



Cultural Change and Legal Reform in Globalized Societies: Normative Tensions and Institutional Adaptation

1. Shadi. Zare: Department of Cultural Studies, Shahid Beheshti University, Tehran, Iran
2. Ehsan. Rahimi*: Department of Cultural Studies, Shahid Beheshti University, Tehran, Iran. Email: ehsan.rahimi.oil@gmail.com (Corresponding Author)
3. Roya. Kamali: Department of Private Law, Shahid Beheshti University, Tehran, Iran

ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore how legal professionals, policymakers, and civil society actors in Tehran perceive the relationship between cultural change and legal reform in globalized societies, with particular attention to normative tensions and institutional adaptation. This qualitative study was conducted using semi-structured interviews with 24 participants in Tehran, Iran. Participants included legal scholars, practicing lawyers, judicial actors, policy professionals, and civil society advocates with direct experience in legal reform, rights discourse, institutional practice, or socio-legal change. Participants were selected through purposive sampling and theoretical saturation guided the final sample size; saturation was reached after the twenty-first interview, and three additional interviews were conducted for confirmation. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews lasting 45–75 minutes. Interviews were audio-recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim, anonymized, and analyzed through thematic analysis. NVivo software was used to organize transcripts, manage codes, compare categories, and support iterative theme development. Four main categories emerged from the data: global normative pressure and local cultural resistance; cultural translation of legal reform; institutional adaptation and selective implementation; and legitimacy, public trust, and everyday legal consciousness. Participants described legal reform as neither a simple importation of global norms nor a purely domestic cultural process. Instead, reform was understood as a negotiated field in which international legal standards, social expectations, professional interpretation, bureaucratic routines, and culturally rooted moral assumptions interact. The findings showed that institutional adaptation depends not only on formal legislative change but also on interpretive mediation, administrative capacity, professional training, and the perceived cultural legitimacy of reform. The study concludes that legal reform in globalized societies is most sustainable when it is culturally intelligible, institutionally supported, and normatively coherent. Reform efforts that ignore local meanings may generate resistance or symbolic compliance, whereas culturally translated and institutionally embedded reforms are more likely to produce practical legal change.

Keywords: cultural change; legal reform; globalization; normative tension; institutional adaptation; legal culture

How to cite this article:

Zare, S., Rahimi, E., & Kamali, R. (2026). Cultural Change and Legal Reform in Globalized Societies: Normative Tensions and Institutional Adaptation. *Contemporary Issues in Law, Culture, and Globalization*, 2(2), 55-65. <https://doi.org/10.61838/cileg.2.2.6>

Introduction

Legal reform in globalized societies increasingly unfolds at the intersection of cultural change, transnational norm diffusion, and institutional adaptation. Contemporary legal systems are no longer shaped only by domestic constitutional orders, national legislative priorities, or internal political debates. They are also influenced by international human rights regimes, global policy models, comparative legal borrowing, transnational advocacy networks, migration, digital communication, economic interdependence, and the circulation of professional legal knowledge. As a result, legal reform has become a complex socio-legal process in which global norms encounter local cultural meanings, institutional constraints, and historically embedded patterns of authority. This process is rarely linear. It often produces normative tensions between universal legal principles and culturally specific understandings of justice, family, gender, religion, authority, public morality, citizenship, and social order.

Globalization has intensified the movement of legal ideas across borders. Concepts such as equality before the law, due process, gender justice, children's rights, anti-discrimination, access to justice, environmental responsibility, corporate accountability, and participatory governance increasingly circulate through treaties, international organizations, professional networks, donor agencies, academic institutions, and civil society campaigns. World society theorists argue that modern nation-states are shaped by global cultural models that define legitimate statehood, rational administration, citizenship, development, and rights (Meyer et al., 1997). From this perspective, domestic legal reform may be understood partly as a response to global scripts of modern legality. However, the adoption of global legal models does not necessarily result in uniform legal practice. Domestic institutions may formally adopt globally legitimate norms while maintaining implementation gaps, symbolic compliance, or selective enforcement. This reflects the broader institutional problem of decoupling, in which formal structures align with global expectations while everyday practice remains shaped by local organizational routines and political constraints.

