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Women's Voices: The Journey towards Cyberfeminism in Iran

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> You can kill me as soon as you like, but you cannot stop the emancipation of women. (Táhirih[1] citied in J.E. Esslemont, 1980: 148)

Abstract

The working paper looks at the history of Iranian media by and for women, culminating in cyberfeminism. The main focus are women's websites and cyber campaigns dedicated to improving women's rights, and how they helped to mobilize Iranian women's movements. There are two main case studies: The main case study on websites is the "Feminist School" as an important site for feminist discourse and women's movements managed from inside Iran. The main case study in relation to cyber campaigns is the "My stealthy freedom" campaign which is undertaken from outside Iran. Through these two case studies, the paper aims to answer the following questions: To what extent and how do these sites provide strategic opportunities for the Iranian women's movement to advocating gender equality and women's rights? And did the cyber campaign help to build coalitions between women's movements inside Iran and diaspora activism outside of Iran? The case studies are based on the author's earlier work on the history of the women' movement, interviews with leaders and directors of women's websites and directors of mobilizing cyber campaigns along with self-reflective and discourse analysis of the websites and campaigns. A biography of the author can be found here: http://www.pen-deutschland.de/en/themen/writers-in-exile/ehemalige-stipendiaten/mansoureh-shojaee/

Keywords

Cyberfeminism, clicktivism, women's movement, Iran, social media.

[1] Táhirih (Qurratol Ayn) [1817–52] was an Iranian poet who was executed on account of her outspokenness and free unveiling. See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/T%C3%A1hirih: accessed 5 July 2016.

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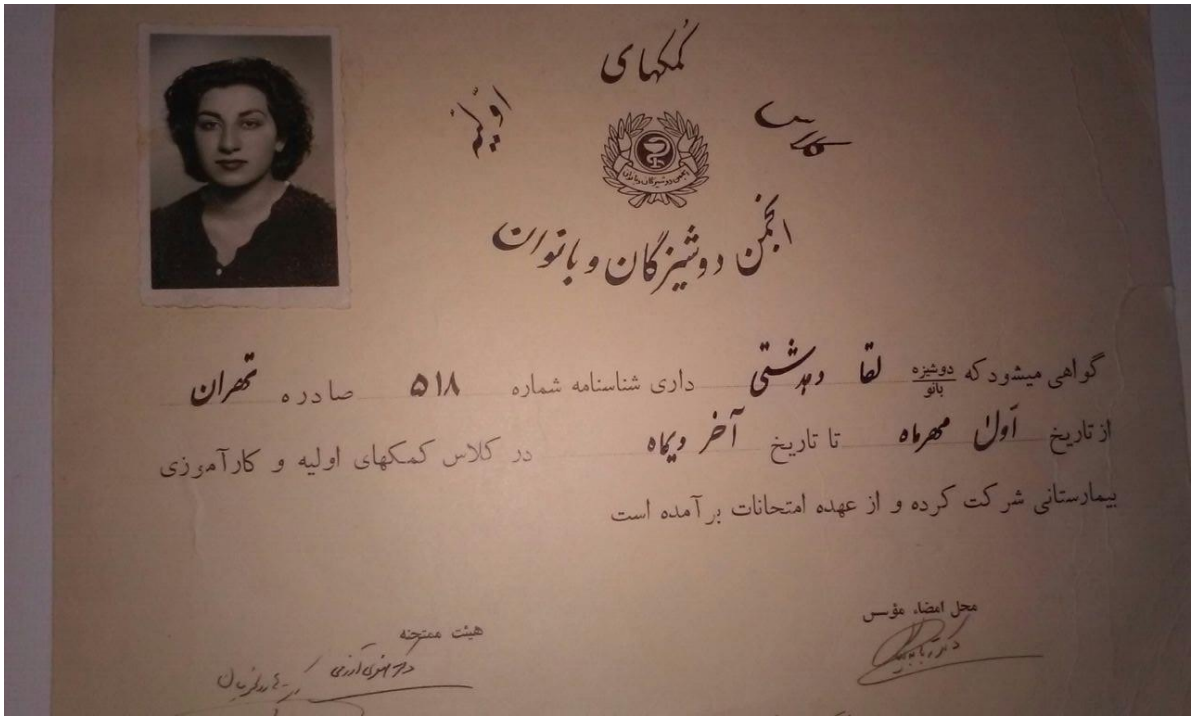
I wish to thank my friends and Iranian colleagues from the Feminist School, especially Noushin Ahamadi Khorasani. I am also thankful to Sahar Mofakham and Isaac Lawrence for their help in translating the Persian version of this text into English. Above all, I would like to thank my mother, Lagha Dehdashti, who was the first woman who taught me the importance of fighting for women's equality (see picture 1).



Picture 1: Lagha Dehdashti's membership certificate in *Anjoman e Doushizegan & Banovan* (Ladies' and Girls' Assembly). See section 2.4 for more information on this Assembly. Source: Author's personal collection.

1. INTRODUCTION

This working paper looks at the history of Iranian women's contribution to journalism and media, via an exploration of today's cyberfeminism that links Iranian feminism and the Iranian diaspora. It positions cyberfeminism in relation to the history of the Iranian women's movement, beginning from the first women's newspaper to the emergence of cyberfeminism in Iran and now in the Iranian diaspora.

The working paper describes how the media has shaped and informed the Iranian feminist movement, which has struggled to survive the oppressive tactics of various Iranian regimes. The first section explores the early journals and magazines of the Iranian feminist movements. The second is a study of women's websites and cyber campaigns on women's rights. And the third is a discussion on social media and cyberfeminism in Iran and in the diaspora.

The paper is based on the author's original research, activism and analysis. The first section is based on her research into early feminist journals from 1994 onward. The second is based on her personal engagement in feminist activism and websites – in particular those of the Feminist School, of which she is a founder and editorial-board member. The third forms her analysis and reflection on the role of cyber campaigns in mobilizing (or not) Iranian women's movements.

The next section gives a detailed history of the many different forms of media produced by feminists in Iran over the last 100 years. This is followed by a discussion on the emergence of cyberfeminism. The fourth section then provides two in-depth case studies which illustrate how the Internet was harnessed by feminists in and outside Iran. The first case study deals with the Feminist School website with which the author is deeply engaged. The Feminist School[1] was established in 2008 with the setting up of its website edited by Noushin Ahmadi Khorasani.[2] This became an important site for feminist discourse and women's movements, managed inside Iran but also linked to writers (including the author) working in the feminist diaspora. The second case study is based on the author's analysis of the well-known international cyber campaign 'My Stealthy Freedom'.[3] On 3 May 2014, this movement set up a Facebook page, managed outside Iran by Iranian journalist Masih Alinejad, and publishes photos of women living in Iran but without wearing a hijab – even if only for a minute. Finally, the conclusion will reflect on the role of 'clicktivism' in contemporary cyberfeminism.

The working paper explores the following questions:

- What is the history of cyberfeminism in Iran?
- How do current cyberfeminism sites provide opportunities for the Iranian women's movement?
- How does cyberspace support the women's movement's goals in advocating gender equality and women's rights?
- How do cyber campaigns outside Iran work with the women's movement in Iran?
- Do these campaigns build a bridge between women's movements inside Iran and diaspora activism outside Iran?

[1] http://feministschool.com/: accessed 2 April 2016.
[2] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Noushin_Ahmadi_Khorasani: accessed 22 April 2016.
[3] http://mystealthyfreedom.net/en/about: accessed 2 April 2016.

The research is based on original material on the history of the women' movement, interviews with leaders and directors of women's websites and directors of cyber campaigns, and self-reflective analysis of the Feminist School website and the Stealthy Freedom cyber campaign. The paper was originally written in Persian, and then translated and edited with the support of the ISS Civic Innovation Research Initiative.

2. A Short History Of Iranian Women's Political And Civic Struggles

2.1. Early Beginnings

Persian history began six centuries before the birth of Christ, when the Achaemenid Empire came to power. It was followed by a succession of dynasties lasting until the end of the Pahlavi dynasty in 1979. This was replaced by the Islamic republic of Iran. The ancient, pre-Islamic dynasties ruled the area before AD 651 (the end of the reign of Yazdegerd III, last king of the Sassanian Empire). Greek historians such as Plutarch wrote about the situation of women in Persia before the rise of Islam, stating that they enjoyed the some legal and social freedoms as men (Sheykh ul Islami,1972: 63). 'The main religion of Iranians was Zoroastrianism. Their sacred book the *Avesta,* names six deities, of which half are women. In this period both genders are seen as equal. Iranian women are involved in social matters, and participate in martial matters. In the Sassanid dynasty, two Iranian princesses Pourandokht, and Azarmidokht for a short time ruled the country' (Sanjana, 1982: 25–6).

Iran was attacked several times by tribal groups and the rival empires of Rome, Greece, Turkey, Arabia and Mongolia. The conflict between Rome and Iran lasted from 92 BC to AD 631, and the Arab attack on Persia took place in AD 651. All of these empires influenced the situation of women in Iranian society. The greatest impact was felt during the 200 years that Iran was under Arabian rule, which led to the spread of Islam throughout the country from AD 651 until 884. In the mid-nineteenth century, more modern thinking and systematic protest by Iranian intellectuals emerged against the ruling Ghajar dynasty. This dynasty ruled Iran for over a century (1795–1925) and was criticized by intellectuals both male and female – for their corruption and repression (Kasravi,1940: 25–9).

