



Cultural Narratives in Human Rights Litigation: Legal Argumentation and Social Meaning

1. Parisa. Shirazi*: Department of Sociology, Allameh Tabatabai University, Tehran, Iran. Email: parisa.shirazi.soc@gmail.com (Corresponding Author)
2. Ali. Hashemi: Department of Human Rights, Allameh Tabatabai University, Tehran, Iran

ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore how cultural narratives are constructed, translated, and strategically mobilized in human rights litigation, and how these narratives shape legal argumentation, institutional interpretation, and social meanings of justice. This qualitative study was conducted using semi-structured interviews with 24 participants in Tehran, Iran, including lawyers, legal academics, civil society advocates, and individuals with direct or indirect experience of human rights litigation. Participants were selected through purposive and snowball sampling based on their knowledge of or involvement in rights-based legal claims. Interviews continued until theoretical saturation was achieved; saturation was reached after the twenty-first interview, and three additional interviews were conducted to confirm thematic stability. Interviews lasted between 45 and 75 minutes, were audio-recorded with informed consent, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using thematic analysis. NVivo software was used for organizing transcripts, coding data, developing categories, and comparing themes across participant groups. Credibility was strengthened through member checking, peer review of codes, reflexive memo-writing, and constant comparison across interviews. Four main categories emerged from the data: cultural translation of rights claims, narrative framing of victimhood and dignity, tension between universal legal norms and local moral vocabularies, and strategic use of social meaning in legal advocacy. Participants described human rights litigation not merely as a technical legal process but as a culturally embedded practice in which legal arguments become persuasive when they are connected to locally intelligible ideas of dignity, honor, harm, family responsibility, fairness, and collective memory. The findings showed that cultural narratives could strengthen litigation by making abstract rights claims socially recognizable, but they could also constrain claimants when courts, lawyers, or institutions relied on stereotypical understandings of culture. The study concludes that cultural narratives play a constitutive role in human rights litigation by shaping how legal harms are named, how rights are justified, and how justice is socially understood. Human rights advocacy should therefore combine doctrinal legal reasoning with culturally sensitive narrative strategies that preserve the universality of rights while making them meaningful within local contexts.

Keywords: Human rights litigation; cultural narratives; legal argumentation; social meaning; qualitative research; legal consciousness

How to cite this article:

Shirazi, P. & Hashemi, A. (2026). Cultural Narratives in Human Rights Litigation: Legal Argumentation and Social Meaning. *Contemporary Issues in Law, Culture, and Globalization*, 2(2), 44-54. <https://doi.org/10.61838/cileg.2.2.5>

Introduction

Human rights litigation is commonly understood as a formal legal mechanism through which individuals and groups seek remedies for violations of dignity, equality, liberty, security, and due process. Yet litigation is never only a technical encounter with statutes, constitutional provisions, international instruments, or judicial procedures. It is also a narrative process through which suffering is named, responsibility is attributed, legal meaning is produced, and social recognition is sought. In this sense, human rights litigation operates at the intersection of legal argumentation and cultural meaning. Lawyers, judges, claimants, civil society actors, and expert witnesses do not merely apply legal norms to facts; they participate in the construction of culturally intelligible stories about harm, victimhood, justice, authority, and social order. The present study examines this intersection by exploring how cultural narratives are used in human rights litigation and how such narratives influence the social meanings attached to rights-based claims.

The connection between law and narrative has long been central to socio-legal scholarship. Cover's influential argument that law exists within a "nomos," or normative universe, emphasizes that legal rules cannot be separated from the stories that give them meaning (Cover, 1983). Legal institutions create authoritative interpretations, but communities also produce their own normative narratives about what is lawful, just, legitimate, or oppressive. This insight is especially important for human rights litigation because rights claims often rely on broad concepts such as dignity, equality, discrimination, vulnerability, and freedom. These concepts are legally significant, but they are also culturally mediated. Their persuasive force depends partly on how they are translated into the moral language of particular communities, institutions, and audiences.

