



Cultural Sensitivity in Legal Aid Services: Practitioner Experiences and Institutional Challenges

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore how legal aid practitioners in Tehran understand, negotiate, and implement cultural sensitivity in their everyday work with socially, linguistically, and economically diverse clients. This qualitative study used semi-structured interviews to examine practitioner experiences of culturally sensitive legal aid provision. Twenty-four participants were recruited from legal aid offices, non-governmental organizations, court-affiliated advisory units, and community-based legal counseling centers in Tehran through purposive and snowball sampling. Participants included legal aid lawyers, legal advisors, intake officers, and case coordinators with direct experience of working with vulnerable and culturally diverse clients. Interviews lasted between 45 and 75 minutes and continued until theoretical saturation was achieved. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using inductive thematic analysis. NVivo software was used to organize transcripts, develop initial codes, compare emerging categories, and refine themes. Credibility was strengthened through peer review, memo writing, member reflection, and maintaining an audit trail. Four main categories emerged from the analysis: cultural translation of legal problems, trust-building and reflexive communication, institutional barriers to culturally sensitive practice, and adaptive strategies under ethical tension. Practitioners described cultural sensitivity not as a separate professional skill but as a continuous interpretive process through which clients' narratives, family obligations, gender norms, migration experiences, economic hardship, and distrust of institutions were translated into legally meaningful claims. However, high caseloads, limited consultation time, lack of trained interpreters, fragmented referral systems, and insufficient institutional training reduced practitioners' capacity to provide culturally responsive services. Cultural sensitivity in legal aid requires more than individual goodwill or interpersonal empathy. It depends on institutional arrangements that support language access, practitioner training, reflective supervision, interdisciplinary cooperation, and flexible service design. Strengthening cultural responsiveness can improve client trust, procedural fairness, and the practical accessibility of legal aid services.

Keywords: cultural sensitivity; legal aid; access to justice; legal practitioners; qualitative research; cultural competence; Tehran; institutional challenges.

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Introduction

Access to justice is a foundational principle of the rule of law, yet its practical realization depends on more than the formal existence of courts, lawyers, and legal rules. Individuals must be able to recognize their problems as legal, communicate those

problems to institutional actors, understand available procedures, trust service providers, and participate meaningfully in decisions that affect their rights. Early access-to-justice scholarship emphasized that legal systems often reproduce inequality when formal rights are not accompanied by practical mechanisms that enable vulnerable groups to use those rights effectively (Cappelletti & Garth, 1978). Later socio-legal research further demonstrated that civil justice experiences are shaped by class, gender, ethnicity, language, social status, and institutional power, meaning that access to law is unevenly distributed across social groups (Rhode, 2004; Sandefur, 2008). Legal aid services occupy a critical position within this landscape because they often constitute the first formal point of contact between marginalized clients and the legal system.

Legal aid is commonly understood as a mechanism for reducing economic barriers to justice, particularly for individuals who cannot afford private legal representation. However, financial cost is only one dimension of exclusion. Clients who seek legal aid may also face linguistic barriers, unfamiliarity with formal legal procedures, limited literacy, fear of state institutions, gendered restrictions on public participation, migration-related insecurity, disability-related communication needs, or cultural expectations about family, authority, shame, honor, reconciliation, and conflict resolution. These barriers influence how legal problems are narrated, what remedies clients consider acceptable, and whether clients continue or withdraw from legal processes. In this sense, legal aid is not merely a technical service for providing legal information; it is also an interpretive and relational practice in which practitioners must translate between legal categories and clients' lived social worlds.

The concept of cultural sensitivity is closely related to cultural competence, cultural humility, and cross-cultural lawyering. Cultural competence was originally defined in service settings as a set of congruent behaviors, attitudes, and policies that enable systems and professionals to work effectively in cross-cultural situations (Cross et al., 1989). In professional practice, this concept has evolved from a static idea of "knowing" other cultures toward a more reflexive understanding of cultural humility, which emphasizes lifelong self-critique, recognition of power imbalance, and openness to the client's own account of meaning (Tervalon & Murray-García, 1998). In legal contexts, this distinction is crucial. Lawyers and legal aid practitioners cannot assume that culture can be reduced to fixed traits or group-based generalizations. Rather, culture intersects with gender, class, legal status, education, religion, disability, family position, and previous experiences with authority. Therefore, culturally sensitive legal aid requires both awareness of social difference and caution against stereotyping.