Many scholars consider the Iranian Constitutional Revolution of 1905–7 a turning point in the history of modern Iran, which ushered in a century of popular struggles and resistance against the absolutism of the shahs and Western imperialism. One of the most well-regarded Iranian publications, the *Encyclopedia Iranica*,[4] based at New York's Columbia University, has the main role of documenting the intellectual background of the Iranian Constitutional Revolution. This movement of intellectuals led to the revolution that demanded a constitutional monarchy and the establishment of a parliament and voting rights.

> At the time even the text of the Constitution itself did not have universal support. Yet, in spite of ideological ambiguities, the Revolution remains an epoch-making episode in the modern history of Persia because of its political achievements and its enduring social and cultural consequences. As a modern revolution, it was aimed at dislodging the old order by means of popular action and by advocacy of the tenets of liberalism, secularism, and nationalism. For the first time in the course of modern Persian history, the

[4] http://www.iranicaonline.org/: accessed 5 July 2016.

> revolutionaries sought to replace arbitrary power with law, representative government, and social justice and to resist the encroachment of imperial powers with conscious nationalism, popular activism, and economic independence. Constitutionalists also tried to curb the power of the conservative religious establishment through modern education and judicial reforms. By centralizing the state, they sought to reduce the power of the tribal and urban notables. The greater sense of nationhood that emerged out of the Revolution has remained essential to the modern Persian identity.[5]

During the Constitutional Revolution, women participated in struggles engaging in underground activities against foreign forces, boycotting of foreign goods and raising funds for the establishment of the National Bank (Sanasarian, 2005: 40).

However, in 1906, when the nationalist movement succeeded in establishing a constitution demanding the 'equality of all citizens in law', women were not recognized in the definition of 'citizen'. The emergence of the women's movement in Iran goes back to this time, when women demanded the right to free association, education and freedom of the press.

The 'Iranian women's movement' was thus started by women concerned with liberal democracy and changes to the constitution. It was a sub-movement of the overall intellectual drive that demanded liberty and equality within the constitutional movement, the primary demands of which were:

a) Access to education
b) Establishment of societies and independent publishing
c) Political and social participation

At the beginning of 1907, following the victory of the constitutional activists and the establishment of parliament, a modern constitution was founded. It was inspired by Iranian culture and included regulations adopted from France, the Netherlands and Belgium. The country's Islamic clergy was able to amend the constitution to include some Islam-inspired rules, including the disenfranchisement of women. Female constitutional activists who had worked against the dictatorship were, along with male activists, prevented from voting by this new constitution, and were treated as being on a par with children, the physically disabled and the mentally ill.

Women activists responded with a groundswell of objection against this discrimination, which they saw as a systemic denial of their rights. Progressive women engaged in a set of political and civil efforts to form a new independent movement, which knew what women wanted and demanded.

The voice of this sub-movement to the public movement against dictatorship was expressed in specialized journals for women, in the establishment of women-only organizations and in the founding of girls' schools.

[5] http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/constitutional-revolution-i: accessed 16 April 2016.

2.2. From Constitutional Movement to Islamic Revolution

The Iranian women's movement has, from its inception up to the present day, given priority to two major elements: independent organizations for women and the production of a distinct women's media.

The aforementioned media is a powerful tool, which has had a very profound role in increasing the voice of women and stating their demands. Women's engagement in the media has varied throughout the different eras of modern Iranian history, but their continuing demands to be represented keeps the movement alive. When government pressure reduces, the volume of women's media (e.g. periodicals and newspapers) increases significantly.

Research and investigation into the media in general, and the publication of newspapers in particular, shows that the role of, and the language used by, the press – especially the women's press – has been influenced by political power and civil society (Shamsolvaezin, 2010). General uprisings, such as the activities involved in pushing for a constitutional monarchy, and other historical turning points – e.g. the nationalization of the Anglo-Iranian Oil company, the Islamic Revolution, President Mohammad Khatami's Reform Government, and the Green Movement – all led to major changes in media practice and content, including in the women's press.

In this chapter, I explore the impact of political power and civil society on women's publications in the modern, contemporary period.

2.3. Women Speaking with a 'Woman's Tongue'

The first Iranian women's journal, *Danesh,* was published in 1911. It was a medical periodical published by a group of women activists and intellectuals. The editor was a female doctor: Dr Kahal.[6] This weekly journal was devoted to family, child-rearing and health issues. In the first volume, the editorial set out the publication's main focus: 'this magazine is for the discussion of family issues, teaching housekeeping, feminine wifely duties, and child bearing…it won't talk about the politics of the country'. This magazine discussed the concerns of middle-class women and did not demand any type of reform. There is an occasional reference to women who became pregnant out of wedlock, abandoned babies, disrespectful attitudes towards women in the streets and the way that middle-class women were treated in marriage, i.e. like a maid.

Two years later, in 1913, another journal was published, by Maryam Amid Mozayenossaltaneh, entitled *Shokoufeh* (Blossom – see picture 2). Its focus was on the familiarization of women with literature, teaching child-rearing and housekeeping, encouraging literacy/education, combatting superstitious beliefs about women and the promotion of ethical standards. Over the following years, the magazine openly criticized child marriage and eventually became a more political publication that targeted international audiences and became affiliated with an association for the education of women.

[6] Bagheri, Elaheh (2014) *The attention to hygiene and health in the first women's magazine in Iran,* http://www.feministschool.com/spip.php?article7300: accessed 22nd April 2016.

Picture 2: Cover of *Shokoufeh* journal. Source: http://mehrkhane.com/fa/news/12357/%D9%86%D8%AE%D8%B3%D8%AA%DB%8C%D9%86-%D8%AA%D8%AC%D8%B1%D8%A8%D9%87%E2%80%8C%D9%87%D8%A7%DB%8C-%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B2%D9%86%D8%A7%D9%85%D9%87%E2%80%8C%D9%86%DA%AF%D8%A7%D8%B1%DB%8C-%D8%B2%D9%86%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%A7%DB%8C%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86 (accessed on 6 October 2016)

Another magazine, entitled *Women's tongue*, was published in 1920 in Isfahan. It courageously published articles on women's issues. It was the first official women's journal to carry a licence bearing the name of a woman, Sedigheh Dolatabadi,[7] who was the magazine's publisher. From the beginning, she took on the struggle for women's rights. Dolatabadi criticized the hijab in the magazine, and received death threats. She wrote uncensored editorials against the influence of Britain in Iran, which led to the magazine being closed down for 13 months.

[7] http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/dawlatabadi-seddiqa: accessed 25 April 2016.

Dolatabadi lived to be 80 (1882–1961): in her will, she requested that women wearing the hijab should not be allowed to take part in her funeral or to visit her grave (Sanasarian: 59). In 1980, a year and a half after the Islamic Revolution, her gravestone was defiled under the edict of Mohamad Sadeghi Khalkhali, an extreme clergyman and jurist of the Islamic Revolutionary Court.

This incident illustrates the hatred and vengeful nature of the government of that time against feminism and its promoters. Despite violent incidents such as these, the name and memory of Sedigheh Dolatabadi has become a unifying force in the women's movement. She is so valued and respected that even 41 years after her death, the first professional non-governmental women's library was established in her name in 2003 in Tehran.[8] This library was a section of the Women's Cultural Centre,[9] a female-staffed non-governmental organization (NGO) of which the current author was a founder, board member and library director. The library's founders thus included board member of the cultural centre and some honorary founders such as Simin Behbahani (1927–2014), a prominent Iranian contemporary poet, lyricist and activist. A book prize was established in her name for the best published book in the field of women's studies. The library was shut down by security forces in 2012 after many threats; however, the book prize continues to be awarded despite similar threats. Its news and announcements are released via the Internet.

In 1921, the *Nameh Banovan* (Ladies' Letter) was published by the editor Shahnaz Azad. It boldly talked about the hijab as a barrier to women's progression. The tone and articles published in the magazine didn't appeal to Iran's ruler at the time – Reza Shah Pahlavi – so it was barred from publication after three days. The motto of this magazine was written boldly on the cover: 'The awakening and salvation of helpless, long-suffering women'.[10]

Iran's neighbour, the then USSR, also had some impact on the country's intellectuals – especially in the north of Iran. The promises of the Bolshevik Government to improve the situation of women situation encouraged leftist women in the north of Iran – specifically in Rasht, a city near the border with, Russia – to establish a new group called Jamiat e Peyk e Saadat Nesvan (Messenger of Happiness for Women). This Rasht women's organization, founded in 1928, which published a magazine with the same title as the group, was the first organization in Iran to celebrate International Women's Day on 8 March that year. The founders of the magazine and organization were arrested and imprisoned in the early years of Reza Shah's rule (Sadr-Hashemi, 1953: 1–5).

As this brief history illustrates, the impact of political power and civil society on the Iranian women's press was very important. The first 15 years after the constitution, with all its attendant ups and downs, was drafted (1905–1920) saw a distribution of political power and the generation of a civil society in Iran. The following 20 years were marked by the opposite: namely, the centralizing of political power and the weakening of civil society. This shift can be noted in the quality and quantity of publications in these two different eras.

When Reza Shah attained power in 1925, he established a modern era, ignoring the country's Islamic clergy. But he prevented the required cultural change, especially on women's issues. His

[8] http://sedighedolatabadi.org/: accessed 25 April 2016.
http://www.jadidonline.com/story/18052009/dr/dowlatabadi: accessed 25 April 2016.
[9] Emami, Goli (2005) *Against All Odds: The Story of a Woman's Cultural Center in Iran*, https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/Goli%20Emami%20Presentation%20for%20Web%20Revised.pdf: accessed 17 April 2016.
[10] http://www.qajarwomen.org/fa/collections/903.html: accessed 25 April 2016.

era gave an illusionary appearance of progress for the changes that occurred under his rule produced barriers to the advancement of the women's movement. Some women's organizations were censored and replaced by government-overseen institutions. Censorship grew, and progressive journals, including independent political magazines, were shut down. In 1942, most of the country's women's journals were published by women's societies, on topics ranging from housekeeping to objecting to the situation of women, and some also talked about national independence as well.

