



Cultural Diversity and Criminal Justice Practices: Institutional Challenges and Legal Response

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore how cultural diversity shapes criminal justice practices in Tehran and to identify institutional challenges and legal responses required for culturally responsive justice administration. This qualitative study was conducted using semi-structured interviews with 24 participants from Tehran, including judges, prosecutors, defense lawyers, police officers, correctional or probation-related professionals, legal scholars, and community-based legal advocates. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, followed by snowball recruitment to access individuals with direct experience of culturally diverse criminal justice encounters. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was reached. Interviews focused on participants' experiences of cultural misunderstanding, linguistic barriers, institutional discretion, procedural fairness, community norms, and possible legal reforms. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis. NVivo software was used to organize transcripts, manage coding, compare categories, and develop final themes. The analysis generated five main categories: linguistic and communicative barriers in criminal proceedings; institutional standardization and limited cultural competence; mistrust, stigma, and perceived discriminatory treatment; tensions between community-based norms and formal criminal law; and emerging legal responses aimed at improving procedural fairness. Participants emphasized that cultural diversity affects criminal justice not only through language differences but also through different understandings of authority, confession, shame, family responsibility, victimhood, and reconciliation. The findings showed that cultural misunderstanding may weaken defendants' participation, reduce victims' willingness to report offenses, and produce inconsistent institutional responses. Cultural diversity presents both a challenge and an opportunity for criminal justice institutions. A culturally responsive legal system does not weaken equality before the law; rather, it strengthens substantive fairness by ensuring that legal procedures are understandable, respectful, and accessible to diverse communities. Reform should focus on interpreter services, cultural competence training, clearer procedural safeguards, community liaison mechanisms, and guidelines for considering cultural context without excusing criminal harm.

Keywords: cultural diversity; criminal justice; legal response; procedural justice; qualitative research; Tehran; legal culture; institutional reform.

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Introduction

Cultural diversity has become one of the central challenges of contemporary criminal justice systems. Modern urban societies are increasingly shaped by migration, internal mobility, ethnic plurality, linguistic variation, religious diversity, and

the coexistence of multiple normative traditions. Criminal justice institutions, however, often operate through standardized procedures that assume a relatively uniform legal subject: a person who understands the official language, recognizes formal legal authority, knows the meaning of procedural rights, and interprets police, prosecutorial, and judicial actions through the same institutional logic as legal professionals. In practice, this assumption is often inaccurate. Defendants, victims, witnesses, families, and community representatives may approach criminal justice institutions with different cultural expectations regarding authority, conflict resolution, shame, reconciliation, gender relations, family responsibility, and the moral meaning of punishment. The result is a complex field in which formal legality, institutional routines, and everyday cultural meanings interact in ways that may either support or undermine justice.

The relationship between cultural diversity and criminal justice cannot be reduced to the simple question of whether cultural background should be considered in legal decision-making. Rather, the deeper issue concerns how criminal justice institutions recognize, translate, manage, or ignore cultural difference in daily practice. Law is not merely a set of written rules; it is also a lived institution that gains meaning through social interaction. Socio-legal scholarship has shown that people encounter law through everyday narratives, institutional experiences, and culturally situated understandings of authority and legitimacy (Ewick & Silbey, 1998). For individuals from culturally diverse communities, criminal justice may be experienced not only as a formal system of rules but also as a symbolic institution that communicates recognition, suspicion, exclusion, or protection. Therefore, examining cultural diversity in criminal justice requires attention to both legal structure and social meaning.

Procedural justice theory provides an important framework for understanding why culturally responsive criminal justice matters. Tyler's work on legitimacy demonstrates that people are more likely to accept legal decisions and cooperate with legal authorities when they perceive procedures as fair, respectful, neutral, and participatory (Tyler, 2006). This insight is especially significant in culturally diverse settings because individuals' perceptions of fairness are shaped not only by outcomes but also by whether they understand the process, feel heard, and believe that authorities treat them with dignity. When language barriers, cultural stereotypes, or institutional indifference prevent meaningful participation, legal procedures may appear arbitrary or hostile even when officials believe they are applying the law neutrally. In this sense, cultural responsiveness is not a matter of preferential treatment; it is a condition of procedural fairness.