Human rights law has global aspirations, but its practical force is shaped by local interpretation. Anthropological and socio-legal studies have shown that human rights norms do not travel as fixed meanings from international texts into domestic contexts. Rather, they are translated, adapted, resisted, and reinterpreted by local actors (Goodale & Merry, 2007; Merry, 2006). Merry's work on the translation of international human rights norms into local justice systems demonstrates that rights become socially meaningful when they are embedded in local categories of harm, morality, and legitimacy (Merry, 2006). Levitt and Merry (2009) describe this process as "vernacularization," meaning the local appropriation and translation of global rights language into terms that resonate with specific cultural settings. This does not imply that human rights become relative or optional. Instead, it shows that universal norms require social mediation if they are to become practically usable and institutionally persuasive.

Litigation is one of the key sites where this mediation occurs. In courtrooms, legal petitions, advocacy campaigns, and institutional hearings, abstract rights must be attached to concrete stories. A claim of discrimination, for example, must be narrated as an experience of exclusion, humiliation, unequal treatment, or denial of dignity. A claim of arbitrary detention must be narrated through social meanings of state authority, personal security, family disruption, and procedural injustice. A claim involving gender, minority status, migration, labor exploitation, or social vulnerability often becomes persuasive only when legal categories are connected to cultural understandings of shame, honor, dependency, duty, recognition, and belonging. Thus, cultural narratives do not simply decorate legal argumentation; they help organize the facts, identify the relevant harm, and determine what kind of legal remedy appears appropriate.

The transformation of lived experience into a legal claim has been theorized through the framework of naming, blaming, and claiming. Felstiner, Abel, and Sarat (1981) argue that injurious experiences do not automatically become legal disputes. First, individuals must perceive an experience as harmful; second, they must attribute responsibility; and third, they must make a claim against another party or institution. Human rights litigation intensifies this process because claimants must often translate diffuse social suffering into recognizable legal categories. Experiences of marginalization, cultural disrespect,

institutional silence, or social humiliation may be deeply harmful, but they are not always immediately legible as rights violations. The role of lawyers and advocates is therefore partly interpretive: they assist claimants in transforming social injury into legal argument.

Legal consciousness scholarship further clarifies this process by showing how ordinary people understand law in everyday life. Ewick and Silbey (1998) argue that law is experienced not only as a formal institution but also as a set of everyday stories, expectations, fears, and strategies. People may see law as majestic and authoritative, as a game to be strategically navigated, or as a power to be resisted. In human rights litigation, these modes of legal consciousness shape whether individuals believe litigation is possible, legitimate, dangerous, honorable, or futile. Cultural narratives may encourage legal claiming when rights are associated with dignity and justice, but they may discourage litigation when going to court is associated with shame, social exposure, or conflict with family and community expectations.

The politics of rights also complicates the role of litigation. Scheingold (1974) famously warned against the “myth of rights,” the assumption that formal recognition of rights automatically produces social transformation. Later work on legal mobilization has shown that litigation can generate political and cultural effects beyond judicial victory or defeat. McCann (1994), for example, demonstrates that rights-based legal mobilization may reshape collective identity, public consciousness, and movement strategy. Epp (1998) similarly emphasizes that rights revolutions depend not only on courts but also on support structures such as lawyers, activists, funding, and organizations. These insights are directly relevant to human rights litigation because the meaning of a case may exceed the court’s final decision. Even unsuccessful litigation can produce public narratives of injustice, strengthen advocacy networks, or redefine social expectations about state responsibility.

However, cultural narratives in human rights litigation are ambivalent. On one hand, they can make legal claims more accessible, emotionally compelling, and socially legitimate. They can humanize victims, contextualize harm, and connect formal rights to everyday moral experience. On the other hand, cultural narratives can also reproduce stereotypes. Courts and legal actors may treat culture as static, traditional, irrational, or incompatible with rights. Claimants may feel pressured to present themselves as ideal victims whose stories conform to institutional expectations of innocence, suffering, or vulnerability. Minow (1990) warns that legal systems often face a “dilemma of difference”: ignoring difference can erase real inequalities, while emphasizing difference can reinforce stigma. Human rights litigation faces a similar dilemma when cultural identity must be recognized without being reduced to stereotype.

