Information and communication technology and women empowerment in Iran

Farid Shirazi

Institute for Innovation and Technology Management, Ted Rogers School of Information Technology Management, Ryerson University, Toronto, Canada

A R T I C L E   I N F O

Article history:
Received 22 May 2010
Received in revised form 19 November 2010
Accepted 15 February 2011
Available online 21 February 2011

Keywords:
Blogging
SMS
ICT
Communication discourse
Mobilization
Participation
Female bloggers

A B S T R A C T

Since the introduction of the Internet in Iran, Iranian women have used this medium not only as a means of accessing and disseminating information but also as the means of voicing their concerns about discriminatory laws and to participate in public discourse. In Iran, the Internet provided a voice to repressed and marginalized groups, particularly young people and educated women. In 2003 the number of female Internet users in Iran reached a remarkably high proportion of nearly half (49%) of the total Internet users in the country, according to the International Telecommunication Union report (ITU, 2008). This constitutes a total of 11.5 million female Internet users in Iran which is the highest level of Internet penetration rate among Islamic countries in the Middle East. Since the first Farsi blog appeared online in 2001, thousands of weblogs have been created including blogs related to women’s issues in Iran. Blogging in Iran has helped repressed and marginalized groups reach out, including women's and human rights activists, ethnic and religious minorities and Iranian youth to get their voices heard and to challenge the long standing univocal government and Islamic religious authorities. Women bloggers have been among the leading bloggers within the Iranian blogosphere. By applying the theory of social action and mobilization, this study finds that women's digital activities prove to be an effective means of participating in communication discourse and mobilizing the female population of Iran in their struggle for a just and fair society.

1. Introduction

In a recent report published in a mainstream Iranian newspaper (Abrar, 2010), an official claimed that, on a daily basis, Iranians exchange 60 million SMS messages—among which young male and female students comprise the largest group of SMS users. Many Iranian families, particularly middle class households, provide cell phones to their school-age daughters to ensure their safety and security. However, the popularity of SMS among young men and women in a conservative society such as Iran, has sent an alarming signal to hardliners about the “immoral” use of cell phones.

The multi-functional capabilities of cell phones and their ability to serve as a means of voice, text, email, video and picture transmission make this device a very popular and an effective tool for socio-political participation and mobilization. The number of cell phone users has increased drastically during the last decade in Iran. For example, while the number of cell phone users in 1998 was estimated to be 239,000, this number increased 180-fold a decade later (ITU, 2010).

In many different social contexts Iranians have used SMS messaging as a means of communication and political mobilization. For example, SMS played an important role during the last two presidential elections in Iran. Throughout the 2005 Iranian presidential election, millions of young Iranians sent SMS messages to boycott the election or to support oppositional candidates. Prior to the June 12, 2009 presidential election, young Iranian voters had used SMS as means of sending out
political messages and converting SMS into a fast and effective political communication channel. During the campaign, a heavy flow of subversive SMS messages were exchanged between users. In these messages, subversive content was generally critical of the hardliner incumbent candidate, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, or supportive of popular liberal opponents. Since the government was unable to filter text messages sent during the campaign, the Ministry of Telecommunications shut down the entire mobile network including the text messaging system a day before the election. In addition, opponents of Ahmadinejad set up their own campaign watch groups to monitor the election across the country by the means of mobile networks. The number of text messages exchanged during the election campaign reached a record high of 110 million messages per day (Tehran Times, 2009). Many of the SMS messages were clearly political and encouraged people to participate in the election—particularly those who were skeptical of the integrity of election or those who might boycott it to rethink their stance. As Hafezi (2009) points out, many SMS messages warned boycotters, “If you plan not to vote, just think about June 13 when you hear that Ahmadinejad has been re-elected.” Other ICT tools such as e-mails, blogs and social networking sites were widely used during the presidential campaigns by liberal candidate supporters, the so called “greens”. According to one ITU report (2010), more than 23 million Iranians had access to the Internet in 2008 while the number of cell phone users reached as high as 43 million in the same year, the actual number of Internet and mobile cell phone users was higher during the presidential election. Given these substantial figures, it is not surprising to read in Hafezi’s (2009) report from Iran that SMS, emails, blogs and social networking sites played an undeniable role in mobilizing the masses during the 2009 presidential election campaign.

Young Iranian men and women became ‘grassroots’ journalists as they captured and disseminated hundreds of thousands of images and video clips of the socio-political events in June, 2009. These independent citizens uploaded their text messages and images on globally popular social networking and video sharing sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube as well as on weblogs. Haider (2009) points out that within the context of democratic societies, individuals can freely use the Internet for their own purposes, such as promoting their own cultures and views where these views can be explored in a safe, non-threatening manner. However, in non-democratic countries, governments may perceive the Internet as a threat and therefore use all possible mechanisms to filter and censor its content. In this context individuals cannot discuss differing viewpoints thus an underground and subversive counter-culture germinates (Haider, 2009).

