

Original Paper

The State of Female Activities in Iran and the Internet

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Abstract

The rapid development of Internet and communication technologies raises the question of what role these media and communication interfaces play in social and political movements and development in individual countries. Although activities in cyberspace, including blogging, participation in social networks and other facilities provided by the Internet for its users are a new phenomenon, they have profound effects on social and political relations in the communities involved. In the information era, Internet is an important part of social movements in democratic societies and local communities. When the government blocks other ways to mobilization, Internet may bring like-minded people together and help them to find support for action. Internet has provided a new space for social movements and the effect of the virtual activities of the users on the actions and, often on the lack of social movements is of high importance.

Meanwhile, the Iranian women's movement, like other social movements in contemporary Iran, realizes the impact and position of cyberspace and has made use of it. Many activists, for whom other ways for expressing their demands have been blocked, have entered this space and taken advantage of it for expressing their opinions and communicating information to other people. In fact, the dominant socio-political forces and the atmosphere of repression, and fear have led many Iranian women to use the virtual space to campaign for women's empowerment and equal rights. They have realized that the Internet may inform the outside world of the movement's goals and activities and facilitate maintaining contact with other members of the movement. In fact, the open space that provides a platform for sharing information and has given the chance to the Iranian women's rights activists to perform their activities in a space with a decentralized structure where there is less pressure than there is in the real world. Campaigns formed following the cyberspace market boom indicate that cyberspace has indeed ushered in a new era in the history of the Iranian women's movement.

The present study, covers the period from 2005 to 2017, provides an analysis of the role of the Internet in the activities of the women's movement and explores the extent to which cyberspace has been assisting

the women's movement in achieving its objectives. By interviewing 50 active women inside Iran, the article investigates whether there has been successful interaction between cyberspace and the Iranian women's social movement resulting from a dynamic adaptation between functions of social and political groups in the real world and the virtual world. It also examines how factors such as social participation, increasing awareness, changing beliefs, traditional views of women and social mobility have been affected by the application of the Internet, and whether cyberspace has been able to make women's voices heard in Iran's patriarchal society.

Keywords

Iranian women's movement, cyberspace, Internet, female activist

1. Introduction

In the twenty-first century, the virtual sphere has played a crucial role in social activities. The growth and expansion of the Internet has facilitated the spread of information to the extent that weblogs and social networking sites have evolved into everyday communication media. They have played a pivotal role in social interactions by reinforcing communication patterns and interactions among users in virtual environments.

Due to this growing trend, the Internet has encompassed the socio-cultural and political activities of users, as well as providing a platform for the sharing of ideas, viewpoints and concerns with a wide range of interlocutors. The unique attractions of these networks have brought about an unprecedented acceptance by the masses to utilize them to achieve their socio-cultural and political objectives.

There are differing viewpoints about the influence of the Internet on socio-political movements. Some, like Robert Putnam (2000, p. 175), have a sceptical view towards the role of the Internet in enhancing social capital. His point of view is that the Internet may be more useful for maintaining existing ties than for creating new ones. Neither can the Internet lead to organizational and political participation if users have no interest in such matters. Cyber sceptics such as Putnam downplay the significance of new technology and argue that using the Internet gives people a false sense of participation and keeps them from actual physical protesting. Some scholars, such as Malcolm Gladwell and Clay Shirky (2011, pp. 28-41) go so far as to assert that new media is a tool of repression. In a majority of cases, in fact, once authoritarian regimes understand the threat posed by the Internet, they launch concentrated efforts to expand their political control.

On the other hand, there is a plethora of opposite views regarding the positive and influential role of the virtual space in the formation, continuation and success of social movements. Scholars such as W. Lance Bennett (2006), Bruce Bimber et al. (2005 & 2012), Jennifer Earl and Katrina Kimport (2011) believe that, although weblogs and social networks are not independent factors in political outlets, in addition to being inexpensive they have succeeded in gathering and spreading data via a bottom-up

approach. Moreover, weblogs and social networks have exposed people to new patterns of interactivity, thereby familiarising them with the likes and trends of one another. Accordingly, this has enabled the Internet to become an indispensable part of social movements in many countries.

One of the most profound impacts of the virtual sphere is the way in which it has enabled social interaction in closed societies where the government has blocked other pathways for mobilisation, such as public gatherings, peaceful protests, and freedom of expression. It might be said that the Internet has *redefined* “mobilization” and “summoning of the masses”.

The Internet is revolutionizing the way people protest and express dissent, especially in closed societies. It can be employed as a medium for organizing and disseminating information. The Internet provides new mechanisms for collecting information about any movement and accelerating the diffusion of relevant news to protesters (Golkar, 2011, p. 57). Therefore, any political and social activity in this environment, which is a virtual and unreal one, will be regarded as a political or social movement since it has originated from the virtual space and runs into the real world. Consequently a change, no matter how transient or insignificant, will emerge. These activities could be realized in different websites or weblogs as well as other social networks such as Facebook and Twitter.

