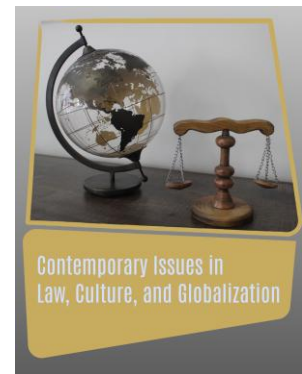




The Localization of International Legal Norms: Cultural Translation and Legal Adaptation

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore how international legal norms are culturally translated, institutionally adapted, and practically interpreted by legal and policy actors in Tehran. This qualitative study used semi-structured interviews to examine the localization of international legal norms in domestic legal and institutional settings. Participants were selected through purposive sampling from legal, academic, policy, and civil society sectors in Tehran. Interviews continued until theoretical saturation was achieved, resulting in 22 participants. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews lasting 45–75 minutes. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis with the support of NVivo software. To enhance trustworthiness, the study used member checking, peer debriefing, analytic memo writing, and constant comparison. The analysis identified four main categories: cultural translation of legal concepts, institutional filtering and selective adaptation, professional mediation by legal actors, and tensions between universal norms and local legitimacy. Participants emphasized that international legal norms rarely enter domestic contexts in their original form; rather, they are reframed through moral language, constitutional principles, religious-cultural values, administrative routines, and institutional priorities. Findings showed that localization may support legal legitimacy when international norms are translated into locally intelligible frameworks, but it may also dilute rights-based commitments when adaptation becomes excessive or politically selective. The localization of international legal norms is a dynamic and contested process shaped by culture, institutions, professional interpretation, and legal-political negotiation. Rather than treating international law as either universally imposed or locally rejected, the study demonstrates that legal adaptation occurs through translation, filtering, negotiation, and selective institutionalization. Effective localization requires interpretive sensitivity, professional capacity, transparent institutional procedures, and safeguards against the erosion of core normative standards.

Keywords: international legal norms; localization; cultural translation; legal adaptation; norm diffusion; legal pluralism; qualitative research; Tehran

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Introduction

International legal norms increasingly shape domestic legal systems, policy reforms, institutional procedures, and public expectations of justice. Human rights standards, anti-discrimination principles, environmental obligations, labor protections,

criminal justice norms, and procedural guarantees now circulate through treaties, conventions, soft-law instruments, judicial networks, international organizations, non-governmental advocacy, academic exchange, and professional legal education. Yet the movement of legal norms from international arenas into domestic settings is never a simple process of transfer. Norms must be interpreted, translated, negotiated, resisted, reformulated, and embedded within local legal cultures. This process is commonly described through concepts such as norm diffusion, localization, vernacularization, legal translation, and legal adaptation. The present study examines this process by focusing on how international legal norms are localized through cultural translation and legal adaptation among legal and institutional actors in Tehran.

The study begins from the premise that international law does not operate only through formal ratification, legislative incorporation, or judicial citation. It also operates through meanings. International norms become socially and institutionally effective when they are made understandable within local moral vocabularies, legal traditions, political expectations, bureaucratic routines, and professional practices. Acharya's theory of norm localization is particularly important in this regard. He argues that local actors do not merely accept or reject external norms; rather, they reconstruct them in ways that fit existing identities, cognitive priors, and institutional traditions (Acharya, 2004). Localization therefore emphasizes agency, adaptation, and congruence-building rather than passive diffusion. This perspective challenges linear models of international legal influence and invites researchers to examine how domestic actors actively reshape global legal ideas.

The concept of localization is closely related to the anthropological literature on the translation of human rights. Merry (2006) showed that international human rights norms must often be translated into local justice vocabularies before they can become practically meaningful. This translation is not merely linguistic. It involves transforming abstract legal principles into culturally recognizable claims, institutional procedures, and everyday practices. Levitt and Merry (2009) used the concept of vernacularization to describe how global rights ideas are adapted by local intermediaries, including activists, lawyers, community leaders, and professionals. These intermediaries occupy a crucial position between global normative frameworks and local social worlds. They may preserve, reinterpret, simplify, or strategically modify international legal norms in order to make them acceptable and usable in specific contexts.