The Internet has provided a voice for the silenced and marginalized groups of Iran, especially women, to express their concerns about socio-cultural, political and economic matters. Such freedom of expression would not be possible through the official media channels (TV, radio and print press), which are controlled by the government.

Many scholars have emphasized the empowering role of ICTs (Sutton and Pollock, 2000) in communication discourse; however, few researchers have investigated ICTs’ impact on promoting women’s rights in the context of Islamic Middle Eastern countries. This paper seeks to shed light on this timely and pertinent subject.

By applying the theory of communication discourse and mobilization and using Internet narratives, this research investigates the role of ICTs and in particular the Internet in emancipating women in Iran in their struggle for social justice.

The rest of paper is organized as follows: Section 2 provides a review of the recent literature on communication discourse, social action and mobilization. Section 3 provides an overview of Iranian women in social and political participation and their roles in the two most prominent cultural and political revolutions. Section 4 discusses the role of Iranian women in digital discourse, and Section 5 provides a critical discussion and conclusion.

2. ICTs and communication discourse

Kaplan and Duchon (1988) argue that ICTs should be viewed from its social and organizational aspects and from the perspectives of its role in communication discourse. Van Dijk (1989) defines discourse as a specific form of language that expands beyond the boundaries of semantic presentation. In this context, discourse is used for the purpose of social interaction and therefore should be interpreted as a means of completing communication between and among different social actors. In this context discourse distinguishes itself from as being passive format of grammar sentences.

Many scholars have also argued that there is a strong relationship between the flow of information provided by ICTs and political behavior. In particular, information is considered to be an important factor in political participation (Bimber, 2001; Quintelier and Vissers, 2008; Tolbert and MacNeal, 2003), political cognition (Eveland et al., 2004; Bimber, 2001; Lau and Redlawsk, 2001; Fiske and Taylor, 1991; Sniderman et al., 1986), public opinion (Norris, 1999, 2001; Neuman and Pool, 1986), political meaning (Davenport, 2007; Neuman et al., 1992), political discussion (Eveland et al., 2004; Norris, 2001; Gamson, 1992) and socio-political mobilization (Bimber, 1998; Ayres, 1999; Norris, 2001; Dahlgren, 2005; Suarez, 2005). Brown et al. (2007) argue that Internet diffusion has been a valuable resource to business (both large and small), government, NGOs and civil society.

Dahlgren (2005) argues that the Internet extends and pluralizes the public sphere which rests upon a “lifeworld” of shared meaning (Danowski, 1991; Benkler, 2006) developed through discussion (Hurrell, 2005). Not only does the digital revolution bring features of freedom of expression to the forefront of our concern and make widespread cultural participation and interaction possible (Balkin, 2004), it also affords national and local governmental bodies the opportunity to enhance democracy (Dertouzos, 1997; Sussman, 1997; Cigler and Burdett, 1998; Bennett and Fielding, 1997; Bimber, 2001).

Verba et al. (1997) argue that citizens’ participation in democratic discourse is at the heart of democracy and access to information is the cornerstone of any shifts that may have taken place in the world (Carnaby and Rao, 2002). Mobilization
theories assert that the use of the Net will facilitate and encourage new forms of political participation (Norris, 1999), which Bonchek (1997) defines as the set of political actions and processes in which individuals are engaged. Network theorists treat ICTs as an enabler as well as constrainer in which social actors use these resources as a socially constructed medium to organize social actions and/or to modify those (Stevenson and Greenberg, 2000). Sarker (2007) argues that theory is affected by action and vice versa. According to the theory of social movements and resource mobilization the fundamental goals of social actions are built upon the shared meanings (Donnellon et al., 1986) which are defined “by conflicts of interest built into institutionalized power relationship” (Jenkins, 1983:528). In this context as noted by Oates (2003) citizens who have access to ICTs are more likely able to share information and to participate in public debate, and such debate is desirable prior to social actions and political processes “whether in an institutionalized form like voting or in a form outside conventional political structures like mass demonstrations” (p. 33).

In this context, ICTs have globally revolutionized communication capabilities among individuals by facilitating news reporting, supporting cultural events, broadening the expression of political views and the dissemination of information, thoughts, ideas, opinions, research articles, and engaging millions of people in digital communities and social networking sites. Fig. 1 shows the role of ICT in communication discourse wherein disseminating information is a pre-requisite for information access which in turn is a pre-requisite for citizen engagement in socio-political and cultural debate. ICTs have had an enormous and positive impact on mobilizing citizens in various cultural, socio-political and economic events—a phenomenon that could not have been predicted decades ago. Adapted and modified from Oates (2003).