Criminal justice systems often claim neutrality by treating all individuals according to the same formal rules. Equality before the law is indeed a foundational legal principle. However, formal sameness may produce practical inequality when individuals do not possess equal linguistic competence, legal literacy, institutional familiarity, or cultural proximity to dominant legal norms. Packer's distinction between crime control and due process models remains useful here: efficient enforcement and procedural protection may come into tension when institutions prioritize speed, confession, case closure, or bureaucratic order over careful attention to individual circumstances (Packer, 1968). In culturally diverse cases, this tension may become more visible. A defendant who does not fully understand police questioning, a victim whose community discourages formal reporting, or a witness whose communication style differs from courtroom expectations may be disadvantaged by procedures that appear neutral on paper but operate unevenly in practice.

The concept of legal consciousness also helps explain how culturally diverse communities interpret criminal justice institutions. Legal consciousness refers to the ways ordinary people understand, use, avoid, resist, or narrate law in everyday life (Ewick & Silbey, 1998). In some communities, criminal justice may be viewed as a protective institution; in others, it may be associated with state coercion, social stigma, moral shame, or distrust. These perceptions influence whether victims report crimes, whether families cooperate with authorities, whether defendants seek legal counsel, and whether communities accept judicial outcomes. Thus, criminal justice practice is not only a technical legal process but also a site where law is socially interpreted and culturally negotiated.

Legal pluralism is another relevant theoretical lens. Although modern states formally centralize criminal law, social life often includes multiple normative orders, including religious norms, customary practices, family expectations, ethnic traditions, neighborhood mediation, and informal dispute resolution. Legal pluralism does not necessarily mean that informal norms are legally valid in the same way as state law; rather, it recognizes that people often experience several normative systems at once (Merry, 2006). In criminal justice, this coexistence can generate institutional challenges. For example, community mediation may help resolve minor conflicts, restore relationships, and reduce escalation. At the same time, informal pressure may silence victims, especially in cases involving domestic violence, sexual harm, child protection, or intra-family offenses. Therefore, criminal justice institutions must distinguish between culturally meaningful reconciliation and coercive informal settlement that undermines individual rights.

Cultural diversity also raises the problem of interpretation, both linguistic and cultural. Language interpretation is essential for due process, but translation is not merely the conversion of words from one language into another. Legal language contains technical meanings, procedural consequences, and institutional assumptions. A defendant may understand ordinary words but not understand the legal consequences of silence, confession, bail conditions, plea negotiation, or sentencing mitigation. Similarly, a victim may understand the literal meaning of a complaint form but not the procedural pathway that follows from filing it. Cultural interpretation is even more complex. Gestures, silence, eye contact, emotional expression, family involvement, and attitudes toward authority may be interpreted differently across cultural contexts. Without adequate cultural competence, legal professionals may misread respect as evasiveness, distress as inconsistency, silence as guilt, or family consultation as manipulation.

The international literature on race, ethnicity, and criminal justice shows that cultural and minority status can affect policing, prosecution, court experiences, sentencing, and public trust. Bowling and Phillips (2002) argue that racism and ethnic inequality must be examined across the entire criminal justice process rather than treated as isolated incidents. Their analysis is relevant beyond the specific context of race because it highlights how institutional practices may reproduce unequal outcomes even without explicit discriminatory intent. Similarly, scholarship on policing multicultural societies emphasizes that legal authorities need organizational strategies that go beyond individual goodwill and address training, accountability, recruitment, communication, and community engagement (Chan, 1997). Cultural diversity becomes an institutional issue when systems lack reliable procedures for recognizing and responding to difference.

