The Virtual Sphere and the Women’s Movement in Post-Reform Iran

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Abstract:

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

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

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

Keywords: Social movement; Iranian women’s movement; Post reform Iran; Cyberspace; Internet; Charles Tilly’s theory of the mobilization of resources
1. Introduction:

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

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

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

On the other hand, there is a plethora of opposite views regarding the positive and influential role of the virtual space in the formation, continuation and success of social movements. Scholars such as W. Lance Bennett (2006), Bruce Bimber et al (2005 and 2012), Jennifer Earl and Katrina Kimport (2011) believe that, although weblogs and social networks are not independent factors in political outlets, in addition to being inexpensive they have succeeded in gathering and spreading data via a bottom-up approach. Moreover, weblogs and social networks have exposed people to new patterns of interactivity, thereby familiarising them with the likes and trends of one another. Accordingly, this has enabled the Internet to become an indispensable part of social movements in many countries.

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

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

Iran was one of the early adopters of the Internet in the Middle East, with Sharif and Guilan Universities offering the first connections to the global network in the early 1990’s (Johari, 2002, p. 49). The Iranian population became familiar with the Internet phenomenon in 1993 and was the second country in the Middle East to be connected to the Internet, after Israel (Rahimi, 2007, p. 49). The demand for Internet subsequently rapidly increased, making it very popular in a few years. At the beginning, no one could foresee how swiftly it would spread in Iranian society. The number of Iranian Internet users increased from 600,000 in 1996 to 42,000,000 people in 2012 according to the Internet World Statistics (IWS)1. In 2010 more than half of the population in Iran (53.3%) had access to the Internet, and Iran was ranked as one of the countries with the highest percentage of Internet users in the Middle East (Lerner, 2010, p. 562).

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1 http://www.Internetworldstats.com/me/ir.htm

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

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

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

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

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

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

The social and political activists' vast efforts in this period triggered a severe reaction from the conservatives in the government who were backed by the religious Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. For the religious conservatives who manipulate the country’s system, the change in the socio-political climate was nothing to celebrate or even tolerate. As part of the crackdown, the Guardian Council2 banned all reformist candidates from running for presidency in 2005. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad came to office, ushering in a more conservative period in Iranian politics and society.

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2 The Council consists of twelve members. Six jurists to be elected by the Parliament and 6 members appointed by Supreme Leader of Iran. It is a council empowered to vet legislation and oversee elections. It approves and disqualifies candidates seeking to run in local, parliamentary, presidential, and Assembly of Experts elections.
Censorship and Internet ban were among the first major dilemmas on the list of the government’s protocol in handling situations. Amidst the condemned issues in media, “women”, and especially the demands of their movement in Iran, became controversial. This situation overlapped with the presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2005. Eventually, the news and reports were not allowed to use the term “feminism” or mention the names of certain famous female activists (Sadeghi, 2010, p. 217).

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

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

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

One of the successful strategies for using the Internet in the social struggle against the regime has been the One Million Signatures Campaign for Changing the Discriminatory Laws against Iranian Women launched in August 2006. In a short time, this campaign allowed Iranian women to shed light on some of the limitations of Iranian society, while demonstrating their qualitatively different experience to the world (Barlow, 2012, p. 59). By having access to the Internet, women activists of the campaign inside Iran were able to raise awareness of their struggles transnationally. The Internet also provided a way for people living outside of Iran, who could not be reached in face-to-face interactions, to sign petitions demonstrating solidarity with the plight of Iranian women (Sameh, 2010). The Internet also offered a way for the campaign to garner contributions from donors (Lerner, 2010).

The Anti-stoning campaign in May 2006 aimed to eventually persuade the Iranian authorities to abolish executions by stoning and bring their legal practices into line with their obligations under international law. Due to the crackdown on civil society after 2005, discussed above, the campaign had limited opportunities to hold meetings and engage in activities in public. But after a successful virtual campaign to save Mokarrameh Ebrahimi from being stoned in 2007, campaign activists

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recognized the power of the Internet (Terman and Fijabi, 2010).

The Green Movement, whose members were active and participated in demonstrations during the disputed presidential elections in 2009, is another example of women using online and virtual space to pursue their goals. Saied Golkar (2011) argues that the Internet has helped political activists expand the Green Movement by increasing their capacity to mobilise the masses and delegitimise the regime.

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

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

Accordingly, this article is seeking to investigate the role of the Internet in the Iranian women’s movement through the application of Charles Tilly’s theory of “the mobilization of resources” as an epistemological framework (Tilly, 1977). Moreover, through a focus on existing viewpoints about the role of virtual space in social movements, this article will examine the opportunities and limitations which are faced by the Iranian women’s movement in this regard.

2. Charles Tilly’s Theory of Resources:

This article seeks to examine the relationship between the Internet with all its related virtual networks and Iranian women’s socio-political movement. This has been done through the analysis of the possibilities that the Internet has provided for social movements. In so doing, this study has relied upon Charles Tilly's Theory of Resources (Tilly, 1977) as the epistemological and methodological paradigm in the analysis of social movements. The role and also the effect of the virtual environment have been examined using Mobilization Model procedures, that is, “power, mobilization, interests, organization, repression-facilitation, opportunities-threat” (Tilly, 1977, pp. 2-4) along with the elements of the comprehensive package of social movement manifestation, “worthiness, unity, commitment and numbers” (Tilly, 1977, pp. 3-4).

It has been shown that successful interaction between the virtual environment and social movements, which appear and continue in the real world, can realize what social movements, including the women’s movement, are seeking. In fact, the contention of this paper is that the Internet can achieve this via enforcing the above-mentioned elements in Tilly’s theory of the mobilization of resources.

In his works, From Mobilization to Revolution (1977) and Social Movements (2004), Charles Tilly attempts to present a hypothesis to describe and explain social movements and collective actions. Like Karl Marx and Max Weber before him, he sees social conflicts as the root of all social reactions including revolutions and social movements. He uses the mobilization model to explain collective action and pays special attention to the concept of benefit and organization in this pattern. In order to define these two concepts, Tilly mentions group and network relations. Group relations consist of the relationships that people create based on common features with others. Network relations, on the other hand, involve people who establish relationships based upon special interpersonal ties.

The next concept in his scheme is mobilization during which people transform from passivity to activity in their ordinary life. In his view, mobilization has three forms: 1. Defensive mobilization which forms against an external threat; 2. Aggressive mobilization, which emerges upon an opportunity that the mobilization of resources has grasped; and finally 3. Provisional mobilization, which stores resources upon foreseeing challenges and rewards (Tilly, 2004). Tilly then contends that the three concepts of opportunity-threat, repression-facilitation and power are the external factors of social actions.
A diagram is used to make the mobilization model clearer. “The diagram shows that the main determinants of a group’s mobilization are its organization, its interest in possible interactions with other contenders, the current opportunity-threat of those interactions and the group’s subjection to repression” (Tilly, 1978, pp. 3-7). According to this diagram the main reason the group does protest against repression is the represented interest for any member or participant.