Norm diffusion theory provides another foundation for the study. Finnemore and Sikkink (1998) famously argued that international norms move through stages of emergence, cascade, and internalization. However, their model also highlights the role of norm entrepreneurs, institutional platforms, persuasion, and legitimacy. Later scholarship has complicated this model by showing that norms are not simply transmitted from global centers to local peripheries. They are contested, translated, and sometimes transformed during the process of implementation. In legal contexts, this means that international legal norms acquire domestic meaning through courts, legislatures, ministries, professional associations, universities, civil society organizations, and public discourse. The domestic life of international law is therefore shaped by both formal legal structures and informal interpretive practices.

Legal pluralism further deepens this discussion by showing that multiple normative orders often coexist within the same social field. State law, religious norms, customary practices, professional standards, international obligations, and community-based moral expectations may overlap, compete, or interact. Merry's work on legal pluralism demonstrates that law cannot be understood as a single unified system operating from the top down; rather, legal meaning emerges through the interaction of multiple normative orders (Merry, 1988). In societies marked by strong cultural traditions, complex constitutional structures, and active engagement with international institutions, localization becomes especially significant because international legal norms must be reconciled with domestic normative pluralism.

Comparative law has long debated whether legal rules can be transplanted from one system to another. Watson (1974) argued that legal transplants are a common mechanism of legal development, suggesting that rules frequently travel across

jurisdictions. However, later scholars criticized overly mechanical understandings of transplantation. Teubner (1998), for example, proposed the idea of “legal irritants,” arguing that imported norms do not simply integrate into domestic systems; they may disturb existing legal arrangements and generate unexpected transformations. This insight is central to the present study. International legal norms may inspire reform, but they may also trigger institutional uncertainty, cultural resistance, selective compliance, or symbolic adoption without substantive change.

The localization of international legal norms is especially relevant in societies where legal modernization, cultural identity, religious values, constitutional commitments, and international obligations intersect. In such settings, international norms may be perceived simultaneously as legal resources, political pressures, moral ideals, foreign imports, or technical standards. Their reception depends not only on their legal validity but also on their perceived legitimacy. A norm that is formally incorporated into national law may remain weak if courts, administrators, or citizens see it as culturally alien or institutionally impractical. Conversely, a norm that lacks full formal incorporation may influence legal reasoning if it resonates with domestic ideas of justice, dignity, fairness, public order, or constitutional morality.

This study focuses on Tehran as a major legal, administrative, academic, and policy center. Tehran provides a relevant context for examining localization because it concentrates legal professionals, universities, ministries, courts, policy institutions, non-governmental organizations, and international-facing professional networks. Legal actors in Tehran often encounter international legal norms through academic literature, treaty discourse, comparative legal analysis, policy reform debates, professional workshops, advocacy projects, and institutional guidelines. Their interpretations provide insight into how international law is understood not only at the level of doctrine but also at the level of practice.

The central problem addressed in this study is that many discussions of international legal norms remain either overly universalist or overly relativist. Universalist approaches may assume that international norms should be implemented uniformly across jurisdictions, with limited attention to local culture and institutional capacity. Relativist approaches, in contrast, may emphasize local difference so strongly that they risk justifying non-compliance or weakening core legal protections. The concept of localization offers a more nuanced approach. It recognizes that international legal norms require cultural and institutional translation while also maintaining that adaptation should not erase their normative substance.

The present study therefore investigates how legal and policy actors understand the localization of international legal norms, what mechanisms they identify as central to cultural translation, and what tensions they experience between universal standards and local legal adaptation. The study contributes to socio-legal scholarship by shifting attention from formal adoption to interpretive practice. It also contributes to international law by showing that implementation depends on the work of local actors who mediate between international standards and domestic legal culture. Finally, it contributes to qualitative legal research by providing empirical insight into how professionals describe the practical challenges of translating international norms into local institutional settings.

Based on these considerations, the study was guided by the following research question: How do legal and institutional actors in Tehran interpret and experience the localization of international legal norms through cultural translation and legal adaptation?

Methods and Materials

This study employed a qualitative research design using semi-structured interviews. A qualitative approach was appropriate because the study sought to explore meanings, interpretations, experiences, and professional perceptions rather than measure predetermined variables. The study focused on how participants understood the localization of international legal norms, how they described cultural translation in legal practice, and how they interpreted the relationship between universal legal principles and domestic legal adaptation.

