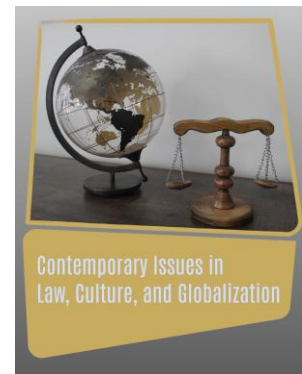




Transnational Legal Advocacy and Cultural Rights: Civil Society Strategies and Global Norms

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore how civil society actors in Tehran understand, translate, and strategically use global cultural rights norms in transnational legal advocacy. This qualitative study was conducted using semi-structured interviews with 24 civil society actors, legal advocates, cultural-rights practitioners, NGO representatives, and policy-oriented experts based in Tehran. Participants were selected through purposive sampling because of their direct experience with rights-based advocacy, cultural policy, legal mobilization, minority rights, heritage protection, artistic freedom, or international human rights discourse. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was achieved, with saturation reached after the twenty-first interview and confirmed through three additional interviews. Interviews were conducted face-to-face or online, audio-recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using thematic analysis. NVivo software was used to organize transcripts, code meaning units, compare categories, and develop themes. Credibility was strengthened through member checking, peer review of coding, reflexive memo-writing, and maintenance of an audit trail. Four main categories emerged from the data: norm translation and cultural framing, evidence-based advocacy and documentation, strategic use of transnational networks, and legitimacy management under institutional constraint. Participants described global cultural rights norms as useful but insufficient unless translated into locally intelligible legal, ethical, and cultural language. Civil society strategies included reframing international standards through national legal concepts, documenting violations through credible evidence, using international networks to amplify domestic concerns, and balancing rights claims with legitimacy, security, and cultural sensitivity. The findings suggest that transnational legal advocacy for cultural rights is not a simple transfer of global norms into local contexts. Rather, it is a negotiated process in which civil society actors reinterpret international standards, build legal and moral credibility, and adapt advocacy strategies to institutional and cultural realities. Effective advocacy depends on the ability to combine global rights language with locally resonant narratives, reliable documentation, and sustainable networks.

Keywords: transnational advocacy; cultural rights; civil society; global norms; legal mobilization; qualitative research; Tehran

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Introduction

Cultural rights have become an increasingly significant field within contemporary human rights law, sociolegal scholarship, and transnational advocacy practice. Although human rights discourse has historically emphasized civil and political liberties,

the right to participate in cultural life, preserve cultural identity, access cultural resources, use language, protect heritage, and engage in creative expression has gradually acquired greater normative and institutional visibility. Article 15 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights recognizes the right of everyone to take part in cultural life, benefit from scientific progress, and enjoy protection of the moral and material interests resulting from creative production (United Nations, 1966). This provision was later elaborated by the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in General Comment No. 21, which frames cultural participation as a dynamic, inclusive, and relational right connected to dignity, identity, education, freedom of expression, minority protection, and non-discrimination (Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights [CESCR], 2009). UNESCO's Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity similarly presents cultural diversity as a common heritage of humanity and emphasizes that cultural rights are integral to the indivisible framework of human rights (UNESCO, 2001). Together, these instruments show that cultural rights are not marginal claims about tradition or heritage alone; they are central to how individuals and communities experience equality, recognition, belonging, and participation in public life.

Despite this normative development, cultural rights remain among the most contested areas of human rights practice. One reason is that culture itself is not a fixed or neutral category. In legal and political discourse, culture may be invoked to defend minority recognition, artistic freedom, language rights, religious practices, indigenous heritage, or community autonomy. At the same time, culture may also be mobilized by states, institutions, or dominant groups to justify exclusion, restrict dissent, or resist external human rights criticism. Sociolegal and anthropological scholarship has therefore challenged simplistic oppositions between universal human rights and local culture. Cowan, Dembour, and Wilson (2001) argue that rights and culture should not be treated as naturally opposed categories; rather, both are socially constructed, politically negotiated, and institutionally mediated. Goodale and Merry (2007) similarly emphasize that human rights become meaningful through practice, translation, and local interpretation. In this view, cultural rights are not merely legal entitlements written in international instruments, but living claims that acquire meaning through advocacy, institutional response, and everyday struggle.