Despite the importance of this subject, there are only a few publications about the role of the Internet in the formation and expansion of the Iranian women’s movement in Iran. In the past, many scholars have dedicated their time to studying Iranian women and their social movements. After the examination of past studies in this area, it has been discovered that so far research and discussion have been centred on how citizens embraced such a new tool to create political movements. Using evidence-based research, a few scholars examined the impact of social media on political communication. Although past research has done an excellent job in exploring the vast topic of “Iranian women”, most literature on the subject have struggled to grasp what this new phenomenon actually means and struggled to analyse how this new form of communication has been affecting the social and political life of the country. Therefore, the aim of this article is to complete past research on the women’s movement in Iran because the overpowering potential of the Internet has created a gap between research literature on Iran and women’s studies. This article proposes that the Internet is not merely a new form of communication but it provides unique opportunities for activists and social movements that open up precisely such a public sphere. This work is an attempt to fill some gaps in women’s studies on Iran by examining the impact of new technology in a developing society.

2. Background

Iran was one of the early adopters of the Internet in the Middle East, with Sharif and Guilan Universities offering the first connections to the global network in the early 1990’s (Johari, 2002, p. 49). The Iranian population became familiar with the Internet phenomenon in 1993 and was the second

country in the Middle East to be connected to the Internet, after Israel (Rahimi, 2007, p. 49). The demand for Internet subsequently rapidly increased, making it very popular in a few years. At the beginning, no one could foresee how swiftly it would spread in Iranian society. The number of Iranian Internet users increased from 600,000 in 1996 to 42,000,000 people in 2012 according to the Internet World Statistics (IWS) (Note 1). In 2010 more than half of the population in Iran (53.3%) had access to the Internet, and Iran was ranked as one of the countries with the highest percentage of Internet users in the Middle East (Lerner, 2010, p. 562).

One of the main reasons behind the upsurge of public interest in the Internet is the sudden increase in the youth population after the 1979 revolution. According to United Nations (UN) reports, over one third of Iran's entire population is between the ages of 15 and 29 (Basmenji, 2005). As the post-revolution baby boom has come of age, it has led to a significant rise in adult education. Subsequently, the literacy rate has risen to above 79% (Asemi, 2006). Consequently, the number of Internet users all around Iran increases day by day. To a certain extent, the Internet has already helped young people liberate themselves from constant societal pressure and the social control of the regime (Golkar, 2011, p. 53).

In recent years and particularly with the rise of political opposition, the rapidly growing and changing Internet has provided creative ways for political dissidents to challenge state authority. However, the Iranian government has tried to control the Internet and restrict access to it by filtering websites and limiting its connection speeds. As Geneive Abdo (2010) explains, the regime's system for blocking access to the Internet has become more sophisticated since Internet use has grown. The regime is aware of the Internet's power and tries not only to control it but use it as a tool for its own ideological purposes and political propaganda.

Iran's Internet censorship goes beyond simply blocking access to particular websites and services. Admittedly, Iran has only one public Internet Service Provider (ISP). The government therefore has been able to dramatically slow down bandwidth speeds in an effort to delay messages meant for the organization of large-scale protest (Rahimi, 2008, p. 49). According to an Iranian newspaper, the number of filtered websites doubled from 5 million in the year 2008 to 10 million in 2009 (Sarmayeh newspaper, 25/07/2009). To access such platforms as Facebook and Twitter, Iranians have employed Virtual Private Networks (VPNs), or use applications designed to hide IP addresses typically known as Deep Web Browsing (Kamran, 2009).

In response to the development of information communication technology, the Iranian regime has heavily invested in filtering Internet social networks, imprisoning bloggers and forming a cyber army which is responsible for fighting against cyber civil society. These efforts, however, have not been successful in preventing the growing number of users from accessing information (Alfoneh, 2013).

Among the range of social movements in contemporary Iran, the women's movement has improved with the usage of the Internet. The dominant socio-political system and the atmosphere of repression, secrecy, and fear have led many Iranian women to use the virtual space as a platform in the fight for women's empowerment and equal rights. This has compromised the government's monopoly on media, expanded social networks, enhanced capacity, and empowered both activists and citizens at large.

The tangible presence of women in socio-political activities dates back to former President Mohammad Khatami's second term in 2001-2005. A large number of activists and people interested in women's studies exceedingly appeared on media in the prime of the reform era in Iran. Therefore, an open environment for the movement allowed socio-political activities to continue. A number of magazines for women such as *Zanan*, *Jameah*, *Khaneh*, *Fekr-e-Rooz* and others were published for the first time. A separate page or a special column was usually allocated for women in many reformist newspapers. Furthermore, the number of female reporters increased significantly. In addition, women's participation in editorial boards and councils increased substantially, too. Khatami's presidency saw the burgeoning of non-government organizations that laid the foundation for a more vibrant civil society. Many NGOs were founded around women's issues (Siddiqi, 2006).

The social and political activists' vast efforts in this period triggered a severe reaction from the conservatives in the government who were backed by the religious Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. For the religious conservatives who manipulate the country's system, the change in the socio-political climate was nothing to celebrate or even tolerate. As part of the crackdown, the Guardian Council (Note 2) banned all reformist candidates from running for presidency in 2005. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad came to office, ushering in a more conservative period in Iranian politics and society. Censorship and Internet ban were among the first major dilemmas on the list of the government's protocol in handling situations. Amidst the condemned issues in media, "women", and especially the demands of their movement in Iran, became controversial. This situation overlapped with the presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2005. Eventually, the news and reports were not allowed to use the term "feminism" or mention the names of certain famous female activists (Sadeghi, 2010, p. 217).