The study was informed by an interpretivist epistemological orientation. From this perspective, legal norms are not treated only as formal rules but as socially interpreted concepts whose meanings are shaped through institutional practice, cultural context, and professional discourse. Thematic analysis was used because it allows systematic identification of patterns across qualitative data while preserving the complexity of participants' accounts (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Participants were selected through purposive sampling. The inclusion criteria were: having professional, academic, policy, or civil society experience related to law, international norms, human rights, legal reform, policy implementation, or socio-legal practice; being based in Tehran; and being willing to participate in a semi-structured interview. Individuals who lacked relevant professional or academic experience in legal or policy fields were excluded.

A total of 22 participants took part in the study. Participants included university law faculty members, practicing lawyers, legal consultants, policy experts, civil society actors, and researchers in international law and socio-legal studies. Interviews continued until theoretical saturation was reached, meaning that no substantially new themes emerged from additional interviews.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. An interview guide was developed based on the literature on norm localization, cultural translation, legal pluralism, and international legal implementation. The interview questions explored participants' experiences with international legal norms, perceptions of cultural and institutional barriers, examples of legal adaptation, the role of legal professionals in translation, and tensions between universal standards and local legitimacy.

Sample interview questions included: "How do you understand the localization of international legal norms?" "What happens when international legal concepts enter domestic legal discourse?" "Who plays the most important role in translating international norms into local legal practice?" "Can adaptation strengthen or weaken international legal principles?" and "What institutional challenges affect the implementation of international norms?"

Interviews lasted between 45 and 75 minutes. With participants' consent, interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Field notes and analytic memos were written after each interview to document emerging ideas, contextual observations, and preliminary interpretations.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis. First, the researchers read the transcripts several times to become familiar with the data. Second, initial codes were generated inductively from the transcripts. Third, related codes were grouped into preliminary categories. Fourth, categories were reviewed in relation to the full dataset. Fifth, themes were refined and named. Finally, representative quotations were selected to illustrate the findings.

NVivo software was used to organize transcripts, manage codes, retrieve coded segments, and compare patterns across participants. The software supported systematic data management but did not replace researcher interpretation. Coding was conducted through an iterative process involving constant comparison across interviews.

Several strategies were used to enhance trustworthiness. Credibility was supported through member checking, in which selected participants reviewed summaries of the findings. Peer debriefing was used to discuss coding decisions and thematic interpretations. Dependability was strengthened through an audit trail documenting interview procedures, coding steps, and analytic decisions. Confirmability was supported through reflexive memo writing. Transferability was enhanced by providing contextual description of participants, setting, and analytic categories.

Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and their right to withdraw at any stage. Written informed consent was obtained before interviews. Identifying details were removed from transcripts, and participants were assigned codes such as P1, P2, and P3. Data were stored securely and used only for research purposes.

Findings

The study included 22 participants from Tehran. Of these, 13 participants were male and 9 were female. Participants' ages ranged from 29 to 61 years. In terms of professional background, 6 participants were university faculty members in law or socio-legal studies, 5 were practicing lawyers, 4 were legal consultants, 3 were policy experts, 2 were civil society actors, and 2 were legal researchers. Regarding educational level, 7 participants held a PhD, 9 held a master's degree, and 6 held a professional law degree or equivalent legal qualification. Participants' professional experience ranged from 5 to 30 years, with most having more than 10 years of experience in legal or policy-related work.

The thematic analysis identified four main categories: cultural translation of legal concepts, institutional filtering and selective adaptation, professional mediation by legal actors, and tensions between universal norms and local legitimacy.

The first category concerned the cultural translation of international legal concepts into locally meaningful language. Participants emphasized that international legal norms often enter domestic discourse through abstract terms such as dignity, equality, accountability, participation, due process, and non-discrimination. However, these concepts require translation into familiar cultural, constitutional, and moral vocabularies before they can become persuasive in local legal settings. Participants noted that translation is not simply a matter of finding equivalent words. Rather, it involves connecting international principles to locally recognized values. One participant explained, "When we speak about dignity in international law, it is too abstract for many institutional actors. But when we connect it to justice, respect, and the moral responsibility of public authority, it becomes more understandable" (P4). Another participant stated, "The problem is not always opposition to the norm. Sometimes the problem is that the norm arrives in a language that people do not recognize as their own" (P11). This category shows that localization depends on interpretive work. International legal norms gain practical relevance when they are framed through concepts that resonate with local legal culture.