The problem of translation is particularly important in transnational legal advocacy. International human rights norms do not travel into domestic settings as complete and self-executing rules. Instead, they are interpreted, reframed, localized, and sometimes resisted by actors who operate across legal, political, and cultural boundaries. Merry's (2006) concept of "vernacularization" is especially useful for understanding this process. She argues that international human rights law must be translated into locally meaningful terms if it is to influence social practice and institutional behavior. This translation is not merely linguistic; it involves cultural mediation, strategic framing, and selective adaptation. Local advocates often rework global norms so they become compatible with domestic legal categories, moral vocabularies, religious or cultural understandings, and institutional expectations. In cultural rights advocacy, this process is particularly delicate because advocates must defend rights claims without appearing to reject local cultural values, and must engage local values without allowing culture to become a justification for rights violations.

Transnational advocacy network theory provides another key framework for this study. Keck and Sikkink (1998) define transnational advocacy networks as networks of activists, civil society organizations, lawyers, researchers, journalists, and international actors who are bound together by shared values and exchange information, resources, and pressure across borders. These networks are especially important when domestic channels are blocked, weak, or unresponsive. In such contexts, local actors may use international allies to amplify claims, circulate evidence, generate reputational pressure, and re-enter domestic debates through what Keck and Sikkink describe as the "boomerang" pattern. Risse, Ropp, and Sikkink (1999) further show that international norms can influence domestic change when transnational pressure interacts with local mobilization,

institutional vulnerability, and discursive accountability. Finnemore and Sikkink's (1998) norm life-cycle model similarly suggests that norms emerge, cascade, and become internalized through the work of norm entrepreneurs, institutional platforms, and repeated socialization. These theories are highly relevant to cultural rights because civil society actors often serve as norm translators and norm entrepreneurs, connecting international legal standards to local struggles over recognition, identity, participation, and dignity.

However, the effectiveness of transnational legal advocacy cannot be understood only through formal legal compliance. Sociolegal scholars have shown that rights become powerful not only through court judgments or treaty ratification, but also through discourse, identity formation, political consciousness, coalition-building, and institutional negotiation. Santos and Rodríguez-Garavito (2005) describe "law and globalization from below" as the use of legal tools by social movements and civil society actors seeking counter-hegemonic forms of justice. Rajagopal (2003) similarly argues that international law must be analyzed from the perspective of social movements and Third World resistance, rather than only through the doctrines of states and international institutions. Merry, Levitt, Rosen, and Yoon (2010) show that human rights can provide social movements with political and moral resources even when activists do not use formal human rights law in a technical sense. These studies suggest that civil society actors may use cultural rights norms as flexible resources for advocacy, education, documentation, coalition-building, and institutional dialogue, rather than only as direct legal claims.

Cultural rights advocacy also raises complex questions of legitimacy. Advocates who rely on global norms may be accused of importing foreign agendas, politicizing culture, or undermining national sovereignty. These accusations can be particularly strong in contexts where international human rights mechanisms are viewed with suspicion or where civil society organizations operate under legal and administrative constraints. Dezalay and Garth (2002) demonstrate that the circulation of legal expertise across borders is never politically neutral; it is shaped by professional hierarchies, institutional power, and struggles over legitimacy. An-Na'im (1990) similarly argues that human rights reform in Muslim-majority societies requires internal cultural and legal legitimacy, not merely external pressure. This does not mean that universal rights must be abandoned, but that advocacy must engage seriously with local normative systems and the social conditions under which legal change becomes acceptable, meaningful, and sustainable.

