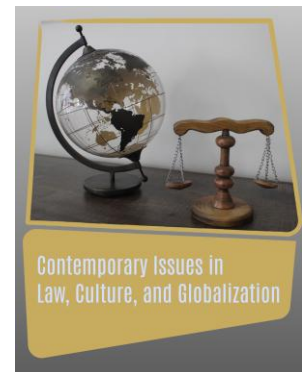




Cultural Perceptions of Justice Among Refugees and Asylum Seekers

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore how refugees and asylum seekers living in Tehran culturally understand justice, institutional fairness, legal recognition, and access to protection in everyday encounters with state, legal, humanitarian, and social institutions. This qualitative study was conducted using semi-structured interviews with 26 refugees and asylum seekers residing in Tehran, Iran. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to include variation in gender, age, country of origin, length of stay, legal status, education, and family situation. Interviews continued until theoretical saturation was reached. The interviews explored participants' experiences of legal documentation, encounters with administrative and justice institutions, perceived fairness, discrimination, cultural expectations of justice, and strategies for seeking help. Interviews were audio-recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim, anonymized, and analyzed through thematic analysis. NVivo software was used to organize codes, compare cases, develop categories, and construct final themes. Analysis generated four main categories: justice as respectful recognition, justice as legal security, justice as culturally meaningful fairness, and justice as accessible protection. Participants did not define justice only through formal law or court access; rather, justice was understood as being listened to, treated with dignity, protected from arbitrary decisions, and recognized as persons with histories, families, needs, and rights. Legal uncertainty, documentation problems, language barriers, discrimination, and limited knowledge of rights weakened trust in institutions. At the same time, participants valued institutions and officers who explained decisions clearly, respected cultural differences, and provided practical routes to assistance. Refugees' and asylum seekers' perceptions of justice are shaped by the intersection of legal status, cultural memory, displacement experience, institutional encounters, and everyday social treatment. Justice becomes meaningful when formal legal procedures are combined with dignity, clarity, cultural sensitivity, and accessible protection. Policies aimed at refugee justice should therefore move beyond procedural availability and address communication, recognition, legal literacy, interpretation, and protection from discrimination.

Keywords: refugees; asylum seekers; cultural perceptions; justice; legal consciousness; procedural justice; legal status; Tehran; qualitative research.

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Introduction

Justice is commonly discussed in legal scholarship as a matter of rights, procedures, institutional guarantees, and access to courts. For refugees and asylum seekers, however, justice is rarely experienced as an abstract legal principle. It is encountered

in registration offices, police checks, humanitarian organizations, schools, hospitals, rental markets, workplaces, and everyday interactions with citizens and authorities. Refugees' understandings of justice are shaped not only by the formal legal framework of the host country but also by memories of violence, displacement, exclusion, cultural norms, religious and moral expectations, and practical struggles for safety and recognition. Therefore, studying cultural perceptions of justice among refugees and asylum seekers requires attention to both legal institutions and lived experience.

The international refugee protection system is grounded in the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol, which define refugee status and establish minimum standards of protection, including non-refoulement, access to basic rights, and protection from discriminatory treatment (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2011). However, the meaning of justice for displaced people cannot be reduced to the existence of formal protections. Refugees often experience a gap between rights as written and rights as lived. Legal recognition may exist on paper, yet access to employment, education, mobility, health care, documentation renewal, and complaint mechanisms may remain uncertain, expensive, bureaucratically complex, or socially stigmatized. This gap between formal legality and everyday insecurity is central to the study of refugee legal consciousness.

Legal consciousness research emphasizes how ordinary people understand, use, avoid, or reinterpret law in daily life. Ewick and Silbey (1998) argued that legality is not confined to courts and official institutions; rather, it is produced in routine social practices and everyday narratives. Merry (1990) similarly showed that people's ideas of justice are shaped by community norms, interpersonal conflicts, social power, and practical expectations, not merely by formal rules. For refugees and asylum seekers, legal consciousness is further complicated by displacement, unfamiliar legal systems, uncertain status, language barriers, and experiences of violence or state failure in the country of origin. The law may be imagined as protection, threat, hope, bureaucracy, or exclusion, depending on prior experiences and present encounters.