A central difficulty is that criminal law must avoid both cultural blindness and cultural relativism. Cultural blindness occurs when institutions ignore cultural context and assume that all people experience the law in the same way. This can lead to misunderstanding, exclusion, and procedural unfairness. Cultural relativism, by contrast, occurs when harmful conduct is excused or minimized simply because it is associated with a cultural practice. Neither approach is sufficient. A rights-based criminal justice system must consider cultural context where it affects understanding, participation, intent, vulnerability, harm, credibility, or access to justice, while also maintaining the equal protection of victims and the public. Literature on cultural defenses and multicultural jurisprudence has emphasized this delicate balance: courts may need cultural knowledge to understand the context of behavior, but cultural explanation should not automatically become legal justification (Renteln, 2004; Foblets & Renteln, 2009).

The Iranian urban context, particularly Tehran, provides a meaningful setting for examining these issues. Tehran is a large metropolitan environment shaped by internal migration, ethnic diversity, socioeconomic inequality, religious and cultural variation, and different levels of legal literacy. Criminal justice professionals in such a setting may encounter defendants, victims, and families whose expectations of law are shaped by local customs, minority identities, rural-urban migration histories, class position, and community-based dispute practices. At the same time, criminal justice institutions are expected to

apply unified national laws and maintain consistency, authority, and public order. This creates a practical tension between legal uniformity and cultural responsiveness. Understanding how professionals experience this tension can help identify institutional gaps and reform possibilities.

Despite growing attention to diversity, access to justice, and procedural fairness, there remains a need for qualitative studies that examine how cultural diversity is managed in everyday criminal justice practice. Much legal scholarship focuses on doctrine, formal rights, or comparative legal policy, while less attention is given to the lived experiences of practitioners who implement criminal law in culturally diverse settings. Qualitative inquiry is especially suitable for this topic because it can capture ambiguity, interpretation, professional discretion, institutional constraint, and the meanings participants attach to justice. Through semi-structured interviews, researchers can explore how legal actors describe cultural misunderstanding, how they define fairness, how they respond to informal community norms, and what reforms they consider realistic.

Accordingly, this study explores cultural diversity and criminal justice practices in Tehran through the perspectives of legal and justice-related professionals. It asks how participants understand the institutional challenges created by cultural diversity, how these challenges affect defendants, victims, and justice processes, and what legal responses may improve fairness and institutional legitimacy. The study contributes to socio-legal and criminological literature by showing that cultural diversity is not an external social issue that occasionally enters the courtroom; rather, it is embedded in communication, discretion, trust, evidence assessment, victim participation, and the perceived legitimacy of criminal justice institutions.

Methods and Materials

This study used a qualitative research design based on semi-structured interviews. A qualitative approach was selected because the purpose of the study was to explore participants' experiences, interpretations, and professional reflections regarding cultural diversity in criminal justice practices. The study focused on Tehran because it is a socially and culturally diverse metropolitan setting in which criminal justice professionals encounter individuals from different ethnic, linguistic, socioeconomic, and community backgrounds.

The study included 24 participants from Tehran. Participants were selected through purposive sampling according to their direct or indirect professional experience with criminal justice cases involving cultural, linguistic, ethnic, family-based, or community-related dimensions. Snowball sampling was also used to identify additional participants with relevant experience. The final sample consisted of 5 judges, 4 prosecutors, 5 criminal defense lawyers, 4 police officers or law-enforcement personnel, 3 correctional/probation-related professionals, and 3 community-based legal advocates or social workers familiar with criminal justice cases. Inclusion criteria were: at least three years of professional experience, direct familiarity with criminal justice procedures, willingness to participate in an interview, and experience with cases involving culturally diverse individuals or communities. Participants who lacked direct professional experience with criminal justice processes were excluded.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. The interview guide included open-ended questions about participants' experiences with cultural diversity in criminal justice settings, language and communication barriers, treatment of defendants and victims from diverse communities, interpretation of cultural practices by legal institutions, challenges in policing and prosecution, the role of informal mediation, and suggested legal or institutional reforms. Examples of guiding questions included: "How does cultural diversity appear in criminal justice cases you have encountered?", "What institutional challenges arise when defendants, victims, or families have different cultural expectations?", "How do language or communication barriers affect criminal procedure?", and "What legal responses could improve fairness in these cases?"