The problem becomes more complex in societies where legal modernity, religious values, national identity, international obligations, and community-based moral norms coexist. In such contexts, human rights litigation requires a delicate argumentative balance. Lawyers may need to invoke constitutional principles, international human rights norms, statutory provisions, religious or ethical concepts, and culturally familiar notions of dignity and fairness. The same legal claim may need to speak simultaneously to judges, state institutions, families, communities, NGOs, and the wider public. Therefore, the success of human rights litigation depends not only on doctrinal accuracy but also on narrative competence: the ability to frame rights claims in ways that remain legally valid while becoming socially intelligible.

Despite the importance of this issue, limited empirical research has examined how legal practitioners, advocates, and affected individuals describe the role of cultural narratives in human rights litigation in local legal contexts. Much existing scholarship focuses either on doctrinal human rights law or on broad theoretical debates about universalism and relativism. Less attention has been paid to the everyday narrative work through which legal actors translate cultural experience into rights-based argument. This study addresses this gap by examining how participants in Tehran understand the relationship between cultural narratives, legal argumentation, and social meaning in human rights litigation. Tehran is an especially relevant context

because it contains dense networks of legal professionals, civil society actors, universities, courts, and rights-based advocacy initiatives, while also reflecting broader tensions between global legal norms and local cultural vocabularies.

Accordingly, this study asks: How are cultural narratives constructed and used in human rights litigation? How do legal actors translate social harm into rights-based legal argument? What tensions arise when universal human rights norms encounter local moral and cultural meanings? And how do these narratives shape broader understandings of justice, dignity, and legal legitimacy? By answering these questions, the study contributes to socio-legal scholarship, human rights theory, and qualitative research on legal practice. It argues that cultural narratives are not peripheral to litigation; rather, they are central to the production of legal meaning. Human rights litigation becomes persuasive when it can connect the universal grammar of rights with the lived grammar of social experience.

Methods and Materials

This study used a qualitative research design based on semi-structured interviews. A qualitative approach was appropriate because the aim was not to measure the frequency of litigation outcomes but to understand how participants interpret, construct, and mobilize cultural narratives in human rights litigation. The study was informed by socio-legal theory, legal consciousness scholarship, and interpretive qualitative methodology. The central focus was on participants' meanings, experiences, and professional interpretations rather than statistical generalization.

The participants consisted of 24 individuals from Tehran who had direct or indirect experience with human rights litigation, rights-based legal advocacy, or socio-legal interpretation of rights claims. The sample included 8 practicing lawyers, 5 legal academics, 6 civil society or NGO advocates, and 5 affected individuals or claimants who had experience with rights-related legal processes. Participants were selected through purposive sampling because the study required individuals with specific knowledge of legal argumentation, human rights claims, and cultural interpretation. Snowball sampling was also used, as several participants introduced other information-rich participants.

The inclusion criteria were: being at least 18 years old; residing or working in Tehran; having professional, academic, advocacy-based, or experiential familiarity with human rights litigation; and willingness to participate in a recorded semi-structured interview. The exclusion criteria were lack of direct relevance to the research topic, unwillingness to provide informed consent, or inability to participate in a full interview.

Theoretical saturation guided the final sample size. Saturation was reached after 21 interviews, when no substantially new codes or categories emerged. Three additional interviews were conducted to confirm the stability and completeness of the thematic structure. The final sample therefore included 24 participants.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. The interview guide was developed based on the study objectives and relevant socio-legal literature. Questions explored participants' understandings of human rights litigation, the role of cultural narratives in legal claims, examples of narrative strategies used in court or advocacy, tensions between universal rights language and local cultural meanings, and perceptions of how litigation shapes public understandings of justice.

