



Law, Culture, and Global Mobility: Migrant Legal Precarity and Institutional Response

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ABSTRACT

This study explored how migrant legal precarity is culturally experienced, institutionally produced, and practically negotiated in everyday encounters with legal and administrative systems in Tehran. This qualitative study used an interpretive design based on semi-structured interviews with 24 participants in Tehran, including migrant residents, legal practitioners, NGO workers, social-service staff, and cultural mediators who had direct experience with migrant legal problems. Participants were selected through purposive and snowball sampling. Interviews focused on legal status, documentation, access to institutions, cultural interpretation of law, and strategies used to manage uncertainty. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was achieved. Interviews were audio-recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim, anonymized, and analyzed using thematic analysis. NVivo software was used to organize codes, develop categories, compare participant groups, and document analytic memos. The analysis generated four main categories: legal status as lived uncertainty, institutional fragmentation and administrative gatekeeping, cultural translation and mistrust of law, and everyday coping and informal legal mobilization. Participants described legal precarity not only as lack of secure documentation but also as an unstable social condition affecting employment, housing, education, health care, police encounters, and family decision-making. Institutional actors emphasized procedural ambiguity, limited inter-agency coordination, and lack of culturally responsive service mechanisms. Migrants frequently relied on informal networks, community intermediaries, and selective institutional engagement to reduce exposure to legal risk. Migrant legal precarity is produced through the interaction of law, institutional practice, cultural interpretation, and unequal access to legal knowledge. Effective institutional response requires clearer procedures, culturally competent communication, accessible legal aid, and coordinated service pathways that recognize migrants as rights-bearing social actors rather than merely administrative cases.

Keywords: migrant legal precarity; global mobility; legal culture; institutional response; semi-legality; qualitative research; Tehran; legal consciousness; migration law; cultural mediation

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Introduction

Global mobility has become one of the defining socio-legal realities of contemporary societies. International migration is not only a demographic phenomenon but also a legal, cultural, institutional, and moral process through which states define

membership, distribute rights, regulate access to welfare, and distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate forms of presence. Recent global estimates show that international migration continues to grow in scale and complexity; the number of international migrants reached approximately 304 million in 2024, while forced displacement reached 123.2 million people by the end of the same year (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs [UN DESA], 2025; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2025). These figures are not merely statistical indicators of movement. They reveal the increasing number of people whose everyday lives are shaped by crossing borders, waiting for documentation, navigating multiple legal orders, and confronting institutions that may simultaneously offer protection, surveillance, exclusion, and conditional inclusion.

The relationship between law and migration is often framed through formal legal categories such as citizen, refugee, asylum seeker, labor migrant, irregular migrant, documented resident, or undocumented entrant. Although these categories are administratively necessary, socio-legal scholarship has shown that they do not fully capture the lived complexity of migrant experience. De Genova (2002) argues that migrant “illegality” should not be understood as an inherent property of migrants themselves but as a socio-political condition produced through law, border regimes, labor markets, and enforcement practices. In this view, legal precarity is not simply the absence of lawful status; it is a structured condition of vulnerability through which migrants are made deportable, governable, and dependent on institutions that often remain opaque to them. Similarly, Menjivar’s (2006) concept of “liminal legality” demonstrates that migrant legal status often exists in a gray zone between full legality and illegality, where temporary protection, expired permits, unresolved cases, and unstable documentation create long-term uncertainty.

This study approaches migrant legal precarity as a culturally mediated and institutionally produced condition. Legal precarity refers to the unstable, insecure, and conditional relationship between migrants and the legal system. It may arise from undocumented status, temporary residence permits, administrative delays, lack of recognition of identity documents, unclear eligibility for services, fear of enforcement, or inconsistent treatment across institutions. However, legal precarity is not experienced only at the level of legal classification. It enters the ordinary spaces of life: renting a room, enrolling a child in school, seeking medical care, signing an employment contract, reporting abuse, approaching police, accessing legal aid, or renewing a document. As Goldring, Berinstein, and Bernhard (2009) argue, precarious migratory status can become institutionalized when laws and policies create pathways into vulnerability and restrict access to social rights. In such circumstances, legality becomes a shifting and uneven field rather than a stable binary.