Diagram 1 adapted from Tilly (1977, p. 3) Further, Tilly comments that social movements emerge when three elements are present:

1. A campaign: a sustained, organized public effort making collective claims on target authorities
2. Social movement repertoire: a form of political action
3. Participants’ concerted public display of worthiness, unity, numbers and commitment (WUNC).

The presence of these three elements would then constitute a social movement.

This research has used Tilly’s theory to analyse the factors and elements which contribute to the women’s movement in Iran. The underpinning assumption in this research is the role of the Internet on mobilization procedures as well as of worthiness, unity, numbers and commitment features.

Therefore, Charles Tilly may be best known for his theory of “Resource Mobilization” (Tilly, 1977, pp. 3-7). As mentioned in the introduction to his From Mobilization to Revolution, his work was intended to formulate a theory for explaining and describing “collective action” (Tilly, 1977, pp. 2-4). In his opinion, phenomena such as revolutions, riots, social movements, political intrigues and even coups are considered as various types of collective actions that occur to induce or precipitate changes in society. For this purpose, it is necessary to theorize about social actions to achieve the recognition of these phenomena. Tilly’s systematic theory about collective action deals with the need to study social movements. Tilly also extensively reviews the classic and recent theories of his predecessors and provides a detailed critical analysis thereof. (Tilly, 2004, p. 104).

Before addressing Tilly’s main theory around collective action, it is necessary to explain his basic model for the analysis of political society. Tilly’s basic model is called the “political model” and is static in nature. He also introduces the concept of the “mobilization model” which may explain collective action and changes in political society. Elements composing the political model include population, government, one or more contenders, a political society, and one or more coalitions. Political power contenders may be divided into two groups: members of the government, and government challengers. In fact, the core
competitiveness and a source of dynamism in the political model are caused by competition between these contenders (members and challengers) in order to obtain a greater share of state power. From Tilly’s point of view, government is an organization which makes use of basic and focused tools in order to control society. Relations and challenges between the government, members and challengers form political society. Sometimes coalitions are formed between the members and challengers whose purpose is collective synchronization with common goals (Tilly, 2004; Ayres, 2005).

2.1. The Mobilization Model:

The dynamics of competition among the political contenders requires using a model for explaining the changes in political society, particularly explaining the collective action of each contender. Tilly uses the mobilization model to explain this collective action. This model is divided into two sections. The components of the first section include interests, organization, and mobilization, while the second section is made up of components including, 1) Repression and Facilitation; 2) Power; 3) Opportunity and Threat; and 4) Collective Action (Tilly, 1977, pp. 3-7).

2.1.1. The First Section of the Mobilization Model:

This section may not explain revolutionary acts, but it shows the existing internal capacity to take proper action. Because, Understanding of activists is the very first step to define movement.

2.1.1.1. Interests:

The first element of the mobilization model is interests (Tilly, 1977). Interests are the common advantages and disadvantages arising from the different interactions between the considered population and other populations.

Analyzing the interests of women in becoming activists in society directed the research to the question of how to define such an interest. By the analysis of their actions, it is possible to discern a common interest among women. This means discovering the steps women take to become active and to handle their own personal needs themselves. In this regard, due to the limitations and difficulties they face, women living in Iranian society share common interests. The interests of the target group of this article include the ability to participate in the public realm and not to be confined to the private sphere, combatting social and legal discrimination against women, as well as the ability to hold public assemblies to promote collective interests.

In accordance with the above, Iranian women share common advantages and disadvantages. Among the common disadvantages are the problems associated with entering the social space which has always been an issue for this part of the society. While the women participating in this study are mostly well educated, the patriarchal system of Iranian society prevents them from participating in different social and political activities. A large percentage of the interviewees jointly agree in regards to this matter. About 87% assert that there have always been great obstacles in their way to enter the social and political arena, and this is well evident in their interviews. For example:

“Even though I was able to obtain my Master’s degree in accounting, I was prevented from entering the labour market. In my dad’s opinion, I should not waste my life. He had permitted me to continue my study in order to find a husband and marry. Now I have to think about housekeeping and satisfying the needs of my husband; the society does not need my abilities.”

The bitter experience of this Iranian woman, outlined above, is an illustration of the point that after years of trying to define the true meaning of rights for women (except for their role as a mother and a wife), many Iranian women are dissatisfied with their restricted conditions. It is important to note that an average Iranian woman has never been able to put herself first in any sort of matter. Due attention needs to be paid to the negativity of the above statement, since a woman who has never lived for herself will not be able to seek rights for herself. One interviewee stated:

“It was hard to convince my husband to allow me to go to the college. He agreed on the condition that it would not have an adverse effect on me doing the household chores. Upon receiving my Bachelor’s degree, I decided to pursue my study to achieve a higher degree. I was enrolled in the relating exam but I realized that he did not want me to obtain a higher degree, because he himself had obtained a Bachelor’s degree, and he discarded my exam card

3 Interview No 12, Group (Bbi): To protect the anonymities of the interviewees, the researcher has placed them in different types of groups and has named them using numbers and the alphabet.
to prevent me to pursue my study, and I had to give up." 4

These statements show the difficulties women face in a society where they are not considered as independent enough to pay their own tuition. A woman is not considered as an independent human being or even as a wife or a partner deserving of equal rights, but is perceived as a labourer. No one respects her interests and she is not defined through an independent social identity. It is clear that patriarchy is deeply rooted in Iranian society and dealing with it is an exhausting task. Of course, some women consider confronting patriarchy as the first step towards reforming Iranian society and using it to create possibilities to move forward. However, some of them feel this issue is very deeply rooted in Iranian society and freedom is completely out of their reach.

“I was about 7 years old. My grandma recounted the story of her life and left me alone with a world of questions and ambiguities. I understood that she, as a woman, had suffered great pains, and how, as a woman, she had been deprived of her normal life in Iranian society. Since then, there has been a spark in my mind that I shall take my rights as a woman.” 5

The standing and character of women in public opinion shows the importance and dignity of the women in a society. For example, the image of a woman that the culture presents represents the attitude of the people of that society. These images may be evaluated through the lens of traditions and customs, as well as the common values of the people. Public culture and beliefs of the Iranian people indicate that a woman is created only for homemaking; and showing bravery and courage by women in public culture is strange. Such a woman is called “weak”, and if someone calls her “a brave woman”, it is strange. It is clear that women living in this public belief system and culture may not find their real position and they are always considered as the second sex.

“Going to school was agonizing for me. The schoolmaster treated us like criminals. Our nails and hair were controlled every day. They came to our classrooms randomly and ordered us to put our hands on the desk, not to move, so that they could check our bags. This sometimes led to the expulsion of the students concerned and was put on their school records. This made students face many problems, problems with which they sometimes struggled for many years.” 6

The interviewees imply that they have been facing these problems from primary school all the way to university. Although these issues may cause some women to avoid receiving an education due to the immense pressure they experience on a daily basis and being treated as if they had no human dignity; other women use these opportunities to rise above and better themselves in order to be able to make a change to these situations.