Sample interview questions included: "How do cultural values or social expectations influence the way human rights claims are presented?" "Can you describe a situation in which a legal argument became stronger or weaker because of its cultural framing?" "How do lawyers translate personal suffering into legal language?" "What kinds of narratives are most persuasive in human rights-related cases?" and "What risks arise when courts interpret human rights claims through cultural assumptions?"

Interviews were conducted in Persian in a private and confidential setting selected by the participant or through secure online communication when necessary. Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 75 minutes. With participants' permission, interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Field notes and reflexive memos were written after each interview to document contextual observations, emerging ideas, and analytic reflections.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis following the six-phase approach proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. NVivo software was used to organize transcripts, manage codes, compare categories, and retrieve participant quotations.

The analysis began with repeated reading of the transcripts to gain familiarity with the data. Initial codes were then generated inductively from participants' words and meanings. Codes included examples such as "rights as dignity," "family honor," "translation of suffering," "strategic storytelling," "fear of public exposure," "universal law versus local values," "ideal victim narrative," "courtroom persuasion," and "social recognition." These codes were then grouped into broader categories through constant comparison across participants and professional groups. The final themes were reviewed in relation to the original transcripts to ensure that they accurately reflected the data.

To strengthen trustworthiness, several strategies were used. Credibility was supported through member checking with selected participants, peer discussion of codes, and the use of direct quotations. Dependability was enhanced by maintaining an audit trail of coding decisions, analytic memos, and theme development. Confirmability was supported through reflexive memo-writing to identify the researcher's assumptions and interpretive choices. Transferability was addressed by providing thick description of the research context, participants, and findings, consistent with qualitative trustworthiness criteria (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants before the interviews. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the confidential nature of the data, their right to withdraw at any stage, and the use of anonymized quotations in the manuscript. All names and identifying details were removed from the transcripts. Participants were identified by codes such as P1, P2, and P3. Audio files and transcripts were stored securely and were accessible only to the research team.

Findings

A total of 24 participants from Tehran took part in the study. The participants included 13 men and 11 women. In terms of age, 5 participants were between 25 and 34 years old, 9 were between 35 and 44 years old, 7 were between 45 and 54 years old, and 3 were 55 years old or older. Regarding professional background, 8 participants were practicing lawyers, 5 were legal academics, 6 were civil society or NGO advocates, and 5 were affected individuals or claimants with experience of rights-related legal processes. In terms of educational level, 4 participants held a bachelor's degree, 11 held a master's degree, and 9 held a doctoral or professional legal degree. With regard to experience in human rights-related work, 6 participants had less than five years of experience, 10 had between five and ten years of experience, and 8 had more than ten years of experience. This demographic composition provided a diverse range of perspectives on the relationship between cultural narratives, legal argumentation, and social meaning in human rights litigation.

The first main category was cultural translation of rights claims. Participants emphasized that human rights language is often too abstract to be persuasive unless it is translated into locally meaningful moral and social terms. Lawyers and advocates described the process of converting concepts such as dignity, equality, discrimination, and due process into narratives that judges, families, institutions, and communities could understand. For example, one lawyer explained, "When I say 'human dignity' in a petition, it is legally correct, but when I explain how the person's dignity was broken in front of family or workplace, the court understands the injury differently" (P4). Participants suggested that legal argumentation becomes stronger when rights are connected to lived experiences of respect, social standing, family responsibility, religious morality, or public fairness. A civil society advocate stated, "The language of international rights is important, but people do not live inside conventions; they live inside families, neighborhoods, workplaces, and memories" (P11). This theme shows that cultural

translation does not necessarily weaken universal rights claims. Rather, it can make them more visible and persuasive by connecting formal legal norms to everyday social meanings.