Norm diffusion literature similarly emphasizes that international norms do not simply enter domestic systems as fixed commands. Finnemore and Sikkink (1998) describe norm emergence, cascade, and internalization as dynamic processes shaped by norm entrepreneurs, institutional platforms, legitimacy concerns, and socialization. In legal reform, this means that global norms become influential when they are interpreted, promoted, contested, and institutionalized by domestic actors. Legal change is therefore not only a matter of legislative drafting but also a process of persuasion, translation, professional uptake, and social meaning-making. Transnational legal process theory likewise suggests that international norms become domestically meaningful through repeated interactions among public officials, courts, lawyers, civil society actors, and international institutions, eventually contributing to interpretation and internalization (Koh, 1996). Yet internalization remains uneven, especially where global legal standards are perceived to conflict with local cultural values or established institutional interests.

The relationship between culture and legal reform is therefore central to understanding the fate of legal change in globalized societies. Culture should not be treated as a static obstacle to reform. Rather, culture consists of evolving meanings, narratives, practices, moral vocabularies, and interpretive frameworks through which people understand law and authority. Socio-legal scholars have long argued that law is embedded in social life and that legal consciousness is shaped by everyday experience, institutional encounters, and cultural narratives (Ewick & Silbey, 1998; Merry, 1990). Legal reform may fail when it is introduced only as a formal textual change without attention to the cultural meanings through which citizens and institutions interpret it. Conversely, culture itself can become a resource for reform when global norms are translated into locally recognizable moral and legal vocabularies.

Merry's work on the translation of international human rights into local justice is particularly relevant here. She argues that global rights ideas become effective when they are vernacularized, meaning translated into local categories, symbols, and narratives that make sense to communities and institutional actors (Merry, 2006). Levitt and Merry (2009) similarly show that

global women's rights norms are locally appropriated and reworked through specific institutional and cultural settings. Vernacularization does not mean diluting universal legal principles; rather, it highlights the interpretive work required to make legal reform socially meaningful. Without such translation, reforms may be perceived as externally imposed, culturally alien, or disconnected from everyday realities. With effective translation, however, reform may acquire legitimacy and become part of local legal consciousness.

At the same time, cultural translation does not eliminate normative tension. Many legal reforms create friction because they challenge existing hierarchies, redistribute authority, redefine rights, or alter the boundaries between private and public life. Reforms concerning gender equality, family law, minority rights, criminal justice, migration, digital privacy, labor protection, and freedom of expression often raise questions about whose values should guide law. Teubner (1998) famously argues that transferred legal norms may function as "legal irritants" rather than simple transplants: when introduced into a new legal culture, they disturb existing institutional arrangements and generate unexpected adaptations. This insight is important because legal reform should not be evaluated only by whether a global norm is adopted, but by how it is transformed through local institutional and cultural systems.

Legal pluralism further complicates this picture. In globalized societies, individuals and institutions often operate within overlapping normative orders, including state law, religious norms, customary expectations, professional standards, international norms, market rules, and community-based moral codes. Berman (2007) argues that globalization produces hybrid legal spaces in which multiple legal authorities may claim relevance. This pluralism can create uncertainty, but it can also generate opportunities for negotiation and innovation. Legal reform in such contexts must manage overlapping sources of legitimacy. A reform may be formally valid within the state legal system but lack social legitimacy among citizens or professional legitimacy among institutional actors. Conversely, culturally legitimate practices may conflict with constitutional rights or international standards. The central challenge is not merely to choose between global law and local culture, but to design reform processes capable of mediating among multiple normative orders.

Institutional adaptation is therefore a crucial dimension of legal reform. Institutions do not passively implement new legal norms; they interpret, filter, prioritize, and sometimes resist them. Institutional theory emphasizes that organizations respond to coercive, normative, and mimetic pressures, often adopting formal reforms to gain legitimacy while preserving familiar routines (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). In the legal field, courts, ministries, police agencies, administrative bodies, bar associations, universities, and civil society organizations all shape how reforms are enacted in practice. Halliday and Carruthers (2009), in their study of global lawmaking, show that global legal norms are negotiated through national institutions and may be adapted, resisted, or reconfigured during implementation. Thus, institutional adaptation is not secondary to legal reform; it is one of the principal sites where reform becomes real or remains symbolic.