A review of the journals of that time shows that government pressure barred women from public participation. The aforementioned publications were the 'lever' to bring them into the social fabric, by establishing organizations and enabling them to start publishing for themselves.

Several critical external events ran contemporaneously to these developments in Iran – the First World War, the occupation of Iran and the growth in Bolshevik power in Iran's neighbourhood among them. There was also the influence of the women's rights movements in Britain and the United States. These events inspired women in Iran to push for internal changes. Equally, the influence of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's modernization reforms in Turkey on the Shah of Iran, and the anti-colonization movement of Egyptians rising up against Britain (including the numbers of Egyptian women joining this resistance and the Feminist Union of Egypt) all had a positive impact on the women's movement in Iran.[11]

2.4. Thirty Years and Three Incidents: 1942–1972

The second Pahlavi regime, 1942

The Second World War, and the exile of Reza Shah Pahlavi from the country, caused political chaos. Even though Iran was occupied by the Allies, the succeeding Pahlavi, Mohammad Reza Shah, brought better conditions, introducing freedom of speech, assembly and association. Although no women's societies were formed in this period, they regained the independence of 20 years previously, as most of these organizations were affiliated to a political party, or a special-interest group.

One of the most radical women's groups at this time was *Tashkilat-e-zanan Iran* (Iranian Women's Party Organization), a branch of the Toudeh party of Iran. This organization published a journal, entitled *Our Awakening*, in 1945. The journal spoke about the need to end the exploitation of working women in factories, the establishment of nurseries for mothers and equal pay for equal work.

Another organization that was active at this time, entitled *Anjoman-e-Zanan* ('Women's Association'), had a newspaper called *Zan-e-emruz* (Today's Woman), which was published in 1944. By 1945, it was barred from publishing – as were other democratic papers. Nevertheless, in the late 1940s there were still some journals and newspapers being published by this women's

[11] Badran, Margot (2008) *Egyptian feminism in the nationalist era*, translated by Faranak Farid, 2016, www.bizfeministler.org/%D9%81%D9%85%DB%8C%D9%86%DB%8C%D8%B3%D9%85-%D9%85%D8%B5%D8%B1%DB%8C-%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D8%B9%D8%B5%D8%B1-%D9%85%D9%80%D9%84%DB%8C-%DA%AF%D8%B1%D8%A7%DB%8C%DB%8C-%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%B1%DA%AF%D9%88%D8%AA-%D8%A8/: accessed on 24th April.

association. These publications highlighted the discriminatory policies of the government. They were dependent for sponsorship upon their own political parties, and even from non-feminist groups – which brings into question their independence. In fact, it can be observed that the focus of the national government was on the nationalization of the oil industry, which became a priority over other public issues, and women's journals experienced problems with circulation during this time.

The CIA coup d'etat, 1953

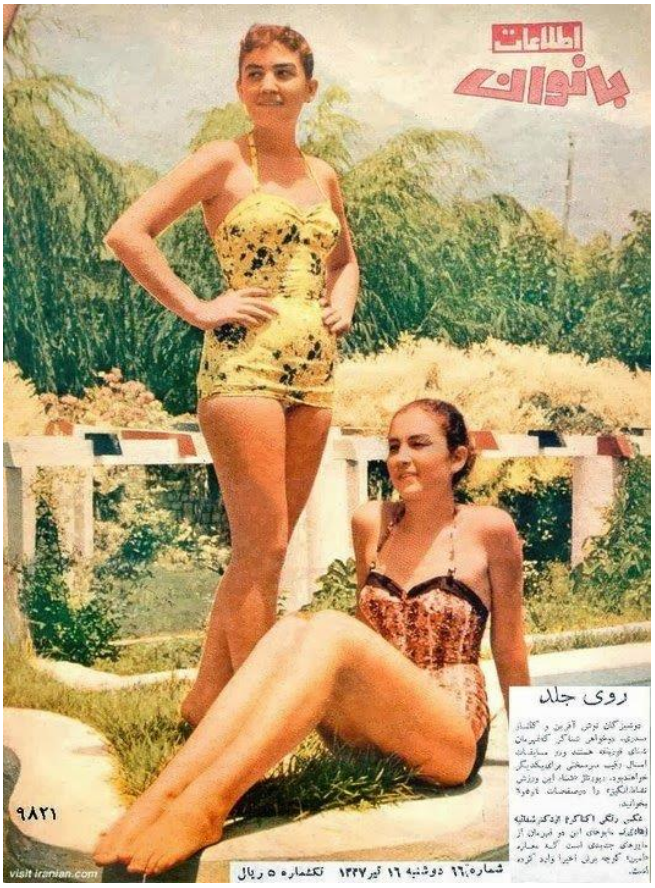
After the coup d'etat in 1953 by the Iranian Army and the CIA (US Central Intelligence Agency), Iran's national government collapsed. Mohammad Reza Shah governed once again, all media were placed under severe restrictions, and there was a revocation of the right of assembly and the freedom to form societies. The only newspapers that had permission to publish were those that defended the actions of the government, which included those journals published by women affiliated with the government. Such an inequitable and elitist viewpoint was the major barrier preventing the integration of women of all classes into political society. Thus, whatever was seen as the women's movement in that period was primarily the expression of women affiliated with the government, and the women's journals reflected the policies of the regime.

The White Revolution reform, the women's franchise and the right to vote, 1963

In January 1963, the Shah of Iran held a national referendum to obtain approval for his entire governance programme, which was known as the White Revolution, or the 'Revolution of the Shah and the People'. Women were given the right to vote in 1963 as part of the reforms. In reality, the struggle for women's right to vote, and the right to political participation had begun 50 years earlier – and anti-government feminist women did not welcome these reforms, believing they were hypocritical as they were imposed by a dictatorship. They publicly denounced the new reforms as governmental propaganda from elitist women's groups.

Following the White Revolution, women's activities depended on the government. There was a lack of progressive movements, and very few from the grass roots. Reforms remained under the control of the government, and even if women's activities in different fields were recognized as legal and official there was no autonomous women's movement.

This lack of women's autonomous movement was reflected in the reduced presence of women in the media. Between the White Revolution and Islamic Revolution, only a couple of women's journals were published – *Ettelaat e banovan* (The Ladies' Information – see picture 3 below) and *Zan-e-Rooz* (Woman of Today). *Ettelaat e banovan* was part of the official newspaper of the government, called *Ettelaat*, and it established an organization called *Anjoman e Doushizegan & Banovan* (Ladies' and Girls' Assembly) with the aim of discussing women's rights, political participation and family law. The content of the magazine was focused on practical knowledge for women's daily life, and the rest comprised literature, stories and occasional household advertisements. Readers of this magazine came from different social groups, and were usually registered members of the association.



Picture 3: Cover of *Ettelaat e banovan* magazine. Source: https://yazarpozar.wordpress.com/2013/09/03/%D8%B1%D9%88%DB%8C-%D8%AC%D9%84%D8%AF-%D9%85%D8%AC%D9%84%D9%87-%D8%A7%D8%B7%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D9%82%D8%AF%DB%8C%D9%85/, accessed on 6 October 2016.

According to Lagha Dehdashti (1937–2008), an active member of this association (see picture 1 above): 'Members of this association included women with very high level governmental jobs as well as housewives, but it was mostly reflecting the higher echelons being from governmental positions. The diversity of the members was also reflected in their dress as it included women wearing the headscarf as well as modern and elegantly dressed women.' She also pointed out that 'the main goals for this diverse group of women were the same: Women's empowerment through education, job position and economic independence.'[12] The content of the magazine focused on these three topics.

The other magazine, *Zan-e-Rooz*, was a sub-section of *Keyhan* newspaper with a high circulation. It featured popular news about actresses, cinema, television and very tabloid-style love stories. It was the instigator of the 'Miss Iran' beauty competition, and was much objected to by the clergy of the time. One of the Shah's most outspoken opponents was a member of the clergy, Ayatollah Khomeini, who publicly accused the ruler of 'violating his oath to defend Islam and the Constitution'. Assuming a leadership role for the first time, Khomeini was adept at focusing attention on concerns that resonated with the general public (Tohidi, 1994: 115).

[12] Personal communication in 2005.

The year 1972 saw the start of guerrilla warfare, the rise of leftist groups, and the 'Muslim Fighter' (a religio-socialist organization). Both men and women joined this struggle against the dictatorship. Most of the intellectual, independent women activists curtailed their activities focused on women's rights in order to join in this movement; this suspension continued for seven years, until the victory of the Islamic Republic in 1979.

2.5. 'The Beautiful, Yet Cruel Revolution' in 1979

> A world must be overturned, but every tear that flows is an accusation; and every man rushing to do something important who treads even on a worm through pure carelessness is committing a crime.[13]

A revolution usually begins with a great deal of idealism; however, it often results in very different outcomes than those imagined. In the Iranian Revolution, for example, women's rights was the first ideological victim of the suppressive revolutionary arm. Approximately one week after the victory of the Islamic Revolution, the office of Ayatollah Khomeini announced the forced wearing of the hijab for women, the abolishment of modern family law and the legalization of polygamy.