In the context of cultural rights, legitimacy is also connected to the tension between preservation and transformation. Cultural rights are often associated with heritage, language, tradition, and collective identity, but they also protect creativity, dissent, reinterpretation, and participation in changing cultural life. Coombe (1998) shows that law plays a central role in shaping the meanings of cultural symbols, authorship, appropriation, and identity. This insight is important because civil society advocacy around cultural rights often concerns contested meanings: whose culture is protected, who has authority to define it, which practices are recognized, and which voices are excluded from official narratives. Advocacy may therefore involve both defensive strategies, such as protecting endangered heritage or minority languages, and transformative strategies, such as challenging monopolies over cultural representation or expanding participation in cultural policy.

Although the global literature on human rights advocacy is extensive, less attention has been given to how civil society actors in specific urban legal and political environments translate cultural rights norms into practical advocacy strategies. Tehran provides a significant setting for such inquiry because it is a major legal, cultural, educational, and civil society center in Iran, where cultural policy, legal advocacy, public discourse, and transnational communication intersect. Civil society actors in Tehran may engage with cultural rights through diverse issues, including heritage preservation, minority recognition, artistic expression, access to cultural resources, language and identity, women's participation in cultural life, and the relationship between religious, national, and global normative frameworks. Their advocacy practices are likely to involve both formal and

informal strategies: legal consultation, policy dialogue, public education, documentation, networking with international organizations, and careful framing of claims within locally acceptable vocabularies.

This study therefore seeks to examine how Tehran-based civil society actors understand and practice transnational legal advocacy in relation to cultural rights. Rather than asking whether global norms are simply accepted or rejected, the study asks how these norms are interpreted, localized, used, limited, and transformed in advocacy practice. The central assumption is that civil society actors are not passive recipients of international legal norms. They are active mediators who translate global standards into local legal arguments, cultural narratives, institutional strategies, and practical forms of claim-making. By focusing on their experiences, this study contributes to sociolegal debates on norm diffusion, legal pluralism, cultural rights, and civil society mobilization. It also offers empirical insight into the strategic, ethical, and institutional challenges that shape cultural rights advocacy in a transnational field.

Methods and Materials

This study used a qualitative research design to explore the meanings, strategies, and challenges through which civil society actors engage in transnational legal advocacy for cultural rights. A qualitative approach was appropriate because the study aimed to understand participants' lived experiences, interpretive frameworks, and strategic reasoning rather than measure predetermined variables. The research was conducted in Tehran, Iran, because Tehran contains a concentration of legal professionals, civil society organizations, cultural institutions, academic experts, and advocacy networks involved in rights-related work.

The participants consisted of 24 individuals selected through purposive sampling. Inclusion criteria were: at least two years of experience in civil society, legal advocacy, cultural rights, human rights education, minority rights, cultural heritage protection, arts advocacy, policy consultation, or related NGO activity; residence or professional activity in Tehran; willingness to participate in a semi-structured interview; and ability to discuss advocacy strategies in relation to cultural rights or global legal norms. Participants included 9 lawyers or legal consultants, 6 NGO or civil society organization staff members, 4 cultural heritage or arts-sector advocates, 3 university-based experts, and 2 independent policy or media advocates. The sample size was determined by theoretical saturation. Saturation was reached after 21 interviews, when no substantially new themes emerged, and three additional interviews were conducted to confirm the stability of the categories.

Data were collected only through semi-structured interviews. An interview guide was developed based on the study objectives and the literature on transnational advocacy, cultural rights, norm diffusion, and legal mobilization. The interview questions addressed participants' understandings of cultural rights, experiences with civil society advocacy, use of international legal norms, strategies for translating global standards into local arguments, cooperation with transnational networks, institutional challenges, and perceptions of legitimacy and risk. Example questions included: "How do you define cultural rights in your field of work?", "How are international human rights norms used in local advocacy?", "What strategies make cultural rights claims more acceptable to institutions or communities?", and "What challenges arise when civil society actors work with transnational legal frameworks?"

Interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes. They were conducted in a private and secure setting, either face-to-face or through encrypted online communication depending on participant preference. All interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent and transcribed verbatim. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, voluntary participation, confidentiality, the right to withdraw, and the anonymization of identifying information. To protect confidentiality, participants were assigned codes from P1 to P24, and any potentially identifying institutional details were removed from the transcripts.