The issue is especially important in societies experiencing rapid cultural change. Urbanization, higher education, digital media, migration, generational change, and global communication expose citizens to new rights claims and legal expectations. Younger generations may increasingly demand transparency, equality, procedural fairness, privacy, and participation. At the same time, older cultural frameworks and institutional traditions may continue to shape public morality, bureaucratic decision-making, and judicial interpretation. This creates a layered normative environment in which legal reform must respond to competing expectations. Legal institutions may be asked simultaneously to preserve cultural continuity and accommodate social transformation. Such conditions produce what may be called normative tension: a conflict among values, authorities, and expectations regarding the proper direction of legal change.

Tehran provides a meaningful context for examining these dynamics. As a large metropolitan center, Tehran is marked by dense legal institutions, universities, civil society organizations, administrative bodies, professional networks, and diverse

social groups. It is also a site where global ideas and local norms interact through academic debate, professional legal practice, digital media, public policy, and everyday social experience. Studying legal professionals, policymakers, and civil society actors in Tehran can therefore illuminate how reform is understood by those positioned between formal legal institutions and broader cultural change. These actors often mediate between legal texts, institutional procedures, citizen expectations, and transnational normative vocabularies.

Despite the growing literature on globalization and legal change, there remains a need for qualitative studies that examine how local actors interpret the relationship between cultural transformation and legal reform. Much existing scholarship focuses on macro-level diffusion of norms, formal legal harmonization, or comparative institutional change. Less attention has been given to the lived interpretive work of professionals who must explain, implement, negotiate, or contest reform in everyday institutional settings. Understanding these perceptions is essential because legal reforms do not operate only through statutes and policies. They depend on the meanings attributed to them by those who teach law, apply law, advocate reform, advise citizens, draft policy, and interact with institutions.

Accordingly, this study explores the perceptions of legal and socio-institutional actors in Tehran regarding cultural change and legal reform in globalized societies. The study asks: How do participants understand the influence of globalization on domestic legal reform? What normative tensions emerge when global legal norms encounter local cultural frameworks? How do institutions adapt to, reinterpret, or resist reform? And what conditions make legal reform culturally legitimate and institutionally sustainable? By addressing these questions, the study contributes to socio-legal debates on norm diffusion, legal pluralism, cultural translation, and institutional adaptation. It argues that legal reform in globalized societies should be understood not as a simple movement from tradition to modernity, or from local culture to global law, but as a negotiated process in which legal meaning is continuously reconstructed.

Methods and Materials

This study employed a qualitative research design grounded in an interpretive socio-legal approach. A qualitative design was appropriate because the aim of the study was not to measure the prevalence of attitudes toward legal reform, but to explore how informed actors interpret the relationship between cultural change, globalization, normative tension, and institutional adaptation. Qualitative inquiry is particularly useful for examining meaning, experience, interpretation, and social processes in context (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Since legal reform involves not only formal rules but also professional judgment, cultural narratives, and institutional practice, an interpretive design enabled the researcher to capture the complexity of participants' perspectives.

The study used semi-structured interviews as the only method of data collection. Semi-structured interviewing was selected because it provides a flexible yet focused framework for eliciting participants' experiences, explanations, and examples (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). This method allowed the researcher to ask common questions across interviews while also probing participant-specific insights. The study was designed to identify recurring themes and conceptual patterns rather than to test predetermined hypotheses.

The study participants consisted of 24 individuals from Tehran who had professional or scholarly experience related to legal reform, cultural change, rights discourse, public policy, institutional practice, or socio-legal advocacy. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure that they could provide rich and relevant information. Maximum variation was also considered in order to include different professional positions within the legal and policy field.