Suffering from seclusion and having no control over the situation during this time, including having limited opportunity to pursue their goals, women's movements came together with the objective of finding a suitable substitute for what they had lost. Iranian women subsequently used the Internet as a tool to help them in pursuing their demands. This led to the usage of virtual spaces towards socio-political activism for women who had previously been deprived of this form of activism. The Iranian women's movement became a pioneering social movement in Iran that embraced the Internet as an emancipating tool.

In the early days of the Internet, at the beginning of this trend, women's blogging played a significant role. Female bloggers, predominantly the young, were among the pioneers of blogging in Iran. Blogging made it possible for them to write about their ideas and needs without the fear of censorship or chastisement. Moreover, they could create virtual identities for themselves without the fear of being recognized and consequently punished. They could now freely reveal their "hidden" selves. Due to the ability to engage in free online participation, there was a drastic improvement in Internet use by women in Iran. Another outcome of women's blogging was attracting younger people to the women's movement. Since the crackdown on newspapers and chronicles in the Ahmadinejad presidency between 2005 and 2013, more female journalists and reporters concerned about women's conditions turned to blogging, which in turn led to the reinforcement of the women's movement (Sreberny & Khiabany, 2010). The use of blogging by women accelerated the spread of the movement's news regarding gatherings and related agendas. As an example, due to having access to the Internet, bloggers could easily announce that a meeting was taking place. Since they were present at those meetings themselves, they could report the right and exact information to others not present. Prior to the advent of the Internet, individuals not present would often receive the wrong information after every meeting that was held (Rahimi, 2011). Gradually, with the expansion of the Internet, and subsequently the emergence of online social networks such as Twitter and Facebook, the role of the Internet has raised people's awareness of the movement's aims and objectives which was conducive to social mobilization (Sadeghi, 2010).

Sites and pages related to women, were not designed only to spread news, but also served as a mobilizing force and means of organization, too. The exchange of views, the proliferation of opinions, and the consciousness-raising process that took place on the Internet encouraged debate on gender equality and women's rights which was invaluable to the women's movement. Internet had opened up space for activists to air their views. A full online participation enabled Iran's women's movement to connect to international women's movements, as well as spreading news to the mainstream news media.

Therefore, Iranian women have tried to notify, inform, and claim women's rights by using this new tool. It has successfully done this by holding campaigns of opposition, establishing educational sites related to women, providing information, creating new campaigns on Facebook, and holding individual weblogs by women's rights activists. Several campaign-centred groups have been formed. They are best recognizable for their associated websites, such as *Change for Equality* (<http://we-change.org/site/english/>), *Feminist School* (the intellectual wing of the women's movement), or *Fair Family Law*. None of these organisations was registered with the government nor were they accessible through a particular physical location. The campaign structure was Internet-based and allowed participants to join or leave without the obligation to recruit or be employed.

The *One Million Signatures Campaign*, for example, was organized and best identified by its associated website (*Change for Equality*: <http://we-change.org/site/english/>) and, accordingly, it could not be accessed through a particular physical location. In relation to this, Parvin Ardalan, the Iranian women's rights activist who launched this campaign pointed out that "Every print magazine for women we had was closed, so we created a new world for ourselves in cyberspace" (Soguel, 2010).

The starting point of the campaign was a rally on 12 June 2006 in *Haft e Tir* square in Tehran, but it was officially launched only on 27 August 2006. It was announced by word of mouth and for the first time through Internet sites as well. The *One Million Signatures Campaign* aims at pressuring the state to recognize the equality of men and women in all laws of the land. This movement has been against gender discrimination in the Iranian legal system. The Internet provides the women participating in the campaign with a way to reach out to international supporters who are encouraged to sign petitions demonstrating solidarity with the plight of Iranian women, as well as to Iranian citizens who cannot be reached in face-to-face interactions or who live outside of Iran (Sameh, 2010, p. 453). The Internet has offered a way for the campaign to garner contributions from donors (Lerner, 2010, p. 564).

Another campaign fought via the Internet is the *Anti-Stoning Campaign* in launched May 2006 with the aim to save lives and with the aspiration to eventually persuade the Iranian authorities to abolish executions by stoning and to bring their legal practices into line with their obligations under international law. Due to the crackdown on civil society after 2005, the Campaign had limited opportunities to hold meetings and activities in public. However, after a successful virtual campaign to save Sakineh Mohammadi Ashtiani from being stoned in 2007, campaign activists recognized the power of the Internet (Terman & Fijabi, 2010).

The sentence of death by stoning handed down in the case of Sakineh Mohammadi Ashtiani in Iran is one of the examples to this point. A court sentenced her to be stoned to death in 2006 but the sentence was suspended in 2010 in the face of international pressure (Retrieved July 13, 2016, from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/sakineh-mohammadi-ashtiani>). Her sentence was then reduced to 10 years of imprisonment because of activist online participation on the Internet. The Islamic Republic of Iran has tried with everything in its power, to cut off the relations between Sakineh and her family on the one side, and her lawyer and the public opinion on the other. However, the virtual space created a link between them (Retrieved June 24, 2016, from <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/MDE13/001/2012/en/>). Finally, the Islamic Republic of Iran, under intense pressure through international public opinion against the stoning sentence of Sakineh, was forced to release her, change the law and to stop this cruel practice. This, in turn, provoked an outcry among the conservatives since stoning was a part of Islamic religious law that should not have been denied within the conceptual framework of a functioning Muslim society based on *Sharia*.