“The university’s dormitory imposed restrictions and only women had to follow those certain rules. They inspected our personal bags in order not to have toiletries or certain books. One day, when I felt really tired and frustrated of those conditions, I decided to talk about it to the other girls. We gathered on campus to protest against those conditions. When the dean of the campus was informed, he didn’t solve our problem but put me through more educational hardship at all stages of my education instead. I was not allowed to pursue my study at higher levels and I could not receive my diploma from the university.” 7

As mentioned before, as well as facing issues and restrictions at home, women also have to face these obstacles at university as well. It is almost as if the society purposely does not want to see them succeed. Instead of focusing on what really matters, they get distracted easily since they have to deal with marginal issues like something as basic as living in a suitable place and not having to worry about having a social life in order to survive. However, the restrictions were not limited to the cases mentioned above. Legal restrictions are considered the most important obstacles standing in women's way since they are almost impossible to overcome, unless under conditions where these rules are adjusted or changed in some way.

“Even though I am a lawyer, I have not yet divorced my husband after six years. Although he seemed to be a broad-minded man, he hated our [women's] gatherings and tried to prevent me from going to these gatherings. For him, our conversation topics were disturbing the order of life and mobilized us against the men. Custody of my son is the most

4 Interview No 8, Group (Abii).
5 Interview No 21, Group (Baii).
6 Interview No 13, Group (Bai).
7 Interview No 22, Group (Bbii).
important thing in my life by which he continually puts me under pressure.”  

It is clear that many of the obstacles women face are due to traditions getting in the way of any sort of adjudication. Iranian women have to prove themselves to be taken seriously and change the thoughts of society towards them. Traditionally, women are expected to run their families, and this duty puts them between the workplace and the family which eventually leads to emotional and psychological consequences. On the other hand, men consider the presence of women as a threat to their power and status.

Such restrictions create a common sense of unity among the women. They feel that they are not able to confront these problems unless they unite and join forces. Consequently, they gain a good sense of satisfaction from holding meetings with other women.

“The common problems we face have brought us closer to one another and have strengthened our solidarity. I feel that I am ready for these women's gatherings, while I am not always ready for other gatherings.”

In this study, all responses from the group who have been holding women's gatherings are positive and it is a fixed part of their social lives. According to data collected through these interviews, 100% of the women who participated in women's gatherings, consider participation as a fixed and necessary part of their active social engagement.

“I take part in a women’s gathering once a month. It is very interesting that women from all walks of life are present at these gatherings. Even uneducated people are present at these gatherings. However, interesting ideas are expressed from which I get many ideas. I enjoy these gatherings. I enter another world and hear about topics in a different way and understand problems differently.”

“We have gatherings held each time in a different city in Iran. They are usually held every two months. The purpose of these unofficial gatherings is to be aware of the situation of other activists and help each other in order to achieve our goals.”

When the interview subjects are asked about the reasons of holding these gatherings, the first reply is that they need each other. More than 75% stated that they take part in these gatherings to be aware of each other, while 67% stated that they are interested in the topics and subjects discussed in these gatherings which affect their decision making for new activities. It is important to note that in recent years, and with the development of technology, these gatherings have not changed considerably. Only the manner of invitation has been changed. They are not forced to call each other, but they send messages in a group formed in virtual space to inform each other.

“We often arrange a meeting in a coffee shop to see each other and talk more closely. The atmosphere is completely feminine. We inform each other in the virtual space.”

The most important thing about the women’s movement in Iran is that despite extensive planned organizational measures that are usually formed in women’s gatherings, Tilly’s mobilization theory does not exactly define the revolutionary organization. Women’s gatherings may not be considered as an organization or group that leads the movement; however, undoubtedly, home network plays a revolutionary organizing role for the individuals involved with them instead of an organization. These networks have undertaken organization and facilitated the collection of the mobilizing resources. Women’s gatherings constitute a unique network in Iran that is responsible for collecting women activists or the mobilization of resources. They bring together women without distinguishing between them for having different opinions and ideas, or even conflicting views. The other function of these gatherings is the collection and receiving of recent news and information through the interactions and relationships with other members. Mobilization actions and collective actions (such as organizing demonstrations, protests and campaigns) are considered as other functions of the gatherings.

In general, we can say that, apart from members having different opinion about how to overcome political and social obstacle placed in their way, all

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8 Interview No 28, Group (Aaii).
9 Interview No 9, Group (Abi).
10 Interview No 36, Group (Bbii).
11 Interview No 41, Group (Baii).
12 Interview No 46 Group (Abii).
face limitations and problems which affect their situation and therefore provide them with common causes. Thus, they are considered to be a part of the same group.

2.1.1.2. Organization:

The second element of this model is ‘organization’. ‘Organization’ is the common identity and unifying structure of individuals in a population. The more robust these elements are, the stronger the ‘organization’ will be. To explain these two elements, Tilly refers to two components: ‘group relationships’ and ‘network relationships’ (Tilly, 2004). ‘Group relationships’ are those relations identified by individuals with respect to their common features and features of other individuals. ‘Network relationships’ include individuals communicating with each other directly or indirectly based on particular interpersonal relationships.

Answering the question “Is it possible to dichotomize these individuals as part of certain organizations?” is not simple. However, the first thing that connects them to each other is, certainly, their common gender. All women are placed in this framework due to their female gender. The results obtained from this research show that there is a common sense of identity shared among them. Of course, this common identity has been changed in different ways, and women’s their external aspects such as personalities, appearance and their view toward life has been altered. Social identity is the common features and characteristics that a group has and is defined based on them. In other words, the social identity of a person refers to the features, characteristics and thoughts that the person has developed through the social commons, and membership in groups. Based on this definition, social identity may be considered as a type of self-analysis in relation to others. This process specifies who a person is ‘psychologically’ and ‘socially’, and what his/her is ‘position’ is. In other words, the identity process makes it possible for each female social activist to find a proper answer for the questions regarding who she is and what she is. Therefore, social identity is the identity that a person obtains in socialization processes and their communications with groups or social units in society. The most obvious ones are the social groups or areas that a person refers to as “we” and considers they belonging to in terms of commitment and affection. Mass communications strengthens this social identity. In this regard, questions about the amount and the type of interactions between the interviewees were asked. Understanding how these individuals take measures to discover their common features with the others is of high importance. In replying to these questions, about 89% of the women interviewed referred to their gender. It seems that the interviewees sought to emphasize that this feature makes a clear distinction between them and others.

Generally, gender is considered as a social system that determines the role of women and certain relations between women and men. Gender roles are not assigned according to biological differences, but it is defined based on the socio-political and economic considerations. These processes of social and cultural definition of gender leads to the distribution of unequal opportunities in job allocations, power structures and reward systems, and the unequal evaluation of positions and roles, which essentially legitimizes inequality. This legitimization leads men and women to unconsciously accept these positions and roles in their own classification system. Men control material resources and power, and use these as a means for the social definition of gender, ideological, and cultural adjustment of these unequal positions in order to apply their cultural power in planning relations and interpersonal relationships. The function of these social and cultural definitions of gender is that they will establish a fundamental relation on micro and macro levels that helps the reproduction of these unequal positions and roles. In terms of social status, women are not able to control these tools of power. As women’s movement is considered as moving against the dominant societal and political trend, it can easily find itself in a dangerous position.