Procedural justice theory provides another useful framework for examining refugee perceptions of justice. Tyler (2006) and Lind and Tyler (1988) showed that people judge institutions not only by outcomes but also by whether procedures appear fair, respectful, neutral, and trustworthy. Voice, dignity, transparency, and respectful treatment are central to perceived legitimacy. This insight is highly relevant to refugees and asylum seekers because many institutional outcomes—such as documentation renewal, permission to work, access to services, or case decisions—may remain uncertain or unfavourable. Even when outcomes are limited, people may still perceive institutions as more legitimate if they are treated respectfully, receive clear explanations, and feel that their stories are heard. Conversely, unclear procedures, dismissive communication, arbitrary treatment, or humiliation can intensify perceptions of injustice even when some form of assistance is provided.

The relationship between legal status and perceived justice is especially important. Refugees and asylum seekers often occupy forms of “liminal legality,” in which they are neither fully outside the law nor fully secure within it (Menjívar, 2006). Legal status may be temporary, renewable, restricted, or dependent on documentation practices that are difficult for displaced people to navigate. Zetter (1991, 2007) argued that refugee labels are not neutral administrative categories; they shape access to rights, services, recognition, and moral legitimacy. Labels such as “refugee,” “asylum seeker,” “undocumented migrant,” or “foreign national” can influence how institutions treat people and how people understand themselves. When legal categories are unstable or poorly understood, justice may be experienced as conditional rather than guaranteed.

Recent empirical research also supports the importance of legal status and communication quality in shaping refugees' perceptions of institutional justice. Frank and Nivorozhkin (2024) found that precarious legal status negatively affects refugees' perceptions of procedural justice, but positive communication with street-level bureaucrats can partially buffer this effect. This finding aligns with Lipsky's (1980) theory of street-level bureaucracy, which emphasizes that frontline officials do not merely implement policy; they actively shape how citizens and non-citizens experience the state. For refugees, a clerk, police officer,

interpreter, caseworker, school administrator, or health provider may become the face of justice or injustice. The everyday conduct of frontline actors can therefore strengthen or weaken institutional trust.

Cultural perceptions of justice are also shaped by refugees' moral worlds. Refugees may come from societies where justice is linked to family honour, religious obligation, community mediation, hospitality, respect for elders, or restorative forms of conflict resolution. These cultural frameworks do not disappear after displacement. Instead, they interact with the legal categories and bureaucratic practices of the host country. For example, some refugees may interpret justice as protection of family unity, recognition of suffering, or moral reciprocity from a host society that is expected to offer sanctuary. Others may associate justice with equal treatment before the law, predictable rules, and the ability to complain without fear. These meanings may coexist, conflict, or shift over time.

Anthropological and socio-legal studies of asylum have shown that the credibility, vulnerability, and deservingness of asylum seekers are often institutionally assessed through culturally specific assumptions (Good, 2007; Fassin, 2012). Asylum seekers may be required to narrate trauma in ways that fit bureaucratic expectations, provide documentary evidence that displacement has made difficult to obtain, or translate culturally embedded experiences into legal categories. This process can produce secondary forms of injustice when people feel that their suffering is doubted, simplified, or misunderstood. Justice, in this sense, is not only a question of whether protection is granted but also of whether displaced persons are interpreted fairly.

The Tehran context makes this issue particularly significant. Iran has hosted large Afghan and Iraqi refugee populations for decades, and many displaced persons live in urban settings rather than camps. Urban displacement creates complex forms of legal and social interaction. Refugees and asylum seekers must navigate schools, health systems, employment markets, municipal spaces, transportation, police encounters, landlords, charities, and legal offices. In such settings, justice is not located in a single institution. It is dispersed across ordinary spaces of survival. This makes qualitative inquiry especially valuable because interviews allow participants to explain how they interpret fairness, recognition, exclusion, and protection in their own words.