A more recent example of using the Internet to organise peaceful protests was the *Green Movement*. Nevertheless, in this protest, which followed the controversial election in June 2009, the presence of thousands of women among the protesters was an unexpected and endearing sight. The noticeable appearance of women coincided with the death of Neda Agha Soltan (Note 3). Therefore, she emerged as the face of the anti-government movement and a symbol of resistance and opposition (Mortensen, 2011, pp. 5-9). The protesters used the Internet to disseminate a video recording of Neda Agha Soltan's death. This new method of interaction has enabled women's movement to revolutionise the way they protest and has made movement stronger.

During the 2009 election campaign and post-election period, the women's movement not only made itself and its own demands visible, but also greatly influenced the *Green Movement's* direction, content, philosophy and mandate. The Internet made it possible for women to create transnational and trans local spaces that at times seemed to approach an ideal public sphere. Therefore, women's activist seized the moment to catch local and international attention, increasing alertness toward their struggle for change.

The recent campaign was when women's movement acted to address the underrepresentation of women in the parliament by launching the "Campaign to Change the Male Face of Parliament". The campaign aimed to support candidates who favour gender equality while drawing public attention and disapproval to those whose records or statements showed opposition. Although, the Campaign did not reach its goal of achieving 50 seats for women in the 2016-2020 Parliament, it was successful in providing the largest female representation in the history of Iran's parliament.

However, the women's movement has been suppressed by the authorities, despite all the achievements that it has gained through its online participation. Websites concentrating on women and their issues are filtered and have become unreachable again and again. Moreover, some activists in the women's movement have been summoned to court, detained, convicted and imprisoned. The more people visited and welcomed women's websites, the more these websites' news became reliable. However, as a consequence of this increase in activity on these sites the suppression by the Iranian regime became more severe.

Some believe that, due to the ever-increasing censorship and suppression exerted by the authorities in the last few years, women have gradually lost their voice in formal settings resulting in a situation where female activists do not have participation in their respective socio-political environments (Rahimi, 2011, p. 165). This trajectory raises some important questions: to what extent have the Internet and virtual spaces been able to aid the Iranian women's movement in achieving its goals? And what are the challenges and rewards of Internet use for the women's movement?

3. Finding

Based on the study of the attitudes of fifty Iranian women activists, this article provides a summary of the findings. These include the role of women activists in addressing women's concerns in Iran and how they evaluate the status of Iranian women, as well as the effective factors in forming their present positions and activists' strategies in changing the status of Iranian women. In fact, answering these questions helps obtain a perspective on the efforts of Iranian women activists, and also paves the way for achieving their goals as the answers shed light on the reasons behind the successes and failures of the Iranian women's movement.

It appears that the Iranian women's movement is not a mass movement. Most of the activists of this movement belong to the country's elite, and include women serving at universities, working as authors and senior civil servants. However, they strive to change the situation for all Iranian women and to remove discrimination from their personal and social lives. They challenge the vision of this Islamic state and its legal manifestations that fail to promote legal change and any gender justice for women. Therefore, although only a small minority of women in Iranian society is represented in the movement, they use every opportunity to change the status of Iranian women as a whole. It has emerged from the research that the Internet is an important tool in the social movement of women who use it as a means to interact with one another and to access and diffuse vital information.

As outlined in the introduction, Iranian women activists have been working towards achieving their goals for many years and, as previously mentioned, while they have changed the form and type of their efforts against the country's social frameworks, they have not given up on the movement. At a time where the capabilities of cyberspace are apparent to everyone, with the use of the Internet they can determine the most effective approach according to the tools available. Cyberspace has been effective in achieving the purposes of the movement and expanding it further.

The purpose of this study is to research Iranian women activists, a select group of college-educated, middle and upper class, mostly married and employed Muslim women. Research in this direction was conducted with the help of the interview method and of the simple random sampling method. Out of a large number of Iranian women active in the field of women's issues, 50 women were selected and interviewed face to face in different Iranian cities: Tehran, Mashhad, Isfahan, Shiraz, Rasht, Arak, Ardebil, Ghazvin, Kish, Tabriz, and Zanjan. The related findings are described hereunder.

Table 1. Educational Level of the Interviewees

Highest Educational Qualification	Frequency	Percentage
Diploma	4	8%
Graduate certificate	2	4%
Bachelor's degree	18	36%
Master's degree	16	32%
PhD	10	20%
Total	50	100%

Table 1 shows the interviewees' level of education. As indicated above, most of the activists interviewed for this research have higher education. 88% of them have bachelor's degree or higher degrees, while only a small percentage (12%) have lower-level degrees.