Interviews lasted between 45 and 75 minutes. They were conducted in Persian at locations chosen for participant convenience and confidentiality. With participants' consent, interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Field

notes were written after each interview to document contextual impressions, emerging analytical ideas, and possible follow-up questions. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was reached, meaning that later interviews no longer generated substantially new categories or conceptual insights. Saturation was assessed through ongoing comparison of interview content, emerging codes, and category development.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The analysis followed a systematic process of familiarization, initial coding, category development, theme review, theme definition, and final narrative reporting, consistent with the approach proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). First, all transcripts were read several times to develop familiarity with the data. Second, initial codes were assigned to meaningful segments of text. Third, related codes were grouped into preliminary categories. Fourth, categories were reviewed against the full dataset to ensure conceptual coherence and adequate evidential support. Fifth, final themes were named and defined in relation to the research objective.

NVivo software was used to organize transcripts, manage codes, compare coded segments, and retrieve quotations. Coding was primarily inductive, allowing themes to emerge from the data, but the interpretation was informed by concepts from procedural justice, legal consciousness, cultural competence, and legal pluralism. To strengthen credibility, two researchers independently reviewed a subset of transcripts and discussed coding differences until interpretive agreement was reached. Member reflection was conducted with four participants who reviewed a summary of the findings and commented on whether the themes reflected their professional experiences. Confidentiality was protected by removing identifying details and assigning participant codes such as P3, P11, and P20.

Findings

A total of 24 participants took part in the study. The sample included 15 men and 9 women. In terms of professional role, 5 participants were judges, 4 were prosecutors, 5 were criminal defense lawyers, 4 were police officers or law-enforcement personnel, 3 were correctional/probation-related professionals, and 3 were community-based legal advocates or social workers. Participants' professional experience ranged from 4 to 26 years, with most participants having between 8 and 15 years of experience. Regarding education, 17 participants held postgraduate degrees in law, criminology, social work, or related fields, while 7 held undergraduate qualifications combined with extensive professional experience. All participants worked in Tehran and reported direct experience with criminal justice cases involving culturally diverse defendants, victims, families, or communities.

The first main category concerned language, legal comprehension, and communication barriers. Participants emphasized that cultural diversity often appears first as a practical difficulty in understanding legal procedures. Some defendants and victims were described as speaking Persian with limited fluency, using local dialects, or lacking familiarity with formal legal vocabulary. However, participants stressed that the problem was not limited to language. Many individuals understood ordinary conversation but did not understand the procedural meaning of legal terms such as complaint, confession, bail, evidence, appeal, or mitigation. One defense lawyer stated, "A person may say 'I understood,' but what they understood is not the legal consequence of the sentence. They understand the words, not the process" (P9). A judge similarly observed, "Sometimes silence is interpreted as cooperation or guilt, while in that person's culture silence before authority is a sign of respect or fear" (P2). Participants believed that these barriers can affect the quality of statements, the reliability of testimony, the ability to exercise rights, and the individual's perception of fairness. Several participants argued that interpreter services, simplified explanations, and culturally sensitive communication protocols are necessary to prevent misunderstanding from becoming procedural disadvantage.