In addition, web 2.0 technology with its various applications that support user generated content (e.g., search engines, wikis, blogging and social network sites) has created opportunities for increased participation (O’Reilly, 2005). As such, the women’s rights activists and bloggers were among the first groups to use the Internet to organize protests concerning violence against women, discriminatory laws and the widening gender divide in Iranian society. The women’s demonstration on the streets of Tehran on June 12, 2006 was organized mainly online, particularly through blogs. During the June 2009 presidential election, bloggers were active reporters and organizers of events that occurred before, during and after the presidential election.

3. Women and the Islamic Revolution

Iran is the only nation in the Islamic Middle Eastern countries that has seen two major revolutions, namely the 1906 Constitutional Revolution and the 1979 Islamic Revolution. The country has also experienced the nationalization of the Iranian Oil Company and thereafter the democratic movement led by Prime Minister Dr. Mohammad Mosaddegh in the 1950’s; the March 8, 1979 women’s mass demonstration on the streets of Tehran; the student-led protests in Tehran and other major cities on July 9, 1999; and on June 12, 2006 the women’s rights and blogger activists’ demonstration against discriminatory laws in Iran (just to name a few). Iranian women had an active role in all of these events. It was not surprising to see the massive presence of women in street protests as a result of the disputed 2009 presidential election. Esfandiari (1997) points out that women in Iran have a long history of participating in socio-political movements. The women’s movement in Iran
started in the late nineteenth century and gained momentum during the Iranian Constitutional Revolution between 1906 and 1911, where women participated in street protests. However, after the revolution, they were sent back inside their homes (Esfandiar, 1997). But not every woman retreated away from the public sphere. A number of educated women remained visible and began to set up schools for girls and to publish women’s journals. These women began a network linking Tehran and the other provinces, which gradually led to the development of the women’s movement. Iranian women had a strong presence in the revolution of 1979 and they created a sense of participation among men and women from all classes and factions of society (Esfandiar, 1997). In the marches that led to the revolution, there were professional women without scarves, women from traditional backgrounds wearing the traditional black veil and others from lower and middle class families with their children. They stood shoulder to shoulder, hoping that the revolution would bring improvement to their economic and social status and, most importantly, to their legal status. Katouzian (2009) reminds us that both highly educated and professional modern and traditional women may have played an active role in 1979, while the former being inevitably more visible as they had not suspected that they would be forced to adopt the Islamic dress code in schools, at the workplace or in public.

In the aftermath of the Islamic revolution, women were the first group to be neglected and oppressed by the new elites in power. Oppressive conceptions of gender in Iran were reinforced with the general desecularization of Iranian society. For example, the 1967 Family Protection Law which, among others, permitted limited polygamy and made it possible for women to apply for divorce under certain circumstances—was among the first laws to be abolished by the Islamic regime (Katouzian, 2009). The traditionalist conservatives, both clergy and lay, believed that women should not only wear the hejab but also should be encouraged to preoccupy themselves only with the precious function of motherhood, rearing alert and active human beings (Workman, 1991). In his well known speech on March 6, 1979, the supreme leader Khomeini declared that government offices were full of ‘naked women’ and demanded that they should wear the Islamic hejab in the workplace (Gheytanchi, 2000; Katouzian, 2009). In March 8, 1979 the International Women’s Day organized by opposition groups turned into street protestations against Khomeini’s new announcement regarding the veiling of women and banning of the Family Protection Law. Thousands of women flooded the streets of Tehran demanding that the authorities hear their plea. It was during this demonstration that for the first time the organized Islamic pressure group called the Hezbollah (Party of God) attacked the peaceful women’s demonstration (Gheytanchi, 2000).

3.1. Women and social injustice in Iran

Van Dijk (2001) points to the following inequalities when discussing inequality and discrimination against women in any given society: (a) power differences in everyday conversational interaction, (b) verbal sexual harassment, (c) gender inequalities in bureaucratic and professional text and talk, (d) limited access to and control over various forms of media discourse, (e) discrimination in hiring and promotion in discourse in the context of organizations, and (f) stereotypical and sexist representations of women in male-dominated discourse in general, and in the mass media in particular (p. 358). While the latter is a lesser issue in Islamic societies and particularly in Iran due to its application of Islamic laws, representations in the mass media, however, tend to highlight a woman’s role primarily as a mother and her general duties in family. Other points mentioned by Van Dijk hold valid when assessing the status of women in Iran. What distinguishes women’s status in Iran, as discussed by many Iranian female bloggers, is that the Islamic ideological views of the role of women in society are enforced by the political establishment and the powerful clerical elites of Iran and as means of power domination. Dominance is defined by Van Dijk (1993) as the exercise of social power by elites, institutions, groups and/or individuals resulting in social inequality, including but not limited to political, cultural and gender inequalities. As such, those in power reinforce patriarchal views that extensively limit and dominate the freedoms afforded to women.