Table 2. Findings Related to the Opinion of the Interviewees about Women's Status in Iran

Assessment of the status of Iranian women based on the interviewees' perspective	Frequency	Percentage
Inequality	17	34%
Difference	10	20%
Oppression	23	46%
Total	50	100%

According to the interviewees, the status of women in Iranian society can be described in three ways: in terms of difference, inequality and oppression. 34% of the interviewees evaluated the position of women in Iran as unequal to that of men. From their perspective, the inequality between men and women has an enormous effect on the kinds of lives Iranian women lead or experience. In contrast, a higher percentage of the interviewees (46%) emphasized that inequality alone cannot reflect the status of women in Iran as they have been effectively oppressed in comparison to men. They see this oppression of Iranian women manifested in political, social and economic terms. This is due to the inequitable exercise of authority in Iran's patriarchal society and is especially evident in laws preventing women from being free or equal to men. The findings show that a lower percentage of the interviewees (20%) saw the status of women in Iranian society as merely different from men's and accepted this as normal. They think that, since men and women are inherently different, their way of life and their capabilities and limitations are also diverse. In their view, the gender differences, and hence certain characteristics that are apparent and different between men and women, justify the

existing unequal treatment of men and women in society. However, the majority of the interviewees (80%) believed that the oppression and inequality of women in Iranian society is in fact unjust, and that in this society women are deprived of their human rights in comparison to men. They emphasized that, Iranian women have been continuously experiencing systematic disadvantages, structural inequalities and institutionalized injustice in their male-dominated society for decades.

Table 3. Relationship between Education and the Opinions of Interviewees

Assessment of the status of women	Education		
	Lower than Bachelor	Bachelor	Higher than Bachelor
Inequality	30.8%	39.7%	30.0%
Difference	46.1%	14.3%	3.3%
Oppression	23.1%	46.0%	66.7%
Total	100%	100%	100%

This study shows that there is a significant connection between the educational level of the interviewees and their opinion of the status of women in Iranian society. Indeed, as the educational level increases to bachelor's degree and higher degrees, more women believe that there is an unjust inequality and oppression of women in Iranian society and women usually suffer oppression disproportionately compared to men. Therefore, although they have studied in an Islamic country and are familiar with Islamic law, they believe that Islamic laws in Iran are not properly implemented. From their point of view, a true Islamic society does not discriminate against part of its members on the basis of gender and is not oppressive towards women. Conversely, as the educational level decreases, more women (46.1%) view the existing differential treatment as being just. The reasons behind this are probably that the expectations of women and their rights and treatment in society are greater when they are more educated.

Table 4. Reasons Proposed to Explain Women's Status in Iranian Society

Reasons	Frequency	Percentage
Gender inequality in Law	32	64%
Physiological factors	12	24%
Society's negative attitudes toward women	6	12%
Total	50	100%

A high percentage (64%) of the interviewees believe that the existence of gender inequality in the law is the most significant reason behind the unequal status of women in Iranian society. Accordingly, the hypothesis that the Iranian women's movement considers gender inequality in the law as its most important issue is proven as they claim that Islamic laws in Iranian society unduly favour Muslim men. Therefore, it can be reasonably argued that the main goal of the women's movement is to achieve equal rights for men and women.

Nearly a quarter of the interviewees (24%) believe that women's status in society is due to the differences between the physiology of men and women and to the fact that men and women are created differently and, therefore, should be treated differently.

A further 12% of the interviewees say that Iranian society's negative attitude towards women is a notable reason behind their inequality and oppression in that society. This negative attitude is evident both in the personal aspects of women's lives in Iran and in their treatment in the wider society.

Based on the above findings, currently the primary focus of the Iranian women's movement is to address the patriarchal framework of the Iranian legal system. Although other factors contribute to women's status in society, such as physiological factors and society's negative attitudes towards women, the activists believe that the first step is to evoke a change within Iran's patriarchal laws.

Table 5. Relationship between Education and the Reasons Proposed to Explain Women's Status in Iranian Society

Reasons	Education		
	Lower than bachelor's degree	Bachelor's degree	Higher than Bachelor's degree
Gender inequality in law	46.1%	79.3%	78.7%
Physiological factors	38.4%	12.7%	18.1%
Society's negative attitudes toward women	15.5%	8%	3.2%
Total	100%	100%	100%

The findings show that there is a slight correlation between education and the evaluation of women's issues from the perspective of the interviewees. The different levels of education of the interviewees can explain different opinions of gender inequality in the law as with an increase in education more and more women believe this to be an issue in society. Of the interviewees with an educational level lower than a bachelor's degree, 46.1% believe gender inequality to be a significant issue, 38.4% consider physiological factors to be important and 15.5% view their society's negative attitudes towards women influencing the status of women in society. Of the interviewees that have obtained a bachelor's degree,

a large percentage (79.3%) believe gender inequality in the law to be prevalent in society, with 12.7% concerned with physiological factors, and 8% viewing society's negative attitudes to be issues that keep women in Iran in the position that they are in. Lastly, the interviewees with the highest level of education, like the other levels, prioritise gender inequality with 78.7% viewing it as the most significant issue. 18.1% are concerned with physiological factors, and 3.2% believing society's negative attitudes towards women to be most prevalent issue. Overall, according to the findings, it is evident that, judging by the opinions of the interviewees, women believe that the main reason for their treatment and status in society is the lack of gender-neutral laws in Iran.