The second category reflected the role of institutions in filtering international legal norms. Participants described courts, ministries, legislative bodies, professional associations, and administrative agencies as key sites where international norms are accepted, narrowed, delayed, or reinterpreted. Institutional actors often adapt norms according to domestic legal hierarchy, administrative feasibility, political sensitivity, and perceived compatibility with existing law. Several participants argued that adaptation is sometimes necessary for implementation but may also become a mechanism of dilution. One legal consultant noted, "Institutions usually ask whether a norm can be absorbed without disturbing existing procedures. If the answer is no, they either postpone it or translate it into a weaker administrative form" (P7). A policy expert similarly observed, "Selective adaptation is very common. The language of international standards may be accepted, but the operational mechanism is changed so much that the original purpose becomes limited" (P15). This category suggests that localization is not neutral. Institutional adaptation may enhance feasibility, but it can also reduce the transformative potential of international legal norms.

The third category concerned the mediating role of lawyers, judges, academics, civil society actors, and policy experts. Participants repeatedly emphasized that international legal norms do not localize themselves; they are localized by professionals who interpret, teach, argue, cite, translate, and operationalize them. Legal professionals were described as "norm brokers" who move between international texts and domestic legal realities. A university faculty member stated, "The most important actors are those who can speak both languages: the language of international law and the language of domestic institutions" (P2). A practicing lawyer explained, "In litigation, you cannot simply cite an international convention and expect acceptance. You must show how it fits constitutional principles, procedural fairness, or existing statutory interpretation" (P9). Participants also highlighted the role of academic education in shaping future legal interpretation. Through teaching, writing, and training, academics contribute to the gradual normalization of international legal vocabulary. This category demonstrates that professional mediation is central to the localization process because legal actors transform international norms into arguments, procedures, and institutional practices.

The fourth category addressed the tension between universal legal standards and local legitimacy. Participants did not frame this tension as a simple conflict between international law and culture. Instead, they described it as a continuing negotiation over authority, identity, and institutional trust. Some participants argued that international norms may be rejected when they are perceived as externally imposed. Others warned that excessive emphasis on local culture can be used to weaken rights protections. One civil society participant stated, “Culture is sometimes used honestly as a bridge, but sometimes it is used as a wall. The challenge is to know the difference” (P18). Another participant observed, “Localization should not mean emptying the norm of its substance. If equality becomes only a decorative word, then adaptation has failed” (P21). This category highlights the central dilemma of localization: international norms must be made locally legitimate, but they must also retain their core normative content. Participants therefore emphasized the need for balanced adaptation that respects local legal culture while preserving the protective function of international law.

Discussion

The findings of this study show that the localization of international legal norms is a complex interpretive and institutional process. Participants described localization not as the direct transfer of legal rules but as a process of cultural translation, institutional filtering, professional mediation, and normative negotiation. These findings are consistent with Acharya’s theory of norm localization, which emphasizes that local actors reconstruct external norms to fit existing identities, cognitive frameworks, and institutional traditions (Acharya, 2004). In the present study, participants repeatedly emphasized that international legal norms become effective only when they are translated into locally meaningful legal and moral vocabularies. This supports the argument that norm acceptance depends not merely on formal legal obligation but also on perceived congruence between international standards and domestic legal culture.

The first finding, cultural translation of legal concepts, aligns strongly with Merry’s work on the translation of international human rights into local justice frameworks (Merry, 2006). Participants indicated that concepts such as dignity, equality, non-discrimination, and accountability require cultural and legal reframing before they can become persuasive in domestic settings. This supports the idea that international legal norms are not self-executing cultural objects. Their social meaning must be produced through translation. Levitt and Merry’s concept of vernacularization is also useful for interpreting this finding. Vernacularization refers to the process through which global rights ideas are adapted into local terms by intermediaries (Levitt & Merry, 2009). In this study, participants described translation as a practical strategy for increasing legitimacy. However, the findings also show that translation is not risk-free. When international norms are excessively simplified or reframed, their original legal force may be weakened.