Culture is central to this process because migrants do not encounter law as abstract doctrine. They interpret law through language, memory, previous state experiences, community narratives, religious and moral expectations, family obligations, gender roles, and histories of displacement. Legal consciousness scholarship has long emphasized that ordinary people understand law not only through statutes and courts but through stories, everyday practices, institutional encounters, and social relationships (Ewick & Silbey, 1998). For migrants, legal consciousness is often formed across multiple legal cultures: the law of the country of origin, the law of the host state, international human rights norms, informal community rules, and the practical advice of intermediaries. This plurality can produce both agency and confusion. Migrants may learn to use law strategically, avoid law defensively, or reinterpret law morally when formal rules appear distant, inaccessible, or contradictory.

The concept of semi-legality is useful for understanding this intermediate condition. Kubal (2013) argues that migration research should move beyond a strict legal/illegal binary and recognize the various forms of “in-between” status that migrants inhabit. Semi-legality may include migrants who possess some documents but lack others, migrants whose legal status depends on employers or family members, individuals awaiting administrative decisions, or people whose formal status does not guarantee practical access to rights. Such conditions are especially important in urban contexts where migrants interact with

multiple institutions, including schools, hospitals, police, courts, municipalities, employers, landlords, and humanitarian organizations. In these settings, legality becomes fragmented across institutional sites. A person may be recognized by one institution, ignored by another, and treated as suspicious by a third.

Global mobility also challenges the traditional relationship between citizenship, territory, and rights. Bosniak (2006) shows that modern citizenship contains an internal tension: liberal societies often claim universal rights within their territory while simultaneously limiting full membership to citizens. Migrants are therefore located inside the state's social and economic life but outside full political belonging. This produces a paradox of presence without secure membership. Migrants work, study, raise children, pay costs, form relationships, and contribute to urban life, yet their legal position may remain conditional and revocable. Sassen (1996) similarly argues that globalization weakens the assumption that sovereignty and membership are contained within fixed national borders. As people, capital, law, and institutions move across borders, states face new pressures to regulate mobility while also responding to humanitarian, economic, and cultural realities.

Institutional response is therefore a key dimension of migrant legal precarity. Institutions do not merely apply migration law; they interpret, translate, filter, delay, simplify, and sometimes distort it. Bureaucratic discretion, unclear procedures, lack of coordination, insufficient translation services, and limited cultural competence can transform formal rights into inaccessible promises. Mountz (2010) has shown that bureaucratic systems may create distance between migrants and rights through procedural complexity and spatial or administrative barriers. Ager and Strang (2008), in their framework of integration, emphasize that access to employment, housing, education, health, social connection, language, culture, safety, and rights are interconnected domains. When legal status is insecure, these domains become mutually reinforcing sites of exclusion: difficulty with documentation affects employment, employment affects housing, housing affects schooling, and schooling affects long-term belonging.

In the Iranian and broader regional context, Tehran represents an important urban site for examining these dynamics because it has long been a destination and transit space for migrants, refugees, and displaced populations, particularly from neighboring countries. Urban migration governance in such contexts is rarely limited to formal immigration offices. Migrants' lives are shaped by schools, workplaces, hospitals, police stations, courts, NGOs, municipal offices, and informal community networks. These institutions may not share a unified understanding of migrant rights and obligations. Consequently, migrants may experience law as inconsistent, personalized, or dependent on the discretion of individual officers, employers, landlords, or intermediaries. This makes Tehran a relevant setting for exploring how global mobility is translated into local legal uncertainty.

The present study is situated at the intersection of law, culture, and global mobility. It examines how migrants and institutional actors in Tehran understand legal precarity, how institutions respond to migrant legal problems, and how cultural interpretation shapes both trust in law and strategies of survival. The study contributes to socio-legal migration research in three ways. First, it shifts attention from formal legal status to the lived experience of legal uncertainty in everyday institutional encounters. Second, it analyzes institutional response not only as policy implementation but as a culturally mediated practice shaped by language, discretion, trust, and administrative routines. Third, it highlights migrants' agency by examining how they use informal networks, community knowledge, selective visibility, and legal intermediaries to navigate unstable legal environments.

Accordingly, the study asks: How do migrants and institutional actors describe the experience of migrant legal precarity in Tehran? What institutional practices intensify or reduce legal uncertainty? How do cultural meanings, language barriers, and legal consciousness shape migrants' engagement with law? By answering these questions, the article seeks to show that migrant legal precarity is not merely a legal status problem. It is a relational condition produced between migrants, institutions, cultural

meanings, and global mobility regimes. Understanding this condition is essential for developing institutional responses that are legally clear, culturally responsive, and socially just.