Table 6. The Impact of Economic, Legal, Physiological and Cultural Factors on the Situation of Women from the Interviewees' Perspective

Factor	Efficiency					Total
	Very Low	Low	Average	High	Very High	
Economic factors	14.7%	31.2%	28.4%	13.8%	11.9%	100%
Law	1.8%	6.4%	9.2%	22%	60.6%	100%
Physiological factors	52.2%	20.2%	19.3%	5.5%	2.8%	100%
Cultural factors	0%	0%	5.5%	29.4%	65.1%	100%

From the perspective of the interviewees, the factors that played the most significant role in the status of women in Iranian society are the economic, legal, physiological and cultural factors. According to the data shown in Table 6, 82.6% of the interviewees evaluated laws and regulations as playing a highly influential role in the current situation and status of the women. Such findings demonstrate the interviewees' belief that the inequality of their legal rights vis-à-vis men should be prioritised and achieving equal rights may be considered the main objective of the women's movement. 45.9% of the interviewees found the effect of the role of the economic factors on the current situation of women low to very low, while 25.7% believe that this factor plays a highly effective role in the current status of women. So, more than half of the activists do not believe that the current situation of women is the result of economic factors.

However, the percentage of those interviewees who have evaluated the role of cultural factors (such as religious beliefs, customs, values, acceptable gender roles and occupations, etc.) on the current situation of women being high and very high is significant (94.5%). Considering this together with the percentage of interviewees to perceive the role of the physiological factors in the status of women to be

high or very high (8.3% of the interviewees), it can be concluded that the women subjects have evaluated the role of cultural factors as much more influential than the factors related to physiological differences. It is to be noted that no one rated the role of cultural factors as low or very low in the current status of women, and most interviewees emphasized this as a highly influential factor.

Overall, the interviewees believe that law and culture in Iran have a significant impact on the situation for women and that these must be addressed by the Iranian women's movement.

Table 7. Findings Related to the Evaluation of the Relationship between the Iranian Women's Movement and Feminism from the Interviewees' Perspective

The movement...	Frequency	Percentage
is associated with feminism	30	60%
is a branch of feminism	3	6%
is not associated with feminism	12	24%
does not exist	5	10%
Total	50	100%

Interviewees responded differently to the question of what the connection is between the Iranian women's movement and the feminist movement. Is the Iranian women's movement related to feminist movements? Is the Iranian women's movement a branch of feminism? Is there no connection between the two? Or, from the interviewees' point of view, does the women's movement even exist in Iran?

According to the findings presented in Table 7, 24% of the interviewees have evaluated the movement of the Iranian women as a movement belonging to the Iranian women but believe it to be entirely disassociated from feminism. These women claim that, although it is a movement that is structurally unstable and in a constant state of flux, it is also unique and does not belong to any feminist movement rooted in other places. Despite their critical views of misguided and repressive Islamic policies in Iran, the interviewees are willing to cooperate with the Islamic framework of Iran, hoping to achieve a gradual shift in its position on women.

The majority (60%) of the interviewees believe that the Iranian women's movement is closely associated with the feminist movement and that this connection has evolved during the era of cyberspace which enables quick communication of information and ideas. They strongly believe that Iran should be gradually reintegrated into the International community. From their point of view, as the space for communication expands, sharing experiences and having strong ties are eye openers and create favourable conditions for establishing links with the global women's movement. Considering this together with the 6% of interviewees who perceive the Iranian women's movement is a branch of feminism, it can be understood that they mostly accept the linking between the Iranian women's

movement and feminism. Notably, 10% of the interviewees have denied the existence of the Iranian women's movement and deemed that such a movement requires the active presence of women in a public sphere. They argue that through decentralized, informal and semiformal activities there cannot be a women's movement. Despite an emphasis on the importance of feminist ideologies, the interviewees distinguish the Iranian women's movement from the feminist movement and deny any connection between the two.

Overall, the interviewees, from those who believe the women's movement to be a unique movement within the Islamic society to those demanding changes from an International framework and even those who deny the existence of an Iranian women's movement altogether, know that there is a significant amount of aversion and discrimination to the feminist movement and feminism in Iran. In order to avoid further disapproval of, and creating obstacles for their movement, despite their true beliefs, some activists deny any link to, or relationship with feminism, 24%, to be precise.

Table 8. Comparative Assessment of Men and Women from the Interviewees' Perspective

		Strongly Agree	Agree	No Opinion	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total
1	Men and women are the same	13.8%	16.5%	6.4%	44%	19.3%	100%
2	Men and women are different and have no similarities	3.7%	8.3%	14.7%	20.2%	53.1%	100%
3	Men and women are similar in some respects and different in other aspects	63.3%	11%	0%	16.4%	9.3%	100%
4	Men are more mature than women, so they are superior to women	0%	0%	6.4%	7.3%	86.3%	100%
5	Considering some characteristics of women, women	1%	4.6%	7.3%	64.2%	22.9%	100%

are superior to							
men							
6 The concept of							
men's superiority							
over women or							
vice versa is not	86.2%	7.9%	0%	5.9%	0%	100%	
valid; they							
complement each							
other							

Another question asked during the interviews was whether the interviewees believe there to be any similarities or differences between men and women and whether they think men have superiority over women or vice versa. This question was asked to identify their assessment of the qualities of men and women from their perspective.