Although much refugee research focuses on integration, trauma, humanitarian need, or legal status determination, less attention has been given to how refugees themselves culturally define justice in everyday host-country life. Integration frameworks such as Ager and Strang's (2008) model highlight employment, housing, education, health, social connections, language, safety, and rights as core domains of refugee settlement. Yet these domains also function as justice domains. Being denied housing, underpaid at work, insulted in public, misunderstood by officials, or unable to renew documents may be experienced not simply as hardship but as injustice. Similarly, being listened to, receiving explanation, gaining access to school, or being protected from exploitation may be interpreted as justice in practical form.

The present study addresses this gap by exploring cultural perceptions of justice among refugees and asylum seekers living in Tehran. Rather than assuming that justice is understood only through courts or formal legal procedures, the study investigates how displaced people describe justice across legal, administrative, social, and moral dimensions. The study asks: How do refugees and asylum seekers define justice in relation to their displacement and host-country experiences? How do legal status, documentation, language, and institutional encounters shape perceptions of fairness? What cultural meanings do participants attach to dignity, recognition, protection, and equality? By answering these questions, the study contributes to socio-legal, refugee, and cultural justice scholarship and provides practical insights for institutions working with displaced populations.

Methods and Materials

This study used a qualitative research design based on semi-structured interviews. A qualitative approach was selected because the purpose of the study was to understand subjective meanings, cultural interpretations, and lived experiences rather than to measure predetermined variables. The study was informed by socio-legal and interpretive traditions that view justice as

a socially constructed and institutionally mediated concept. Thematic analysis was used to identify patterns across participants' narratives while preserving the contextual richness of individual experiences.

The participants were 26 refugees and asylum seekers residing in Tehran, Iran. Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants with diverse backgrounds in terms of gender, age, country of origin, legal status, length of residence, education, and family situation. The inclusion criteria were: being 18 years of age or older; identifying as a refugee, asylum seeker, or displaced person seeking protection; residing in Tehran for at least six months; and being willing to participate in an interview about justice, law, institutions, and everyday experiences. Individuals were excluded if participation caused visible distress or if they were unable to provide informed consent.

The final sample included 14 men and 12 women. Participants ranged in age from 19 to 56 years. Twenty-one participants were from Afghanistan, three from Iraq, and two from other conflict-affected backgrounds. Regarding legal situation, 15 participants held some form of refugee or temporary protection documentation, six described themselves as asylum seekers awaiting or seeking regularization, and five reported unstable or expired documentation. Interviews continued until theoretical saturation was reached; after the twenty-fourth interview, no substantially new categories emerged, and two additional interviews were conducted to confirm the stability of the thematic structure.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. The interview guide included open-ended questions about participants' meanings of justice, experiences with legal and administrative institutions, documentation, police or authority encounters, access to services, discrimination, cultural values, family protection, community support, and expectations from the host society. Example questions included: "When you hear the word justice, what does it mean to you?" "Can you describe a time when you felt treated fairly or unfairly by an institution?" "How has your legal status affected your sense of justice?" and "Are there cultural or family values that shape how you understand justice?"

Interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes. They were conducted in locations chosen to ensure privacy and participant comfort. With participants' consent, interviews were audio-recorded. When recording was not preferred, detailed notes were taken. Participants were informed that they could refuse to answer any question or withdraw at any time. All identifying details were removed during transcription, and participants were assigned codes from P1 to P26.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The analysis followed a systematic process of familiarization, initial coding, category development, theme refinement, and interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021). First, transcripts were read several times to develop familiarity with the data. Second, meaningful units related to justice, fairness, recognition, legal status, institutional treatment, cultural values, and protection were coded. Third, related codes were grouped into preliminary categories. Fourth, categories were compared across participant groups to identify similarities and differences. Fifth, final themes were refined through repeated review of the coded data.