Based on Tilly’s theory (Tilly, 2004), a group relationship can be identified between these women. It means that they have stated that they have common features. First, they explore themselves, and then take steps to understand their commonalities with other women. Furthermore, the study of women working in social arenas in Iran implies that they try to define their common identity in the form of their female gender. In fact, emphasizing their gender and giving priority to it, this identity is in the framework of their reactions against the patriarchal atmosphere ruling their social relations in the society of Iran. Defining a border
between themselves and patriarchy, and highlighting this common factor means that Iranian women have tried to establish strong organizations to achieve their goals. Therefore, they take joint action to establish network relationships which are required for the formation of a group (Tilly, 2004).

In this regard, all women interviewed, including those who are in employment and those who are not, with higher or lower forms of education, of all ages, considered themselves as feminists. It is important to mention that, although Iranian society reacts very severely to their views and actions, they still carry on.

“Regardless of multiple, and sometimes contradictory, definitions of the word “Feminism”, I am a feminist and always introduce myself as a feminist. It is supposed that if a person is feminist, she is an ‘anti-man’ person and is seeking specific privileges. In this process, propaganda is highly effective, as it is difficult to agree to the equality of men and women. Giving privileges to women as an equal gender to men imposes pressure on society, and the patriarchal society in Iran prove that they don’t want to agree to this. Therefore, there is a massive propaganda campaign against feminism, and the government misrepresents the demands of feminists to arouse animosity towards them to the extent that women refrain from joining the feminist cause. They have exploited religion to make an obstacle in the way of these demands.” 13

“Although the view of society's view of this issue is negative, I insist to say that I am a feminist. In my opinion, many of the definitions of 'feminist' used in society are wrong, so the reaction to it is a severe one. What people know about feminism is the information offered by the government, but they themselves never sought to define it.” 14

“I am proud to say that I am a feminist, and I insist on my position and defend it. In our society, when feminism is discussed, everyone objects to it, particularly the men in any profession. For instance, once I asked a composer to compose music for my poetry about women, but when he realized that it was a feminist poem, he refused because he disagreed with feminism and felt strongly against it.” 15

These women highlight a process using feminist views that define a border between them and the others. However, they have failed to find a specific definition of the others who humiliate them and don’t recognize their identity. In this case, they are confused and are not able to define their borders and distinguish between friends and foes.

One of the interviewees stresses that “one of my problems, is to face women who don’t accept each other. As an example, when you talk to a woman and she finds out that you are a feminist, she behaves in a manner as to intimidate you and [to give the impression] that you are not someone important, nor does your activity distinguish you from other women. Of course, I have no claim in this regard, and I don’t see any privileges as to the others, but those women try to show our personality and actions as not valued and suppressed. They don’t want that other women make progress. They feel a sense of retardation. They don’t know that they can thrive by supporting other women.” 16

It is to be noted that there are several examples of women who have governmental jobs and are responsible for encouraging other women to enter social areas, but they object to the employment of women and think that women’s employment is damaging. Consequently, they exacerbate the problems for women in the social arena. In other words, it essentially stresses and advertises the sexual view of Iranian society. Some of them believe that the employment of women damages the social status and employment market of men who are seen by default as the breadwinners. They simply emphasize that there is no need for women to fight the hidden patriarchal culture in Iranian society, but it is better that they choose the simplest way to achieve their basic human rights. If this happens, the interests of Iranian men will not be affected, but also those interests will be met more than before; as domination provides men with more benefits they do not want to lose.

Another interviewee gives an example of a personal experience to authenticate this point. “Once I visited a woman psychologist. She told me: ‘You women are all the same (as if she had another gender). If someone is active in the field of women, psychologically there must be a problem that has led her to this position. If someone is active in the field of women or children, maybe it is because of

13 Interview No 17, Group (Bai).
14 Interview No 37 Group (Abi).
15 Interview No 39, Group (Bbii).
16 Interview No 23, Group (Bai).
her own family or society and/or some social or emotional trauma'. I agree that we are all affected, but the difference between us is that we’ve thought more than others, and we want to take measures to resolve the issues women have been facing. I feel that these women have not been trained properly, so they are not able to distinguish between friends and foes.”

These statements represented the women’s new identity challenges in Iranian society. And since the Iranian society still has a closed space with Islamic traditions, achieving a new identity is often accompanied by a crisis. Iranian culture intensified by Islamic tradition does not permit women to have the idea of a freely created identity. As a consequence, Iranian women need to overcome external barriers to commit to the idea of redefining their identity and sometimes if they were not educated enough they might even stand in each other’s way.

Although there are still barriers for women in finding a new identity and redefining previous values and norms, one of the factors putting these women together to find a stronger common identity is opposition to the external opposing element. When women come together, they feel that they have more to say to each other. The reason is not that they have common feelings and are of same gender, but they have a common foe (that is the patriarchal system) which restricts their freedom and imposes problems on them. The formation of women’s organizations accelerates whenever new restrictions are placed on them. They start using their power and their relationships in order to find a solution for their problems. Combination of the group and network relationships leads to the formation of a group.

In Tilly’s opinion, when the individuals are able to distinguish themselves from the others, they will be able to form a specific organization whose members have several common features. (Tilly, 2004, p. 104)

In one of the questions asked in interviews with Iranian women, the response provided by about 96% of the interviewees is that one of the purposes of the patriarchal system is to separate women from each other to prevent their success and access to power. As stated by one of the interviewees: “this system wants to separate women, but women want their meetings. The only solution for changing the social system is collective work.17

As mentioned before, diversity in women thoughts and actions should not be attacked. It is important that they are convergent and support each other. They cannot achieve this goal, unless by conversations, satisfaction and consensus.

For the establishment of a political active organization, members of the organization or some of them shall be informed of the interests of that organization and this awareness will develop a network. Commitment and awareness of the members to the collective interests is more, establishment of the organization will be more probable. Extent and quality of the organization will determine the mobilization power of that organization.

2.1.1.3. Mobilization:

The third element in Tilly’s model is mobilization which includes the controlled or accumulated resources of a claimant. It is a process by which a group of individuals are changed from passive to active participants in life. In fact, mobilization is a kind of attempt to obtain any type of resources that the group requires for advancing their collective action. Here, Tilly considers that the control and skill of using resources and assets of the group are more important than the amount of assets. He classifies mobilization into three types: defensive, offensive and preparatory. These three types have situational and cognitive differences. Defensive mobilization is when a threat from the non-members of a group induces the group to react to it. Offensive mobilization refers to the reaction of the group against the opportunity achieved by the group to the resource mobilization. Preparatory mobilization refers to the accumulation of the resources through prediction of the opportunities and threats in the future. (Tilly, 2003). In this sense, Tilly’s definition of the three different types of mobilization can be interpreted for the Iranian women’s movement as follows:

1) Defensive mobilization: In defensive mobilization, an outside threat motivates the members of a group to gather their resources, causing them to maintain their benefits. One example of this mobilization is resistance towards laws. In this regard, many laws that are

17 Interview No 38, Group (Baii).

18 Interview No 22, Group (Bbii).
incompatible with the real benefits of the women will be resisted. The movement will become aware of the conflict presented by the new law towards women’s rights, and then forces the legislators to adjust the new verdict. One example is the act debated in Parliament on the early retirement of women. This law was met with serious opposition and after two years it was still not legislated in 2017, but it has been submitted to the Parliament for review.