Table 8 shows that 63.3% (1) of the interviewees disagree or strongly disagree with the idea that there is no difference between men and women, and 30.3% (1) of them agree or strongly agree with it. Indeed, 73.3% (2) of the interviewees disagree with the idea that men and women are different, while 12% (2) of them agree. Furthermore, 74.3% (3) of the interviewees agree with the idea that men and women are different in some respects and similar in some other aspects, while 25.7% (3) disagree.

The final analysis of the findings shows that most of the interviewees with different approaches disagree with the idea of similarity and difference between men and women and, with a realistic approach, noting a difference between men and women in some respects, while accepting their similarities in other aspects.

In relation to the natural superiority of either of the two sexes, 93.6% (4) of the interviewees disagreed with the superiority of men over women. Also, 87.1% (5) of the interviewees denied the intrinsic superiority of women over the men, with only 5.6% (5) of the interviewees believing in the intrinsic superiority of women over men. Finally, the response rate to the question of denial of superiority of either sex over the other was considered as the index of evaluation of the realistic approach to the relation of the two sexes. From these findings and the consensus of a denial of a superior gender it can be gathered that the interviewees adopt an impartial rather than an extremist approach.

In this regard, 94.1% (6) of the interviewees agreed that men and women complement one another and disagreed with the superiority of either one over the other; only 5.9% (6) of the interviewees disagreed with this statement.

Most of the interviewees (74.3%) (3) agreed with the existence of similarities and differences between men and women and, by acknowledging that men and women complement each other, they adopted the impartial approach. To sum up, from the interviewees perspective, the Iranian women's movement does not have an extreme view on differentiation between the two genders. Since it promotes impartiality and equality, it could even attract men to stand with women to change the patriarchal attitudes and practices of Iranian society.

Table 9. Findings Related to the Relationship between the Internet and Iranian Women's Movement from the Interviewees' Perspective

	Statement	Strongly Agree		Agree		No Opinion		Disagree		Strongly Disagree		Total	
		No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
1	The Internet is a positive tool to participate in women's movement in Iran	28	56%	17	34%	2	4%	3	6%	0	0%	50	100%
2	The Internet is an indispensable part of women's movement in Iran	33	66%	14	28%	2	4%	1	2%	0	0%	50	100%
3	Use the Internet as a communication tool for spreading news	19	38%	18	36%	0	0%	11	22%	2	4%	50	100%
4	The Internet enables women to find their voices	41	82%	6	12%	0	0%	2	4%	1	2%	50	100%
5	The Internet provides the opportunity to connect with international women's	23	46%	13	26%	9	18%	3	6%	2	4%	50	100%

	movements and coalitions												
6	Internet provides the opportunity to raise awareness about the plight of Iranian women internationally	9	18%	19	38%	1	2%	16	32%	5	10%	50	100%
7	Discrimination against women has been reduced through the growth of the Internet	11	22%	8	16%	0	0%	20	40%	11	22%	50	100%
8	Some changes to the laws related to women will be considered as a consequence of women's activities on the Internet	18	36%	13	26%	3	6%	10	20%	6	12%	50	100%
9	Use of the Internet as a communications tool to reach larger audiences	36	72%	7	14%	0	0%	3	6%	4	8%	50	100%
10	Internet as a tool for resisting state control and battling with opposing points of view	20	40%	16	32%	5	10%	5	10%	4	8%	50	100%
11	Virtual demonstrations can satisfy the protester's desire	7	14%	13	26%	3	6%	6	12%	21	42%	50	100%

for the emotional
rush and thrill of
real, physical action

The set of statements presented to the interviewees to gather information and to help gain a more comprehensive understanding of women activists' relationship with the Internet are described hereunder.

- 1) The Internet has provided women with a platform to participate in women's movement in Iran.
- 2) The Internet has become an indispensable part of women's movement in Iran.
- 3) The Iranian women's movement is able to use the Internet as a communications tool for spreading news.
- 4) The Internet enables women to find their voices.
- 5) The Internet has given the Iranian women's movement the opportunity to connect with international women's movements and coalitions.
- 6) The Internet has given the Iranian women's movement the opportunity to raise awareness about the plight of Iranian women internationally.
- 7) The existing discrimination against women in Iranian political culture and the patriarchal discourse derived from Iranian political culture have been affected by women's activities on the Internet.
- 8) Some changes that have occurred to the laws concerning women in the last decade, and the improvement in women's status in Iranian society will be considered as a consequence of the efficacy of women's activities on the Internet.
- 9) The Iranian women's movement can use the Internet as a communications tool to reach a larger audience.
- 10) The Internet can be considered as a tool for resisting state control and battling with opposing points of view.
- 11) Virtual demonstrations can satisfy the protester's desire for the emotional rush and thrill of real, physical action.

