009) anthropological approach, which treats human rights as a lived social practice rather than merely a legal code. In this sense, human rights discourse appears to operate as a bridge between formal legal principles and ordinary moral expectations. Participants did not need technical legal knowledge to recognize humiliation, exclusion, or arbitrary treatment as rights-related experiences.

The second finding indicated that human rights were translated through family, workplace, and community relations. This supports Merry's (2006) concept of translation, according to which international human rights norms become effective only when adapted to local social meanings. Levitt and Merry (2009) describe this process as vernacularization, in which global rights ideas are expressed through locally familiar vocabularies and practices. In the present study, participants translated human rights into concepts such as dignity in the family, fairness at work, respectful administrative treatment, and being heard in community interactions. This suggests that local meaning does not weaken human rights; rather, it may be the condition through which human rights become understandable and actionable.

The third finding showed that rights claiming was often cautious and strategic. Participants did not always use rights language openly, even when they believed that a right had been violated. This finding is consistent with legal consciousness research showing that people's willingness to claim rights depends on social location, perceived consequences, institutional confidence, and relational context (Nielsen, 2000). Silence, in this study, was not simply evidence of ignorance or passivity. It was often a strategic response to unequal power relations, fear of escalation, or concern about damaging social or professional relationships. This finding complicates rights-based assumptions that legal awareness automatically produces legal mobilization. People may know their rights but still avoid formal rights language because the social cost of claiming may appear too high.

The fourth finding highlighted the importance of institutional trust and procedural accessibility. Participants distinguished between having rights in principle and being able to use them in practice. This distinction is central to socio-legal studies of law in everyday life. Sarat and Kearns (1993) argue that law's presence in daily life is shaped by both its authority and its distance from ordinary experience. In the present study, legal distance emerged through unclear procedures, perceived bureaucracy, cost, delay, and uncertainty. This supports Simmons's (2009) argument that human rights law matters domestically when it becomes available as a practical resource for actors. Formal recognition alone is insufficient if individuals cannot access information, navigate institutions, or trust that their claims will be treated seriously.

The fifth finding showed that participants practiced human rights through everyday acts of dignity, recognition, and informal support. This finding aligns with Goodale and Merry's (2007) view that human rights practice often differs from formal legal imagination. Human rights may be practiced not only through litigation or advocacy campaigns but also through daily conduct: listening, documenting, mediating, informing, refusing humiliation, and supporting vulnerable persons. Such practices indicate that rights are not only institutional instruments but also ethical and relational practices. This does not mean that informal practice can replace formal legal accountability. Rather, it shows that the social life of human rights includes both formal mechanisms and ordinary interpersonal conduct.

The findings also contribute to debates on global and local dimensions of human rights. International human rights law often depends on universal language, but universal norms must travel through particular social contexts. Risse et al. (2013) emphasize that human rights compliance involves socialization, persuasion, and institutionalization. The present study adds that these processes also occur at the everyday level, where people decide how to name harm, whether to make claims, whom to approach, and which vocabulary is socially possible. Similarly, Keck and Sikkink's (1998) work on advocacy networks shows that rights claims gain power through communication and mobilization. However, this study suggests that before rights become mobilized publicly, they are often privately interpreted, morally tested, and relationally negotiated.

Another important implication is that human rights education should not be limited to teaching legal instruments. Participants' narratives suggest that rights education may be more effective when connected to everyday examples: workplace respect, family decision-making, administrative fairness, privacy, access to services, and non-humiliation. This supports Merry's (2010) broader argument that legal culture shapes how law is understood and used. If human rights are communicated only in technical legal language, they may remain distant from ordinary experience. If they are translated into meaningful local vocabularies without losing their normative content, they may become more socially usable.

The study also shows that local interpretation is not always harmonious. Rights may conflict with social expectations, family hierarchies, institutional habits, or fear of consequences. Participants sometimes replaced rights language with softer moral appeals such as fairness, respect, or consideration. This finding should not be interpreted as evidence that rights are irrelevant. Rather, it shows that rights are socially negotiated. In many contexts, rights language may be present beneath other words. A person asking to be treated fairly may be making a rights claim, even if they avoid formal terminology. Recognizing these indirect rights practices is important for researchers, lawyers, educators, and policymakers who seek to understand how legal norms function beyond official institutions.