The second main category concerned the narrative framing of victimhood, dignity, and harm. Participants explained that human rights litigation often depends on how the claimant's suffering is narrated. Legal harm must be presented not only as a procedural violation but also as a meaningful injury to dignity, identity, security, or belonging. Several participants noted that courts and institutions tend to respond more strongly when legal arguments include a coherent narrative of how the violation affected the person's life. One affected participant said, "At first, I only said that my right was violated. Later, my lawyer asked me to explain what changed in my life. Then I understood that the case was not only about a rule; it was about how I was treated as a person" (P19). However, participants also identified risks in victim narratives. Some claimants felt pressured to appear helpless, morally innocent, or socially respectable in order to be believed. One NGO advocate observed, "Sometimes the system wants a perfect victim. If the person is angry, complicated, or socially different, their suffering becomes less believable" (P13). This category indicates that narratives of dignity and harm can humanize legal claims, but they may also reproduce narrow expectations about who deserves recognition.

The third main category was the tension between universal human rights norms and local moral vocabularies. Participants frequently described human rights litigation as an arena where global legal language meets local moral expectations. Some lawyers argued that references to international human rights standards could strengthen a claim by giving it normative authority. Others noted that excessive reliance on international terminology could create resistance if courts perceived the claim as culturally external or politically sensitive. A legal academic explained, "The challenge is not whether rights are universal or local. The challenge is argumentative: how to show that a universal right also has a recognizable moral place inside our own legal and cultural language" (P7). Participants therefore described a dual strategy: maintaining the universality of rights while presenting them through familiar concepts such as justice, dignity, fairness, responsibility, and protection from humiliation. One lawyer stated, "If I present the argument only as an imported norm, it may be rejected. If I show that the same value exists in our legal and moral tradition, the argument becomes harder to dismiss" (P2). This category shows that cultural narratives can mediate between universal rights and local legitimacy, but they also reveal institutional anxieties about the source and meaning of human rights norms.

The fourth main category was the strategic use of social meaning in legal advocacy. Participants described litigation as part of a wider field of social communication. Even when a case was formally addressed to a court, its meaning could extend to families, NGOs, media, professional networks, and future claimants. Lawyers and advocates used cultural narratives strategically to make claims more persuasive, reduce stigma, mobilize support, and create broader recognition of rights violations. One advocate stated, "Sometimes the court decision is not the only result. The case teaches people a new language for naming injustice" (P15). Participants also noted that litigation could reshape legal consciousness by showing people that certain experiences previously seen as private misfortune could be understood as legal wrongs. One participant explained, "Before the case, many people said this is just life, just culture, just family problems. After the case, some began to say: maybe this is a violation, maybe it has a legal name" (P21). This category suggests that human rights litigation produces social meaning beyond the courtroom. It can change how communities interpret harm, responsibility, and justice, even when legal remedies remain limited.

Discussion

The present study explored how cultural narratives are constructed, translated, and mobilized in human rights litigation and how these narratives shape legal argumentation and social meaning. The findings showed that human rights litigation is not merely a technical process of applying legal norms to facts. Rather, it is a culturally embedded practice in which rights claims

become persuasive through narrative translation, moral framing, and social recognition. Four main categories were identified: cultural translation of rights claims, narrative framing of victimhood and dignity, tension between universal norms and local moral vocabularies, and strategic use of social meaning in legal advocacy. Together, these findings suggest that cultural narratives operate as a bridge between formal legal doctrine and lived experiences of harm.

The first finding showed that participants understood cultural translation as essential to effective human rights litigation. Abstract legal norms such as dignity, equality, non-discrimination, and procedural fairness became more persuasive when connected to local understandings of respect, humiliation, family responsibility, and social standing. This finding is consistent with Merry's argument that international human rights norms become practically meaningful through translation into local justice frameworks (Merry, 2006). It also aligns with Levitt and Merry's concept of vernacularization, which explains how global rights ideas are adapted into locally intelligible forms without necessarily abandoning their universal normative content (Levitt & Merry, 2009). In the present study, participants did not describe cultural translation as a rejection of human rights universalism. Instead, they described it as a necessary argumentative process through which universal norms acquire social recognizability. This supports Goodale and Merry's broader claim that human rights should be studied in practice, where actors mobilize rights language differently across local settings (Goodale & Merry, 2007).