Methods and Materials

This study employed a qualitative interpretive design to examine migrant legal precarity and institutional response in Tehran. A qualitative approach was appropriate because the study aimed to understand meanings, experiences, perceptions, and institutional practices rather than measure predetermined variables. The interpretive orientation allowed the researcher to explore how migrants and institutional actors make sense of law, legal status, documentation, bureaucratic encounters, and cultural barriers in everyday life. The study was guided by socio-legal assumptions that law is not only a formal system of rules but also a lived social practice shaped by institutions, narratives, power relations, and cultural interpretation.

The study used semi-structured interviews as the only method of data collection. Semi-structured interviews were selected because they provided a flexible but focused way to examine participants' experiences while allowing unexpected themes to emerge. The interview guide included open-ended questions about migration history, legal status, access to documentation, encounters with legal and administrative institutions, perceived barriers to rights, cultural and linguistic challenges, trust in institutions, coping strategies, and suggestions for institutional reform. For institutional participants, questions focused on service provision, legal-administrative procedures, professional challenges, cultural mediation, inter-agency coordination, and perceptions of migrant vulnerability.

The participants were 24 individuals recruited in Tehran through purposive and snowball sampling. The sample included 14 migrant residents and 10 institutional actors who had direct experience with migrant legal issues. Migrant participants were selected because they had personal experience with documentation, residence status, access to institutions, or legal uncertainty. Institutional participants were selected because their professional roles involved working with migrants in legal, social, humanitarian, municipal, or community-based settings.

The migrant group included individuals from Afghanistan, Iraq, and Pakistan who were residing in Tehran at the time of interview. The institutional group included four legal practitioners or legal-aid workers, three NGO workers, two social-service or municipal staff members, and one interpreter/cultural mediator. Inclusion criteria were: being 18 years of age or older, having direct personal or professional experience with migrant legal issues in Tehran, willingness to participate in an interview, and ability to provide informed consent. Individuals were excluded if participation was likely to cause serious distress, if they were unable to complete the interview safely, or if confidentiality could not be adequately protected.

The final sample size was determined by theoretical saturation. Saturation was considered achieved when additional interviews no longer generated substantially new codes or conceptual insights regarding migrant legal precarity, institutional response, or cultural interpretation. Initial saturation was reached after 21 interviews, and three additional interviews were conducted to confirm the stability of the categories. This procedure is consistent with qualitative sampling principles that emphasize depth, relevance, and conceptual completeness rather than statistical representativeness (Guest et al., 2006; Hennink et al., 2017).

Data were collected through individual semi-structured interviews conducted in private and secure settings in Tehran. Interviews lasted approximately 45 to 80 minutes. Depending on participant preference and language ability, interviews were conducted in Persian, Dari, or English. When needed, a trusted interpreter or cultural mediator assisted with communication. All interviews began with an explanation of the study purpose, voluntary participation, confidentiality, anonymity, and the right to withdraw at any time. Written or verbal informed consent was obtained before each interview.

The interview guide was developed based on socio-legal migration literature and refined after the first three interviews to improve clarity and sensitivity. Migrant participants were asked to describe situations in which legal status affected their daily

lives, including employment, housing, education, health care, police encounters, and access to public services. They were also asked how they understood legal rules, where they obtained legal information, whom they trusted, and how they responded to institutional barriers. Institutional participants were asked to describe common legal problems faced by migrants, institutional limitations, communication challenges, procedural ambiguities, and possible reforms.

Interviews were audio-recorded with permission and transcribed verbatim. Identifying information was removed during transcription. Participants were assigned codes such as M01 for migrant participants and I01 for institutional participants. Field notes were written after each interview to document contextual observations, preliminary analytic ideas, emotional tone, and reflexive considerations. These notes were not used as a separate data source but supported the interpretation of interview material.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the general principles proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). NVivo software was used to organize transcripts, manage codes, compare categories, retrieve excerpts, and develop analytic memos. The analysis began with repeated reading of transcripts to achieve familiarity with the data. Initial codes were then generated inductively, with attention to both semantic content and latent meanings. Examples of early codes included “fear of offices,” “documents as protection,” “unclear rules,” “intermediary dependence,” “language barrier,” “selective visibility,” “institutional discretion,” and “rights without access.”