NVivo software was used to organize transcripts, store codes, compare cases, retrieve quotations, and develop thematic maps. To enhance credibility, the researcher used memo-writing, peer discussion, and constant comparison. Reflexive notes were maintained to monitor assumptions about law, culture, migration, and justice. Transferability was supported through thick description of the study context, participants, and findings. Dependability was strengthened by maintaining an audit trail of coding decisions, category revisions, and analytic memos.

Findings

The study included 26 refugees and asylum seekers living in Tehran. Of these, 14 participants were male and 12 were female. In terms of age, six participants were 18–25 years old, nine were 26–35 years old, seven were 36–45 years old, and four were older than 45. Regarding country of origin, 21 participants were from Afghanistan, three were from Iraq, and two were from other conflict-affected countries. In relation to education, five participants had primary education, nine had

secondary education, eight had completed high school or diploma-level education, and four had university education. Concerning legal status, 15 participants had valid refugee or temporary protection documentation, six were asylum seekers or applicants seeking regularization, and five had expired, unstable, or unclear documentation. The length of residence in Iran varied from less than two years to more than twenty years. Eleven participants were single, twelve were married, and three were widowed or separated.

The first main category was justice as respectful recognition. Participants repeatedly explained that justice meant being seen as a human being before being judged as a foreigner, refugee, Afghan, Iraqi, undocumented person, or poor migrant. For many participants, the most painful experiences of injustice occurred in ordinary institutional encounters where they felt ignored, humiliated, or reduced to their legal status. Justice was therefore associated with being listened to, addressed respectfully, and allowed to explain one's situation. One participant stated, "When they listen to me and do not speak to me like I am guilty only because I am a refugee, I feel there is justice" (P7, male, 34). Another participant explained, "Justice is not only a paper or a stamp. Justice is when someone sees that I am a mother and I am trying to protect my children" (P12, female, 41). Participants emphasized that respectful treatment could reduce fear even when institutions could not solve all problems. Clear communication, polite behaviour, and acknowledgement of suffering were interpreted as signs that the institution was fair. In contrast, shouting, dismissive language, mockery of accent, or refusal to explain procedures were experienced as moral injuries. This category shows that participants' cultural understanding of justice was deeply relational: justice was not only the correct application of rules but the recognition of dignity in encounters marked by vulnerability.

The second category was justice as legal security. Participants connected justice to stable documentation, predictable procedures, protection from deportation, and the ability to plan their lives without constant fear. Those with expired or unstable documents described justice as "security from sudden decisions." Documentation was not experienced merely as an administrative requirement; it shaped mobility, employment, schooling, housing, and psychological safety. One participant said, "Every time my document is close to expiring, my life becomes small. I do not know if I can work, travel, or even go to an office. Justice would mean not living with this fear every year" (P3, male, 29). Another participant noted, "If the law is clear, even if it is difficult, people can understand. But when every office says something different, we feel lost" (P18, female, 33). Participants distinguished between strict law and arbitrary law. Several stated that they could accept difficult rules if they were explained clearly and applied equally. What they experienced as injustice was uncertainty, inconsistent information, informal payments, long waiting periods, and dependency on individual officers' discretion. This category indicates that refugees and asylum seekers understand justice as legal predictability and protection against arbitrary power. Legal security was also tied to family stability; participants feared that documentation problems could separate families, interrupt children's education, or expose workers to exploitation.

The third category was justice as culturally meaningful fairness. Participants did not describe justice only in liberal legal terms such as individual rights or formal equality. Many connected justice to cultural and moral values such as family responsibility, hospitality, respect for elders, religious duty, neighbourly support, and protection of the vulnerable. For some participants, justice meant that a host society should recognize the moral condition of displacement and respond with compassion. One participant explained, "In our culture, if someone comes to your door because of danger, you do not first ask what benefit he brings. You give safety. This is justice" (P21, male, 46). A female participant said, "Justice means my children are not punished for a war they did not choose. They should study like other children" (P10, female, 38). Participants also compared justice in the host society with experiences in their country of origin. Some associated justice with the absence of violence, revenge, corruption, or ethnic discrimination. Others described justice as equal treatment across nationality, religion, gender, and class. This category shows that cultural perceptions of justice were plural. Participants combined formal legal ideas

with moral expectations rooted in family, religion, community, and memories of displacement. Justice was meaningful when institutions understood not only legal categories but also the cultural weight of exile, family protection, and social honour.