2) Offensive mobilization: In offensive mobilization, the organization collects resources in response to opportunities to achieve new benefits. Holding elections in Iran is an example of this kind of mobilization, as women conclude that candidates wanting to be elected try to take advantage of the female side of the population during elections and their election slogan is chosen so that they would be able to achieve their goals. These women expect that their candidate would give in to their demands and obtain for them some advantages; otherwise, they will not support him in his later attempts at re-election.

3) Preparatory mobilization: In preparatory mobilization, the organization predicts future opportunities and threats. Subsequently, it collects and reserves its resources. To mobilize effectively in a society, various groups with different thoughts and goals unite to make positive changes. One example is the ‘One Million-Signatures Campaign’, that had a considerable effect on the society of Iran and it has become clear to men that women’s problems in that society, and many men have understood that women can talk about their problems.

Women have more complex minds and are able to deal with problems since they have always been in positions of dealing with more difficult conditions in Iranian society. With this regard, the women’s movement had included all three types of mobilization in different periods of time. Therefore, the use of cyberspace by women over the past decade may be considered a response to state oppression for defensive and preparatory mobilization. After the detention of women activists, websites and weblogs were developed to support them and create anti-government propaganda.

Moreover, based on data collected by this study, cyberspace is the current source base used by women activists. About 96% of educated women use it differently and 72% of housewives are online about 5 to 7 hours a day. Working women, whether working in public or private sectors, are all active in cyberspace. The only difference is that working women in the public sector (who form 19% of the subjects interviewed for this study), have no access to many sites and are forced to spend more time, energy and cost to use Internet. Employees of the private sector (who form 69% of the subjects), have more freedom and use these spaces more freely.

As the statistics show, women with a high school diploma form 17% of the interviewees, 58% of them included women with higher degrees. Among these women, those having a high school diploma are active 4 hours a day, women having Bachelor’s degrees spent 7.5 hours and women with Master’s and higher degrees made use of the Internet for 4.5 hours a day. One of the interviewees expresses her opinion in this respect thus:

“The Iranian women’s movement has no official media. There is no media source to communicate with the women’s society members. Internet has provided a platform for this movement. In my opinion, the Internet is a big change in many fields; particularly because it has had an important role in communication for the women’s movement.”

Another woman said: “The Internet is my communication bridge with the world. I am a member of various Internet groups active in the field of women, and I follow their news and share them with others. I write my comments and read the comments of other people, criticizing or approving them.”

In reacting to this new opportunity, women have mobilized their resources, i.e. the virtual space, for the fulfillment of their goals that they have already described as their fundamental rights.

“When Facebook started out, all bloggers and other activists started using it. We found our friends there and knew where they were and what they were doing. We shared our subjects and inserted comments in our friends’ subjects. Now, about a year later, I have not visited my Facebook page because of other virtual pages. Iran has blocked access to Facebook and we are forced to use a

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29 Interview No 23, Group (Aai).
VPN\textsuperscript{20} to enter it, so we prefer to use other virtual spaces.\textsuperscript{21}

An interviewee confirmed these statements and stated that “Virtual pages, sites and blogs seem like a man with a limited shelf life because, the government has the ability to control it. In the past few years Facebook was very interesting. It is less important now and people are not as active on it as there were in the past. The Internet opens a new space with a new name, suddenly all people become a member and uses the new application.” \textsuperscript{22}

This statement like many others reveal that restricting access to such tool has become important to government crackdowns but surprisingly not, Iranian women activists still find ways to get around government restrictions by using tools that evaded Iran’s censorship technology. However, women’s activist praise the various possibilities of the Internet as a new space for social movement, however, asking interviewees whether they approve or disapprove with a certain characteristic of the Internet in Iranian society. One of the interviewees states that “even though the Internet can be used by the government as a tool to suppress opponents but can be used at any opportunity given.” \textsuperscript{23}

The nature of interaction in cyberspace connects the political affiliations of the users and gives them hope by more radical actions against the frustrations caused by permanent repression by the government.

“I am constantly online throughout the day and read women’s news in the different virtual spaces. I communicate with people and put comments for important news and try to start discussions which lead people to further information.”\textsuperscript{24}

It can be argued that the path that Iranian women activists have travelled through the online movement and blogging demonstrates how Internet restrictions are a means to create political opportunities and facilitate resource mobilization in Iran. Moreover, the successful interaction between cyberspace and social movements has arisen from a dynamic cooperation among the social and political groups in real world and virtual world. Virtual space, as a variable, affects social movements, facilitates their mobilization and provides a modern tool to challenge the challengers in order to organize opponents to the government and create collective action. With this interpretation, we can claim that those political groups with a stronger social position (if they can use the facilities of the cyberspace to create an opportunity for the movement) complete and facilitate the mobilization and organization. They can show the needs and demands of the real world in the virtual world and they will be able to develop their models for political and social life in Iranian society.

\textbf{2.1.2. The Second Section of the Mobilization Model:}

Variables of the first chapter of the mobilization model may not explain the revolutionary action by themselves. This model only shows the existing intergroup capacity for taking measures and will not consider motivations or immediate opportunities for that action. Those motivations and opportunities will find their positions in the other half of the mobilization model and political society model. Therefore, concepts that have been studied in this article are the factors which cause the formation of a social action. The Second Section of Charles Tilly’s Mobilization Theory is formed of components including (1) Collective Action (2) Power (3) Repression and Facilitation (4) Opportunity and Threat; that are included as the most important and out-group components (Tilly, 2004).

\textbf{2.1.2.1. Collective Action:}

One of the most important tools for the announcement of the existence in political and social aspects is collective action. According to Tilly, the types of collective action are different according to the conditions of the period. In other words, in each period, there are various options that people may use to achieve their common goals. Tilly proposed two principles for the selection of the type of collective action: “What types of action are accessible and what is the use and application of those tools to which the groups must pay attention?” (Tilly, 1984, p. 153).

The collective action process, when starting too late, is a violent and complicated one with an uncertain outcome. The complication of this process is due to the fact that collective action is faced with
different types of resistances from the government, since different demands are proposed, this accumulated energy is released in different ways that will be destructive. Therefore, the outcome will be uncertain. Collective action always begins with a problem, and this problem may include a wide range of issues such as injustice, marginalization by the government, and a lack of political freedom. There are also always leading groups in society that try to solve problems via different activities. This is called ‘social movement repertoire’ (Tilly, 2004, p. 3), and it reminds the political elite that the result of such activity is being marginalized by the government, arrest and imprisonment. It may also lead to the closing of media outlets and creating a stifling repressive atmosphere in order to maintain regime survival and keep control of the society.

This trend will cause the continuation and intensification of the underlying problems. Under these conditions, some groups and political, intellectual and civil factions may turn to form a type of limited and sectional social movement, whose results are not achieved. This movement may divide the reformers in Iranian society and undermine the reforming project. On the other hand, actions taken by the reformers may lead to the formation of the social movement.