The second finding concerned the narrative framing of victimhood, dignity, and harm. Participants reported that legal claims became stronger when they narrated how a rights violation affected a person's dignity, identity, security, and everyday life. This finding supports Cover's view that law and narrative are inseparable because legal meaning is produced within normative worlds shaped by stories of right and wrong (Cover, 1983). It also reflects the socio-legal insight that disputes are constructed through processes of naming, blaming, and claiming (Felstiner et al., 1981). In human rights litigation, an injury must first be named as a harm, then connected to responsibility, and finally expressed as a legal claim. Participants' accounts showed that this transformation often requires narrative work. However, the findings also revealed a problematic side of victim narratives. Some claimants may need to conform to institutional expectations of ideal victimhood in order to be believed. This finding corresponds with Minow's analysis of the dilemma of difference: legal recognition of difference may be necessary, but it can also reinforce stereotypes if institutions define which forms of suffering are legitimate (Minow, 1990). Thus, narrative framing is both empowering and constraining.

The third finding highlighted tensions between universal human rights norms and local moral vocabularies. Participants emphasized that rights arguments could face resistance when presented as culturally external, politically sensitive, or disconnected from local legal traditions. At the same time, they argued that universal rights could gain legitimacy when framed through locally familiar concepts of justice, dignity, fairness, and moral responsibility. This finding contributes to debates on universalism and cultural relativism by showing that the practical problem is not simply whether rights are universal or local. Rather, the problem is how rights are argued, translated, and institutionally received. An-Na'im (1992) argues that cross-cultural legitimacy is essential for human rights implementation, while Benhabib (2002) emphasizes that cultural claims must be negotiated within democratic and rights-respecting frameworks. The present findings support this position by showing that participants sought neither pure universalism detached from social context nor cultural relativism that weakens rights protection. Instead, they described a hybrid argumentative practice that preserves universal legal commitments while grounding them in recognizable moral vocabularies.

The fourth finding showed that participants understood litigation as a producer of social meaning beyond the courtroom. Human rights cases were described as events that could reshape legal consciousness, public understanding, and collective language for naming injustice. This finding aligns with legal mobilization scholarship, especially McCann's argument that litigation can influence collective identity and rights consciousness beyond formal judicial outcomes (McCann, 1994). It also

supports Epp's emphasis on support structures for rights enforcement, including lawyers, activists, and organizations that enable rights claims to become socially and institutionally effective (Epp, 1998). Participants' accounts suggested that even when litigation does not produce full legal victory, it may still generate new public narratives about dignity, responsibility, and injustice. This is consistent with Scheingold's warning that rights should not be understood only through formal legal success, because the politics of rights includes symbolic, mobilizing, and consciousness-raising effects (Scheingold, 1974).

The findings also deepen legal consciousness theory. Ewick and Silbey (1998) argue that legality is experienced in everyday life through ordinary narratives and practices. The present study extends this insight to human rights litigation by showing how legal actors actively reshape everyday legal consciousness. Participants described situations in which experiences previously viewed as private misfortune, family conflict, social shame, or institutional routine were gradually reinterpreted as legal harms. This transformation is central to human rights litigation because many rights violations are normalized before they are challenged. When litigation provides a language for naming such experiences, it can alter how people understand themselves as rights-bearing subjects. However, the findings also show that legal consciousness is shaped by fear, stigma, and distrust. Some individuals may avoid litigation because public claiming can expose them to social judgment. Therefore, litigation can empower claimants, but it can also intensify vulnerability if cultural narratives are not handled carefully.