Social justice is an integral part of democratic discourse (Choue et al., 2006; Shearing and Wood, 2003; Habermas, 1998; Mann, 1970). Stahl (2008) argues that while it is difficult to give a comprehensive definition of the term “justice”, three main aspects of justice appear in the recent literature including justice of exchange (iustitia commutativa), justice of distribution (iustitia distributiva), and legal justice (iustitia legalis) (see Stahl, 2008 for more discussion on social justice).

Misra (2009) points out that social movements share five major things: (1) a feeling of injustice, (2) an understanding of oppression as a political condition, (3) a desire to change political conditions or shift power, (4) a belief in the power of many, and (5) the presence of the powerless. Newburry et al. (2008) argue that women in positions of power are influenced by both the institutional structures and individual cognitive schemas. In particular, when the institutional structures undermine the legitimacy of women’s rights it can bring unfavorable outcomes for women in terms of pay or promotions. Sarker (2007) points out that female activists who struggle for equity and social justice often face charges of illegitimacy or irrelevance.

Many well educated female doctors, journalists, lawyers, engineers, educators, medical staff, ICT professionals, research scholars as well as ordinary women in Iran are demanding an end to discriminatory laws against women in their country. Despite the fact that the number of university students has increased from 2.15 million in 2005 to 3.5 million in 2008 (Payyand, 2008), the Islamic state’s ideological view on the role of women in society has severely impacted their roles in the workplace. For example, although the number of female students accounts for 63% of the total students enrolled in universities,
only 7% of tenured university faculty position are held by women (United Nations, 2010). Also, despite the presence of highly qualified and educated women in Iran in areas such as medicine, engineering, economic and social sciences, the share of female employment in the country has decreased drastically during recent years. For example, albeit the number of women employed in non-agricultural sectors was 13.8% before the 1979 revolution, this number decreased to 12% in 2002 (Iran Statistical Yearbook, 2002/3). In the ICT sector the situation is even worse—female employees accounted for 6.1% of the total full time employees in 2000, yet this value decreased to 4.5% in 2006 (ITU, 2008). This is of particular importance when comparing Iran’s ICT employment equity with other Middle Eastern countries As a case in point, the number of female full-time ICT staff in Kuwait has increased from 28.4% in 1997 to 43% in 2005 (ITU, 2008).

Women in Iran who manage to overcome the initial barriers to employment will face gender discrimination at their workplace. This discrimination can be seen in the discrepancy of women’s wages in non-agricultural sectors—female employees earned only 41% of wages earned by their male counterparts, according to one United Nations report (UNDP, 2008). Sarker (2007) points out that the imbalances of power and consumption of resources have led to conditions that are not viable for the healthy existence of the common person. In this context the unequal wages (hence wealth) and restrictions on women involvement in leadership positions in the workplace can be viewed as imbalances of power. For example, only 4% of the total employed women in Iran are in leadership and management positions according to Moghadam (2010).

4. Women’s movements and blogging in Iran

Women in Iran have openly voiced their concerns about the socio-economic and political situation through different channels from media publications, supportive NGOs, and blogging. For example, while there were 13 women’s rights NGOs in Iran before the 1979 revolution, the number of women’s rights NGOs increased to 430 in 2005 (United Nations, 2010). In addition there are other active women’s rights NGOs that are not officially registered (Rostami Povey, 2006). In the area of women’s newspapers and magazines, prior to the revolution there were only two publications, by 1999 this number increased to ten newspapers (Rostami Povey, 2006) despite the fact many of these independent and specialized magazines were banned from publishing in recent years (Freedom House, 2009; Human Rights Watch, 2010).

Since the first Farsi blog appeared on the Net in 2001 (Dayem, 2009), thousands of weblogs including blogs related to women issues in Iran have been created. The blogosphere, as noted by Stanyer (2006), is an interconnected universe of blogs and women have been among the leading bloggers within the Iranian blogosphere. The popularity of female bloggers’ sites is the result of more than a century of active social and political participation of women in Iran’s modern history.

4.1. Women in digital sphere

Sutton and Pollock (2000) argue that female activists promoting social justice understand the importance of access to and use of new technology. Parvin Ardalan, the Iranian women’s rights activist who launched the One Million Signatures campaign in 2006 and who is the founding member and editor of Change for Equality, said in a recent interview, “Every print magazine for women we had was closed, so we created a new world for ourselves in cyberspace” (Soguel, 2010). For many women’s rights activists, the Internet offers open lines of communication and a means to reach likeminded individuals, particularly when traditional print media serve as a blockade to the freedom of speech in Iran.