The findings show that a majority of the interviewed women activists (90%) stated that the Internet has provided them with a platform to participate in women's movement in Iran. they consider cyberspace as a positive tool, and it has never been a barrier for them in continuing and succeeding in their activities. 94% (2) of the interviewees have specified that they could not imagine the current state of the Iranian women's movement existing without cyberspace as an integral and operating component. 74% (3) of the women interviewed use the Internet as a tool for spreading news. Most interviewees, 94% (4), have been able to find a new identity and voice by using the Internet to make their opinions

public, and only 6% (4) disagreed with this function of cyberspace. 72% (5) acknowledged that cyberspace provided the opportunity for the movement to communicate with other activists in other countries; only 10% (5) believe that they can communicate with other activists in other countries without using the Internet. 56% (6) agree or strongly agree that the Internet has provided a new opportunity to raise people's awareness of the Iranian women's movement internationally, while 42% (6) of the activists disagree with this and believe that the movement has a good domestic and international presence without the use of the Internet.

It is to be noted that despite an increased use of cyberspace, the interviewees do not believe that this space can prevent discrimination against women or have a significant role in decreasing it, for more than half of them (62%) (7) disagree with the statement that cyberspace has been helpful in removing discrimination against women. Others (38%) (7) have accepted that cyberspace is a tool that helps women, but they believe that they should not rely solely on the Internet. 32% (8) of the interviewees disagree with the impact of cyberspace on changing laws which discriminate against women, however, most (62%) (8) agree with the impact of cyberspace activities on reducing discrimination against women.

Also, 72% (10) of the interviewees use the Internet to object to the government's discriminatory policies against women. These women believe that cyberspace has provided an effective platform for doing so. 86% (9) of the interviewees use this tool to attract more advocacy but 14% (9) believe that this tool is unable to undertake real and influential activities, despite it attracting more audiences. Therefore, the impact of these activists may be seen as minimal, as a person is not a "real" activist by merely studying women's issues in cyberspace. More than half of the interviewees (54%) (11) believe that cyberspace and the activities performed in this space will not achieve the real goals of the movement, and that physical activities carried out in the real world are still more effective. On the other hand, 40% (11) of the interviewees believe that the Internet has met the demands of the movement's activists and gave those who had no chance to take part in the direct activities of the movement the opportunity to be involved and have a voice without taking the risk of actual activism.

Table 10. Findings Related to the Solution of Women's Problems in Iran from the Interviewees' Perspective

Solution	Frequency	Percentage
Changing the attitude of society towards women	22	44 %
Ensuring the economic independence of women	2	4 %
Improvement of laws and regulations	20	40 %
Promoting women's awareness	6	12 %
Total	50	100 %

The interviewees were asked which of four solutions provided would, in their opinion, best address women's issues in Iran. The solutions included changing the attitude of society towards women, ensuring the economic independence of women, improving laws and regulations, and promoting women's awareness in Iran. The findings shown in this table can be taken as implicitly referring to the goals of the Iranian women's movement. Most interviewees (44%) consider changing the attitude of society towards women as the main solution to women's problems. This is due to their belief that women's problems in Iran arise largely from the negative attitude in this patriarchal society towards women. 40% of the interviewees consider improving laws and regulations as the solution which makes improving laws and regulations the second most highly favoured solution. Only 12% of the interviewees believed in promoting women's awareness to be the most effective route to solving women's problems in Iran. Notably, a mere 4% of interviewees believed that ensuring the economic independence of women to be the most effective solution.

In interpreting these results, it seems to be true that the interviewees rate the solutions according to what they believe to be the major obstacle for the improvement of women's status in Iran. From the interviewees' perspective, it can be concluded that the main priorities of the Iranian women's movement are to change attitudes in society towards women and bring about a change in laws and regulations in Iran whilst focusing less on promoting women's awareness and ensuring their economic independence.

4. Conclusion

It can be deduced from the findings presented that an important characteristic of the Iranian women's movement is its realism in accepting the differences between men and women in some aspects, on one hand, and emphasizing the similarity and the existence of common characteristics between them, on the other hand. Indeed, they emphasise that a person's humanity and their human rights are characteristics

that must be free from gender discrimination. Therefore, women activists are asking for equality on the grounds of similarity, while not denying the differences existing between men and women. Laws and regulations promote the inequality of men and women, cultural attitudes consider women weaker than, and inferior to men, and societal constraints on women based on their “inequality” are the most important issues tackled by the Iranian women’s movement. Therefore, achieving equal rights for men and women, and gaining respect for the human dignity of women are among the most important goals of the Iranian women’s movement. In this regard, the activists have tried to achieve greater influence and presence in their society by using the Internet while pursuing their activities in other forms as well. The main purpose of using cyberspace as a new platform is to open new channels of communication and help to create a new identity free from the traditional attitudes towards women in Iranian society. Data obtained from interviewing women activists indicate that cyberspace is an effective tool and it has an important role in constructing an independent identity for Iranian women. Furthermore, cyberspace provides opportunities for the activists to invent and employ different methods in achieving the goals of their movement.

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Notes

Note 1. <http://www.Internetworldstats.com/me/ir.htm>

Note 2. The Council consists of twelve members. Six jurists to be elected by the Parliament and 6 members appointed by Supreme Leader of Iran. It is a council empowered to vet legislation and oversee elections. It approves and disqualifies candidates seeking to run in local, parliamentary, presidential, and Assembly of Experts elections.

Note 3. Whilst participating in the protests following the June 2009 elections, Neda Agha Soltan was shot dead by Iranian officials.