Cross-cultural lawyering scholarship has emphasized that legal professionals must develop practical habits for identifying how cultural assumptions shape interviewing, counseling, fact development, credibility assessment, negotiation, and client decision-making. Bryant (2001) argued that all lawyering is, in some sense, cross-cultural because lawyers and clients often occupy different social locations, use different vocabularies, and interpret problems through different institutional frames. Similarly, legal-clinic literature has shown that cultural competency training can help future practitioners recognize their own assumptions, communicate more effectively with diverse clients, and avoid reducing clients to legal problems detached from social context (Pay, 2014; Voyvodic, 2006). These insights are highly relevant to legal aid because practitioners often work with clients who experience overlapping disadvantages and whose legal problems are embedded in complex family, economic, and administrative conditions.

Cultural sensitivity is also linked to procedural justice. Tyler's (2006) theory of procedural justice shows that people's acceptance of legal authority is strongly influenced by whether they perceive procedures as fair, respectful, transparent, and allowing them voice. For legal aid clients, procedural fairness may begin before entering the courtroom. It may be shaped by whether a practitioner listens carefully, explains legal options in plain language, respects the client's dignity, and acknowledges the social meaning of the dispute. When clients feel misunderstood or judged, they may withhold information, distrust advice, or abandon their claims. Conversely, when practitioners create a communicative environment in which clients feel heard and respected, legal aid can become a bridge between marginalized communities and formal justice institutions.

Legal consciousness scholarship further clarifies why culturally sensitive legal aid matters. People do not encounter law as abstract doctrine; they understand it through everyday narratives, social relationships, previous institutional encounters, and collective meanings (Ewick & Silbey, 1998; Merry, 1990). Some clients may see law as distant and inaccessible, some may view it as a strategic tool, and others may experience it as threatening or arbitrary. Nielsen (2000) demonstrated that legal consciousness varies according to social position and everyday experience. Therefore, practitioners cannot assume that clients approach legal aid with shared expectations about rights, evidence, procedure, or legal authority. Culturally sensitive practice requires eliciting the client's understanding of the problem before translating that problem into legal language.

In large urban settings such as Tehran, cultural sensitivity in legal aid is particularly important because legal aid practitioners may work with clients from diverse ethnic, linguistic, regional, socioeconomic, and migration backgrounds. Tehran attracts internal migrants from different provinces as well as migrant and refugee populations, while also concentrating legal, administrative, and judicial institutions. Clients may bring disputes related to family law, labor rights, tenancy, documentation, domestic violence, child custody, inheritance, debt, administrative sanctions, or access to public services. These problems are often intensified by poverty, limited social support, gender inequality, and distrust of official institutions. As a result, legal aid practitioners must often interpret not only legal documents but also unspoken fears, family pressures, community expectations, and culturally specific ways of narrating harm.

Despite growing international attention to cultural competence in legal education and public-interest lawyering, less is known about how practitioners themselves experience the institutional conditions that support or restrict culturally sensitive legal aid. Much of the literature emphasizes the skills lawyers should acquire, but fewer studies examine how those skills are enacted under real service constraints such as overcrowded offices, time pressure, insufficient interpreters, limited funding, rigid forms, and lack of reflective supervision. This gap is important because cultural sensitivity cannot be reduced to individual attitude. Even highly committed practitioners may be unable to provide culturally responsive services when institutional structures reward speed, standardization, and procedural compliance over listening, translation, and relational trust.

Accordingly, this study explores practitioner experiences of cultural sensitivity in legal aid services in Tehran. It investigates how practitioners define cultural sensitivity, what challenges they encounter when working with culturally diverse clients, what strategies they use to bridge cultural and legal meanings, and what institutional reforms they perceive as necessary. By focusing on practitioners' accounts, the study contributes to socio-legal scholarship on access to justice, legal consciousness, and culturally competent lawyering. It also offers practical implications for legal aid organizations seeking to improve service quality, client trust, and institutional responsiveness.

Methods and Materials

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design with an interpretive orientation. The purpose was to explore the meanings, experiences, and institutional challenges associated with culturally sensitive legal aid practice from the perspective of practitioners. A qualitative approach was appropriate because the study sought to understand how practitioners interpret client diversity, negotiate cultural meanings during legal counseling, and respond to institutional constraints in daily practice.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling followed by snowball sampling. The inclusion criteria were: direct experience in legal aid or low-cost legal counseling services in Tehran, at least two years of professional experience with vulnerable or culturally diverse clients, willingness to participate in an audio-recorded interview, and ability to provide reflective accounts of practitioner-client interactions. Practitioners who had no direct client contact or whose work was limited to administrative supervision were excluded.