A review of the most popular women blogs and website (in terms of the number of visitors and the number of posted comments) pooled from Alexa.com and belonging to feminist bloggers and women NGOs shows that various women’s issues have been discussed openly on the Net. These issues cover many aspects of a woman’s daily life in Iran form socio-cultural concerns to political and economical issues. These issues highlight the discriminatory laws of Iran against women as the main barriers toward women’s development in Iran. Some of the main issues discussed in these blogs and website are summarized below in order to stress the important role of ICTs and the Internet in particular in emancipating women in Iran.

4.1.1. Discriminatory laws

The discriminatory laws discussed in feminist blogs analyze many aspects of family laws in Iran that directly and indirectly impact women’s socio-economic situation in Iran. These discussions include but not limited to:

Inheritance: According to the Sharia law, if a man dies while married and has children, the sons always receive twice the amount of inheritance compared to the daughters. However, if a man dies in a marriage and doesn’t have any children, the widow receives only one fourth of his belongings and the rest of his estate may end up to the hands of the government. On the contrary, if a woman dies before her husband, the man receives the total of her belongings.

Polygamy: Polygamy in Iran has taken a turn; a man can now take a second wife without the permission of his first wife. According to the Islamic Sharia Law, a man can marry up to four wives. The prevailing family-law in Iran allowed men to marry more than one woman at the same time only if they can provide financially for their wives (Family Law, 2010).

Temporary marriage (Sigheh): In a temporary marriage, the wife does not benefit from her husband’s will nor does he have to pay a monthly allowance to her. Unless stated otherwise, men have to pay (mehriyyeh) an amount of money or something of value during a divorce. Note: it could be a rose or something with a monetary value. This sort of payment doesn’t cover any expenses for a divorcée. In any type of marriage whether temporary or permanent, the wife does not have the right to file for divorce. On the other hand, men have the sole right to cut chases and file for divorce or step out a marriage.
According to the discriminatory laws, an immediate marriage can take place for a man in these conditions:

- First wife does not satisfy sexually.
- First wife has an illness or is infertile.
- Imprisonment of the first wife for a year.
- Any type of addiction to alcohol or drugs (chronic addiction).
- First wife leaves the husband for a period of 6 months to a year.

**Divorce:** According to the Sharia law, after a divorce women cannot take custody of their children. The children are given to the father unless the girl is above 11 years of age and the boy is above 2 years of age (Amjadian, 2008).

### 4.1.2. Social and cultural issues

Many other issues that have had a social impact on women’s lives and are widely discussed in women blogs include:

#### Addiction and divorce

Men can remarry or divorce their spouses if the wife is an addict. But a women needs to prove her husband is an addict and in many cases she might not get a divorce permit.

One of these reports discussed widely in blogs and websites is about Fatemeh, a woman who was forced into marriage at the age of 14. She is now a mother of three children and seeking for divorce because husband is addicted to drugs. Fatemeh lives in a rented single room with her children. Her husband has left them for seven years and he is no longer their provider, although he does visit once a month to forcefully take Fatemeh’s money or use the children to sell drugs on the street or to deliver drugs to customers. Fatemeh has tried many times to divorce but has failed. Unfortunately, in these cases, many women commit suicide or plan the death of their husbands to release themselves from this dreadful life. Further, since the legal age at which females can marry is 13, some men have been known to take advantage of the law by marrying multiple young girls and using them as sex slaves (Ebadi, 2010).

### 4.1.3. Stoning

One of the prominent topics discussed on almost all feminist blogs is the discussion of stoning and its negative socio-cultural and psychological impacts on society. According to Iranian Islamic law, while men are able to have four wives and many other temporary wives (sigheh), women may be stoned to death if they have sexual relations outside of marriage. Not only is the secular society of Iran against stoning, but many in the Islamic community condemn stoning as an act against humanity and the Quran. One of these Islamic scholars is Jila Mohamed Shariyat Panah, a female Quran educator. Her views are discussed on many feminist websites. According to Jila, stoning is not mentioned in the Quran (The Feminist School, 2010). She reasons that if Islamic law is based on the Holy book, then in what ways is stoning merciful and how does one determine the number of stones to be thrown?

### 4.1.4. Women and sport

Women in sports is another major topic discussed in the Iranian blogs in general and the feminist blogs in particular. The restrictions applied to women in attending football matches in stadiums and other sport compounds have not only gained significant attention in weblogs but also in organized protest rallies. These organized demonstrations sought to break the ban so that women could attend this popular sport at the Azadi Stadium in Tehran; however, the rallies have ended with arrests, injuries and the prosecution of young female football supporters in Tehran (Meydaan, 2008).