After initial coding, codes were compared across migrant and institutional participants. Related codes were grouped into broader categories. The researcher then reviewed these categories in relation to the entire dataset to ensure that each category was internally coherent and analytically distinct. Categories were refined through memo writing, constant comparison, and re-reading of negative or divergent cases. The final analysis produced four main categories: legal status as lived uncertainty; institutional fragmentation and administrative gatekeeping; cultural translation and mistrust of law; and everyday coping and informal legal mobilization.

To enhance trustworthiness, several strategies were used. Credibility was supported through prolonged engagement with the data, comparison across participant groups, and member reflection with selected participants. Dependability was strengthened by maintaining an audit trail of coding decisions, category development, and analytic memos. Confirmability was supported through reflexive memoing, especially regarding the researcher’s assumptions about law, vulnerability, and migrant agency. Transferability was addressed by providing detailed contextual description of the study setting, participants, and institutional conditions. These procedures are consistent with qualitative trustworthiness criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985).

Given the sensitivity of migrant legal status, particular attention was paid to confidentiality and participant safety. No identifying details were included in transcripts or reports. Participants were informed that they did not need to answer questions that made them uncomfortable. Interviews avoided collecting unnecessary details about irregular entry, undocumented work, or other information that could increase legal risk. Audio files and transcripts were stored securely and accessible only to the research team. The presentation of findings uses anonymized participant codes and removes details that could reveal identity, nationality-specific risk, workplace, neighborhood, or institutional affiliation.

Findings

A total of 24 participants took part in the study. Of these, 14 participants were migrant residents of Tehran and 10 were institutional actors working with migrant legal or social issues. The sample included 13 men and 11 women. Participants’ ages ranged from 21 to 58 years. Among migrant participants, 10 were from Afghanistan, 2 from Iraq, and 2 from Pakistan. Regarding legal situation, 6 migrant participants reported having temporary residence or work-related documentation, 4 described refugee- or asylum-related documentation, and 4 reported expired, incomplete, or uncertain documentation. In terms

of education, 5 participants had primary or lower-secondary education, 8 had upper-secondary education, 7 had university education, and 4 had professional or legal training. Among institutional actors, 4 were legal practitioners or legal-aid workers, 3 were NGO workers, 2 were social-service or municipal staff, and 1 was an interpreter/cultural mediator. This diversity allowed the study to compare migrant experiences of legal precarity with institutional interpretations of procedural and cultural barriers.

Participants described legal status not as a fixed administrative label but as a continuous condition of uncertainty that entered daily life. Migrant participants repeatedly explained that documentation affected their ability to work, rent housing, move through the city, register children in school, seek medical care, and approach official institutions. Even participants with some form of documentation did not always feel legally secure because permits could expire, rules could change, employers could refuse recognition, or institutions could interpret documents differently. One migrant participant stated, “I have a paper, but I do not know when it will stop protecting me. Every time I go to an office, I feel they may say this is not enough” (M04). Another participant explained, “The problem is not only being legal or illegal. The problem is that you never know what you are today. For work they say one thing, for school another thing, for hospital another thing” (M09). Institutional actors confirmed this uncertainty, noting that migrants often possess partial documentation that is valid in one context but insufficient in another. A legal-aid worker explained, “Many people are not completely outside the system, but they are not fully inside it either. Their documents open one door and close another” (I02). This category shows that legal precarity is experienced as temporal insecurity, institutional unpredictability, and emotional burden. Migrants linked uncertainty to fear, hesitation, and self-restriction. Several participants avoided institutions unless absolutely necessary because they feared that asking for help could expose them to scrutiny. Thus, legal status became a lived condition shaping behavior, identity, and access to rights.

The second category concerned the fragmented nature of institutional response. Participants reported that different institutions applied rules inconsistently, requested different documents, or referred migrants from one office to another without clear resolution. Migrant participants described repeated visits, contradictory instructions, long waiting periods, and dependence on individual officers’ discretion. One participant said, “One office told me to bring a letter from another office. When I went there, they said they do not give that letter. I was going in circles” (M02). Another stated, “Sometimes the rule is not written anywhere. It depends on who is sitting behind the desk” (M11). Institutional actors also acknowledged coordination problems. A municipal staff member explained, “The difficulty is that migration issues are connected to education, health, employment, police, and welfare, but each institution sees only its own part” (I06). Legal practitioners described administrative gatekeeping as a major cause of vulnerability because migrants often lacked the language, time, money, and confidence to challenge decisions. Some institutional participants emphasized that frontline staff were not always trained to interpret migrant documentation or identify rights-based obligations. As a result, institutional response often became person-dependent rather than procedure-dependent. This fragmentation produced secondary precarity: even when migrants had a formal entitlement, they could not always convert it into practical access. Participants described this as exhausting and humiliating. For many migrants, institutional fragmentation increased reliance on brokers, informal advice, or community intermediaries who could explain procedures but sometimes also exploited uncertainty.