Shortly after he issued these proclamations, thousands of women marched in protest, going out on to the streets on International Women's Day (8 March) of 1979. The only result was to postpone the enforcement of the proclamation by six months (Ahmadi Khorasani, 2013: 183–4).

The suppression was continued by so called 'revolutionary' groups against the progressive front, who were termed 'anti-revolutionary'. Day after day the latter were attacked, and any small sign of resistance was repressed by the sharp sword of the Islamic Revolution. This era coincided with the Iran–Iraq war, which was the most violent and terrifying time since the Islamic Revolution in Iran.

Two aspects aided the suppression: governmental censorship, which consisted of 'guillotining' publications and newspapers. There were no equal-rights activists opposing the closing down of one of the two remaining non-feminist, commercial women's magazines (left over from the White Revolution). The magazine *Ettelaat e Banovan* (Ladies' Information) occasionally spoke of women's-rights issues, and was barred from publication at the beginning of 1980. In fact, from 1980 to 1990, the only magazine for women accepted by the government was *Zan-e-Rooz* (Woman of Today).

This magazine tried to persuade *hezbollahi* (revolutionary) women to confront anti-revolutionary, 'bad hijab' women by suggesting that it was legal to oppose them. In addition, the same *hezbollahi* women during the war promoted the participation in the war effort, and urged other women to encourage their husbands and sons to go to the front lines. It also published photos of actresses wearing the accepted form of the hijab, who were supported by the government. These actresses were from TV series broadcast on Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB), an anti-feminist organization that expected women to adhere to strict, oppressive standards of dress and behaviour.

[13] Rosa Luxemburg (1918) https://rosaluxemburgblog.wordpress.com/quotes-about-rosa-luxemburg/: accessed 25 April 2016.

2.6. Official Women's Publications

After the end of the eight-year war between Iran and Iraq, and the death of Ayatollah Khomeini in 1988, a new government, entitled the 'government of development', was formed. The change in administration and leadership, along with the necessity of having international communication and international development programmes, led to the government caring more about women's issues.

In reality, the government had noted that women's issues were one of the factors that were promoted by international development programmes. As a result, the extensive censorship of newspapers was lessened slightly, so that in 1991, the first monthly periodical with a female journalist as editor, *Majalleh Zanan* (The Women's Magazine – see picture 4 below), was accepted by the government. It published for around 16 years until in 2008, when Mahmoud Ahmadinejad came to power and, once more, this magazine was barred from publishing for five years. In 2013, as a result of another new government coming to power, this magazine once more re-entered circulation. During these difficult years of censorship and harassment, feminism was even considered by some to be a criminal activity. In this oppressive atmosphere, the editorial team of *Majalleh Zanan* claimed that they were the only feminist magazine in Iran at this time.

Picture 4: Cover of *Majalleh Zanan*. Source: *http://iranianuk.com/20140204223005035/%D8%B1%D9%88%DB%8C-%D8%AC%D9%84%D8%AF-%D9%85%D8%AC%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%DB%8C%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86%DB%8C-%D8%A7%D8%B2-%D9%BE%DB%8C%D8%B4-%D8%AA%D8%A7-%D9%BE%D8%B3-%D8%A7%D8%B2-%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%82%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%A8* (accessed on 6 October 2016)

There were, however, other magazines on women's issues. In 1992, another seasonal periodical, entitled *Farzaneh* (Sage), which specialized in women's rights, was established. This magazine belonged to Islamic feminists with close ties to the government. Other magazines appeared, which were mostly governmental or belonged to women with close ties to the government, such as *Payam e Zan* (Woman's Message), *Soroush Banovan* (Ladies' Angel) and *Payam e Hajar* (Hajar's Message). Although the women who taught Humanities in universities could never usually publish any academic periodical specialized in women's issues, as that would have threatened their jobs, there was a periodical called *Motaleaat e zanan* (Women's Studies), which circulated within academic circles. *Iran Dokht* was a women's magazine published by religious intellectuals in 2006, which was censored in 2009. Another example of a woman's newspaper, *Rooznameh Zan* (literally: 'Woman's Newspaper'), was published for a year under the reformist government, which came to power after the development government, by Faezeh Hashemi Rafsanjani, an MP in the sixth parliament who was also the daughter of the development government's president. This newspaper covered the various viewpoints of feminists in Iran, and was barred from publishing in the last year of the reformist government.

2.7. Alternative Women's Magazines

There were also alternative publications by secular feminists, which were subjected to severe governmental control and limits but which adopted creative, tactical ways to publish. For example, *Jense Dovom* (Second Sex) and *Fasle Zanan* (Women's Season) were two seasonal periodical publications that were published by Noushin Ahmadi Khorasani, a reputable Iranian feminist who obtained permission to publish a book (rather than a periodical) and then used this permission to produce a selection of articles. *Jense Dovom* was published between 1997 and 2000, and *Fasle Zanan* from 2002 until 2004.

The other strategy applied by the Women's Cultural Centre and some other associations, with incredible difficulty and effort, was to publish some reports and feminist opinions in the shape of an internal bulletin, which, based upon Iranian law, does not require any permit to issue. Considering the fact that they were only allowed to distribute and sell the bulletin in their own societies and NGO centres, this type of publication could not reach a wide audience. Therefore, some progressive booksellers started to help out NGOs by secretly selling these bulletins to their trusted customers 'under the table'. In this way, some of the alternative publications could distribute to a wider audience, even occasionally to small rural towns via networking.

Thus, women's periodicals were spread hand to hand between interested parties in the three fields of journalism, activism and academia, avoiding censorship in both official and unofficial areas. The response to the spread and development of the women's movement, especially secular feminism, was an increase in control by governmental censors, specifically aimed at these publications and these feminist groups. In response, many of these scrutinized groups found the need to expand their publications on the Internet.

3. CYBERSPACE: ENSURING THE CONTINUITY OF THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT?

At first, many women were not involved in the technological side of the Internet in Iran; they were mostly users of these products. From being simply users, however, they soon also became producers of material on the Internet.[14] Especially in totalitarian countries such as Iran, activist women (due to the nature of oppressive governments) have found in cyberspace a way to spread feminist dialogues on, for example, how to promote gender equality.

The use of cyberspace became a defensive tactic of the Iranian women's movement. The expansion of the Internet was very much welcomed by female journalists and women's activists. As shown above, they had no opportunity to publish their ideas (especially those promoting feminism) within 'real' space because of governmental censorship, patriarchal power structures and police interrogation. The unconditional freedom of cyberspace allowed activists to write freely about women's issues, adding to the academic voice and making good on earlier deficiencies arising from focusing on theory rather than feminist activism.

The ease and direct presence of women's-movement activists in producing feminist literature in the field of cyber-feminism enabled an engagement with feminist theoreticians. Erudite and literate younger women, who did not have the opportunity to publish their ideas in public spaces prior to Internet accessibility, began to write about feminism in reports, news-research articles and creative literature. Their work in internal bulletins reached a wide audience, spreading feminist ideas. This new breed of activist-journalist allowed the inter-relations between professional journalism and professional activism to develop in the Iranian women's movement, and facilitated the foundation of activist-journalism.

The multiple voices and the continuous presence of women from different groups in cyberspace enable a wide spread of feminist ideas. Iranian women's activists have placed a heavy focus on learning and teaching International Communications Technology (ICT) as part of their feminist activism and developing the communication potential of this space. Despite government censure, the unreliability of Internet technology within Iran and inaccessibility for the large majority of women who did not have access to essential computer hardware, cyberspace has nevertheless promoted the exchange of information and ideas among independent feminists.

A special characteristic of cyberspace has been to devolve away from a hierarchical structure. 'Being without a head' means that the Iranian feminist movement is a civil and modern movement shaped by diverse groups and individual activists connected via official networks. The type of relationships within this movement aims to be horizontal (i.e. on a 'level playing field'). Internet technology allows many women's movements to develop horizontal relations and a

[14] Seifi, Farnaz (2010) *Internet, a tool for continuous connections for the Iranian women's movement*, BBC Persian, http://www.bbc.com/persian/science/2010/03/100305_superpower_women_internet.shtml: accessed 25 April 2016.

diversity of discourse within the women's movement. Cyberspace allows activists within the women's field to have their own private media and own voice.

A further characteristic of the Internet is the ease and speed of international communications. This speed helped to counter the earlier lack of communication with other feminists in different parts of the world, and a debate was opened between international women's movements and Iranian feminists who lived abroad. In fact, the Iranian women's movement took form both inside and outside the country and could be characterized as Iranian feminists without borders. Cyberspace allowed a widespread interaction with international women's movements and feminists via the Internet, which could broadcast news of the oppression, suppression and discrimination against women in Iran. On the other hand, Iranian feminist websites inside and outside the country did not necessarily have the same priorities. Through interactive communications in cyberspace, they could support and develop different discourses between women's movements, activists sometimes producing challenging polemics. However, despite it being an international, universal forum, there still remain different challenges between the varied approaches of the Iranian women's movements.

Such were the characteristics of cyberspace that laid the foundations of cyber-feminism to Iran. Even if the term 'cyber-feminism' is based on Western feminism,[15] for Iranian activist-journalists it means something different – using networking made possible via the cyber era to achieve their political goals. For some parts of the Iranian women's movement, this new identity was doubly demanding due to the pressure in maintaining a balance between 'real' activism and publications within cyberspace. For others, cyberspace was a place to find refuge in order to organize and redefine their activities in the frame of that same cyberspace. Although cyber-feminism gave many new facilities to these women, such facilities couldn't be hidden from the scrutiny of security organizations. Feminist websites have been censured and blocked multiple times, and many of the activists publishing in cyberspace have been interrogated, imprisoned, sentenced to jail and barred from studying or working just because of their writing activities, which the security organizations have interpreted as communicating with 'aliens'.