Other feminist weblogs are specialized in discussions of literature and poetry and/or diaristic content. One of the female bloggers who wrote one of the earliest and the most visited blog in Iran is a young mother of two. Her blog, “Nooshi and chicks” (http://nooshi.org), presents a story about a young woman who wants to divorce her husband and to take custody of her two children. The intersecting and unique aspects of the blog that attract many visitors rely on her willingness to explain details her life as well as her detailed descriptions of her small children’s thoughts and activities. Nooshi grasps an image and describes her children’s behavior in a simple reserved manner. Her simple stories not only criticize the discriminatory laws of Iran but also demonstrate her strong ability to write about things that many people might disregard as mundane. However, her stories communicate the incredible events of daily domestic life in Iran and their impact on ordinary life-world experiences.

In addition ICTs and in particular blogging have provided other marginalized groups and individuals who are active in underground communities including but not limited to underground rap music groups, gays, radical feminist groups, religious minorities as well atheists to voice their desires for change and social inclusion.

It is also important to note that the Iranian women bloggers are mainly active in larger cities and generally from middle class households. However, many women in rural areas do not have access to the Internet, nor do they have enough skills or education to use ICT tools and services in order to express their thoughts and opinions regarding the struggles they face in their daily lives. In addition, the conservative cultural environment in many of these areas does not favor women’s involvement in communication discourse. In other words, the digital divide in Iran is not only pronounced as the divide between poor and rich but also between and across urban and rural areas where there may be no access to ICT resources. Despite the fact that women’s issues in rural areas are discussed in prominent women websites and blogs, these articles are mainly in the form of edited news reports rather than from the women in these areas via their own discourse.
4.2. The Iranian women digital community: political participation and mobilization

Bashi (2009) points out that since the 1990’s, various women’s NGOs, magazines such as Zanan, and specific campaign movements such as the One Million Signatures Demanding Changes to Discriminatory Laws, the Stop Stoning Forever Campaign and the Stop the violence against women movement have been established in Iran. Many of these NGOs question their “male dominated” society and have requested equal rights for men and women. Many women including journalists, lawyers and leaders in women’s NGOs and groups have started websites and weblogs to support their agendas. Bashi (2009) explains that women have worked relentlessly and across ideological divides to publicize, mobilize and realize their specific demands for women’s rights in society and have gained substantial momentum among bloggers who campaign for cultural change and equal rights for Iranian men and women. A few years before the disputed 2009 presidential election, many NGOs instigated demonstrations in support of women’s rights in Iran through active blogging campaigns, e-mails and face-to-face meetings. As a result of such campaigns, women were able to organize a street protest in Tehran on June 12, 2006 against the violation of women’s rights in the Iranian constitution and the increased gender divide in Iranian society. Unfortunately, if not unexpectedly, many of the female activists were arrested for their engagement in the demonstration (Mir-Hosseini, 2006). Despite the brutal crackdown on this demonstration, women succeeded in this cause because of the substantial support they gained in the public and digital spheres. Thousands of pictures and video clips were posted on the Internet as well as on social networking sites supporting the women’s movement and condemning the brutality of the police. Following this demonstration, the campaign One Million Signatures Demanding Changes to Discriminatory Laws was launched online on August 28, 2006 (One Million Signatures, 2006). The women’s rights activists highlighted this event as one of the most magnificent social campaigns the Iranian democratic movement has produced in its modern history:

“The successful implementation of this campaign will prove once and for all that the demand for changes to discriminatory laws is not limited to a few thousand women who have supported these types of efforts in the past. In fact, the successful implementation of this campaign will demonstrate that support for legal changes are broad-based and that a large majority of men and women are suffering from the inequities that are promoted by Iranian law” (One Million Signatures, 2006).

Prior to 2009, women’s rights activists from many campaign groups have built a coalition for women’s empowerment to promote their agendas towards presidential elections. Since then we have seen women on the streets of major cities in Iran voicing their desire for democratic changes and to put an end to discriminatory laws. The killing of the young female philosophy student Neda Agha Soltan on the streets of Tehran on June 20, 2009 was captured on a mobile phone and was promptly posted on the Internet. This utilization of an ICT made the Iranian women’s movement much stronger and Neda quickly became an icon for the entire democratic movement.

The difference between the current women’s protestations and their previous actions is not only their massive presence on the street demonstrations and their nonviolent democratic aspiration (Bashi, 2010) but also their active presence on the web. Women in Iran have created an immense and strong supportive network of blogs and other social ties through networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube that speak to the momentum of their presence in a democratic discourse. These women took the initiative to talk directly to their peers and the rest of the world about the unjust social conditions of women and girls in Iran. Women have also achieved a high presence on the Internet. While in the physical sphere women may suffer from an ever increasing socio-political, cultural and economic gap between genders and discriminatory laws, in the digital sphere the situation is different. The number of female Internet users in Iran has reached as high as 49% of the total number of Internet users according to ITU 2008 report. This is the highest Internet usage rate for women in the Middle East. This is a high presence in the digital world considering the gender-segregated society of Iran. That’s why it is not surprising that Iranian women take advantage of the Internet, primarily through blogs, to voice their desire for democratic changes and to put an end to discriminatory laws. The killing of the young female philosophy student Neda Agha Soltan on the streets of Tehran on June 20, 2009 was captured on a mobile phone and was promptly posted on the Internet. This utilization of an ICT made the Iranian women’s movement much stronger and Neda quickly became an icon for the entire democratic movement.