Another important implication of the findings concerns legal argumentation. In doctrinal legal analysis, persuasive argument often depends on legal authority, precedent, statutory interpretation, and evidentiary reasoning. The present study suggests that in human rights litigation, persuasive argument also depends on narrative coherence and cultural intelligibility. Lawyers must connect legal norms to concrete experiences in ways that courts can recognize as legally relevant and communities can recognize as morally meaningful. This does not mean that legal argument should be reduced to emotion or cultural appeal. Rather, it means that rights-based argumentation requires integration of doctrinal reasoning with narrative interpretation. As Sarat and Felstiner (1995) show in their work on lawyer-client interactions, legal professionals do not merely process disputes; they shape clients' understandings of what the dispute means. In the present study, lawyers and advocates played a similar role by helping claimants transform lived injuries into legally structured narratives.

The findings further indicate that cultural narratives can both challenge and reproduce power. When used critically, cultural narratives can expose hidden forms of harm, contest institutional indifference, and make marginalized experiences visible. However, when used uncritically, they can reinforce dominant assumptions about gender, family, morality, vulnerability, and social respectability. This dual function reflects broader socio-legal concerns about rights discourse. Baxi (2008) argues that human rights must remain attentive to the struggles of people and communities affected by domination, rather than becoming a purely institutional language. The present study supports this view by showing that cultural narratives are most effective when they emerge from claimants' lived experiences rather than being imposed by legal professionals or institutions. Human rights litigation should therefore avoid using culture as a fixed explanatory category. Culture should be treated as dynamic, contested, and internally diverse.

Overall, the study demonstrates that cultural narratives are constitutive of human rights litigation. They shape how harms are recognized, how legal arguments are framed, how universal norms are localized, and how litigation produces broader social meaning. The findings support a socio-legal understanding of litigation as both a legal and cultural practice. Human rights litigation does not simply enforce rights after violations occur; it participates in defining what counts as harm, who is recognized as a rights-bearing subject, and what justice means within a given social context. This insight has practical importance for lawyers, judges, NGOs, and policymakers. Rights-based legal advocacy should not rely solely on formal legal language, nor should it instrumentalize culture in ways that reinforce stereotypes. Instead, it should develop culturally sensitive, claimant-centered, and doctrinally rigorous narrative strategies that connect universal rights to local moral worlds.

This study has several limitations. First, the sample was limited to 24 participants in Tehran, which may restrict the transferability of the findings to other cities, rural communities, or legal systems. Second, the study relied on semi-structured interviews, meaning that the findings reflect participants' perceptions and interpretations rather than direct observation of courtroom proceedings or legal documents. Third, because human rights litigation can involve sensitive legal and political issues, some participants may have avoided discussing certain experiences in detail. Fourth, the diversity of participant roles strengthened the study but also created variation in the depth and type of legal experience represented in the data. Finally, as with all qualitative research, the researcher's interpretive role may have influenced coding and theme development despite the use of reflexive and trustworthiness strategies.

Future research should examine cultural narratives in human rights litigation across different cities, legal institutions, and social groups to compare how narrative strategies vary by context. Studies could also use courtroom observation, legal document analysis, or case-study methods to examine how cultural narratives appear in petitions, judgments, expert reports, and advocacy materials. Comparative research between domestic courts, quasi-judicial bodies, and international human rights mechanisms would also be valuable. Future studies may explore how gender, class, ethnicity, migration status, disability, or religious identity affects the credibility of rights narratives. Longitudinal research could further examine whether litigation changes public understanding of rights over time, especially in cases that receive media or civil society attention.

Legal practitioners and human rights advocates should develop narrative strategies that connect formal legal claims to the lived meanings of dignity, harm, and justice without reducing claimants to stereotypes. Lawyers should work collaboratively with claimants to ensure that their stories are represented accurately, respectfully, and strategically. Training programs for lawyers, judges, and NGO workers should include cultural competence, trauma-informed interviewing, and socio-legal approaches to narrative argumentation. Legal advocacy organizations should also document how rights claims are socially understood by affected communities before framing litigation strategies. Courts and legal institutions should be attentive to the difference between culturally informed interpretation and cultural stereotyping. Human rights litigation is most effective when it preserves the universality of rights while making those rights meaningful in the language of people's lived realities.