The second finding, institutional filtering and selective adaptation, demonstrates that domestic institutions play a decisive role in shaping the practical meaning of international legal norms. Participants described courts, ministries, legislative bodies, and administrative organizations as sites where norms are evaluated, narrowed, delayed, or reformulated. This finding is consistent with socio-legal approaches that distinguish between law in texts and law in action. Formal adoption of international norms does not guarantee implementation. Institutions must interpret the scope, authority, and procedural implications of these norms. The finding also corresponds with Teubner’s concept of legal irritants. Teubner argued that imported legal norms may generate unexpected effects because they disturb existing institutional arrangements rather than simply integrate into them (Teubner, 1998). In the present study, participants similarly reported that international legal norms can produce uncertainty, resistance, and selective adaptation when they challenge established institutional routines.

The findings also engage with debates on legal transplants. Watson’s theory of legal transplants suggested that legal rules often travel across jurisdictions and contribute to legal development (Watson, 1974). However, the present study supports a more contextual understanding of transplantation. Participants did not deny that international legal norms can influence

domestic law. Rather, they emphasized that transferred norms must be interpreted within local legal culture, institutional capacity, and political constraints. This suggests that legal transfer is not merely the movement of rules but the transformation of meaning. A norm may be formally adopted but practically altered through implementation. Therefore, localization should be understood as a socio-legal process that includes both doctrinal reception and cultural adaptation.

The third finding, professional mediation by legal actors, highlights the central role of intermediaries. Participants identified lawyers, judges, academics, civil society actors, and policy experts as key agents in the localization process. This finding supports norm diffusion theory, particularly the emphasis placed by Finnemore and Sikkink on norm entrepreneurs and institutional platforms (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998). In the present study, legal actors operated as translators, brokers, and interpreters. They connected international legal language to constitutional principles, statutory interpretation, procedural fairness, and institutional practice. This finding also supports Levitt and Merry's argument that intermediaries are central to vernacularization because they move between global and local normative worlds (Levitt & Merry, 2009). Without such professional mediation, international norms may remain symbolic, abstract, or disconnected from practice.

The role of academic institutions is particularly important. Participants noted that legal education gradually normalizes international legal vocabulary and shapes future interpretive possibilities. This suggests that localization occurs not only through courts and legislation but also through professional socialization. Law schools, training programs, academic publications, and professional workshops contribute to the production of legal meaning. Through these spaces, international norms may become part of domestic legal consciousness. However, this process depends on the quality of translation. If international legal concepts are taught only as abstract external standards, they may remain distant from domestic practice. If they are taught through comparative reasoning and local legal examples, they may become more practically usable.

The fourth finding, tensions between universal norms and local legitimacy, reflects one of the most important debates in international law and socio-legal studies. Participants rejected both rigid universalism and unrestricted cultural relativism. They emphasized that international norms require local legitimacy but also warned that cultural adaptation can be misused to dilute rights protections. This finding is consistent with Merry's warning that cultural translation may both empower and limit rights claims (Merry, 2006). It also reflects broader debates in legal pluralism. Merry (1988) showed that multiple normative orders coexist and interact within social fields. In such contexts, international legal norms must negotiate with domestic law, cultural values, religious norms, professional expectations, and institutional routines. The present findings suggest that localization is most effective when it creates dialogue among these normative orders without allowing local adaptation to erase core protections.

The study also contributes to the literature on transnational legal ordering. Halliday and Shaffer conceptualize transnational legal orders as normative systems that develop across national boundaries and become institutionalized through legal practice (Halliday & Shaffer, 2015). The findings of this study suggest that transnational legal ordering depends on local interpretive labor. International norms do not become institutionalized simply because they exist in treaties or global discourse. They become part of domestic legal order when local actors translate them into procedures, arguments, policies, and institutional expectations. Therefore, localization can be seen as a micro-level mechanism through which transnational legal orders become domestically meaningful.