This increase in pressure on reformist media in the women's field during the presidency of Ahmadinejad between 2005 and 2013 led to the word 'feminism' being officially censored in sources and works in regards to women.

3.1. Iranian Cyberfeminism: Building on the Shoulders of Women's Websites

During the first two years of the reformist government, independent women's organizations and groups began to have more space to develop their public activities in order to be more visible in society. The relative freedom of founding organizations on the one hand and learning about Internet technology on the other allowed the existing structures within the women's movement to develop better facilities for using cyber-technology, in order to promote easier and broader theories about feminism. Cyberspace emerged as a useful and strategic space for activist-journalists, young people and critics of hierarchical power.

[15] Wilding, Faith (1998) *History of Cyberfeminism*, https://historyofcyberfeminism.wordpress.com/history-of-cyberfeminism/: accessed 25 April 2016; Wilding, Faith (1998) *Where is the feminism in Cyberfeminism?* http://www.obn.org/cfundef/faith_def.html: accessed 25 April 2016.

At the beginning of the year 2000, a news website under the name *Zanan-e-Iran* (Iran's Women) was set up. The editorial for this website was written by one of the women close to the country's reformists. The website was dedicated to news and reports about women, and it was active only for a short period. In fact, the importance of forming civil organizations and groups to help support a presence within the cyber-world is very important. Websites that begin their activities with an individual contributor don't normally last long or find a wide audience. Examining the manner in which these sites evolved in Iran and those managed outside the country, one can see that there is a continuity between the first generation of feminists at the beginning of the constitutional era and those active during the period marked by the nationalization of the oil industry. These women's association had similar styles in media production – presenting themselves as an institution and publishing a magazine or website leading to the phenomenon of feminist activist-journalist.

In 2002, Iran's first feminist website, *Tribune Feministi* (The Feminist Tribune),[16] became connected to the Women's Cultural Centre. This website was managed by the members of the women's centre as the main conduit of secular feminism in the country. Although this was supposedly the reformist era in Iran, the 'Feminist Tribune' was suppressed four times in just two years of activities. Finally, after multiple meetings with the members of the cultural centre to find a solution to the issue of suppression, it was decided that they should use a different title. Removing the word 'feminist' would make it less likely to be identified and therefore suppressed. The new website therefore adopted the title *Zanestan* (Her Land).[17]

In fact, even the process of choosing a name for a feminist website proved to be as complicated as designing a defence tactic in a long-term war of attrition with a government targeting women's publications and any other type of involvement with women's issues. After the launch of 'Her Land' by the women's cultural centre, other groups of independent women and NGOs began to launch their own sites. Most prominent were *Meydan e Zanan* (Women's Field)[18] and *Kanoon e Zanan Iran* (Iranian Women's Club).[19] One of the most prominent websites acting as a catalyst for change in 2005, at the beginning of Ahmadinejad's regime, was *Taghiir Baraye Barabary* (Change for Equality).[20]

The website *Madreseh e Feministi* (Feminist School) [21]and *Ta qanoone khanevade barabar* (Toward Fair Family Law), which later changed its named to 'The Feminism' (*Bidarzani*),[22] were established after the 'Change for Equality' website. In 2016, they are still active promoting feminism in Iran. 'The Feminist School' is a good example of cyber-feminism in Iran promoting diversity, decentralizing from power and opposing hierarchical power relationships in cyber-feminism. Its membership has presented the theory of self-reliant cells, which is based on establishing several small cyber-groups that work independently yet in the framework of women's-movement goals.

[16] www.iftribune.es/WCC.htm: accessed 25 April 2016.
[17] www.zanestan.es/sitemap.html , accessed 25 April 2016.
[18] www.Meydaan.info: accessed 25 April 2016.
[19] www.ir-women.com: accessed 25 April 2016.
[20] www.we-change.org: accessed 25April 2016.
[21] www.Feministschool.com : accessed 25April 2016.
[22] http://bidarzani.com/: accessed 25 April 2016.

Amongst Iranian websites outside of Iran are 'Shahrzad News';[23] *Shabakeh Hambastegi Zanan* ('Iranian Women's Solidarity');[24] and, in recent years, *Ma Zanan* ('We, Women')[25] and *Khaneh Amn* ('The Women's Shelter').[26] Two other websites, called *Polhaii Baray Zanan* (Bridges for Women)[27]and 'Zan Negar',[28] have been formed in the last two years – mostly dedicated to translating articles and reports from non-Persian writers. Since 2014, there have also been two websites with the names 'Macho-land'[29] and S*hish Rangs* ('Six Colours'),[30] which cover homosexual and women's issues together. Unlike the variety of websites inside Iran, their members and directors are avowedly secular and, mostly, radical feminists.

The My Stealthy Freedom[31] campaign on Facebook has been one of the best-known acts amongst Iranian-diaspora feminists in recent years, as an interactive and popular form of mass-media launching cyber campaigns for civil activists.

4. CASE STUDIES OF CYBERFEMINISM IN AND OUTSIDE IRAN

The modern nature of the cyber-world bypasses print media's traditional structures. In Marshall Berman's appropriation of Marx's and Engels's famous dictum: 'All that is solid melts into air'.

The impact of cyber-technology inside and outside Iran can be illustrated by the following two case studies. The 'Feminist School' website was launched with the effort of groups of activist-feminists in Iran. And the My Stealthy Freedom campaign was started by the efforts of one Iranian feminist journalist outside the country, in 2014–16 on Facebook.

4.1. The Feminist School

In 2008, the website 'The Feminist School' declared itself as an entity, formed by a small group of activist-journalists. This group was at first made up of members, founders and activists involved in a 'one million signatures campaign',[32] which claimed to change discriminatory laws and sought to secure equal rights in family law and an end to polygamy, honour killings and any other forms of violence against women.

Its website, 'Change For Equality', was an online representation of the 'One Million Signatures' campaign. The Feminist School group declared their separate existence from the campaign whilst still emphasizing their commitment to its original goals. They also developed a

[23] https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCNXaN_mtNNqM8FDKJSD3jZw: accessed 25 April 2016.
[24] www.iran-women-solidarity.net: accessed 25April 2016.
[25] http://mazanan.com/?p=3808: accessed 25April 2016.
[26] http://www.khanehamn.org/: accessed 25 April 2016.
[27] http://www.bridgesforwomen.org/: accessed 25 April 2016.
[28] http://zannegaar.net/: accessed 25 April 2016.
[29] http://macholand.org/: accessed 25 April 2016.
[30] https://6rang.wordpress.com/: accessed 25 April 2016.
[31] https://www.facebook.com/StealthyFreedom: accessed 25 April 2016.
[32] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/One_Million_Signatures: accessed 25 April 2016.

theory of organizing into a Self-Reliant Cell, as 'an explosion of centralized activity branching out to many separate but contiguous organizations, societies and movements'.[33]

An emphasis on the importance of pluralism and also the necessity of increasing the quantity of women's media were the fundamental reasons for practising this theory. Additionally, the group saw the contradictions and criticisms between the centralized structures of the campaign and their own desired goal, such as a networking structure. The centralized organization determined the manner in which they were running the 'Change for Equality' website. This caused organizational problems with regard to circulation of information and the publishing of articles. The idea of self/reliant cells as Noushin Ahmadi Khorasani proposed – 'an effort to break the barriers of campaign structure' (Ahmadi Khorasani, 2012: 238–9) – aimed to break down the centralized organizational structure, and to shape a networked movement.

Although chosen, after much discussion, from critical observations within the Feminist School, the theory of self/reliant cells eventually facilitated a better use of Internet technology – one that gradually made a decentralized modern outlook and organizational method inevitable.

For the Feminist School, the nature of cyberspace as a borderless geography was a welcome solution that could transform the centralized 'campaign for one million signatures' into a decentralized one.

The One Million Signature campaign was originally a leaderless movement built on face-to-face relationships with different spectrums, classes and groups of women in different cities. The bottom-up approach and the horizontal structure of relationships forming part of the campaign were highly effective in terms of changing discriminatory laws, but became hampered by the problem of centralization. The centralization of the campaign limited decision making about information and news distribution. Such decisions were confined to Tehran, and made by a few members. This type of relationship was paradoxical, as the campaign in theory valued a horizontal structure between members and a pluralist working model.

Against a background of increasing security pressures and limited internet access, the authorities started to target well-known administrators of the website. These people were interrogated and threatened, so the campaign website began to publish the news about the arrest of its members. The author of this paper was one of those arrested and while the news of her arrest was not made public on the Campaign's website, it was nevertheless reported by others. This was a conscious choice in order to collect more facts and document the government's actions which could then be used in a more strategic way by international human rights organizations, particularly Reports Without Borders.

Launching a parallel website run by different people, and not under the authority of the campaign website, was a defensive strategy to help to relieve pressure on well-known members and to continue the spread of the campaign's dialogue. The Feminist School undertook this as an innovative move, prompted by very difficult conditions, with full knowledge of the theoretical approach (i.e. that of Self-Reliant cells) and security concerns surrounding it.

This transformative move, like most innovations, was initially shocking to some members of the campaign – especially the website administrators, who were critical of the

[33] Loghmani ,Sara (2008) *Self reliant cells an Idea based on One million Signature campaign*, http://www.feministschool.com/spip.php?article51: accessed 24 April 2016.