The final sample consisted of 24 participants from Tehran. Participants included 10 legal aid lawyers, 5 NGO-based legal advisors, 4 court-affiliated legal counselors, 3 social workers or case coordinators working alongside legal teams, and 2 intake

officers or paralegal staff. The sample was designed to capture variation in gender, professional role, years of experience, and type of service setting. Theoretical saturation was reached after the twenty-first interview, when no substantially new categories emerged. Three additional interviews were conducted to confirm the adequacy and stability of the thematic structure.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. The interview guide was developed based on the literature on access to justice, cultural competence, cross-cultural lawyering, and practitioner-client communication. Questions addressed participants' understanding of cultural sensitivity, experiences with culturally diverse clients, communication barriers, institutional constraints, strategies for trust-building, ethical dilemmas, and recommendations for improving legal aid services. Example questions included: "How do you define cultural sensitivity in legal aid work?", "Can you describe a situation in which cultural difference affected the legal counseling process?", "What institutional conditions make culturally sensitive practice difficult?", and "What types of training or support would help practitioners work more effectively with diverse clients?"

Interviews lasted between 45 and 75 minutes and were conducted in private settings selected to protect confidentiality. With participants' consent, interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Field notes were written after each interview to document contextual observations, preliminary analytic impressions, and emerging questions for subsequent interviews. Data collection and analysis proceeded concurrently so that early findings could inform later interviews.

Data were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis following the six-phase process proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. NVivo software was used to manage transcripts, organize codes, compare patterns across participants, retrieve coded segments, and develop analytic memos. The analysis began with repeated reading of transcripts to identify significant statements related to cultural sensitivity, client communication, institutional barriers, and practitioner strategies. Initial codes were then grouped into subcategories and broader themes. Coding was both semantic and latent, meaning that attention was paid not only to explicit statements but also to underlying assumptions about law, culture, power, and professional responsibility.

To enhance trustworthiness, several strategies were used. Credibility was supported through prolonged engagement with the data, peer review of the coding structure, and participant reflection on selected interpretations. Dependability was strengthened by maintaining an audit trail of coding decisions, theme revisions, and analytic memos. Confirmability was supported through reflexive memo writing, in which the researcher documented assumptions and interpretive choices. Transferability was addressed by providing detailed descriptions of the research context, participants, and service settings, consistent with qualitative trustworthiness criteria (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Nowell et al., 2017).

Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and their right to withdraw at any stage before data analysis. Written informed consent was obtained before each interview. Identifying information was removed from transcripts, and participants were assigned codes such as P1, P2, and P3. Audio files and transcripts were stored securely and accessed only for research purposes. Because the interviews included discussion of sensitive client experiences, participants were instructed not to disclose names, case numbers, or identifiable client details.

Findings

The study included 24 legal aid practitioners working in Tehran. Of the participants, 13 were women and 11 were men. Participants' ages ranged from 27 to 58 years, with most falling between 35 and 44 years. Regarding professional role, 10 participants were legal aid lawyers, 5 were NGO-based legal advisors, 4 were court-affiliated legal counselors, 3 were social workers or case coordinators working in legal service settings, and 2 were intake officers or paralegal staff. In terms of professional experience, 6 participants had 2–5 years of experience, 9 had 6–10 years, and 9 had more than 10 years of

experience. Educationally, 5 held a bachelor's degree in law or a related field, 12 held a master's degree, and 7 held doctoral-level qualifications or were doctoral candidates. Participants reported working with low-income families, women seeking family-law assistance, Afghan migrant clients, internal migrants from different regions of Iran, persons with disabilities, and clients with limited legal literacy.

The first main category concerned the cultural translation of legal problems. Practitioners explained that clients rarely presented their concerns in formal legal language. Instead, they narrated problems through family obligations, moral expectations, fear of shame, community pressure, gender roles, economic dependency, migration insecurity, or distrust of official institutions. Practitioners described their role as translating these socially embedded narratives into legally recognizable claims without erasing the client's own meaning. For example, family disputes were often presented not simply as divorce, custody, or maintenance cases but as conflicts involving honor, parental authority, reconciliation expectations, or fear of social judgment. One participant stated, "Many clients do not begin by saying, 'I have a legal claim.' They begin with a story about family pressure, fear, or shame. My first task is to understand what the legal issue is inside that story" (P6). Another practitioner noted, "If I only listen for legal keywords, I miss the real problem. Sometimes the client is talking about inheritance, but the deeper issue is exclusion from the family after migration to Tehran" (P14). Participants emphasized that cultural translation required patience, plain-language questioning, and sensitivity to indirect communication. Some clients avoided naming violence, discrimination, or exploitation directly because of fear, embarrassment, or previous negative experiences with authorities. Practitioners therefore had to create a space in which the client could move gradually from socially acceptable narratives to legally relevant facts. However, participants also warned that cultural translation must not become cultural stereotyping. As one lawyer explained, "Culture helps me ask better questions, but it should not make me assume the answer" (P3). This category shows that culturally sensitive legal aid begins with interpretive listening: the practitioner must understand how clients define harm before converting that harm into legal categories.