The fourth category was justice as accessible protection and practical help. Participants emphasized that rights were meaningful only when they could be used. Many described barriers to accessing justice, including limited knowledge of rights, language and accent discrimination, fear of authorities, cost of legal advice, lack of interpreters, uncertainty about complaint mechanisms, and dependence on informal networks. Several participants said that they avoided reporting exploitation or abuse because they feared that their legal status would be questioned. One participant stated, “If an employer does not pay me, where can I go? If I complain, maybe they ask about my papers first. So I stay silent” (P5, male, 27). Another participant explained, “Sometimes organizations help, but you must know where to go. Many women do not know, or they are afraid to speak” (P16, female, 31). Participants valued humanitarian organizations, community leaders, translators, teachers, and sympathetic officials who helped them navigate systems. However, they also noted that reliance on informal mediation could create inequality because those with stronger networks gained access while isolated refugees remained invisible. This category demonstrates that participants understood justice pragmatically. A right that could not be accessed, explained, translated, or safely claimed was not experienced as real justice. Participants’ narratives therefore linked justice to legal literacy, trusted intermediaries, safe complaint systems, and culturally sensitive service delivery.

Discussion

This study explored cultural perceptions of justice among refugees and asylum seekers residing in Tehran. The findings showed that participants understood justice through four interrelated meanings: respectful recognition, legal security, culturally meaningful fairness, and accessible protection. These results suggest that refugees’ perceptions of justice are not limited to courts, legal rules, or formal rights. Instead, justice is experienced through everyday encounters with institutions, officers, employers, landlords, schools, health systems, humanitarian agencies, and members of the host community. For participants, justice became visible when they were treated with dignity, when rules were predictable, when cultural meanings of family and protection were understood, and when rights could be practically accessed.

The first finding, justice as respectful recognition, aligns strongly with procedural justice theory. Tyler (2006) argued that people evaluate institutions partly through the quality of treatment they receive, especially whether they feel heard, respected, and treated neutrally. Lind and Tyler (1988) similarly emphasized that voice and dignity are central to perceptions of fairness. In the present study, refugees and asylum seekers often judged justice less by the final decision and more by the relational quality of the encounter. Even when institutions were unable to provide immediate solutions, respectful communication reduced fear and strengthened trust. This finding is consistent with Frank and Nivorozhkin’s (2024) conclusion that communication quality can buffer the negative effect of precarious legal status on refugees’ perceptions of procedural justice. It also supports Lipsky’s (1980) argument that street-level bureaucrats shape how vulnerable populations experience the state. For refugees, the frontline encounter is not a minor administrative detail; it is the lived site of justice.

The second finding, justice as legal security, reflects the central role of legal status in refugee lives. Participants associated justice with stable documentation, protection from arbitrary decisions, and freedom from constant fear of removal, interruption, or exclusion. This supports Menjívar’s (2006) concept of liminal legality, in which migrants live in uncertain legal positions that shape work, family, mobility, and identity. It also aligns with Zetter’s (1991, 2007) work on refugee labelling, which shows that administrative categories structure recognition and access to resources. In this study, documentation was not merely bureaucratic; it was existential. Participants described legal uncertainty as shrinking their future, weakening their ability to work, exposing them to exploitation, and limiting their children’s opportunities. Similar findings have been reported in research showing that insecure legal status contributes to structural vulnerability and reduced well-being among refugees and asylum

seekers (Nowak et al., 2023). Thus, justice for displaced people requires more than formal access to procedures; it requires procedures that are predictable, comprehensible, and protective.