The second category involved the tension between standardized institutional routines and the need for culturally informed professional judgment. Participants explained that criminal justice institutions are designed to process cases according to

uniform rules, timelines, forms, and evidentiary expectations. While this standardization supports legal equality and administrative efficiency, it may also limit the ability of officials to recognize culturally specific meanings. A prosecutor explained, “The file has boxes that must be completed, but cultural context does not have a box. Unless the officer or prosecutor is personally sensitive, it disappears from the case” (P6). Police participants also noted that frontline officers often lack training in cultural competence and may rely on personal assumptions when interpreting behavior. One police officer said, “We are trained to identify risk, contradiction, and confession, but not trained enough to understand why people from different backgrounds communicate differently” (P13). Participants did not argue that culture should override criminal law. Rather, they suggested that cultural knowledge should help institutions understand context, avoid stereotypes, and distinguish between explanation and excuse. Limited cultural competence was therefore seen as an institutional weakness rather than merely an individual failing.

The third category concerned mistrust between culturally diverse communities and criminal justice institutions. Participants reported that some defendants, victims, and families approach the justice system with fear, suspicion, or low expectations of fairness. This mistrust was linked to prior negative experiences, socioeconomic marginalization, lack of legal literacy, and community narratives about unequal treatment. A community advocate stated, “Some families believe that once they enter the criminal justice system, they will lose control of the problem and also lose their dignity in the community” (P22). Defense lawyers reported that minority or migrant-background defendants sometimes assumed that officials would not believe them, especially when they lacked social status or spoke with a recognizable accent. One lawyer said, “The problem is not always direct discrimination. Sometimes the person feels already judged before speaking” (P11). Participants also discussed stigma attached to victims, particularly women and young people, who may avoid reporting offenses because of fear of family pressure or community blame. The findings suggest that cultural diversity intersects with class, gender, and institutional power, shaping whether people perceive criminal justice as protective or threatening.

The fourth category addressed tensions between informal community practices and formal criminal justice. Participants described cases in which families, elders, neighborhood figures, or community mediators attempted to resolve disputes before or during formal proceedings. In minor conflicts, such mediation was sometimes viewed positively because it reduced hostility, encouraged compensation, and restored social relationships. However, participants warned that informal settlement can become problematic when it pressures victims to withdraw complaints or minimizes serious harm. A prosecutor noted, “Reconciliation is valuable when it is voluntary, but in some cases the victim is surrounded by family pressure, and then reconciliation becomes another form of coercion” (P4). A social worker similarly stated, “In some communities, protecting family reputation is treated as more important than protecting the victim” (P21). Participants emphasized that criminal justice institutions need clearer criteria for engaging with community-based norms. They argued that legal actors should respect culturally meaningful conflict resolution where appropriate but must protect individual rights, especially in cases involving violence, abuse, or vulnerable victims.

The fifth category concerned possible legal and institutional responses. Participants proposed reforms focused on procedural fairness, cultural competence, access to interpretation, community liaison, and clearer guidelines for considering cultural context. Judges and lawyers emphasized the need for plain-language explanation of rights and procedural steps. Police and correctional participants highlighted training programs on cultural communication, implicit bias, and conflict de-escalation. Community advocates recommended liaison mechanisms between justice institutions and trusted local organizations, especially for victims who fear stigma or retaliation. One judge stated, “The law must remain general, but the path to understanding the law must be adapted to people’s realities” (P1). A police officer added, “Training should not teach us stereotypes about groups; it should teach us how to ask better questions and avoid quick judgments” (P15). Participants also supported the development

of guidelines for when cultural context may be relevant to intent, mitigation, victim support, or restorative practices, while clearly stating that cultural claims cannot justify violence or coercion.

Discussion

This study explored how cultural diversity shapes criminal justice practices in Tehran and identified the institutional challenges and legal responses associated with culturally diverse cases. The findings showed that cultural diversity affects criminal justice through communication, institutional routines, trust, informal norms, and reform needs. These results support socio-legal approaches that view law not only as formal doctrine but also as an institution experienced through everyday meanings, narratives, and social relationships (Ewick & Silbey, 1998; Sarat & Kearns, 1995). Participants did not describe cultural diversity as a marginal or exceptional issue. Instead, they presented it as a recurring practical condition that influences how people understand authority, participate in proceedings, report victimization, interpret fairness, and respond to legal outcomes.