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The analysis followed an iterative process involving familiarization with transcripts, initial coding, development of preliminary categories, review of themes, refinement of theme boundaries, and final

interpretation. NVivo software was used to organize the data, manage codes, compare excerpts, and retrieve coded segments. Analysis began with repeated reading of transcripts and writing reflexive memos. Meaning units related to advocacy strategies, norm translation, institutional barriers, legitimacy, cultural framing, and transnational networks were coded inductively. Codes were then grouped into broader categories based on conceptual similarity and recurrence across interviews. The final themes were developed through comparison across participants and review of negative or divergent cases.

Trustworthiness was addressed through several strategies. Credibility was strengthened through member checking with selected participants and peer review of the coding framework. Dependability was supported by maintaining an audit trail of coding decisions, memos, and theme revisions. Confirmability was enhanced through reflexive memo-writing to identify researcher assumptions. Transferability was supported by providing detailed descriptions of participants, context, and analytic categories. The study followed ethical principles of informed consent, confidentiality, voluntary participation, and protection of participants from professional or social risk.

Findings

The study included 24 participants from Tehran. Of these, 13 participants were women and 11 were men. In terms of age, 7 participants were between 25 and 34 years old, 10 were between 35 and 44 years old, and 7 were 45 years old or above. Regarding education, 5 participants held a bachelor's degree, 12 held a master's degree, and 7 held a doctoral degree or professional legal qualification. In terms of professional background, 9 participants were lawyers or legal consultants, 6 worked in NGOs or civil society organizations, 4 were active in cultural heritage or arts advocacy, 3 were university-based experts, and 2 were independent policy or media advocates. Work experience in advocacy or related cultural-rights fields ranged from 3 to 22 years: 5 participants had less than 5 years of experience, 11 had 5–10 years of experience, and 8 had more than 10 years of experience.

The first main category was norm translation and cultural framing. Participants emphasized that global cultural rights norms rarely become persuasive in local advocacy when presented only as international legal obligations. Instead, advocates described the need to translate rights language into locally meaningful terms, including constitutional principles, ethical values, religiously acceptable concepts, cultural heritage discourse, and public-interest arguments. Several participants stated that the phrase “cultural rights” was sometimes perceived as abstract, foreign, or politically sensitive, whereas related ideas such as dignity, participation, heritage protection, artistic contribution, and social respect were more understandable to communities and institutions. One participant explained, “When we say Article 15 or cultural participation, many officials do not react. But when we explain that people should not be separated from their language, memory, and cultural contribution, the conversation becomes more possible” (P6). Another participant stated, “The international language gives us a framework, but the local language gives us access” (P14). This category shows that civil society actors used global norms as interpretive resources, but they carefully reframed them to fit domestic legal and cultural vocabularies.

The second main category was evidence-based advocacy and documentation. Participants repeatedly described documentation as the foundation of credible cultural rights advocacy. They argued that cultural rights violations are often difficult to prove because they may appear as administrative neglect, unequal access, symbolic exclusion, censorship, underfunding, or lack of participation rather than direct physical harm. Therefore, advocates relied on interviews, legal records, media reports, policy documents, photographs, expert opinions, and community testimonies to transform dispersed experiences into recognizable claims. One participant noted, “Without documentation, cultural rights remain emotional stories. With documentation, they become legal and policy issues” (P3). Another participant explained that evidence helped advocates avoid accusations of exaggeration: “Institutions may reject moral criticism, but they have more difficulty rejecting a well-prepared file with dates, cases, and comparative standards” (P19). Participants also reported that evidence was essential for

communicating with transnational partners, because international organizations required credible, verifiable, and carefully anonymized information. This category indicates that documentation functioned as both a legal strategy and a legitimacy-building practice.