Upon comparison of these conditions with regard to Iran’s domestic affairs and the situation of women, it can be concluded that Iranian women have turned to a type of social action in Iranian society through which they have tried to achieve their social movement goals. According to Tilly's theories (Tilly, 2004), the question arises: How have women taken the required measures for the formation of collective action? In response to this question, it should be referred to Tilly’s point of origin and raise the question of what activities should be performed for achieving women’s rights. That means what type of personal action is performed by each person that will lead to collective action.

The most important issue is why and how these persons turned to this movement. An overview of the interviews performed with the women shows that each person began performing activities as an individual. Overall, these women all stand side by side and rely on each other in order to take steps towards reaching certain objectives they have in mind.

Individual actions are determined according to a certain orientation as to a series of demands and goals. The activists consider certain definitions for their behaviour and that definition will affect their behaviours. In explaining the subject statements, the women activists, first engage themselves with activities which have positive meaning and are suitable to reach the goal they pursue. These are activities for the improvement of women’s situation. In this vein, any kind of involvement with women’s affairs is considered positively and the woman shapes her personal traits accordingly. Taking the responsibility of a dormitory is one example where the main purpose is to pay special attention to girls in a context where they are under visible or invisible oppression, like in all other spaces which are managed by men. Therefore, she evaluates her presence in the dormitory positively. Although these decisions are mostly limited by intervention of the patriarchal cultural and social structures, individual actions will pave the way for prevailing on these structures, as the active and creative role of the activists may not be denied in adjustment of these structures.

Tilly considered activists’ understanding of their work as a requirement of their action (Van Laer & Van Aelst, 2010, p. 1149). The introduction of this action is clear since women feel differences since birth from men. However, their social activism starts once they enter the official sphere of society and begin to discover the predominant anti-women order of society.

Tilly stresses that activism in his opinion is not only a choice but insists that it shows a new identity for the presence of women. However, this will have consequences such as being accused by family and others of being rebels and destroyers of the valuable traditions of the past. Without considering the predicted consequences, this behaviour is inspired by the idea of the false antecedent conditions. In this sense, a person will devote themselves to the service of a goal. Women make decisions based on activism, will follow different social behaviours in response to social pressures and become activists in the social area. However, since there is opposition of the individual actions and social structures, women should be able to aggregate them and convert them to collective actions with common goals. In this regard, a basis will be defined.

A person’s behaviour in response to the pressures in society is not to leave the social arena, but initially

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25 Interview No 22, Group (Bbii).
it is to make an effort to remedy the situation. This effort will have consequences, and it will give the person countless problems. However, the goal is so great that such considerations will not prevent movement. There is a relation between powerlessness and social mobility, as well as between an organization and feeling powerless. When the membership of the organization grows, the feeling of powerlessness will decrease and those who are organized will feel less powerless than those who are not organized.

As mentioned earlier, collective action always begins with an issue or a problem that includes a wide range of issues such as inequality, marginalization by the government, lack of political freedoms and family issues that the interviewees face. Women feel that they should take action to overcome these problems, as insecurity or lack of action will not lead to positive results and no change will be made in their conditions. After raising an issue, the repertoire of the social movement will begin to move and they will strive to be active members of the society. In this regard, they will take action, along with other persons who have the same problem.

By reviewing these discussions, the conclusion can be reached that collective action among these women is accepted as necessary. They stand together in response to social pressures to achieve a common goal that meets the wishes and interests of individual members. The development of virtual activities and heavy use of the Internet provide an opportunity to the opponents of government policies that will inevitably result in the facilitation of the mobilization process. Of course, the response by the government to the mobilization process was suppression; however, though it does not solve the issues or make the problem go away, women have been encouraged to take as much advantage as they can from this space.

Explaining this issue, it should be said that, in some cases, activity in this space is highly effective and provides the movement with many participants and fans. However, the movement cannot keep these participants in the long term, due to the suppression in the virtual space by the government. Although this suppression and punishment by the government have increased the expenses of the women activists, they have not forgotten the importance of applying virtual tools. Suppression has shown to be very ineffective with regards to this matter. Suppression has not only failed to stop female activists continuing their collective action, but also it has become a threatening factor that facilitates mobilization, as it encourages feelings of sympathy and closeness among this population.

2.1.2.2. Power:

Power of the group for collective action depends on the resources mobilized by that group. Collective action is subject to:

1) mutual interests, i.e. advantages and disadvantages that may result from the interaction with other groups;
2) the intensity and power of its organization, i.e. common identity and unifying structure among the members of the group
3) the mobilization of resources, i.e. the resources owned by the group.

Talking about her activities from the beginning of to the present, one of the interviewee says:

“My main activities begun after I was admitted to university; however, I took part in some activities, such as the Islamic Association, during high school. I was admitted to study sociology at Shahid Beheshti University in 1987 and was immediately accepted as the head of the council of the dormitory. On the other hand, I became a member of the Islamic Council of the university and began to perform activities in the central council of the university. As I was interested in women’s topics, I began to write for the Salam newspaper in 1991 and assumed responsibility for the Women's Tribune page where the articles embraced topics in the field of legal, political and social issues concerning women. Then I became the editor-in-chief of a publication called ‘Printing and Publishing’ (Chap va Enteshar), and then I was transferred to ‘Hoda’ at the Ministry of the Interior. I was interested in topics such as women studies, and social and cultural educational centers that performed activities in the field of empowering women and improving their conditions. At the same time, the debate was raised about NGOs and how our team could establish six educational workshops for Iranian women in all provinces. We had many accomplishments with the help of literature from the NGOs, mechanisms, and the efficiency of the facilitators. After several years working in the Office of Women’s Affairs, I was transferred to the Office of Social Affairs, and there I individually pursued the topic of NGOs. An initial bylaw was written for the NGOs whereby the NGOs
Although this woman mentions political activities in some government position, however, examples of female activists committed to the Iranian women’s movement like her can rarely be found. Women mostly subordinate positions in Iranian politics which is not a hidden fact, as the political system combined with patriarchal culture encourages women to accept their subordinate position and not to challenge patriarchal structure. Despite the dominant view that attempt to marginalize women, active women constantly struggle to change the clichéd role for women and participate in socio-political activities whatever it is provided to change societies perceptions about women. In this regard, Tilly considered the activists’ understanding of their role as an introduction to action (Tilly, 2004).

As is described by another interviewee:

“Starting with the voluntary and informal activities in the social fields relating to the women, I felt these restrictions more stringent than compared to what men had to deal with. It is not as easily done for her since she has to deal with society, traditions, and even her own family sometimes. The inequalities between women and men are clear and painful, but we should help each other to reduce these inequalities. Another annoying issue was that there was a serious conflict in law and custom for women’s economic issues. For example, women receive their Mahrieh after their marriage, so they should make some investment after their marriage. However, we see that this doesn’t happen, and women have no capital. If a woman demands her dowry, she will be in trouble in her personal life and will also be accused by her husband and his family of causing discord. Even her own family will tell her that she is not a good wife. This is not approved by the law and it will eventually result in making women economically deprived.”