Female bloggers are among the most successful bloggers in Iran and their blogs are among the most popular, receiving visits and comments by many in Iran. Surprisingly (in the context of the Middle East), many active female bloggers use their real identity online despite the high risk of doing so in Iran. Among those who use their real identity we find professional journalists, women’s rights activist, and professionals such as lawyers, engineers and doctors. Withheld (2009) points out that the state censorship, low payment, and the high risk of arrest and other punitive measures for journalists who dare to take an investigative role have pushed Iranian journalists to utilize the virtual world of the Internet. University students have always been active in social and political movements in Iran and their blogs are among the most popular critical blogs in the country.

A review of 50 of the most popular Iranian blogs (in terms of the most linked and cited blogs within the Iranian blogosphere) published by Networkedblogs (2010) shows that 14 of these blogs are written by female bloggers. 10 blogs have anonymous identities and the remaining blogs (26) are written by men (at the time of writing this paper). While a majority of these blogs contain socio-political and cultural themes, the diaristic style, poetry and technology related blogs are among the list of popular blogs as well. A clear majority of these blogs (40) are written by people who have provided their real identities, indicating that known bloggers write the most cited and trusted blogs. As mentioned, one such blogger is Jila Bani Yaghoob, a journalist and women’s rights activist. She and other female activists initiated a campaign for freedom of the press and the release of jailed journalists among whom was her husband, Bahman Ahmadi-Amouee. She writes in her blog “We are Journalists” about an open letter directed to the head of the Iranian Judiciary’s Human Rights Committee regarding her husband and other imprisoned journalists: “[Bahman’s] critical articles about the ninth administration [led by
Mr. Ahmadinejad], written within the framework of the constitution, have been described as “insults against the president.” The critical articles have now led to an imprisonment and lashing sentence…” (Jila, 2010). Jila was awarded the sixth international “Best of the Blogs” prize for her Farsi blog (RWB, 2010). Another Iranian blogger and women’s rights activist, Leila, writes in her blog (femirani.com),

“[…] Pictures and videos clips posted on the Internet clearly show that women in Iran are in the forefront of street protests. These brave women are confronting the brutality of police and Basij forces (the plainclothes paramilitary forces). Seeing these images makes me proud of being an Iranian and a woman. There is no doubt this civil uprising, without the presence of such prominent women, wouldn’t be possible. These days a woman [Neda] is a symbol of protest in Iran. Women in Iran are the pillars of this movement. They did not flood into streets just because of the fraud practiced in the presidential election but also they come into streets to protest against the inequality between men and women…they come to achieve their rights whether socio-economic, legal or political.”

In a slightly different view, the day before the presidential election another female journalist writes about Shadi, a young woman who wanted to vote for a more liberal candidate (Modarresi, 2009). Shadi comments, “This time we are going to carefully monitor the performance of the next government. We’re going to ensure our demands are addressed. We do not want our votes to be in vain.” Another woman in Tehran encouraged others to vote for Mousavi: “Vote for Mousavi! He is going to make it possible for women to decide freely about their headscarves! He will let women regain their real social status!” A group of women cheerfully say that they will remove their scarves as a symbolic gesture the day Mousavi has been elected (Modarresi, 2009).

Women played an important role before, during and after the disputed presidential election in June 12, 2009 in organizing and leading the mass demonstrations in Iran, both in forms of online activities as well as their physical presence in the street demonstrations. Pictures, video clips and articles posted on social network sites, YouTube, blogs and international news agencies show the important role of women in civil movements, a process that was initiated years ago through various women’s NGO’s and women’s rights movements as well as through independent female bloggers, lawyers and journalists in Iran.

The recent events in Iran changed the role and the perception of women in Iran. They were not only the marginalized suppressed groups but an important force to stand against repression and the military brutalities. Iranian women were more organized than ever. They effectively used all possible communication channels from Facebook, Twitter, e-mail and blogging to face-to-face contact and served as active opinion makers with families, friends and neighbors. They seek not only to protest against the fraudulent election results but also to raise their voices for improving women’s rights in society and against any form of gender discrimination in Iran. Women were present everywhere: on the frontlines in street clashes, as speakers in mass demonstrations, in schools and universities and online. Despite the fact that many were brutally beaten, arrested, raped and even killed while in military custody, they refused to relent and showed courage, continuing to make their peaceful presence a compelling statement for democratic change in Iran. As emphasized by Bosi (2007) individuals may choose to participate in political discourse in order to state their views and communicate their feelings. They want to express their anger at injustices or want to make known that they are morally outraged and disaffected with the authorities who are held accountable for an unwanted situation. Sarker (2007) argues that women’s movements have been focused on structural changes in society that involve paradigmatic shifts in social, political, and cultural behavior; therefore, “they continually seek to explore and represent aspects of history that have been obscured, in the belief that oppression, on the quotidian level, is structural rather than individual” (p. 2).