The third main category was strategic use of transnational networks. Participants described transnational networks as important but sensitive resources. These networks included international NGOs, academic institutions, diaspora experts, UN-related mechanisms, foreign universities, professional associations, and informal expert communities. Participants used these networks to access comparative legal knowledge, translate documents, receive technical training, amplify local issues, and learn from advocacy experiences in other countries. However, participants also emphasized that transnational cooperation had to be managed carefully because visible foreign association could create suspicion or undermine local credibility. One participant stated, “International support is useful when it strengthens our technical capacity, but it becomes harmful if it allows others to say that the claim is not local” (P11). Another participant added, “We need networks, but we also need boundaries. The issue must remain rooted in the experience of people here” (P21). This category suggests that civil society actors did not simply depend on external pressure; rather, they selectively used transnational networks while preserving domestic ownership of cultural rights claims.

The fourth main category was legitimacy management under institutional constraint. Participants described cultural rights advocacy as a field shaped by legal ambiguity, administrative caution, political sensitivity, and uneven institutional access. Many stated that successful advocacy required careful management of language, timing, institutional relationships, and public visibility. Participants often avoided confrontational framing when seeking policy dialogue, using terms such as cultural participation, social cohesion, public trust, heritage protection, or community consultation instead of direct accusations of rights violation. One participant said, “Sometimes the strongest strategy is not to use the strongest words. You must keep the door open if you want institutional change” (P8). Another participant stated, “We constantly calculate: what can be said, where it can be said, and who should say it” (P17). Participants also identified ethical tensions, especially when balancing public advocacy with the safety of communities or artists. This category shows that advocacy was not only a legal activity but also a practice of risk management, institutional negotiation, and ethical judgment.

Discussion

The findings of this study show that transnational legal advocacy for cultural rights is best understood as a situated practice of translation, documentation, networking, and legitimacy management. Participants did not treat global cultural rights norms as ready-made legal solutions that could be directly inserted into local institutions. Instead, they approached such norms as flexible resources that required cultural, legal, and strategic adaptation. This finding aligns closely with Merry’s (2006) concept of vernacularization, which explains how international human rights ideas become meaningful through translation into local cultural and institutional vocabularies. It also supports Goodale and Merry’s (2007) argument that human rights must be studied in practice, where their meanings are shaped by actors, institutions, and social contexts. In this study, cultural rights became persuasive when advocates connected them to locally recognizable concepts such as dignity, heritage, participation, social trust, and public responsibility. This does not imply a rejection of universal rights. Rather, it shows that universal norms gain practical force when they are articulated through locally intelligible forms of reasoning.

The first category, norm translation and cultural framing, confirms that cultural rights advocacy depends heavily on interpretive mediation. Participants repeatedly emphasized that international legal terminology alone was insufficient in local advocacy. This finding is consistent with Cowan et al. (2001), who criticize rigid oppositions between rights and culture and argue that both are negotiated categories. It also corresponds with An-Na’im’s (1990) view that human rights reform in culturally and religiously complex societies requires internal legitimacy and normative persuasion. Participants’ accounts

suggest that advocates act as cultural brokers who move between global legal language and domestic moral, legal, and cultural vocabularies. This role is particularly important in cultural rights because the subject matter itself—heritage, language, artistic expression, identity, and participation—is deeply embedded in local meanings. Therefore, the diffusion of cultural rights norms is not a linear process of adoption, but a negotiated process of reinterpretation.

The second category, evidence-based advocacy and documentation, demonstrates that civil society actors transform cultural rights from abstract moral claims into institutionally recognizable issues through evidence production. Participants described documentation as essential for credibility, policy dialogue, and transnational communication. This finding is aligned with Keck and Sikkink's (1998) emphasis on information politics, in which advocacy networks generate and circulate credible information to influence states and institutions. In the field of cultural rights, evidence production is particularly challenging because violations may appear as exclusion from cultural decision-making, underrepresentation, restrictions on expression, loss of heritage, or unequal access to cultural resources. These forms of harm are often gradual, symbolic, or administrative rather than immediately visible. The finding also supports Sikkink's (2017) argument that human rights change is often slow and depends on sustained struggles, documentation, and accountability practices. In this study, documentation was not merely a technical process; it was a form of legal construction through which dispersed experiences became claims capable of entering institutional and transnational arenas.