The third category related to cultural and linguistic mediation in migrants’ encounters with law. Participants emphasized that legal rules were difficult to understand not only because of language barriers but also because legal concepts did not always match migrants’ previous experiences of state authority, rights, family responsibility, or institutional trust. Some migrants associated official institutions with danger, corruption, or punishment due to experiences in their country of origin or previous migration journey. Others interpreted law through community narratives, religious norms, or advice from relatives rather than official information. One participant said, “I do not understand the words they use. Even when someone translates, I do not

know what it means for my life” (M06). Another explained, “In our community, people say, ‘Do not go unless you must, because if they know too much about you, it becomes a problem’” (M13). Institutional actors identified cultural translation as a missing element in service provision. An NGO worker stated, “Translation is not only changing words from Dari to Persian. Sometimes we must explain what a legal form means, why a signature matters, and what risk the person imagines” (I04). Participants also described gendered dimensions of cultural mediation. Some women migrants relied on male relatives for institutional communication, which could limit their access to independent legal information. Others preferred female staff or trusted NGO workers when discussing family violence, custody, or employment exploitation. This category shows that mistrust of law is not simple ignorance or refusal; it is often a rational response to past harm, present uncertainty, and culturally mediated interpretations of institutional power.

The fourth category captured the strategies migrants used to manage legal precarity. Participants did not present themselves only as passive victims of institutional systems. Instead, they described active but constrained strategies, including seeking advice from community elders, using NGO networks, keeping copies of documents, avoiding certain public spaces, choosing employers who were less likely to report them, relying on interpreters, and approaching institutions through trusted intermediaries. One participant stated, “Before I go anywhere, I ask three or four people what happened to them. We learn from each other because the office does not explain everything” (M01). Another explained, “I always carry copies of my papers. Even if they are old, they show I am not hiding” (M08). Institutional participants recognized the importance of informal networks but warned that informal legal advice could be inaccurate or exploitative. A legal practitioner noted, “Community knowledge helps people survive, but it can also spread fear or wrong information. When official advice is inaccessible, unofficial advice becomes powerful” (I01). Migrants also practiced selective visibility: they tried to appear compliant when necessary but avoided unnecessary contact with institutions. This strategy reduced immediate risk but often prevented access to legal remedies. For example, some participants avoided reporting wage theft, domestic violence, or landlord abuse because they feared that legal action would expose their status. The findings therefore show that migrant agency operates within structural constraints. Informal mobilization helps migrants navigate uncertainty but cannot replace clear institutional pathways, accessible legal aid, and rights-based protection.

Discussion

The first major finding was that legal status functioned as lived uncertainty rather than a stable administrative classification. Migrants did not experience legality as a simple binary between documented and undocumented presence; instead, they described layered and shifting forms of insecurity. This finding aligns closely with Menjívar’s (2006) concept of liminal legality, which shows how migrants may remain suspended between formal recognition and exclusion for long periods. It also supports Kubal’s (2013) argument that semi-legality is a useful framework for understanding ambiguous migrant positions that cannot be reduced to legal/illegal categories. In the present study, even participants with documents often felt insecure because documentation was temporary, inconsistently recognized, or insufficient across institutional settings. This confirms De Genova’s (2002) argument that migrant illegality and deportability are not merely legal facts but social conditions produced through the organization of state power and everyday surveillance. The finding also corresponds with Goldring et al. (2009), who argue that precarious migratory status can become institutionalized when legal and policy arrangements create unstable access to rights. In this study, legal precarity affected not only formal legal matters but also housing, employment, health care, education, and family life. Therefore, migrant legal precarity should be conceptualized as a cross-domain social condition. Its harm lies not only in possible exclusion from the state but also in the daily anticipation of exclusion. This anticipatory dimension produced self-restriction: migrants avoided institutions, tolerated exploitation, delayed claims, and limited mobility because they feared that contact with formal systems could worsen their situation.