Feminist School. There were accusations of splitting from the campaign's main website, which led to an unfriendly and hostile environment amongst campaign members.

Eventually this problem lessened, when other members of the campaign in Tehran and other cities also launched their own websites. The unfriendly relations levelled out to a more professional working relationship. Even so, the new tactics of the Feminist School were scrutinized and condemned by campaign website members with written attacks. Despite all these challenges, the Feminist School did publish and promote dialogue in the women's movement and produced a discourse in support of different groups in and outside of campaign.

The presence of the 'Feminist School' – and, later, other websites – presented a transparent critique of power relations within the campaign. Some members were not able to launch independent websites as they lacked knowledge about how to use cyberspace, and some were not motivated to take advantage of non-centralized Internet spaces. Some were not able to participate in all aspects that modern Internet technology offered to a horizontal structure.

Overall, the campaign could not take these innovations on board, and this led to a lack of cohesion in its structure – an apparent example of the concept 'all that is solid melts into air' (Berman, Marshall [after Marx and Engels], 1985). Furthermore, at the same time it also had to deal with suppression and persecution by the security forces.

One of the successful moves by the Feminist School was the formation of two pluralist coalitions involving different groups in cyberspace and in real space. The School set up coalitions of small groups within and outside the campaign in order to advocate for gender equality, demanding open dialogue and equal laws. The first, named Family Law Coalition,[34] opposed a new article to the polygamy law that threatened to make women's situations harder than before. The Iranian 'Family Protection Bill' added two articles to this law so that men could take multiple wives. But the coalition's efforts were successful, and the Iranian parliament (known in Iran as the *Majlis*) removed those two contested articles, indefinitely postponing the bill's discussion on the floor of parliament. In addition, the *Majlis* sent the bill back to the Parliamentary Judicial Committee for further revisions.

The coalition were successful in suspending the article. The publication of new articles and reports on the 'Feminist School' website created the possibility for active members outside Tehran to contribute, and enabled a strong networked organization. The successful experience of the Family Law Coalition encouraged the Feminist School to establish other coalitions too. Just before the presidential election in 2009, the *Hamgraii e Zanan Baraye Motalebat* ('Coalition of Iranian women states its election demands') was formed.[35]

Their goal was twofold: to make Iran a signatory to the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW); and to aim for the elimination of discriminatory laws against women, especially through the review of articles 19, 20, 21 and 115 of the constitution.

This coalition had a different focus from the One Million Signatures campaign, which centred on the legal discourse. The former focused on the democratic discourse as a turning point for the women's movement at that time.

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[34] Amani, Elahe (2008) *Iran women say no to polygamy*, http://www.alternet.org/story/100941/iran_women_say_no_to_polygamy: accessed 25 April 2016.
[35] http://www.payvand.com/news/09/may/1236.html: accessed 25April 2016.

The electoral slogan of the coalition was 'We vote for women's demands'. The coalition aimed to reach governmental and public audiences. At the public level, they took advantage of the relatively open space available during election periods to go on to the streets and speak with different women, encouraging them to vote for those candidates who supported women's demands. At the governmental level, some members went to speak to the four presidential candidates and their spokespeople about the demands of the coalition, an approach also utilized in the One Million Signatures campaign.

The 'Feminist School' website had earlier started publishing theories and ideas about democracy and political participation amongst the members of the women's movement. In cyberspace, they supported the real-world discussions and activities of the coalition through publishing theoretical materials and the transmission of news/reports.

After the fraudulent 2009 election, the announcement of the real voting tallies led to a wave of suppression, arrests and killings. Many independent women's groups were affected, and there was severe repression by the state. Despite cyber-attacks by the government, some women's websites, such as 'Feminist School', were able to publish news of the suppression. However, the cost of this effort was too great. For instance, on 27 December 2009, the current author wrote a testimonial called 'Green Barricades in the Red Ashura',[36] relating to a street demonstration that had been forcefully attacked by police and the security forces. She published her report on 'Feminist School', and, eight hours later, police attacked her home and arrested her. It was her third period of imprisonment due to her writing and political activities. Throughout all these repressive efforts, the Internet remained the only tool for promoting non-violence and the discussions and activities of the women's movement.

The governmental censoring and suppression targeted well-known websites. Many of the administrators of these sites were imprisoned or were forced to flee the country – for instance, the 'Feminist School' was suppressed 14 times in 2009 alone.[37] Young members of this website had to leave the country, and one of its administrators was imprisoned. These difficult circumstances did not stop the resistance of small self/reliant cells in the cyber-world. The difficult conditions that caused the destruction of independent organizations in the real world did not stop cyber activities through the establishment of new independent groups that were formed according to the theory of self/reliant cells.

Cyber-feminism in Iran was, however, occasionally forced into hiding when there was an increase in suppression – although, with its technological facilities, it did prove to be a progressive tool for the support of feminist aims and discourse. At the end of 2010 until the beginning of the Arab Spring in 2011 and on to 2013, the Feminist School shifted to publishing very mild feminist literature, i.e. sociological theories and the issue of domestic violence against women, in order to avoid government attacks against them.

The new presidency in 2013 led to a better condition for feminist views to be heard. As the country's most popular social network, Facebook was a space used by the vast majority of the public in Iran. The Feminist School decided to set up a Facebook page linked to their website. This increased the School's activities and the quality of articles. Members of the

[36] http://feministschool.com/english/spip.php?article360: accessed 2 August 2016.
[37] https://hra-news.org/fa/cultural/1389-02-03-13-25-18: accessed 25 April 2016;
https://rahekargar.wordpress.com/2010/04/22/dena-902/: accessed 25 April 2016.

Facebook page of the Feminist School reached 70,000. This number of members for a page, specifically for feminists that were trying not call attention to themselves, was significant in both sections (Persian and non-Persian language).

The quality of the Feminist School's topics and material attracted articles from non-Iranian feminists, including members of the School who had been forced to leave the country after the suppression following the 2009 election but had kept their co-working relationship with the website. The site's editor, Noushin Ahmadi Khorasani, one of the most well-known activist-journalist and a researcher of feminism in Iran, has continued to live in the country, braving the dangers that she has always been under. Despite these dangers, she has kept the website and her relationship with exiled members of the School. In fact, 'Feminist School' is a bridge that connects the discourse of feminists living in the country with the external diaspora.

The Feminist School are a successful example of Iranian cyber-feminism due to several factors. They were able to harness cyber-technology to promote the aims of the women's movement. They took on a modern, horizontal form of leadership, which facilitated a broad spread of knowledge and shared information. Working within a decentralized network, they were able to mobilize both real-world and cyberspace resources, combining on-the-ground fieldwork with cyber activities at various times as the need arose. They were also able to build on the significant social capital of the School's founders, and to build bridges, via these members, between Iranian feminists in and outside Iran – and also non-Iranian feminists. In doing so, they created strong, internal and external feminist campaigns. They were careful to enjoy, and to be uniquely Iranian, while also utilizing the experience of other progressive countries by taking an educational approach to learn from them. Their activities were carried out voluntarily, and they were able to encourage the participation of successful writers on the website, ensuring quality and relevance.

4.2. The Presence of Diaspora Feminism in Cyberspace

After the crackdown of 2009, as indicated above, many well-known Iranian activist women, along with other political and civil activists, were forced into exile. This was the third wave of exiles in the last 60 years in Iran. What differentiated this from the earlier waves was the presence of middle-aged feminist women who were well-known representatives of the women's movement. This group had particular difficulties in going into exile. All but one were married, and had to leave adult children and husbands behind. Though some were able to bring their family to join them, the breakup of other families has created a host of mental, social and emotional traumas for them. As they were part of an elite group, and part of the intellectual life of Iranian society, their new situation in exile was not easy. It was difficult at that age to find the motivation and ability to retrain or re-educate themselves. Many did not have the sufficient level of language proficiency in their host country, and it proved difficult to learn a new language at their age as well as cope with mental/emotional anxiety.

The situation for young women was significantly better than their middle-aged counterparts. These young women had the ability to use the Internet, learn new languages and engage in journalistic activities, and quickly found themselves courted by the media outside Iran. Some received help from human-rights organizations with scholarships and possibilities to enter universities.

Nevertheless, these young women like their older compatriots shared a feeling of shame because of friends left behind who were imprisoned or under prosecution, banned from working or studying. They felt guilty at having left the activist life back in Iran, and were torn between staying or going back. This uncertainty was a barrier preventing them from making a new life in their host country, specifically given their mental and psychological anxieties due to previous campaign struggles and imprisonment.

Members of both age groups sought to maintain relationships, and the cyber-world became a refuge for these members of the diaspora movement. They took shelter in cyberspace – not only to publish and spread the word, or to build feminist networks, but also to retain political and social communications and to heal. Cyberspace provided the possibility for personal, emotional networks, and the creation of an honest, interactive and unofficial space through Facebook kept companions connected and created a welcoming space for the diaspora feminists. Facebook as a technology enabled windows of opportunity for diaspora feminists to stay linked to the motherland and their native tongue.

Considering Facebook as a continent on its own, young women activists grew up in this borderless geography even as the government in Iran was putting pressure on Facebook users inside the country with threats of imprisonment, suppression, etc. Facebook was providing a borderless space in which to publish articles by groups such as the Feminist School. The resulting exchange of views allowed for easy discussion, and broke the isolation of political and social groups. It encouraged members to use Facebook in a serious manner, and laid the foundations for campaigns and cyber-coalitions on specific problems facing women in Iran, ranging from political to social, legal and citizenship issues.