A key contribution of this study is its emphasis on balance. Participants did not view localization as inherently positive or negative. Instead, they described it as a necessary but ambivalent process. On the one hand, localization can increase legitimacy, reduce resistance, and make international norms more usable in domestic institutions. On the other hand, localization can become a mechanism for symbolic compliance, selective implementation, or normative dilution. This dual nature is important for legal reform. Reformers should not assume that local adaptation automatically strengthens international law. Nor should

they assume that fidelity to international norms requires ignoring local culture. The challenge is to develop adaptation processes that preserve the substance of international legal commitments while making them institutionally and culturally intelligible.

The findings also suggest that the success of localization depends on institutional transparency. When institutions adapt international norms through clear legal reasoning, public justification, and procedural safeguards, localization may enhance legitimacy. However, when adaptation occurs through opaque administrative discretion or political selectivity, it may weaken accountability. Participants' accounts show that selective adaptation is particularly problematic when international legal language is adopted symbolically but implementation mechanisms are weakened. This finding has practical significance for policymakers and legal professionals. Localization should be accompanied by monitoring, interpretive guidelines, professional training, and opportunities for public and expert participation.

Overall, the study demonstrates that the localization of international legal norms is not a secondary stage after legal adoption. It is a central condition of implementation. International legal norms become effective through cultural translation, institutional adaptation, and professional interpretation. The process is shaped by power, legitimacy, legal culture, and institutional capacity. The findings support an understanding of international law as a living socio-legal process rather than a fixed body of external commands. In this view, domestic actors are not merely recipients of global norms; they are active participants in producing the local meaning of international law.

This study has several limitations. First, the research was conducted only in Tehran, which may limit the transferability of the findings to other cities, rural areas, or jurisdictions with different legal cultures and institutional structures. Second, the study relied on semi-structured interviews, meaning that the findings reflect participants' perceptions and interpretations rather than direct observation of institutional decision-making. Third, although the sample included participants from different legal and policy backgrounds, some institutional actors may have been underrepresented. Fourth, because international legal norms cover a broad range of areas, the study did not focus on one specific treaty regime or legal field. Future research may produce more detailed findings by focusing on specific domains such as human rights, environmental law, labor law, criminal justice, or migration law.

Future studies should examine the localization of international legal norms in different regions and institutional settings to compare how legal culture, administrative structure, and professional networks shape adaptation. Comparative studies between Tehran and other cities could show whether localization processes differ across legal communities. Future research could also focus on specific legal fields, such as women's rights, children's rights, environmental protection, refugee law, or fair trial standards. Ethnographic research inside courts, ministries, legal clinics, or civil society organizations would also be valuable because it could capture localization as it occurs in practice. In addition, future studies could examine how citizens, not only legal professionals, understand localized international norms in everyday legal encounters.

Legal and policy institutions should develop clearer procedures for translating and adapting international legal norms into domestic practice. Professional training programs can help judges, lawyers, policymakers, and administrators understand both the substance of international standards and the cultural requirements of local implementation. Academic institutions should strengthen comparative and socio-legal education so that future legal professionals can work effectively across international and domestic normative frameworks. Civil society organizations can also play a constructive role by translating international legal concepts into accessible public language while preserving their core rights-based meaning. Finally, adaptation should be transparent, reasoned, and accountable so that localization supports legal legitimacy without weakening essential normative protections.

Conclusion

This study explored the localization of international legal norms through cultural translation and legal adaptation among legal and institutional actors in Tehran. The findings showed that localization is a dynamic process shaped by interpretation, institutional filtering, professional mediation, and tensions between universality and local legitimacy. International legal norms do not enter domestic legal systems as fixed and fully formed rules. They are reconstructed through local vocabularies, institutional priorities, legal traditions, and professional practices.

The study identified four main categories: cultural translation of legal concepts, institutional filtering and selective adaptation, professional mediation by legal actors, and tensions between universal norms and local legitimacy. These categories show that localization can strengthen international law by making it more culturally intelligible and institutionally feasible. However, localization can also weaken international norms when adaptation becomes selective, symbolic, or politically constrained.

The study concludes that effective localization requires a careful balance between cultural sensitivity and normative fidelity. International legal norms should be translated into local legal language, but their core protective content should not be emptied. Legal professionals, academic institutions, policymakers, and civil society actors all have important roles in this process. Localization should therefore be understood not as a compromise with universality but as a necessary condition for meaningful legal implementation.

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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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