The findings further indicate that trust is a central condition for rights practice. When participants believed that institutions were responsive, rights appeared more concrete. When procedures seemed confusing or inaccessible, rights appeared symbolic or distant. This supports socio-legal arguments that legal consciousness is shaped by experience with institutions, not merely by knowledge of legal rules. Legal empowerment therefore requires more than awareness campaigns. It requires institutions that are procedurally clear, respectful, affordable, and accountable. Without these conditions, people may internalize the idea that rights exist only for those with resources, connections, or specialized knowledge.

Overall, the study contributes to human rights scholarship by demonstrating that the effectiveness of human rights law depends on its social circulation. Human rights law becomes alive when people interpret it, translate it, test it against experience, and use it in everyday relations. The participants' narratives show that local legal meanings are not secondary to formal law; they are central to whether human rights are recognized and practiced. Human rights implementation should therefore be understood as both a legal and cultural process. It requires formal protection, but also social trust, meaningful communication, institutional accessibility, and everyday practices of dignity.

This study has several limitations. First, the research was conducted only in Tehran; therefore, the findings may not fully represent experiences in smaller cities, rural areas, or other cultural and institutional settings. Second, the sample size was appropriate for qualitative saturation but not intended for statistical generalization. Third, participants who agreed to be interviewed may have had greater interest in rights, law, or social issues than those who declined participation. Fourth, because the topic of human rights may be socially sensitive, some participants may have moderated their responses or avoided discussing certain experiences in detail. Finally, the study relied on self-reported narratives, which provide rich insight into meaning and interpretation but cannot independently verify all described events.

Future research should compare local meanings of human rights across different cities, regions, social classes, and institutional contexts. Comparative studies could examine whether human rights are interpreted differently among youth, women, workers, migrants, professionals, or marginalized communities. Future research may also combine interviews with ethnographic observation in legal aid centers, administrative offices, workplaces, schools, or community organizations to examine rights practice as it occurs in real time. Longitudinal studies would be useful for understanding how legal consciousness changes after people experience legal procedures, public campaigns, education programs, or institutional reforms. Researchers may also explore the role of digital media in shaping everyday rights awareness and rights mobilization.

Practitioners and policymakers should communicate human rights in language that connects with ordinary experiences of dignity, fairness, and respectful treatment. Public legal education should use concrete examples from family life, employment, administrative procedures, education, health, and community relations. Legal and administrative institutions should simplify complaint procedures, provide accessible guidance, reduce unnecessary delays, and train staff in respectful communication. Civil-society organizations, educators, lawyers, and social workers can play an important role as translators of rights language, helping people understand available options without increasing fear or social risk. Human rights practice should be strengthened not only through legal reform but also through everyday institutional accountability and cultures of dignity.

Conclusion

This qualitative study examined the social life of human rights law by exploring local legal meanings and everyday practice among 24 participants in Tehran. The findings showed that human rights were understood not merely as formal legal doctrine but as a practical moral language of dignity, fairness, recognition, and respectful treatment. Participants translated rights through family, workplace, community, and institutional relations. They used rights language cautiously, often balancing legal awareness against social risk, institutional uncertainty, and relational consequences. The study also found that procedural accessibility and institutional trust strongly shaped whether rights were perceived as real and usable.

The article argues that human rights law becomes socially meaningful when it is interpreted, translated, and practiced in everyday life. Local legal meanings do not simply reflect ignorance of formal law; they reveal how people make law usable within their social worlds. Human rights implementation therefore requires more than legal recognition. It depends on accessible institutions, culturally meaningful rights education, trusted procedures, and everyday practices that protect dignity. By focusing on the lived meanings of human rights, this study contributes to socio-legal and human-rights scholarship and highlights the importance of studying law where it is actually encountered: in ordinary social practice.

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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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