In 2012 came their first Facebook campaign: 'No to obligatory Hijab'.[38] The campaign was launched by a group of student-movement members who had left Iran in 2009–10. Although they kept their identity as the members of the student movement, they worked closely on several human-rights topics during their time in exile – a period officially regarded as a time of failure for the student movement in Iran.

Most of the women activists of this third wave of exiles, and those remaining in Iran, supported this campaign, though it was not backed by feminist women of the second wave of political migrants from Iran. This disagreement was due to the liberal approach of the campaign's founders, which was not accepted by second-wave migrants.[39]

The next campaign happened in 2013, just before the presidential election. Two days prior to election day, a young female activist who had left the country in 2009 started a campaign, 'I vote without Hijab'.[40] Those who followed this campaign believed that participation in elections was necessary to achieve women's rights, and were mostly the third wave of exiles. The feminists of the second wave, those who had a more radical approach to elections, did not join this campaign as they did not believe in voting for the government. So in the author's view, even if they did not believe in the compulsory hijab, they prevented the chance for a unified feminist discourse, which could have reached out to not only the elite feminists in exile but also to ordinary Iranian women everywhere.

[38]https://www.facebook.com/search/top/?q=%DA%A9%D9%85%D9%BE%DB%8C%D9%86%20%D9%86%D9%87%20%D8%A8%D9%87%20%D8%AD%D8%AC%D8%A7%D8%A8%20%D8%A7%D8%AC%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B1%DB%8C: accessed 19 April 2016.
[39] http://bamdadkhabar.com/2012/08/11612/: accessed 19 April 2016.
[40] http://www.radiozamaneh.com/76664: accessed 25 April 2016.

This second generation of feminists had lived in European countries for a long time, enjoyed a stable social and economic structure and had their own professional network. In not supporting this campaign about the compulsory hijab, they missed an important opportunity. Particularly because it invited Iranian women living outside Iran to choose not to wear the hijab when voting in embassies, 'I vote without Hijab' was a strategic way of promoting discourse on the right of all Iranian women to choose what they wear. But unfortunately, due to the lack of awareness of the second wave of feminists, the chance to link to ordinary Iranian woman outside the country was lost.

The campaign 'I vote with no Hijab' lasted only three days, but it had a quite profound impact in keeping alive discourse on the compulsory hijab. It created the groundwork for the 'My Stealthy Freedom' campaign.

4.3. The 'My Stealthy Freedom' Campaign

This second case study covers the 'My Stealthy Freedom' campaign, which has its own specific history.

The establishment of the moderate new government in 2013 created a window of hope for Iranian feminists. This sense of hope could be seen in the growth of new social networks via Facebook. In 2013, under the new president, Hassan Rouhani, who represented the moderate political wing in Iran, a more moderate and mild climate emerged. Masih Alinejad, a well-known journalist who lived in the United States took advantage of this moment and planted the seed of her campaign, 'My Stealthy Freedom'. She had left the country in 2009 and knew a lot about Iran. She set up the Facebook page in order to encourage women to protest against the compulsory hijab, and to object to all restrictions that Iranian women face in their native country.

Due to discriminatory laws, Iranian women have to wear the hijab in public places. Their personal choice is disregarded. The obligation even applies to women belonging to different religions, as all are obliged to wear the Islamic hijab. More than 30 years after the revolution, the enforcement of the compulsory hijab is still one of the unsolved oppressions of women by the regime. Even those who fail to satisfy political Islam by not conforming to the type of their scarf or the colour of their clothes can be imprisoned, fined or sentenced to receive corporal punishment (lashes).

Masih Alinejad states the following on her Facebook page 'My Stealthy Freedom':

> This page does not belong to any group or party. This page is concerned with women inside Iran. All women and girls in Iran are submitted to social restrictions and deterrent laws and they are not free to choose what to wear. But considering all these limitations, sometimes they experience some freedoms. Those free moments from these restrictions this page records until the day that women gain the right to choose their clothes. The stealthy freedom of women will occur on this page.

She has, from the beginning, told activist women not to consider her and her campaign in a serious way. The idea of launching this campaign 'came to my mind when I accidentally

published one of my photos when I was driving without a scarf'.[41] On her personal Facebook page, she asked others to send similar photos if they had any. And it seems that lots of women and girls have taken photos of themselves in public areas. And she simply wrote a story about that.

Two weeks after that story and the pictures were published on Facebook, more than 230,000 people had joined the page. By the end of 2015, more than 750,000 had joined. The page attracted feminist and non-feminist women alike, inside and outside the country. Even the second wave of feminists in exile took notice.

There are several reasons the campaign could attract so many people. Firstly, Masih Alinejad was an independent journalist who, though well-known as a reformist feminist journalist, has never been affiliated with the women's movement in Iran. She was therefore not part of a particular faction or political affiliation within the women's movement. Secondly, she touched on a commonly shared discourse about the oppressive use of the compulsory hijab for all classes of Iranian women. Thirdly, the page cleverly showed individual objection in daily life, which had no particular political or social aim. This stealthy objection against the compulsory hijab gave voice to women from whom feminists had never heard before. These women had never been affiliated with the women's movement and had not paid attention to the right to choose one's own clothes.

At the beginning of the campaign, in a round-table discussion on BBC Persian TV, I asked Masih Alinejad about the potential of this campaign to move into activism (see the transcript in the Appendix, below). She replied that 'this campaign is a journalistic movement in cyber-feminism which is run by women who have become their own media subject. If this campaign is to be connected with the women's movement then women's movement members should follow up.'[42]

Masih Alinejad, as the administrator of the 'My Stealthy Freedom' Facebook page, was relying on 35 years of the women's struggle. She was using her popularity and her ease of presence on Facebook to bring the demands of women to the media. Although this Facebook campaign opened up public debate about the hijab, the question is whether the nearly one million members of this page[43] would actually make a difference in Iran and change the government prohibition on women choosing their own clothes? There is no clear answer to that.

The importance of this page for cyberfeminism leads to a series of questions:

1. Would the negative and aggressive reactions from the government media against its administrator motivate members of the 'My Stealthy Freedom' page to be more active towards changing the law?
2. Do any of the members of this page want to become actively involved in changing the law?
3. Does this cyber-page have the same goals as feminist activists, or is it just a controversial form of digital activism-as-'clicktivism'?[44]

[41] Masih Alinejad, personal correspondence with the author.
[42] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TRAehcI-L58&feature=youtu.be (starting at app. 6 mins into the recording): accessed 25April 2016.
[43] 983,697 members, as of April 2016; see http://mystealthyfreedom.net/en/: accessed 12 May 2016.
[44] 'Clicktivism', a cyber-behaviour whereby people can support a cause at the click of a computer mouse, comes as membership of traditional campaigning organizations, such as political parties and trade unions, is at an all-time low.

4. Do such movements in the cyber-world have the capability to utilize social movements in the real world?
5. Can social media and communication technologies that enable the popularity of such sporadic activities shape new trends within the women's movement?

5. CONCLUSION: DOES CLICKTIVISM REPRESENT A DANGER OR A HELPING HAND FOR CYBER FEMINISM?

> In a world that has become a network with the wireless Internet and the specific characteristics of that is the distribution of photos and ideas like a virus, movements can develop contagiously. This movement in the south and north, in Tunisia and Iceland began and from there sent its own fire to the variety of social perspectives in the four corners of this blue planet which was in danger of destruction as a result of the greed of human beings.[45]

The Arab Spring in 2011 showed the world a different face of the Middle East and Arabic countries with their continuous presence in cyberspace. Sociologists and experts in social movements became alert to the impact of Internet technology and its importance for social movements.

Social movements are, characteristically, collaborative, non-hierarchal, horizontal networks. However, cyber- and Internet networks, although able to be harnessed as effective mobilizing tools in the Arab Spring, did not on their own produce the social uprisings.

In Iran, there is no freedom to form political parties, trade unions or non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Social movements have been the ones with the capability to mobilize the masses to discuss their political and civil demands. Access to the Internet by social movements has enabled them to reach out to audiences within Iranian society. On the other hand, it can also decrease political action as people can feel that just signing a petition on the Internet or 'liking' a piece of breaking news, a report or an article is, in itself, a political act. Such activity may go no further, and people do not take up their responsibility in political and civil fields. This phenomenon has been recognized as the reappearance of 'slacktivism' (so-called slacker behavior, dating from the pre-Internet age) through the cyber arena. We can say that slacktivism's online equivalent is 'clictivism', which is defined as feel-good online activism with less, or even zero, political or social impact than real-life mobilization. People simply click, 'like' or sign online petitions, writing some comments and do nothing more.

Its historical, social and political background shows that the Feminist School was formed out of years of Iranian women's-movement activities, built on years of effort by members in both real and cyber-worlds. Its web page uses many different tactics in different situations; it is not part of phenomena such as slacktivism or clicktivism in the cyber-world.

See Howard, Emma (2014) *How 'clicktivism' has changed the face of political campaigns*, http://www.theguardian.com/society/2014/sep/24/clicktivism-changed-political-campaigns-38-degrees-change: accessed 25 April 2016.

[45] Manuel Castells (2012) *Networks of Outrage and Hope, Social Movements in the Internet Age*, translated by Mojtaba Gholipoor. Tehran: Markaz, p. 29.