The third category, strategic use of transnational networks, supports the central claims of transnational advocacy network theory while also complicating them. Keck and Sikkink (1998) and Risse et al. (1999) show that transnational networks can amplify domestic claims, generate pressure, and create pathways for norm diffusion when local channels are blocked. Participants in this study similarly described transnational networks as sources of comparative knowledge, technical expertise, visibility, and moral support. However, they also emphasized the risks of excessive visibility or perceived external dependence. This finding indicates that the “boomerang” model must be interpreted carefully in sensitive advocacy environments. Transnational support may strengthen claims, but it may also expose advocates to accusations of foreign influence or reduce the perceived authenticity of local demands. This confirms Dezalay and Garth's (2002) insight that transnational legal expertise is shaped by power relations and struggles over legitimacy. It also resonates with Santos and Rodríguez-Garavito's (2005) concept of globalization from below, because participants attempted to use global legal resources without surrendering local ownership of advocacy agendas.

The fourth category, legitimacy management under institutional constraint, reveals the practical and ethical complexity of cultural rights advocacy. Participants' accounts show that civil society strategies were shaped not only by legal principles but also by institutional access, political sensitivity, professional risk, and community safety. This finding is consistent with Rajagopal's (2003) critique of state-centered international law and his emphasis on social movements as actors who operate within unequal institutional fields. It also supports Merry et al.'s (2010) argument that human rights can provide diffuse political and moral resources even when they are not used through formal litigation. Participants often chose moderated language, incremental dialogue, and culturally resonant framing not because they lacked commitment to rights, but because they understood advocacy as a long-term process requiring access, trust, and protection of affected communities. This finding suggests that strategic restraint should not automatically be interpreted as weakness or compromise. In constrained contexts, it may function as a practical condition for sustaining advocacy.

Taken together, the findings suggest that civil society actors operate as norm intermediaries between international law, domestic institutions, and affected communities. This intermediary role requires legal knowledge, cultural literacy, documentary capacity, network access, and ethical judgment. Finnemore and Sikkink's (1998) theory of norm dynamics is helpful here because participants can be understood as norm entrepreneurs who promote emerging or contested standards.

However, the findings also show that norm entrepreneurship is not only about persuasion at the international level; it also involves careful local work to make norms understandable, legitimate, and usable. In this sense, cultural rights advocacy is not simply about applying global norms to local problems, but about producing hybrid legal meanings that can travel across institutional and cultural boundaries.

The study also contributes to the literature on cultural rights by showing that cultural rights are both protective and participatory. Participants did not define cultural rights only as preservation of heritage or defense of tradition. They also associated cultural rights with participation in decision-making, access to cultural spaces, artistic expression, minority recognition, and the right of communities to shape the meaning of their own cultural life. This broader understanding is consistent with CESCR General Comment No. 21, which conceptualizes cultural life as dynamic and inclusive rather than static or folkloric (CESCR, 2009). It also aligns with Coombe's (1998) argument that law shapes cultural meanings and struggles over identity. The findings therefore challenge narrow understandings of culture as merely historical inheritance. For civil society actors, culture was a living field of participation, recognition, and contestation.

Another important implication concerns the relationship between universality and locality. The participants' strategies show that localization of human rights should not be equated with relativism. Advocates did not abandon global norms; they translated them. They did not reject international standards; they made them usable in local legal and cultural contexts. This distinction is crucial. As UNESCO (2001) emphasizes, cultural diversity cannot be invoked to limit internationally guaranteed human rights. At the same time, effective advocacy requires attention to the cultural forms through which rights claims are understood and accepted. The findings therefore support a dialogical model of cultural rights advocacy: global norms provide standards of dignity and equality, while local translation provides the communicative and institutional pathways through which those standards can influence practice.

The findings further indicate that legal advocacy is most effective when combined with non-legal strategies. Participants used legal norms, but they also relied on education, media, documentation, coalition-building, expert consultation, and institutional dialogue. This supports sociolegal perspectives that view law as a cultural and political resource rather than only a formal command. Goodale (2009) argues that anthropology and sociolegal analysis can reveal the lived and practical dimensions of human rights beyond doctrinal texts. The present study confirms this point by showing that cultural rights advocacy takes place in meetings, reports, training sessions, informal networks, public narratives, and negotiations as much as in courts or formal legal petitions.