The third finding, justice as culturally meaningful fairness, demonstrates that refugees interpret justice through moral and cultural frameworks as well as legal ones. Participants described justice through ideas of hospitality, family protection, religious duty, equality, compassion, and responsibility toward the vulnerable. This supports socio-legal arguments that legal consciousness is culturally embedded and shaped by everyday narratives (Ewick & Silbey, 1998; Merry, 1990). Refugees do not enter host-country legal systems as culturally blank subjects. They bring memories of conflict, prior experiences of state authority, family obligations, religious values, and community-based expectations of fairness. Fassin's (2012) discussion of humanitarian reason is useful here because refugee protection often operates through moral categories of suffering and deservingness. However, the present findings suggest that refugees themselves also evaluate institutions morally. They ask not only whether the law was followed, but whether the response was humane, compassionate, and attentive to family survival.

The fourth finding, justice as accessible protection and practical help, contributes to debates on access to justice. Participants repeatedly emphasized that formal rights were insufficient unless they could be understood, claimed, and used safely. This supports Hathaway's (2005) argument that refugee rights must be effective in practice, not merely recognized in legal doctrine. It also aligns with integration scholarship showing that rights and citizenship are foundational domains of refugee settlement (Ager & Strang, 2008). Participants' narratives revealed that access barriers were cumulative: limited legal literacy, language difficulties, fear of officials, financial constraints, lack of interpreters, and uncertainty about complaint procedures interacted to produce silence. In cases of labour exploitation, discrimination, or family vulnerability, participants sometimes avoided formal complaint mechanisms because they feared exposure or retaliation. Therefore, access to justice must be understood as a practical pathway, not only as the theoretical availability of courts or offices.

A significant contribution of this study is that it connects cultural perceptions of justice with institutional legitimacy. Refugees and asylum seekers in this study did not reject law as such. Many participants expressed a desire for clear rules, equal treatment, and lawful procedures. Their criticism focused on inconsistency, humiliation, lack of explanation, and inaccessible remedies. This finding resonates with Kox's (2025) research showing that migrants without authorized status may still view immigration systems as legitimate when rules are lawful and human rights are respected. In the present study, participants similarly distinguished between strictness and injustice. Strict rules could be tolerated when transparent and equally applied; arbitrary or disrespectful treatment was interpreted as injustice. This distinction is important for policy because it shows that institutional trust can be strengthened even within resource-constrained systems through fairness, clarity, and respectful treatment.

The findings also suggest that refugee justice must be understood across multiple institutional sites. Traditional legal analysis often focuses on courts, asylum procedures, or statutory rights. Participants in this study located justice in schools, workplaces, police encounters, documentation offices, health services, humanitarian organizations, and neighbourhood relations. This supports the broader socio-legal view that legality is produced in everyday life (Ewick & Silbey, 1998). For urban refugees, justice is dispersed across social spaces. A child's access to education, a worker's ability to recover wages, a mother's ability to seek health care, or a family's ability to renew documents may carry as much justice meaning as formal litigation. Therefore, refugee justice policy should integrate legal assistance with social services, education systems, labour protection, and community mediation.

The Tehran context also highlights the importance of long-term and protracted displacement. Many refugees in Iran, particularly Afghans, have lived in the country for years or decades. Protracted displacement complicates the distinction between emergency protection and social membership. Participants' accounts suggest that justice becomes increasingly tied to

belonging over time. Those who had spent many years in Iran, or whose children were born or educated there, often framed justice as recognition of contribution, continuity, and future possibility. This finding aligns with Ager and Strang's (2008) integration framework, particularly the role of social connections, rights, safety, education, and employment. It also supports Beiser's (2006) argument that refugee well-being is shaped by long-term settlement conditions, not only by pre-displacement trauma.

The cultural dimension of justice was particularly visible in participants' emphasis on family. Participants often evaluated justice through its impact on children, spouses, widowed mothers, and family unity. This finding is consistent with refugee mental health research showing that post-displacement stressors, family separation, uncertainty, and social exclusion can strongly affect well-being (Kirmayer et al., 2011; Porter & Haslam, 2005). In the present study, family was not only a psychological concern but also a justice framework. A policy or institutional decision was considered unjust when it endangered children's education, separated family members, or ignored the responsibilities of parents. Thus, culturally responsive justice should recognize that refugees may experience rights collectively and relationally, not only individually.