The first finding concerned linguistic and communicative barriers in criminal proceedings. Participants emphasized that legal comprehension is not the same as ordinary language understanding. This distinction is important because due process depends on meaningful participation, not merely physical presence in legal proceedings. Tyler's procedural justice theory helps explain this result: people are more likely to regard legal institutions as legitimate when they experience respectful treatment, voice, neutrality, and trustworthy authority (Tyler, 2006; Tyler & Huo, 2002). If defendants or victims do not understand the meaning of legal procedures, they cannot experience genuine voice or participation. The findings also align with scholarship on access to justice, which emphasizes that legal systems must be understandable and navigable for ordinary people, especially those with limited legal literacy. In culturally diverse cases, communication failures may be misread as inconsistency, resistance, or guilt. Therefore, interpreter services, plain-language explanation, and culturally aware questioning are not optional administrative improvements; they are procedural safeguards.

The second finding involved institutional standardization and limited cultural competence. Participants recognized that standardized procedures support consistency and equality before the law. However, they also argued that rigid routines can erase relevant cultural context. This finding reflects a central tension in criminal justice theory: institutions must balance uniform legality with individualized justice. Packer's (1968) distinction between crime control and due process remains relevant because culturally diverse cases often reveal the cost of speed and bureaucratic efficiency. When institutions prioritize rapid file completion, cultural context may disappear from police reports, prosecutorial decisions, and judicial reasoning. Chan's (1997) work on policing in multicultural societies similarly emphasizes that organizational culture shapes how officers interpret difference. Cultural competence should therefore not be reduced to personal sensitivity. It requires institutional training, supervision, interpretive resources, and accountability mechanisms that help officials understand context without relying on stereotypes.

The third finding concerned mistrust, stigma, and perceived discriminatory treatment. Participants reported that some culturally diverse individuals approach criminal justice institutions with fear or low expectations of fairness. This finding is consistent with research on minority experiences in criminal justice, which shows that unequal treatment may occur across multiple institutional stages and may be reinforced by historical memory, community narratives, and socioeconomic disadvantage (Bowling & Phillips, 2002; Phillips & Bowling, 2007). The important point is that perceived injustice can damage legitimacy even when officials believe they are acting neutrally. Procedural justice research shows that trust in law is shaped by the quality of interpersonal treatment as well as outcomes (Tyler, 2006). In the present study, participants' accounts suggest that mistrust may reduce reporting, cooperation, and acceptance of decisions. For victims, stigma can be especially harmful

because community pressure may prevent formal complaint or encourage withdrawal. Thus, culturally responsive criminal justice must address both institutional behavior and the social conditions that shape people's willingness to use legal protection.

The fourth finding addressed tensions between community-based norms and formal criminal law. Participants viewed informal mediation ambivalently. In some cases, community-based resolution was considered useful for reducing conflict and restoring relationships. In other cases, it was seen as dangerous when it pressured victims or minimized serious harm. This result aligns with legal pluralism scholarship, which argues that people often navigate multiple normative orders, including state law, family expectations, religious norms, and community-based practices (Merry, 2006). However, the findings also show why legal pluralism must be approached critically in criminal justice. Informal norms may support reconciliation, but they may also reproduce inequality, silence victims, or protect powerful family members. Literature on cultural defenses similarly warns that cultural explanation should not become automatic justification for criminal harm (Renteln, 2004; Foblets & Renteln, 2009). Therefore, legal response should distinguish between voluntary restorative settlement and coercive informal pressure.