The second main category was trust-building and reflexive communication. Participants repeatedly described trust as the foundation of effective legal aid, especially when clients came from marginalized groups or had previous experiences of institutional neglect. Practitioners stated that clients often approached legal aid with suspicion, expecting judgment, bureaucracy, or empty promises. For migrant clients, women in family conflict, and low-income clients, distrust was intensified by fear of exposure, deportation, retaliation, or social stigma. Participants therefore viewed culturally sensitive communication as more than polite language; it involved demonstrating respect, explaining confidentiality, avoiding technical jargon, and acknowledging the client's fear without reinforcing it. One participant said, "When a client feels that I am rushing, they stop talking. They answer only yes or no. But when I explain slowly and show that I am not judging them, the real facts come out" (P11). Another stated, "Some women bring a relative to speak for them. I understand the family context, but I also have to protect the client's independent voice. This is delicate because if I reject the relative too harshly, the client may not return" (P20). Participants also described reflexivity as essential. They recognized that practitioners bring their own social assumptions into interviews, including assumptions about gender, ethnicity, education, family structure, and credibility. One legal advisor reflected, "Sometimes we think we are neutral, but neutrality can hide our own cultural habits. I have learned to ask myself why I find one client 'cooperative' and another 'difficult'" (P8). Practitioners linked communication to procedural fairness: clients were more likely to accept difficult legal advice when they felt heard, respected, and informed. Trust-building was therefore both an ethical responsibility and a practical condition for accurate fact-finding and sustained participation in legal processes.

The third main category involved institutional barriers that restricted culturally sensitive practice. Although participants generally valued cultural sensitivity, they emphasized that organizational conditions often made it difficult to implement. The

most frequently mentioned barriers were high caseloads, short consultation times, limited access to trained interpreters, lack of private interview spaces, insufficient cultural competence training, fragmented referral networks, and rigid administrative forms. Practitioners reported that legal aid systems often measure productivity through the number of clients served rather than the quality of communication or the client's understanding of legal options. One participant observed, "The system wants quick intake, quick advice, quick closure. But cultural understanding is not quick. Sometimes the first thirty minutes are only for building enough trust to hear the real issue" (P2). Another explained, "We do not have professional interpreters. Sometimes a child, neighbor, or relative translates. This creates problems for confidentiality and accuracy, especially in family or violence cases" (P17). Participants also criticized the absence of regular training and supervision. Many had learned culturally sensitive practice through experience, mistakes, or informal mentoring rather than structured institutional support. Some stated that institutional forms did not capture cultural or social context, forcing practitioners to fit complex lives into narrow legal categories. As one counselor said, "The form asks for case type, income, and documents. It does not ask what prevents this person from speaking, returning, trusting, or deciding" (P22). Participants therefore framed cultural sensitivity as an institutional issue, not merely an individual skill. Without adequate time, language resources, interdisciplinary cooperation, and reflective supervision, practitioners felt that culturally responsive legal aid remained dependent on personal commitment rather than organizational design.

The fourth main category concerned adaptive strategies and ethical tensions. Practitioners developed practical methods to respond to cultural diversity despite institutional limitations. These included using plain-language explanations, drawing diagrams of legal procedures, checking client understanding, collaborating with social workers or community organizations, allowing gradual disclosure, offering gender-sensitive interview arrangements, and separating legal advice from moral judgment. Some practitioners used culturally familiar examples to explain rights and procedures, while others created informal referral pathways to shelters, psychologists, migrant-support organizations, or municipal services. One participant explained, "I do not only say, 'You have this right.' I explain what steps are needed, who may react, what documents matter, and what risks the client should consider. Rights must become understandable in the client's real life" (P9). However, participants also described ethical tensions. Respecting cultural context sometimes conflicted with protecting individual autonomy, especially in family disputes, domestic violence cases, early marriage concerns, inheritance conflicts, or cases involving family pressure. Practitioners struggled to distinguish cultural sensitivity from cultural relativism. As one lawyer noted, "Respecting culture does not mean accepting harm. I can understand family pressure, but I cannot let it silence the client's legal choice" (P19). Others described the risk of relying on community intermediaries who could facilitate communication but also influence the client's decision. Practitioners therefore emphasized the need for culturally sensitive boundaries: listening to cultural context, but maintaining confidentiality, informed consent, client autonomy, and legal accuracy. This category shows that culturally sensitive legal aid is not a simple accommodation of culture; it is an ethical practice of balancing respect, rights, safety, and professional responsibility.