The study further shows that refugees' perceptions of justice are shaped by comparison. Participants compared current experiences with violence, corruption, insecurity, or discrimination in their countries of origin. Some perceived the host environment as more secure than the places they fled, while still criticizing discrimination and legal uncertainty. This comparative moral evaluation complicates simplistic assumptions that refugees either feel grateful or alienated. Their perceptions are layered: a person may appreciate safety while still experiencing injustice; may respect law while fearing institutions; may value hospitality while feeling socially excluded. This layered perception should be reflected in research and policy.

Finally, the findings have implications for humanitarian organizations, legal aid providers, and state institutions. Improving refugees' perceptions of justice does not depend only on large legal reforms, although such reforms may be necessary. It also requires changes in communication, interpretation, legal literacy, frontline training, complaint safety, and coordination between agencies. Participants repeatedly valued officers and organizations that explained procedures clearly and treated them respectfully. This suggests that procedural justice principles can be translated into practical institutional training: explain decisions, allow voice, avoid humiliating language, ensure interpretation, provide written guidance, and create safe referral pathways. Such practices may not eliminate legal precarity, but they can reduce secondary injustice and strengthen institutional trust.

This study has several limitations. First, the sample was limited to 26 refugees and asylum seekers residing in Tehran; therefore, the findings may not represent the experiences of refugees in other Iranian cities, rural areas, camps, border provinces, or other national contexts. Second, the study relied only on semi-structured interviews, which means that the findings reflect narrated experiences rather than direct observation of institutional encounters. Third, participants with unstable legal status may have been cautious in describing sensitive experiences, especially those involving authorities, employment, or documentation. Fourth, because the study focused on cultural perceptions of justice, it did not evaluate the legal accuracy of participants' claims or compare them with institutional records. Finally, language, translation, and trust may have influenced the depth and framing of participant narratives.

Future research should compare refugees' and asylum seekers' perceptions of justice across different cities, legal statuses, nationalities, genders, and generations. Longitudinal studies could examine how perceptions of justice change over time as documentation, employment, education, and social belonging evolve. Ethnographic research in documentation offices, legal aid centres, schools, health services, and community organizations could provide deeper insight into how justice is produced in everyday institutional encounters. Future studies should also examine the perspectives of frontline officials, interpreters,

lawyers, humanitarian workers, teachers, and employers to better understand the institutional conditions that shape refugee justice. Comparative research between host countries would also help identify which legal and administrative practices most effectively support dignity, trust, and access to protection.

Institutions working with refugees and asylum seekers should strengthen justice-oriented service delivery by prioritizing respectful communication, clear explanations, interpretation, legal literacy, and safe complaint mechanisms. Frontline workers should receive training on procedural justice, cultural sensitivity, trauma-informed communication, and the specific vulnerabilities created by legal uncertainty. Legal aid and humanitarian organizations should provide accessible guidance on documentation, employment rights, education, health access, and available complaint pathways. Special attention should be given to women, undocumented persons, families with children, and individuals without strong community networks. Justice-oriented practice should not treat refugees only as administrative cases but as persons whose dignity, family responsibilities, cultural meanings, and future aspirations must be recognized.

Conclusion

This study showed that refugees and asylum seekers understand justice through a combination of legal, cultural, moral, and practical meanings. Justice was not limited to courts or formal procedures. Participants described justice as respectful recognition, legal security, culturally meaningful fairness, and accessible protection. These perceptions were shaped by displacement histories, legal status, documentation practices, family responsibilities, cultural values, institutional encounters, and everyday treatment in the host society. The findings suggest that refugee justice must be approached as both a legal and relational phenomenon. Formal rights are essential, but they become meaningful only when refugees can understand, access, and claim them without humiliation or fear. Policies and practices that promote dignity, transparency, interpretation, legal literacy, and safe pathways to assistance can strengthen trust and reduce experiences of injustice among refugees and asylum seekers.

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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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