The final sample included 7 legal academics, 6 practicing lawyers, 4 judges or former judicial officials, 4 policymakers or public administration professionals, and 3 civil society advocates. Inclusion criteria were: residence or professional activity in Tehran; at least five years of relevant experience; familiarity with legal reform debates or institutional legal practice; and

willingness to participate in an audio-recorded interview. Exclusion criteria were lack of direct professional relevance to the study topic and unwillingness to provide informed consent.

Theoretical saturation guided the final sample size. Saturation was reached after 21 interviews, when no substantially new categories emerged from the data. Three additional interviews were conducted to confirm and refine the thematic structure. This approach is consistent with qualitative research in which sample size is determined by informational richness and saturation rather than statistical representativeness (Guest et al., 2006).

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted in Tehran. Interviews lasted between 45 and 75 minutes. The interview guide was developed based on the study objectives and relevant socio-legal literature on globalization, legal reform, cultural translation, and institutional adaptation. The interview guide included questions such as: How do you understand the relationship between cultural change and legal reform? In what areas do global legal norms create tension with local cultural expectations? How do legal institutions respond to reform pressures? What makes a legal reform socially legitimate? What factors lead to symbolic rather than practical implementation?

All interviews were conducted in Persian to allow participants to express complex cultural and legal meanings in their preferred language. With participants' consent, interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Field notes were written after each interview to document contextual observations, analytic reflections, and emerging ideas. Participants were assigned codes from P01 to P24 to protect anonymity.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis was appropriate because it offers a systematic yet flexible method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns of meaning across qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis followed six recursive phases: 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 and manage the data. Transcripts were imported into NVivo, and initial codes were generated line by line. Codes were then compared across participants and grouped into broader categories. The coding process combined inductive and sensitizing approaches. While the analysis remained grounded in participants' accounts, concepts such as norm diffusion, legal pluralism, vernacularization, institutional adaptation, and symbolic compliance helped sensitize the researcher to theoretically relevant patterns.

To enhance trustworthiness, several strategies were used. Credibility was supported through prolonged engagement with the transcripts, repeated reading, peer debriefing, and the use of direct quotations. Dependability was strengthened by maintaining an audit trail of coding decisions, theme development, and analytic memos. Confirmability was supported through reflexive memo-writing and comparison between raw data and interpretive claims. Transferability was addressed by providing contextual detail about participants, study setting, and thematic findings. These strategies align with Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria for trustworthiness in qualitative research.

The study followed ethical principles of informed consent, confidentiality, voluntary participation, and protection of participants' professional identity. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, their right to withdraw, and the intended academic use of the findings. No identifying information was included in the transcripts or final report. All audio files and transcripts were stored securely and accessible only to the research team.

Findings

A total of 24 participants from Tehran took part in the study. Of these, 13 participants were male and 11 were female. In terms of age, 5 participants were between 25 and 34 years old, 8 were between 35 and 44 years old, 7 were between 45 and 54 years old, and 4 were 55 years old or above. Regarding professional background, 7 participants were legal academics, 6 were practicing lawyers, 4 were judges or former judicial officials, 4 were policymakers or public administration professionals, and

3 were civil society advocates. In terms of educational level, 8 participants held a master's degree, 10 held a doctoral degree, and 6 held professional legal qualifications with advanced practice experience. Participants' years of professional experience ranged from 5 to 31 years, with 6 participants having 5–10 years of experience, 9 having 11–20 years, and 9 having more than 20 years of experience.

The first main category concerned the tension between global normative pressure and local cultural resistance. Participants frequently described globalization as a source of new legal expectations, especially in areas such as human rights, gender equality, environmental responsibility, access to justice, digital rights, procedural fairness, and transparency. However, they emphasized that global legal norms often encounter local resistance when they are perceived as externally imposed or insufficiently attentive to cultural and religious meanings. For many participants, resistance did not necessarily reflect opposition to reform itself, but rather distrust toward the language, timing, or institutional pathway through which reform was introduced. One participant stated, “When a reform is presented as something we must accept because the world says so, people become defensive. But when the same idea is explained through justice, dignity, and social need, it becomes easier to discuss” (P08, legal academic). Another participant explained, “The problem is not always the content of reform. Sometimes the problem is that society feels it has not participated in producing the reform” (P14, policymaker). Participants therefore viewed legal reform as a legitimacy-sensitive process. They argued that global norms can stimulate important changes, but if they are framed as cultural replacement rather than legal improvement, they may generate symbolic compliance, public skepticism, or institutional reluctance.