Discussion

The findings show that practitioners understood cultural sensitivity primarily as a process of cultural translation. Clients did not usually present their problems in doctrinal categories; rather, they narrated them through social meanings such as shame, family obligation, migration insecurity, gendered vulnerability, economic dependence, or fear of authority. This finding aligns with socio-legal scholarship showing that people experience law through everyday meanings rather than through formal legal doctrine (Ewick & Silbey, 1998; Merry, 1990). It also supports Sandefur's (2008) argument that access to civil justice is shaped by how people interpret problems, whether they recognize them as legal, and how institutions respond to their social position. For legal aid practitioners, cultural sensitivity therefore requires more than knowledge of legal rules. It requires the ability to

hear the legal significance of narratives that may initially appear moral, familial, emotional, or administrative. This finding is also consistent with cross-cultural lawyering scholarship, which emphasizes that lawyers must examine how cultural assumptions shape interviewing, counseling, and problem definition (Bryant, 2001; Pay, 2014). Practitioners in this study did not describe culture as a fixed list of ethnic characteristics. Instead, they treated it as a changing interpretive field shaped by class, gender, migration, language, and institutional experience. This supports the movement from static cultural competence toward cultural humility, in which practitioners remain attentive to the limits of their own assumptions and learn from the client's account of meaning (Tervalon & Murray-García, 1998).

The second finding concerned trust-building and reflexive communication. Participants emphasized that clients were more likely to disclose legally relevant information when they felt respected, listened to, and protected from judgment. This finding is strongly aligned with procedural justice theory. Tyler (2006) argued that people's trust in legal authority is shaped by whether they experience procedures as fair, respectful, neutral, and allowing voice. In legal aid settings, the experience of procedural justice begins before formal adjudication. It begins in the first interview, where the client decides whether the practitioner is safe, competent, and willing to understand the problem. The participants' emphasis on plain language, confidentiality, nonjudgmental listening, and client voice reflects the practical foundations of procedural fairness. The finding also supports multicultural competence literature, which identifies awareness, knowledge, and skills as central dimensions of effective cross-cultural professional practice (Sue et al., 1992). However, the present findings extend this literature by showing that reflexive communication is not only a matter of interpersonal sensitivity but also a condition for accurate legal representation. If clients withhold information because they feel rushed, judged, or misunderstood, practitioners may misidentify the claim, recommend inappropriate procedures, or fail to detect risk. Thus, culturally sensitive communication improves both ethical quality and legal effectiveness.

The third finding showed that institutional barriers limited the implementation of culturally sensitive practice. Participants described high caseloads, short consultations, lack of trained interpreters, rigid intake forms, limited privacy, fragmented referrals, and insufficient training as major obstacles. This finding is consistent with access-to-justice scholarship emphasizing that inequality is reproduced not only by individual prejudice but also by institutional design, resource distribution, and procedural complexity (Cappelletti & Garth, 1978; Rhode, 2004; Sandefur, 2008). It also aligns with legal aid standards that frame cultural competence, language access, disability awareness, and humility as organizational responsibilities rather than optional personal virtues (American Bar Association, 2021). The practitioners' accounts suggest that culturally sensitive legal aid cannot be sustained if institutions reward speed and numerical output while ignoring the communicative labor required to understand clients' lived contexts. This is particularly important in legal aid settings because vulnerable clients often need more time, clearer explanations, and stronger referral support than clients with higher legal literacy or greater institutional confidence. The absence of professional interpreters was especially significant. Informal interpretation by relatives, neighbors, or children may create risks for confidentiality, accuracy, and client autonomy. Therefore, institutional investment in language access is not merely administrative; it is a core component of equal participation in justice processes.