Women limited access to economic, political and cultural resources is an obstacle to the growth of capital and national productivity. Although, women can bring some changes in society but they are mostly in subordinate position and this condition cannot be changed until they reach the point of realizing they need to be united. Therefore, the analysis of above statement entails the relationship of individual to collective action. On the individual level one can easily imagine the formation of common grievances by everyday experience that lead to collective action from Tilly’s point of view.

When women confront a problem, one person is not capable of changing the society’s point of view, so collective action is predicted to occur. To challenge the subordination of women in society by the patriarchal order, the interviewee explain how she eventually got involved in activities and understood the importance of group activities:

“Upon admittance to university, I became familiar with women’s activities. Since the One Million Signatures Campaign began, some of my friends

26 Interview No 18, Group (Baii).

27 Mahrieh is the sum paid or promised to be paid by the groom to the bride at the time of marriage, often not collected until the husband’s divorce or death.

28 Interview No 30, Group (Abi).
had been active in that campaign. I was more familiar with these activities. After that some of my friends and I formed a team and established an NGO, where I have been working since its foundation. Our site named Feminist informs the people. We also have another site named Stop Violence that is active in the field of violence against female activists. It makes an optional change towards forming new groups for pursuing an offensive movement to achieve new rights and benefits.”

Therefore, for women group based emotions resulting from perceived injustice are thought to motivate collective action in an attempt to rectify the state of unfair deprivation. The extent to which women respond to this deprivation involves several different factors and varies from extremely high to extremely low across different conditions.

“A personal experience of my childhood caused me to go into such topics. When I was a child, my older brother was a political prisoner; he was a pro-Marxist and performed activities with Marxist groups. He was arrested and imprisoned after the Islamic Revolution of Iran. For many years, he was transferred from one prison to another, and those specific conditions were my concern. When I grew up, I became a social activist and social issues were my concern. I began my activity in the fields of the security of unaccompanied women and working children. I was 18 years old, very inexperienced, and highly sensitive in dealing with these issues. As I didn’t have enough information, I dealt with them emotionally. I did whatever was possible and felt that these poor women should be supported. During the first six months, I helped with the least facilities and received no support or contribution. Thus, I harmed myself more, materially and spiritually. We prepared several forms and asked the right people to approach our center, so that we could help them for gaining experience. It was very difficult at first, because many women didn’t trust us and wouldn’t approach us; therefore, we tried to solve this problem by negotiation. A few women approached us and their friend accompanied them on their next visit. Our contributions gradually took on more of an organized form. We trained them at our center and help them, but our certificates were not valid, so we tried to receive a permit and convinced the Ministry of Public Education to accept the certificates issued by our center. We approached the governmental schools and took the required measures for those people to receive a valid diploma which they can use for employment.”

The vested interest of an activist to participate in a team effort is a motivation for him/her, while the lack of this vested interest becomes a barrier. An almost obvious interest for active women that applies to most interviewees is their willingness, readiness and in most cases eagerness to become involved in group activities:

“The members of this group were mostly university students who tried to help, but our activity was more widespread. We all get started reading the Convention on Human Rights, bent on finding the origin of the problems and understanding why the United Nations does not prevent governments from neglecting human rights.”

Explaining her personal experience, another interviewee shows that she shares a common belief with the other participants in this collective action. In this regard, the struggle of being women in Iranian society is more understandable for other Iranian women; therefore, she can establish a closer relationship with her peers.

“I grew up in a traditional family who strictly follows traditional culture and is highly sensitive to the role of women. I have always been curious and active-minded. This question always came back to me: Why am I so different from my male peers? They have more freedom than me. There were no sensitivities and restrictions for them. But I had to bear these issues. Another bad incident was that I was raped by one of my male peers when I was nine years old. It was very bad and after many years, I still think about it and I’m always upset. Later, I tried to be a top student so I could be accepted into Law (which is a difficult field of study) to solve this problem for myself and women like me. I was highly active during my education at the university and was a member of the Guild Council, the Academic Association and the Islamic Association, and all my activities were focused on the adjudication of the girl students. Although the Iranian laws don’t favour women, I try to use all my knowledge and ability to find the best solution. I prefer to accept the cases involved in social affairs. For example, I accepted to act as for a thirty-year-old physician who was raped, because I

29 Interview No 47, Group (Baii).
30 Interview No 9, Group (Aaii).
31 Interview No 36, Group (Bbii).
sympathized with her. Most of my cases are family-based and I’ve tried to spend all my time and energy in solving my clients’ problems.”

Undoubtedly, women came together to pursue a common goal. It is obvious from the words of the interviewees how these common goals have been formed. Sometimes women are not able to remember the starting point, so they will figure the cause of the issue without considering the starting point. More details are given in another interviewee’s statement:

“I’ve read and heard that many women states that they have been tightly controlled as girls in their childhood and it caused them to think about women’s issues. But the more I think, I can’t draw a conclusion about where it began [for me]. We felt the restrictions in society and in our families, but I really don’t know if that is where it began. When I started working, I was not active in the field of women, it began from the issue of political prisoners. Discussions about political prisoners and supporting them was a very important issue for me and I was seriously active in the field of human rights. In this regard, I got to know met female activists. Topics related to women were interesting to me and I was motivated to know more about them. When we read and hear more, we know that we have experienced these issues and problems, and it causes you to be more involved in these issues. One person alone is not able to deal with the restrictions, issues and problems.”

Although she has not been able to remember the starting point of being women activist but she knows how to play the strong women role in Iranian society. As Tilly clarified ‘a group of people, voluntarily and with determination, take the required actions for the implementation of a common plan by investment in a certain social identity, a unifying belief, a common plan, and a collective action’ (Tilly, 2004). Therefore, she is determined to take action and be a part of a group that would create a collective action. Because of same struggles, another interviewee points out her experience of working as a group:

“In our family, as my mum was a social activist, she gathered a group of women to meet every month. At first, these gatherings were only friendly meetings, but gradually they formed as a group to try to take positive measures. They sometimes decided to help poor people and collect contributions. I hold gatherings with my friends. We gather and watch documentaries on women and children and discuss current issues.”

In addition to this basic personal experience, the next statement revolves around interview’s personal decision to seek certain forms of engagement when the opportunity arises.

“I have been serving as a lawyer for ten years. The main area of my activity is women and I am always the lawyer for women’s cases. I’ve got to this point due to my experience in my adolescence. I grew up in a traditional and religious family, so I became aware of differences as a girl. The veiling imposed by my family was very annoying. I also had to perform religious rituals. Therefore, I began reading books banned by my family and these new radical thoughts opened a new world to me. I could understand to be different and bear the difficulties of being different. When I was 18 years old, Iranian society was better due to the presidency of Mr. Khatami and I was able to get involved in the work of different groups. Meeting people like myself and our similar problems brought us closer together.”