The second finding concerned institutional fragmentation and administrative gatekeeping. Participants described a system in which migrants were often moved between offices, asked for inconsistent documents, and exposed to discretionary decision-making. This finding is consistent with socio-legal research showing that formal rights may be weakened when institutions lack coordination, transparency, or cultural competence. Mountz (2010) demonstrates that bureaucratic systems can produce distance between migrants and protection through procedural complexity and administrative barriers. Similarly, Ager and Strang's (2008) integration framework emphasizes that access to rights is connected to institutional domains such as employment, housing, education, health, and social connection. The present findings show that when these domains are administratively disconnected, migrants experience legal precarity as cumulative exclusion. A document accepted for one purpose may not be accepted for another; a referral may not lead to service; and a formal entitlement may remain practically inaccessible. This supports Goldring et al.'s (2009) claim that precarious status is not only produced by immigration law but also by institutional practices that restrict access to services. The study also extends this literature by emphasizing the role of frontline discretion. Participants often interpreted institutional outcomes as dependent on the person behind the desk rather than on written rules. Such discretionary uncertainty can undermine trust in law and generate perceptions of arbitrariness. From a socio-legal perspective, this means that institutional response is not merely the implementation of migration policy; it is a site where law is translated into everyday inclusion or exclusion.

The third finding showed that cultural translation, language, and mistrust shaped migrants' legal consciousness. Migrants' reluctance to approach institutions was not simply a result of legal ignorance. Rather, it reflected culturally mediated interpretations of risk, previous experiences of state authority, community narratives, gendered dependencies, and uncertainty about the meaning of legal documents. This finding aligns with Ewick and Silbey's (1998) legal consciousness framework, which argues that people experience and interpret law through everyday narratives and social practices. Migrants in this study were not encountering law as neutral text; they were encountering law through fear, advice, translation, memory, and institutional performance. Merry's (2006) work on translation is also relevant here. Although Merry focuses on human rights norms, her argument that global legal ideas require translation into local cultural settings helps explain why legal information alone is insufficient. Migrants may need cultural mediation that explains not only what a rule says but what it means, how it applies, what risks it carries, and how it relates to family and community obligations. The findings also resonate with Vertovec's (2007) concept of super-diversity, which highlights the complex interaction of legal statuses, languages, migration channels, gender, religion, class, and social networks in contemporary migration contexts. In Tehran, migrants' trust in institutions was shaped by more than nationality or language. It was shaped by status, gender, documentation history, prior institutional encounters, and the availability of trusted intermediaries. Therefore, culturally responsive legal practice should not be reduced to translation services alone. It requires institutional capacity to recognize fear, explain procedures clearly, protect confidentiality, and communicate rights in ways that migrants can practically use.

The fourth finding concerned everyday coping and informal legal mobilization. Migrants developed strategies to manage uncertainty, including community consultation, document preservation, selective visibility, reliance on NGOs, and use of intermediaries. These strategies demonstrate agency under constraint. They support Coutin's (2000) analysis of how migrants engage in "legalizing moves" through everyday practices, claims, identities, and institutional negotiations. They also align with De Genova's (2002) view that deportability shapes everyday conduct, not only formal legal outcomes. In this study, migrants often avoided reporting abuse or exploitation because the risk of institutional exposure seemed greater than the possible benefit of legal remedy. This finding illustrates a central contradiction of migrant legal precarity: the individuals most in need of legal protection may be least able to safely claim it. The reliance on informal networks also reflects the gap between formal legal systems and accessible legal knowledge. Community advice helped migrants survive, but it could also reproduce

misinformation, fear, and dependence on brokers. This finding suggests that legal mobilization among precarious migrants is often indirect, relational, and defensive. Migrants do not always mobilize law through courts or official complaints; they mobilize fragments of legal knowledge through community networks, NGOs, interpreters, employers, and personal experience. Institutional reform should therefore strengthen safe, low-threshold, and culturally mediated pathways to legal information and complaint mechanisms.