The fifth finding concerned reform needs. Participants proposed practical legal responses, including interpreter access, plain-language communication, cultural competence training, community liaison, procedural guidelines, and safeguards against coercive reconciliation. These proposals are consistent with procedural justice and institutional legitimacy frameworks. They also reflect Merry's (2006) argument that legal norms become effective when translated into local meanings without abandoning rights-based principles. A culturally responsive criminal justice system should not fragment criminal law into separate cultural rules. Rather, it should improve the capacity of institutions to apply general legal principles fairly across diverse social contexts. The goal is not to excuse harmful conduct but to ensure that defendants understand proceedings, victims can seek protection without stigma, and officials interpret behavior with sufficient contextual awareness.

Overall, the study suggests that cultural diversity requires a move from formal equality toward substantive procedural fairness. Formal equality asks whether the same rule is applied to everyone. Substantive procedural fairness asks whether everyone can understand, access, and meaningfully participate in the procedure through which the rule is applied. This distinction is central to criminal justice reform in diverse societies. Without culturally responsive procedures, legal equality may remain abstract. With excessive cultural relativism, legal protection may become inconsistent or unequal. The challenge is therefore to develop institutional practices that recognize cultural context while preserving individual rights, public safety, and the authority of criminal law.

This study has several limitations. First, the sample was limited to 24 participants from Tehran, and the findings may not represent criminal justice experiences in other Iranian cities or rural regions. Second, the study focused on professional perspectives rather than directly interviewing defendants, victims, witnesses, or family members from culturally diverse communities. As a result, the findings reflect institutional and practitioner interpretations more than the lived experiences of ordinary justice users. Third, the sensitive nature of criminal justice work may have influenced participants' willingness to discuss discrimination, institutional weakness, or problematic practices openly. Fourth, because the study used qualitative interviews, the findings should not be interpreted as statistically generalizable. Instead, they provide conceptual and interpretive insight into how cultural diversity is experienced within criminal justice practice.

Future research should include the perspectives of defendants, victims, witnesses, and families from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Comparative studies across different Iranian cities could clarify whether the challenges identified in Tehran are similar or different in smaller cities, border provinces, or rural communities. Future studies could also focus on specific stages of the criminal justice process, such as police interrogation, prosecution, trial, sentencing, prison, probation, or restorative justice. In addition, mixed-methods research could combine qualitative interviews with case-file analysis, courtroom

observation, or survey data to examine how cultural diversity affects procedural outcomes. Further research is also needed on gender, class, migration status, and ethnicity as intersecting factors in criminal justice experiences.

Criminal justice institutions should develop structured cultural competence programs for judges, prosecutors, police officers, lawyers, and correctional professionals. These programs should avoid stereotypes and instead focus on communication skills, legal interpretation, implicit bias, trauma-informed practice, and respectful questioning. Interpreter services should be strengthened, and legal rights should be explained in clear and accessible language. Courts and police stations should consider using written and oral procedural guides for people with limited legal literacy. Community liaison mechanisms may help build trust, especially for victims who fear stigma or retaliation. Finally, guidelines should clarify how cultural context may be considered in criminal cases while maintaining that culture cannot justify violence, coercion, or violation of fundamental rights.

Conclusion

This study examined cultural diversity and criminal justice practices in Tehran through qualitative interviews with 24 legal and justice-related professionals. The findings showed that cultural diversity creates institutional challenges in communication, legal comprehension, professional discretion, trust, victim participation, informal mediation, and procedural fairness. Participants emphasized that cultural difference should not be treated as an excuse for criminal behavior, but it should be considered where it affects understanding, participation, vulnerability, intent, credibility, or access to justice.

The study concludes that culturally responsive criminal justice strengthens rather than weakens the rule of law. A justice system that ignores cultural diversity may apply the same rules formally while producing unequal experiences in practice. Conversely, a justice system that recognizes cultural context within rights-based limits can improve legitimacy, fairness, and public trust. Legal response should therefore focus on interpreter access, plain-language procedures, cultural competence training, institutional guidelines, community liaison, and safeguards against coercive informal settlement. In culturally diverse societies, the central task of criminal justice is not only to punish crime but also to ensure that legal authority is understandable, accessible, respectful, and substantively fair.

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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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