The second main category was cultural translation. Participants repeatedly argued that legal reform becomes more effective when abstract legal principles are translated into locally meaningful concepts. They noted that terms such as equality, autonomy, privacy, child protection, accountability, and non-discrimination may not have identical meanings across legal cultures. Therefore, reform requires interpretive mediation by legal scholars, judges, lawyers, educators, media actors, and civil society organizations. Participants emphasized that cultural translation does not mean abandoning universal principles, but rather making them understandable within existing moral and legal vocabularies. One lawyer explained, “If you use only imported terminology, many people think the reform belongs to another society. But if you show that the same reform protects fairness, family stability, public trust, or human dignity, then it enters the local conversation” (P03, lawyer). A civil society participant similarly noted, “We learned that legal language must be translated twice: first from international documents into national law, and then from national law into everyday language” (P19, civil society advocate). Participants also identified universities and professional associations as important sites of translation because they train legal actors who later interpret reforms in courts, administrative agencies, and public debate. This category shows that reform is not only a legal-technical act but also a cultural-communicative process.

The third main category concerned institutional adaptation and selective implementation. Participants consistently argued that the success of legal reform depends on whether institutions develop the capacity, incentives, procedures, and professional culture needed to implement new norms. Several participants described situations in which formal legal changes were adopted but not fully practiced because administrative routines, judicial interpretations, budgetary resources, or professional training remained unchanged. One former judicial official stated, “A new law may be passed, but the institution continues with old habits. Reform needs forms, guidelines, training, supervision, and sometimes a new mindset” (P11, former judicial official). Another participant added, “Institutions adapt selectively. They accept the parts of reform that are easy to document, but avoid the parts that require redistribution of power or accountability” (P22, policy professional). Participants identified selective implementation as a central feature of legal reform in globalized societies. Institutions may adopt reform language to demonstrate modernity or international alignment while limiting practical transformation. At the same time, some participants

emphasized that gradual adaptation may be necessary in complex cultural settings. They argued that institutional change requires time, professional dialogue, and internal ownership. This category indicates that legal reform must be evaluated not only by legislative adoption but also by implementation mechanisms, institutional learning, and everyday administrative practice.

The fourth main category was legitimacy, public trust, and everyday legal consciousness. Participants argued that legal reform becomes sustainable when citizens perceive law as connected to their lived experiences and moral expectations. They explained that people judge reforms not only by formal legality but also by whether institutions apply them consistently, respectfully, and fairly. A legal academic stated, “People do not experience reform through official documents. They experience it when they go to court, to an office, to the police, or when they ask whether the law protects them in real life” (P05, legal academic). Participants emphasized that public trust is damaged when reforms are announced but not implemented, when legal language is inaccessible, or when enforcement is inconsistent. A lawyer noted, “The gap between law on paper and law in practice creates cynicism. Citizens begin to think reform is only a slogan” (P16, lawyer). Participants also linked legitimacy to participation. They argued that reforms are more likely to be accepted when affected groups, professional communities, and civil society actors are included in consultation. This category shows that legal reform is not complete when a statute changes; it must enter everyday legal consciousness through fair implementation, accessible explanation, and visible institutional commitment.

Discussion

The present study explored how legal professionals, policymakers, and civil society actors in Tehran perceive cultural change and legal reform in globalized societies. The findings revealed that legal reform is best understood as a negotiated socio-legal process shaped by global normative pressure, local cultural interpretation, institutional adaptation, and public legitimacy. Four main categories emerged from the interviews: global normative pressure and local cultural resistance; cultural translation of legal reform; institutional adaptation and selective implementation; and legitimacy, public trust, and everyday legal consciousness. Together, these categories show that legal reform is not simply a matter of adopting new legal texts. Rather, it requires the reconstruction of legal meaning across cultural, institutional, and professional fields.