Taken together, the findings show that migrant legal precarity is produced through the interaction of formal status, institutional organization, cultural interpretation, and everyday survival strategies. This supports broader socio-legal arguments that law operates not only through written rules but also through practices, narratives, administrative routines, and unequal capacities to act (Ewick & Silbey, 1998; Merry, 2006). It also contributes to migration scholarship by showing how global mobility becomes locally organized through institutional encounters in urban settings. While global migration debates often focus on borders, entry, and national policy, this study demonstrates that migrants' rights and vulnerabilities are frequently determined after entry, in ordinary encounters with schools, hospitals, employers, police, courts, NGOs, and municipal offices. The institutional response to migration is therefore not a single policy field but a dispersed governance environment. In such an environment, migrants' access to rights depends on whether institutions can coordinate procedures, recognize diverse documentation, communicate clearly, and protect individuals from exposure to further harm.

Limitations: This study has several limitations. First, the sample was limited to 24 participants in Tehran and therefore cannot represent all migrant groups, legal statuses, or institutional settings. Second, because the study relied only on semi-structured interviews, it captured participants' perceptions and reported experiences rather than direct observation of institutional encounters. Third, some migrants may have avoided discussing sensitive legal issues because of fear, mistrust, or concern about confidentiality. Fourth, the inclusion of both migrants and institutional actors strengthened comparative interpretation but also created variation in the type and depth of experiences reported. Finally, because legal and administrative procedures may change over time, the findings should be interpreted in relation to the specific temporal and urban context in which the study was conducted.

Suggestions for Future Research: Future studies should examine migrant legal precarity across multiple cities and compare how institutional response varies by urban context, migrant nationality, gender, class, legal status, and length of residence. Longitudinal research would be particularly valuable for understanding how migrants move into, out of, or within precarious legal conditions over time. Future research could also combine interviews with ethnographic observation of legal-aid centers, administrative offices, NGOs, and service institutions to better understand how discretion operates in practice. Comparative studies across countries in the region would help clarify how different legal cultures and migration governance systems shape migrant vulnerability. Additional research should also focus on women migrants, undocumented workers, migrant children, and families facing custody, schooling, labor exploitation, or domestic violence issues.

Suggestions for Practice: Institutions working with migrants should develop clear, accessible, and multilingual procedural guidance explaining documentation requirements, service eligibility, complaint pathways, and confidentiality protections. Frontline staff should receive training on migrant legal status, cultural competence, trauma-informed communication, and referral procedures. Legal-aid services should be expanded through safe community-based access points, especially for migrants who fear formal institutions. NGOs, municipal offices, schools, hospitals, and legal practitioners should build coordinated referral networks so that migrants are not repeatedly redirected without resolution. Institutions should also use trained cultural mediators who can explain legal meanings, not merely translate words. Finally, complaint mechanisms should be designed to protect migrants from retaliation, exposure, or status-related harm when they report exploitation, violence, or denial of services.

Conclusion

This study examined migrant legal precarity and institutional response in Tehran through qualitative interviews with migrants and institutional actors. The findings show that legal precarity is not limited to undocumented status or formal exclusion from law. Rather, it is a lived condition of uncertainty shaped by temporary documents, inconsistent recognition, institutional fragmentation, cultural mistrust, and unequal access to legal knowledge. Migrants experienced legal status as something unstable and situational, affecting ordinary decisions about work, housing, education, health care, movement, and contact with authorities. Institutional actors confirmed that fragmented procedures, limited coordination, and insufficient cultural mediation often prevented migrants from converting formal rights into practical access.

The study also shows that culture plays a central role in the experience of law. Migrants interpreted legal systems through language, memory, community narratives, family obligations, and previous experiences of state authority. Mistrust of law was therefore not simply a lack of awareness; it was often a rational response to uncertainty, fear, and inconsistent institutional treatment. At the same time, migrants developed everyday strategies to cope with legal precarity, including informal advice networks, NGO support, document preservation, selective visibility, and reliance on trusted intermediaries. These strategies reveal agency, but they also show the limits of survival-based legal mobilization when formal systems remain unclear or risky.

The article contributes to socio-legal migration scholarship by showing how global mobility becomes locally experienced through institutional encounters. Migrant precarity is produced not only at borders but also in offices, workplaces, schools, clinics, neighborhoods, and legal-aid spaces. Therefore, institutional response should move beyond narrow administrative control and toward rights-based, culturally responsive, and coordinated governance. Clearer procedures, accessible legal information, trained cultural mediators, inter-agency coordination, and safe complaint pathways are essential for reducing legal vulnerability. Ultimately, migrants should be approached not as administrative problems but as social actors whose legal security, cultural dignity, and practical access to institutions are central to justice in an age of global mobility.

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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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