Despite the fact that women’s voices in Iran have been neglected by the hardliners and the conservative clergy, ICTs has helped women to mobilize masses for their cause and to get public support both domestically and internationally. As a consequence the ultimate results of such supports were the release of some of the imprisoned women rights activists, lawyers and journalists. There are also numerous reports in regard to the positive impacts of digital campaigns which resulted in reverting court verdicts even in difficult cases such as stoning. The recent camping for Skineh Mohamadi Ashtiani who is sentenced to death by the means of stoning for “adultery” got enormous national and international attention (http://freesakineh.org/). However, it is not clear that ICTs and in particular blogging was able to make institutional changes in Iran, but tools and services provided by ICTs have helped the Iranian women to effectively and efficiently participate in communication discourse by forming digital communities and by the means of web publishing.

5. Conclusion

While women in Iran were active participants in the major social-political movements that have occurred during the last century including but not limited to two major revolutions, the patriarchy of Iran and its new powerful elites have often neglected women as active actors in the socio-political and economic development of Iran. Despite major improvements to women’s social, legal and economic conditions after the Constitutional Revolution during the 1960s and 1970s, Iran’s Islamic revolution reversed many rights by means of imposing Islamic political ideology and practices on women’s life of Iran.

The increased number of educated women during 1990s and the expansion of networked mega cities in Iran provided them with a good foundation and the ability to share and disseminate their thoughts and concerns about social injustices in Iran and therefore gave them strength to demand constitutional changes. Women’s access to ICT training not only
provided them the ability to close the gender digital gap but also to enhance their role and presence in society. Thousands of highly educated women such as doctors, engineers, journalists, lawyers, social workers and health professionals, teachers, professors and other professions in conjunction with female university and high school students became more active in the social, cultural and political spheres of Iranian society. In this regard, ICTs provide the women of Iran with the tools to effectively and efficiently participate in the wider public discourse. However, these tools and services are not available in rural and less developed regions in Iran preventing female populations of these areas to participate in that public discourse.

Various social, cultural, political, legal and economic topics are discussed in the female authored blogs and women’s NGOs of Iran. One of the main concerns discussed in blogs is the discriminatory laws against women in Iran. Blogging not only empowered women in discussing these issues in a public sphere but also enabled them to organize rallies in form of various online petitions and street protestations to voice their concern and to gain public support. This support is highlighted by the fact that many women's blogs are among the most visited and reader-responsive blogs within the Iranian blogosphere.

The June 2009 presidential election was a turning point for women in Iran. They had an active presence and the courage to participate in street demonstrations and to gain respect for peaceful demand for changes in Iran. Bosi (2007) points out that individuals participate in protest actions to not only manifest their own views but also to gain dignity in their lives, reject the subordination of their identities, and to establish grounds for pride. For some individuals, the sacrifices and resources spent put toward the movement’s goals were an indication of their commitments to oppose unjust institutions and demand changes in the current situation (Bosi, 2007). Neda’s death made the voice of Iranian women much louder both within Iranian society and across the globe. As Carnaby and Rao (2002) write, the people’s voice must be clear and loud—clear so that policymakers understand the citizens’ concerns and loud so that they have an incentive to pay attention to what is said and this was exactly what the women of Iran have done not only by their physical presence in street demonstrations but also by the means of blogging and being active participants and opinion makers within digital communities.

Despite the fact that women’s voices in Iran seemed to be neglected by the hardliners and the conservative clergy, they were successful in organizing and mobilizing masses for their cause and to get public support. The effect of women’s participation in democratic discourse expanded beyond the national boundaries and imposed positive impacts on other women across the region, in particular the female digital communities and intellectuals in the Middle East.

Even though this research was limited to Iran’s unique situation, lessons learned from the Iranian women’s digital movement can provide valuable information and insights to other Middle Eastern women who live under similar oppressive socio-economic, political and cultural conditions as women in Iran. In this context the rich experiences of the Iranian women activists’ in using ICT tools and services to make their voices heard will slowly but confidently mobilize other women in the Middle East to rally for change.

Acknowledgments

The author appreciates the assistance of Ronak Kordnejad and her amazing work in reviewing and categorizing many articles and comments posted on major female-authored Farsi blogs and websites as well as the valuable comments and suggestions by Eva Woyzbun, Dr. Jan E Servaes and anonymous reviewers.

References