The first finding showed that global normative pressure can stimulate legal reform but may also generate local cultural resistance. Participants did not reject global norms as inherently incompatible with local culture. Instead, they emphasized that resistance often emerges when reform is framed as external pressure or cultural replacement. This finding aligns with norm diffusion theory, which argues that international norms become influential through processes of persuasion, socialization, and legitimacy rather than through mechanical adoption (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998). It also supports world society theory, which suggests that states adopt globally legitimate models of law, rights, and rational governance, but that formal adoption may coexist with local variation and decoupling (Meyer et al., 1997). In this study, participants described reform as a legitimacy-sensitive process in which the source, language, and social framing of legal change matter. This is consistent with Risse et al.’s (1999) argument that international norms affect domestic change through interaction among states, civil society, and transnational actors, but that internalization depends on domestic political and social conditions.

The second finding highlighted cultural translation as a central mechanism of legal reform. Participants argued that reforms become more acceptable and effective when legal concepts are expressed through locally meaningful vocabularies such as justice, dignity, fairness, family protection, social order, and public trust. This finding strongly aligns with Merry’s (2006) concept of vernacularization, according to which international legal and human rights norms must be translated into local cultural terms in order to become socially meaningful. Levitt and Merry (2009) similarly show that global rights ideas are not simply copied into local settings; they are appropriated, adapted, and reinterpreted by local actors. The present findings extend

this argument by showing that cultural translation is not limited to civil society advocacy but also occurs within legal education, judicial reasoning, administrative practice, and professional legal discourse. Participants viewed lawyers, judges, academics, and policy professionals as cultural intermediaries who mediate between global legal language and local legal consciousness.

The third finding concerned institutional adaptation and selective implementation. Participants explained that reforms often remain incomplete when institutional procedures, professional training, administrative resources, and accountability systems do not change alongside formal law. This finding is consistent with institutional theory, especially DiMaggio and Powell's (1983) argument that organizations respond to coercive, normative, and mimetic pressures in ways that may produce formal conformity without deep practical transformation. In the context of legal reform, institutions may adopt the vocabulary of modernization, rights, transparency, or accountability while preserving familiar routines. The findings also correspond with Halliday and Carruthers' (2009) work on global lawmaking, which demonstrates that global norms are negotiated through national institutions and may produce implementation gaps when domestic actors reinterpret or resist reform. Participants' accounts of selective implementation suggest that reform should be evaluated not only in terms of legislative enactment but also in terms of institutional learning, bureaucratic practice, and professional accountability.

The fourth finding showed that public trust and everyday legal consciousness are essential to the sustainability of legal reform. Participants emphasized that citizens encounter legal reform through practical experiences with courts, administrative offices, police, lawyers, and public agencies. This finding is consistent with socio-legal studies of legal consciousness, which argue that people understand law through everyday interactions and social narratives rather than only through formal legal texts (Ewick & Silbey, 1998; Merry, 1990). When reforms are announced but inconsistently implemented, citizens may interpret law as symbolic, inaccessible, or politically selective. Conversely, when reforms produce visible fairness and procedural respect, they may strengthen legal legitimacy. This finding also supports the argument that law is not only a system of rules but a cultural institution whose authority depends on meaning, trust, and repeated social experience.

A key contribution of the present study is that it brings together norm diffusion, cultural translation, legal pluralism, and institutional adaptation within one empirical framework. The findings suggest that legal reform in globalized societies is shaped by four interdependent processes. First, global norms create pressure for change by introducing new standards of legitimacy. Second, these norms must be translated into local cultural and legal vocabularies. Third, institutions must adapt their routines, capacities, and interpretive frameworks. Fourth, citizens must experience reform as credible and meaningful in everyday legal encounters. If one of these processes fails, reform may become symbolic, resisted, or unevenly implemented.