The fourth finding concerned adaptive strategies and ethical tensions. Practitioners used flexible methods such as plain-language explanation, gradual disclosure, interdisciplinary referral, gender-sensitive interview arrangements, and collaboration with community organizations. These strategies reflect Bryant's (2001) view that cross-cultural lawyering requires practical habits that help lawyers recognize difference, avoid assumptions, and preserve the client's voice. They also align with Voyvodic's (2006) argument that culturally competent lawyering involves awareness of oneself as a cultural actor, recognition of discriminatory patterns, and acquisition of skills that reduce the harmful effects of bias in professional interaction. However, the findings also show that cultural sensitivity creates ethical dilemmas. Practitioners sometimes had to respect family and

community context while also protecting the client's autonomy, confidentiality, and safety. This tension is especially visible in family law, domestic violence, migration, and inheritance disputes, where cultural expectations may both support and constrain clients. The results therefore caution against simplistic interpretations of cultural sensitivity as accommodation. Culturally sensitive legal aid does not mean accepting all cultural practices or allowing community pressure to replace individual consent. Rather, it requires a rights-based and reflective approach that listens carefully to cultural context while maintaining professional obligations. In this sense, cultural sensitivity and legal ethics should be understood as mutually reinforcing rather than competing commitments.

Limitations: This study has several limitations. First, the sample was limited to practitioners working in Tehran, and the findings may not fully represent legal aid experiences in smaller cities, rural regions, or provinces with different linguistic and institutional conditions. Second, the study focused on practitioner perspectives and did not directly include clients' experiences of culturally sensitive or insensitive legal aid. As a result, the findings reflect how practitioners interpret their own practices rather than how clients evaluate those practices. Third, because the data were collected through interviews, participants may have emphasized socially desirable accounts of empathy, fairness, and professional responsibility. Although confidentiality and reflective questioning were used to reduce this risk, observational data could have provided additional insight into actual practitioner-client interactions. Finally, the sample included different professional roles, which enriched the data but also meant that participants did not all have identical responsibilities or authority within legal aid institutions.

Suggestions for Future Research: Future studies should examine cultural sensitivity in legal aid from the perspective of clients, especially women, migrants, refugees, persons with disabilities, ethnic minorities, and low-literacy clients. Comparative research across different Iranian cities could identify how regional, linguistic, and institutional variation shapes legal aid practice. Future studies could also use observation of legal consultations, document analysis, or case studies to examine how cultural sensitivity is enacted in real interactions rather than only described retrospectively. Quantitative or mixed-methods studies may be useful for assessing whether culturally sensitive practices improve client satisfaction, legal understanding, continued participation, and perceived procedural fairness. In addition, future research should explore the role of interpreters, community intermediaries, digital legal aid platforms, and interdisciplinary teams in improving access to justice for culturally diverse populations.

Suggestions for Practice: Legal aid institutions should move from individual-level expectations of sensitivity toward organizational systems that make culturally responsive practice possible. This includes providing regular training on cultural humility, implicit bias, trauma-informed interviewing, language access, disability inclusion, and cross-cultural communication. Institutions should develop clear protocols for professional interpretation, avoid reliance on family members in sensitive cases, and redesign intake forms to capture social and cultural barriers affecting legal participation. Legal aid offices should also provide reflective supervision, peer consultation, and interdisciplinary referral networks with social workers, psychologists, shelters, migrant-support organizations, and community services. Finally, service quality should be evaluated not only by the number of clients served but also by whether clients understand their rights, feel respected, participate in decisions, and can realistically follow the legal steps recommended to them.

Conclusion

This study explored practitioner experiences of cultural sensitivity in legal aid services in Tehran. The findings indicate that culturally sensitive legal aid is a complex professional and institutional practice. Practitioners must translate clients' lived experiences into legal categories, build trust through respectful and reflexive communication, respond to institutional constraints, and manage ethical tensions between cultural context and individual rights. The results show that cultural sensitivity cannot be reduced to personal kindness or general awareness of diversity. It requires concrete skills, institutional resources,

language support, interdisciplinary cooperation, reflective supervision, and service structures that allow practitioners enough time to understand clients' problems in context.

The study contributes to access-to-justice scholarship by showing that legal aid barriers are not only financial or procedural but also cultural and communicative. Clients may be formally eligible for legal aid yet still unable to participate meaningfully if their narratives are misunderstood, their fears are ignored, or their social constraints are treated as irrelevant. Legal aid services therefore need to recognize cultural sensitivity as central to legal quality, professional ethics, and procedural fairness. Strengthening culturally responsive legal aid can improve client trust, enhance the accuracy of legal counseling, and make legal institutions more accessible to diverse communities.

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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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