Conclusion

This study examined the role of cultural narratives in human rights litigation, focusing on how legal argumentation and social meaning are shaped through narrative practices. The findings showed that human rights claims become persuasive not only through legal doctrine but also through cultural translation, narrative framing, moral vocabulary, and social recognition. Participants described litigation as a process in which abstract rights are connected to concrete experiences of dignity, harm, humiliation, fairness, and responsibility. Cultural narratives helped make legal claims intelligible and compelling, but they also created risks when courts or advocates relied on stereotypical assumptions about culture, victimhood, or social respectability.

The study contributes to socio-legal and human rights scholarship by showing that cultural narratives are not external to litigation; they are central to how rights are named, argued, and understood. Human rights litigation should therefore be approached as both a legal and cultural practice. Effective rights advocacy requires doctrinal precision, but it also requires sensitivity to the social worlds in which claimants live and in which legal decisions acquire meaning. By integrating universal human rights norms with locally meaningful narratives of dignity and justice, litigation can become not only a mechanism of legal remedy but also a means of transforming legal consciousness and social recognition.

Acknowledgments

We would like to express our appreciation and gratitude to all those who helped us carrying out this study.

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.

Funding

This research was carried out independently with personal funding and without the financial support of any governmental or private institution or organization.

References

- An-Na'im, A. A. (Ed.). (1992). *Human rights in cross-cultural perspectives: A quest for consensus*. University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Baxi, U. (2008). *The future of human rights*. Oxford University Press.
- Benhabib, S. (2002). *The claims of culture: Equality and diversity in the global era*. Princeton University Press.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Bruner, J. (1990). *Acts of meaning*. Harvard University Press.
- Cover, R. M. (1983). The Supreme Court, 1982 Term—Foreword: Nomos and narrative. *Harvard Law Review*, 97(1), 4–68. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1340787>
- Epp, C. R. (1998). *The rights revolution: Lawyers, activists, and supreme courts in comparative perspective*. University of Chicago Press.
- Ewick, P., & Silbey, S. S. (1998). *The common place of law: Stories from everyday life*. University of Chicago Press.
- Felstiner, W. L. F., Abel, R. L., & Sarat, A. (1981). The emergence and transformation of disputes: Naming, blaming, claiming. *Law & Society Review*, 15(3–4), 631–654. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3053505>
- Goodale, M. (2009). *Surrendering to utopia: An anthropology of human rights*. Stanford University Press.
- Goodale, M., & Merry, S. E. (Eds.). (2007). *The practice of human rights: Tracking law between the global and the local*. Cambridge University Press.
- Guest, G., Bunce, A., & Johnson, L. (2006). How many interviews are enough? An experiment with data saturation and variability. *Field Methods*, 18(1), 59–82. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1525822X05279903>
- Kvale, S., & Brinkmann, S. (2009). *InterViews: Learning the craft of qualitative research interviewing* (2nd ed.). Sage.
- Levitt, P., & Merry, S. E. (2009). Vernacularization on the ground: Local uses of global women's rights in Peru, China, India and the United States. *Global Networks*, 9(4), 441–461. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1471-0374.2009.00263.x>
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Sage.
- McCann, M. W. (1994). *Rights at work: Pay equity reform and the politics of legal mobilization*. University of Chicago Press.
- Merry, S. E. (2006). *Human rights and gender violence: Translating international law into local justice*. University of Chicago Press.

- Minow, M. (1990). *Making all the difference: Inclusion, exclusion, and American law*. Cornell University Press.
- Polletta, F. (2006). *It was like a fever: Storytelling in protest and politics*. University of Chicago Press.
- Sarat, A., & Felstiner, W. L. F. (1995). *Divorce lawyers and their clients: Power and meaning in the legal process*. Oxford University Press.
- Scheingold, S. A. (1974). *The politics of rights: Lawyers, public policy, and political change*. Yale University Press.
- Snow, D. A., & Benford, R. D. (1988). Ideology, frame resonance, and participant mobilization. *International Social Movement Research*, 1, 197–217.