The findings also support Teubner's (1998) argument that legal transfers often operate as legal irritants rather than simple transplants. Participants described global norms as capable of disturbing existing assumptions, generating debate, and forcing institutions to reconsider established practices. However, this disturbance did not always produce direct convergence with global models. Instead, reforms were reinterpreted through domestic institutions and cultural expectations. This suggests that legal reform should not be judged by whether local law becomes identical to global models. Rather, it should be assessed by whether reform produces normatively defensible, institutionally functional, and culturally intelligible legal change.

Legal pluralism provides another useful lens for interpreting the findings. Participants' accounts showed that legal reform operates within overlapping normative orders, including state law, religious and cultural norms, professional ethics, international standards, bureaucratic rules, and public expectations. Berman (2007) argues that globalization creates hybrid legal spaces in which multiple communities and authorities generate normative claims. The present study confirms this insight at the level of professional perception. Participants did not describe law as a single unified system moving smoothly toward modernization. Instead, they described a plural normative environment in which reform requires negotiation among competing

sources of legitimacy. This explains why legal change may be accepted in one institutional arena but resisted in another, or embraced by younger citizens but questioned by older professional groups.

The study also indicates that institutional adaptation is not merely technical. It is normative and cultural. Training judges, revising administrative forms, creating implementation guidelines, and strengthening monitoring systems are technical steps, but they also communicate whether reform is taken seriously. Participants suggested that institutions often adapt selectively when reforms threaten established power relations or require accountability. This finding has practical importance. It implies that reform designers should not assume that passing a law is sufficient. Legal reform requires implementation architecture, professional education, interpretive guidance, citizen communication, and evaluation mechanisms. Without these, reform may remain a formal sign of global alignment rather than a lived transformation in legal practice.

Another important point concerns the role of participation. Participants repeatedly linked legitimacy to inclusion of affected groups, professional communities, and civil society actors. This aligns with deliberative and participatory approaches to reform, which argue that legal change is more legitimate when those affected by reform are included in defining problems and shaping solutions. In culturally sensitive areas, participation can reduce the perception that reform is imposed from above or outside. It can also help identify culturally resonant ways to communicate legal principles without sacrificing normative commitments to rights and justice.

Overall, the findings suggest that cultural change and legal reform should not be treated as separate processes. Cultural change creates new expectations of law, while legal reform can reshape cultural understandings of rights, responsibility, and justice. However, this relationship is mediated by institutions. Institutions translate cultural demands into legal procedures and translate legal reforms into everyday practice. When institutions are adaptive, transparent, and trusted, they can reduce normative tension. When they are rigid, under-resourced, or inconsistent, they may intensify resistance and weaken reform legitimacy.

This study has several limitations. First, the sample was limited to 24 participants from Tehran, and the findings may not fully represent perspectives in other Iranian cities or rural contexts. Tehran is a major legal, administrative, academic, and cultural center, and participants' experiences may differ from those of actors working in smaller cities or less institutionally dense settings. Second, the study focused on legal professionals, policymakers, and civil society actors rather than ordinary citizens. Although these participants provided rich expert insights, future research should include citizens who directly experience legal reform in everyday life. Third, the study relied only on semi-structured interviews. While this was consistent with the research design, additional methods such as document analysis, courtroom observation, or policy analysis could provide further evidence regarding the relationship between formal reform and institutional practice.

Future studies should examine cultural change and legal reform across multiple cities and institutional settings in order to compare how local context shapes reform interpretation. Comparative qualitative research could explore differences between metropolitan and non-metropolitan legal cultures, or between different legal domains such as family law, criminal justice, digital rights, labor law, environmental regulation, and minority rights. Future research should also include the perspectives of ordinary citizens, especially groups most affected by reform. Longitudinal studies would be valuable for examining how legal reforms move from proposal to enactment and then to implementation over time. In addition, future studies could combine interviews with analysis of legal documents, judicial decisions, policy guidelines, and media debates to better understand how reform language changes across institutional arenas.