In the case of the 'My Stealthy Freedom' campaign, its administrator was honestly just looking to utilize social networks and promote the discourse of the right to choose clothes. There was no intention to link this social-media campaign to political agitation in Iran in order to change the law. Even if the campaign reveals the desperation of the women, it belongs to the many kinds of individualized expressions that remain in cyberspace.

Asef Bayat calls these types of expressions non-movements:

> The vehicles through which ordinary people change their societies are not simply audible mass protests or revolutions, even though they represent an aspect of popular mobilization; rather, people resort more widely to what I will elaborate as "nonmovements"— the collective endeavors of millions of noncollective actors, carried out in the main squares, back streets, court houses, or communities.[46]

The point is that if these non-movements gather enough support from the independent media – especially in cyberspace and, in the case of the 'Stealthy' campaign, the support of the women's movement – then they have the opportunity to become an effective social movement.

Masih Alinejad comments that even if she does not 'see this willpower and capability to organize' and is concerned at the level of 'suppression, oppression and pressure of the government', she would have a 'positive outlook' if women's movements organized a demonstration against the hijab.[47]

She sees two main factors: the freedom of holding demonstrations and the need for sufficent social capital. But she does not consider the demands and willpower of the nearly one million members of the campaign. Could these members contemplate bearing the heavy cost of security agents curtailing their civil activities if they objected in real life to what they objected to in cyberspace? Can the cyber-experience provide the strength for people to join struggles in the real world?

The reality is that the women's movement cannot be limited to either cyberspace or real space. Both spaces are needed. The Iranian women's movement is now trying to understand how to be active in both arenas, harnessing the important effect of social networks and ensuring that cyber-feminism does not just melt away into clicktivism.

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[46] Asef Bayat (2010) *Life as politics: How Ordinary people change the Middle East*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, p. ix.

[47] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TRAehcI-L58&feature=youtu.be (starting at app. 6 mins into the recording): accessed 25April 2016.

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APPENDIX: INTERVIEW WITH MASIH ALINEJAD, DIRECTOR OF THE 'MY STEALTHY FREEDOM' CYBER CAMPAIGN

Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TRAehcI-L58&feature=youtu.be: accessed 25April 2016 (starting app. 6 mins into the recording).

1. *Please briefly explain about the 'My Stealthy Freedom' campaign, and your motivation when you launched this campaign?*

'My Stealthy Freedom' is an online campaign which stands against the repressive laws enforced against women in Iran. The compulsory hijab is the most visible symbol of oppression against women, and now women across Iran share pictures of themselves without headscarves on MSF.

MSF is a platform on Facebook where Women in Iran have been posting pictures of themselves after taking their hijab off in public, in a country where it is illegal for a female to leave the house without wearing a headscarf under Islamic law. The page is showcasing women who are going one step further in their acts of dissent by uploading videos of themselves walking through populated areas with their heads uncovered.

'My Stealthy Freedom' flourished into a movement attracting nearly one million supporters. Before being a campaigner, I have to say I am a journalist. For me it is really important to give voice to voiceless people – specially the women of Iran.

Let me be clear, there are two Irans: one is 'on the map' – where you see women in hijab. The other is illegal Iran – where women sing, dance, take off their scarves. Everything they are banned from [doing] they do underground. I determined to strengthen 'illegal' Iran and portray the country's 'real identity' through social media. Before the MSF campaign, I used social media to give voice to those mothers who lost their beloved ones on the 2009 [post-presidential-election] demonstrations, and now I use social media to give ordinary women a voice. 'My Stealthy Freedom' is a mirror to look in and see that those women who protest against the forced hijab are not isolated in doing this, it allows them to talk to others who support them and want to end this discrimination. The woman who sent their photos and videos to me are only some examples of a silent majority. They are the representatives of those who don't agree with the rules, who dare to risk their lives and reject the mandatory-hijab law in Iran. Stealthy freedom does not scare the government of Iran at all, but when you talk about your stealthy freedom a lot, that does scare them. They don't want us, the women of Iran, to be heard.

Every day in Iran there is a cultural war between the Iranian Government and the women of Iran. There are two different lifestyles – one for those who want to be themselves, who want to be free to choose what they want to wear, who want to dance, who want to listen to music, who want to watch volleyball and football in stadiums, and those who want to control this society and its women. You never hear the voice of these women in any official media. MSF allows Iranian women who have never had a voice or a chance to speak to form their own media.

On Iranian TV, it's all women in black, but on the MSF page on Facebook, its women without headscarves and wearing colourful clothing, dancing and singing.

This is [also] the cultural war between the Iranian Government and young people. Again, MSF picked the hijab as its main issue because the hijab is the most visible symbol of oppression against the women of Iran.

2. *When did this campaign declare itself? What is your estimation for the length of activities?*

   In May 2014, the page began when I posted a photograph of myself driving down a road in Iran without wearing a headscarf. The image was captioned with: 'The Hijab is being forced on women not only by the Morality Police, but also out of consideration for family, through wanting to keep a job and because of fear of judgment from others.' I wrote that I had experienced all of these pressures too: 'I was sure that most Iranian women who don't believe in the forced hijab have enjoyed freedom in secret, so I asked them if they wished to share this moment of stealthy freedom.'

   The word stealthy is a translation of *yavashaki*, which means 'hidden'. And this means a lot for a woman who grew up in Iran. If you fell in love with someone: *yavashaki*. You travel with your boyfriend: *yavashaki*. You take off your scarf: *yavashaki*. Alcohol is *yavashaki*. Dating is *yavashaki*. Dancing is *yavashaki*. Music is *yavashaki*. Singing solo for women is *yavashaki*. Everything you can imagine that's normal to you and me exists in Iran but you have to hide it, as if it doesn't exist: *yavashaki*. Why? Because it's a crime, and according to Iranian Sharia laws, you get lashes for some of these so-called 'crimes'.

   So when I asked women through my Facebook page if they do have *yavashaki*, the response I received shortly after starting the page was staggering: I was bombarded by pictures. Then I thought these women need their own platform. They don't want to be *yavashaki* ANY MORE. They want to speak out against the compulsory hijab. That was the reason that I started to publish their photos on a new page called 'My Stealthy Freedom'.

   In the photos, which I published without including full names, women in different outdoor environments can be seen after removing their hijab, alongside a few words describing the lack of freedom embodied in having to wear a hijab, or what it means to briefly remove it in public.

3. *Was this campaign the first cyber-movement to target the wearing of the obligatory hijab in Iran?*

   Of course MSF was not the first cyber-movement to target the wearing of the obligatory hijab in Iran.

4. *Have you got any criticism of any other previous cyber-movements related to the hijab?*

   No I do not. They encouraged us.

5. *How did other campaigns and movements before yours influence your motivation when you launched this campaign? Have you benefited from any of the experiences encountered by similar movements?*

   I think all the previous movements against the mandatory hijab helped me to get a better view of how to run MSF campaign. I realized that in this time I have to give the platform to the ordinary women rather than women activists or female journalists and so on. […] It's a place where ordinary female Iranians with different opinions can meet and talk about how they feel, think and what they do in private. They don't have to be afraid of

censorship, like in the Iranian public sphere. It makes them brave to see that they are not alone with their thoughts and actions.

With social media, Iranian women inside Iran can break open the barrier between private and public life. For instance, one post showed a mother with her daughter. 'The beautiful seaside in Kish [Island]', the younger woman wrote, 'We strolled on the rocks and experienced the cool breeze flowing through our hair. Is this a big request?' A young woman from the city of Fuman, in the northern province of Gilan, sent a picture of herself in the woods. 'I took this picture in the spring', she wrote, 'It makes me feel happy.' Another young woman was pictured unveiled just next to a big billboard in Tehran's Yas sports complex asking women to respect the Islamic hijab. The captions are sometimes more powerful than the images of bare heads and smiling faces. One woman wrote, 'I just want to have the right to CHOOSE! Maybe I would have even chosen to wear a scarf if I'd had options to choose from. But it hurts me so much when others make decisions for ME instead of myself.'

In many of the images, the women fly the veil behind them like a defiant flag.

So what is the significance of this coming together on this page? The reason is exactly to show that our sharing of freedom in Iran is STEALTHY.

These stealthy acts will challenge the absence of freedom, when revealed. Another significance of MSF: this page does not belong to any political group and the initiative reflects the concerns of Iranian women, who face legal and social restrictions. All of the photos and captions posted have been sent by women from all over Iran, and this is a site dedicated to Iranian women inside the country who want to share their 'stealthily' taken photos without the veil. I also learned from experiences that we have to translate all the posts into English and French to get more international media involved, and also requesting the attention of every single one of those female politicians travelling to Iran. Because they have to wear the hijab as well during their visit in Iran.

When the officials of our country travel to non-Muslim countries, they want them to respect their Islamic values. They conveniently avoid attending the receptions that you organize on the pretext that alcohol is being served. If that is the case, why don't the Western female politicians ask them to respect our human values, which is the freedom to choose? For more than 30 years, our questions have been censored in Iran's national media outlets. For more than 30 years, it has been forbidden even for journalists and reporters to broach questions with regards to the hijab.

However, many women in Iran want their voices to be heard by the government officials of their own country. These are women who should be entitled to the freedom of choice when it comes to deciding what to wear, and they do not want this right to remain stealthy for the rest of their lives.

We are pleading with female politicians to bring up this subject during their conversations with Iranian officials.

We asked the female politicians around the world on MSF several times NOT TO say that the hijab is required by law, and that everyone should follow the law in Iran. Here we are talking about a discriminatory law. If we keep silent in the face of unfair laws, then slavery, which also used to be a law, would still be with us.