Overall, this study suggests that transnational legal advocacy for cultural rights is a complex, multi-level practice. Its effectiveness depends on the ability of civil society actors to combine global standards with local legitimacy, credible documentation, careful networking, and ethical risk management. The findings highlight the importance of civil society not only as an implementer of global norms but as a producer of legal meaning. Cultural rights become socially effective when advocates translate them into narratives, evidence, and strategies that institutions and communities can recognize. Therefore, future legal and policy frameworks should pay greater attention to the intermediary role of civil society actors and the conditions that enable them to work safely, credibly, and sustainably.

This study has several limitations. First, the participants were selected from Tehran, which may limit the transferability of the findings to smaller cities, rural areas, border regions, or communities with different civil society structures. Second, the study relied only on semi-structured interviews; therefore, the findings reflect participants' reported experiences and interpretations rather than direct observation of advocacy practices. Third, because cultural rights advocacy can be politically and professionally sensitive, some participants may have avoided discussing certain details, organizations, or cases. Fourth,

although the study included participants from different professional backgrounds, it did not directly include state officials, judges, or members of all affected cultural communities. These limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings.

Future research should compare cultural rights advocacy across different cities and regions to identify how local institutional conditions shape civil society strategies. Comparative studies could also examine differences between advocacy fields, such as heritage protection, artistic freedom, minority language rights, women's cultural participation, and access to cultural resources. Longitudinal research would be valuable for understanding how advocacy networks develop over time and how global norms gradually influence domestic legal and policy discourse. Future studies could also include state officials, policymakers, judges, journalists, and community members to provide a more comprehensive picture of the interaction between civil society claims and institutional responses. In addition, ethnographic research could observe advocacy meetings, training workshops, and documentation practices directly.

Civil society organizations working on cultural rights should invest in three main capacities: legal literacy, documentation quality, and culturally grounded communication. Advocates should present global norms in ways that are legally accurate but also locally understandable, avoiding unnecessarily abstract or confrontational language when dialogue is possible. Organizations should develop secure systems for collecting, anonymizing, and preserving evidence, especially when working with vulnerable communities or sensitive cultural issues. Transnational cooperation should be used strategically to strengthen technical capacity, comparative learning, and visibility while preserving local ownership of claims. Finally, advocacy programs should include training on ethical risk assessment, institutional negotiation, and community participation so that cultural rights claims remain both effective and accountable to the people they seek to represent.

Conclusion

This study examined how civil society actors in Tehran understand and practice transnational legal advocacy in relation to cultural rights. The findings show that advocacy is not a simple process of importing global norms into domestic settings. Rather, it is a situated practice of translation, documentation, networking, and legitimacy management. Participants used international cultural rights norms as important resources, but they adapted them to local legal concepts, cultural narratives, institutional expectations, and ethical constraints. Four main categories were identified: norm translation and cultural framing, evidence-based advocacy and documentation, strategic use of transnational networks, and legitimacy management under institutional constraint.

The study contributes to sociolegal scholarship by showing that civil society actors function as norm intermediaries who connect global standards with local meanings. Their work demonstrates that cultural rights are not only matters of heritage or identity preservation, but also rights of participation, recognition, access, expression, and dignity. Effective advocacy requires more than formal reference to international law; it requires credible evidence, locally resonant language, strategic networks, and careful protection of legitimacy and safety. The findings also show that localization of cultural rights does not necessarily weaken universal human rights. On the contrary, translation can make universal norms more practical, persuasive, and institutionally effective.

In conclusion, transnational legal advocacy for cultural rights depends on the ability of civil society actors to operate across multiple normative fields. They must speak the language of international law, understand domestic institutions, respect community meanings, and manage the risks of advocacy. Supporting civil society capacity in these areas is essential for strengthening cultural rights protection and ensuring that global norms become meaningful in everyday legal and 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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