Legal reform should be designed as both a normative and institutional process. Policymakers should consider cultural meaning, public communication, professional training, and implementation capacity from the beginning of reform design. Reform language should be clear, accessible, and connected to locally meaningful concepts such as justice, dignity, fairness,

accountability, and public trust. Legal institutions should receive practical guidelines, training, and monitoring tools to ensure that formal reforms are implemented consistently. Civil society organizations, professional associations, universities, and affected communities should be included in consultation processes so that reforms are not perceived as externally imposed or disconnected from social realities. Finally, reform evaluation should examine not only whether laws have changed, but whether citizens experience greater fairness, protection, participation, and trust in legal institutions.

Conclusion

This study examined cultural change and legal reform in globalized societies through the perceptions of legal professionals, policymakers, judicial actors, and civil society advocates in Tehran. The findings showed that legal reform is shaped by global normative pressures, local cultural meanings, institutional routines, and public trust. Participants viewed globalization as an important source of legal change, but they also emphasized that global norms can produce resistance when they are perceived as externally imposed or culturally disconnected. The study found that cultural translation is essential for making reform understandable and legitimate. Legal concepts must be expressed in ways that connect with local moral vocabularies while preserving their normative substance.

The study also demonstrated that institutional adaptation determines whether reform becomes practical or remains symbolic. Formal legislative change is insufficient without professional training, administrative procedures, interpretive guidance, accountability mechanisms, and citizen-oriented communication. Institutions mediate between legal text and social life; therefore, their capacity and willingness to adapt are central to reform outcomes. Public trust emerged as another critical condition. Citizens judge reform through everyday encounters with legal and administrative institutions, and inconsistent implementation can weaken belief in law.

The article concludes that sustainable legal reform in globalized societies requires a balance between normative commitment and cultural intelligibility. Reform should neither abandon universal principles in the name of culture nor ignore local meaning in the name of global legality. Instead, effective reform depends on negotiated adaptation: translating norms, building institutional capacity, engaging affected communities, and ensuring that legal change is visible in practice. Cultural change and legal reform are mutually constitutive processes, and their success depends on the ability of institutions to mediate normative tension with legitimacy, consistency, and responsiveness.

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

- Berman, P. S. (2007). Global legal pluralism. *Southern California Law Review*, 80, 1155–1238.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- DiMaggio, P. J., & Powell, W. W. (1983). The iron cage revisited: Institutional isomorphism and collective rationality in organizational fields. *American Sociological Review*, 48(2), 147–160. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2095101>
- Ewick, P., & Silbey, S. S. (1998). *The common place of law: Stories from everyday life*. University of Chicago Press.
- Finnemore, M., & Sikkink, K. (1998). International norm dynamics and political change. *International Organization*, 52(4), 887–917. <https://doi.org/10.1162/002081898550789>
- 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>
- Halliday, T. C., & Carruthers, B. G. (2009). *Bankrupt: Global lawmaking and systemic financial crisis*. Stanford University Press.
- Koh, H. H. (1996). Transnational legal process. *Nebraska Law Review*, 75(1), 181–207.
- Kvale, S., & Brinkmann, S. (2015). *InterViews: Learning the craft of qualitative research interviewing* (3rd ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Levitt, P., & Merry, S. (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 Publications.
- Merry, S. E. (1990). *Getting justice and getting even: Legal consciousness among working-class Americans*. University of Chicago Press.
- Merry, S. E. (2006). *Human rights and gender violence: Translating international law into local justice*. University of Chicago Press.
- Meyer, J. W., Boli, J., Thomas, G. M., & Ramirez, F. O. (1997). World society and the nation-state. *American Journal of Sociology*, 103(1), 144–181. <https://doi.org/10.1086/231174>
- Risse, T., Ropp, S. C., & Sikkink, K. (Eds.). (1999). *The power of human rights: International norms and domestic change*. Cambridge University Press.
- Santos, B. de S. (2002). *Toward a new legal common sense: Law, globalization, and emancipation* (2nd ed.). Butterworths LexisNexis.
- Teubner, G. (1998). Legal irritants: Good faith in British law or how unifying law ends up in new divergencies. *The Modern Law Review*, 61(1), 11–32. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2230.00125>