She clearly states that having a problem and a disability to deal with made her a social activist. Another interesting point is that about 96% of the female subjects have declared that they have been inspired by a popular slogan that encouraged them to gather and act in the virtual media. One example is the following quote from an epic poem “Join us dear, join us dear, don’t stay alone, as this joint pain can never be treated individually”. So, any field research about a given social movement shall take into account its members’ conception of their movement and what they consider to be their main problems. Thus, the most reasonable way to engage in social activity is to pay attention to the activists. They are certainly reasonable, able to choose, define a strategy and a discourse, mobilize the resources and take advantages of their political opportunities. Activists interact, communicate and influence each other. They negotiate and make their decisions which creates a public, organized and sustainable activity by which they also demand certain services from the authorities who have been chosen by them. Tilly calls this the ‘campaign’
(Tilly, 2004, pp. 4–10). Using political acts, including forming an organization or a union, holding public meetings, marching, striking, collecting signatures, public speeches, and the distribution of promotional leaflets are what Tilly calls 'the action reserve' of the movement (Tilly, 2004, pp. 2-4). They perform activities and show their commitments to their movement and demands publicly.

2.1.2.3. Repression and Facilitation:
Repression is any act of a group that increases the costs of the collective act. Repression from Tilly’s point of view is the government’s strategies to raise the costs of collective action. (Tilly, 2006, Chapter 4). On the one hand, repressive strategies by ruling government such as banning demonstration, censoring information, surveillance and arresting dissidents might increase the cost of contention. On the other hand, however, acts that decrease the cost of the collective act of a group is a form of facilitation (Tilly, 1978, P. 100). In fact, despite the recent years of the Iranian government’s repressive efforts toward women activists, providing no facilitation for them, the Iranian women’s movement continued to pursue their socio-political activities merely demanding a quick transition to the more open platform. In fact, the development of virtual activities and the increasing use of the Internet have provided an opportunity for the opponents of government policies to facilitate the mobilization process. It is also considered a threat for their challengers, as it may lead to a concentration on cyberspace censorship and the repression of cyberspace activists in the real world. A majority of the interviewed women have realised the power of the Internet to organize, mobilize and express dissent. They considered the Internet to be a facility to challenge patriarchy and work towards a more just and equal society. However, to facilitate collective action in terms of the interviewees point of view cyberspace should be used with caution to prevent repression by the government:

‘The Internet has become an extension of our offline lives. As we challenge gender inequalities in all aspects of society, we must recognise that the government view it as an invading force that threatens the Islamic state’s strict social, religious, and political values, therefore the control over the means of publication and consumption of content online is growing rapidly.’

In terms of the government’s intention to restrict access from websites and massive censorship another interviewee gives an example:

“After the Internet played an important role in the opposition movement that followed the disputed presidential election of June 12, 2009, the Iranian government rewarded an active campaign against Internet freedom, using extensive and sophisticated methods of control that went well beyond simple content filtering.”

The interviewee simply pointed out the new strategy that the government has adopted to repress the contention. In this case the type of repression employed by government officials included online organising efforts by extending regime propaganda into the digital sphere. Both hacking and production of pro-regime online content are the efforts that the Iranian government believed to be a method to repress and exert their power. Therefore, this space has been under threat for women activist who face backlash in the form of repression by the government.

One of the methods of suppressing the opposing voices is to reveal their undesirable faces on the Internet. That is, whenever they felt that our activities on the Internet caused the formation and attraction of the audience, the government tries to create an image of these women being against Islam in order for them not to be accepted by the majority of society.’

From the interviewee’s point of view the Internet is a critical space for women’s rights activism, a struggle that is sharpening a conflict with the government but Women have long realized the importance of freedom of expression and access to information in voicing opposition to patriarchal systems and challenging the status quo. As an extension of offline life, the Internet can be a transformative public and political space where women can criticize patriarchal order and express their identities, feelings and thoughts in a rather safe space.

Therefore, despite these limitations, the Internet remains the only means available for Iranian

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36 Interview No 28, Group (Aai).
37 Interview No 7, Group (Baii).
citizens and dissenters to obtain news and organize themselves:

“I’ve found my way after involving myself in different activities for pursuing gender equality and I’m not afraid of prison and investigation. But those women who cooperated with us are no longer amongst us. They have been made to disappear by the Government. For example, after the 2009 presidential elections, many of the activists were arrested, including me. Many different activities were performed in cyberspace at that time. Our situation was reported to others, and the freedom for political prisoners was demanded many times.”

According to the interviewee, for women activist, the Internet has become a critical space to access relevant information, provide support and mobilize women. The repression strategy such as arresting dissidents, torture and corrupt trials, that women activists are subject to, not only has failed to cause fear and hesitation amongst women activists, it has further enhanced the importance of this sphere for them. In this regards another interviewee talks about her bad experiences during her imprisonment:

“When I was imprisoned, I was transferred to a room for interrogation every day. The interrogator asked me different questions. But one of the main questions was to tell them about my friends or to snitch on them, but I resisted. One day when I was tired of resistance, they tried to threaten me. The interrogator told me to write down my friends names. I answered him that I wouldn’t snitch. He told me, ‘if you continue resistance, I’ll rape your younger sister who is only sixteen years old; then you’ll beg me not to do it and write your friends’ names’. I told him ‘you are wrong, there will be a punishment for everything. We must pay the price of being women in the Iranian society, and I was punished, and now that I am imprisoned, my sister will be punished; but she’ll understand that she must struggle and resist throughout her life, but not with you, but with the traditions and history that created such a patriarchal society’.”

This pattern of compelling others to also push for change, coupled with the willingness to take personal responsibility teaches an important lesson. This is that the repression of the collective action employed to change the Iranian society does not prevent these women from continuing their activities; in fact, they become more motivated to continue and to not be afraid of repressive actions. Here, too, her participation to engage in new forms of activism:

“When the government fears our activities on the Internet, it is clear that this space has had positive effects such as awareness and revealing actual news, so the path is right and will help us to achieve our goals.”

These elaborations underline the crucial importance of pursuing the Iranian women’s movement goals through being active on the Internet.

**2.1.2.4. Opportunity and Threat:**

Controlling websites, weblogs and social networks are the tools that show how the protest movement uses the Internet. In fact, the Internet is a tool providing a widespread and decentralized access for organizing the movement. Cyberspace is able to transfer the messages of the organisation to the outside world and meanwhile communicate with its members. The open information sharing system in the developed field of the Internet has provided this opportunity for the movement's activists to be active in a space with a decentralized structure, where there is less pressure than in the real world. The other benefit is that people living in other countries will be informed of the activists’ activities. Also, their intellectual contributions may impose pressure on the government and force them to retreat from their positions. Cyberspace is similar to a tool which aids in the organisation of movements and focuses the attention of their supporters on one specific subject, which could lead to changes in the real world.

With this regard, several questions were raised in the interviews to elicit the opinions of the Iranian female activists regarding whether cyberspace is an opportunity (or a threat) relating to the activities of the Iranian women’s movement. The other part of the answers included the opinions of interviewees to this question: Was the Internet successful as a tool to render services to the women’s movement? The answers were very clear. 83% of the women interviewed agreed with the effectiveness of this tool and considered it as an opportunity for achieving the movement’s goals. One of the interviewee elaborated on this:

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38 Interview No 19, Group (Bbi).
39 Interview No 32, Group (Baii).
40 Interview No 17, Group (Bai).
In my opinion, cyberspace has been effective in the field of homemakers and the general female population. For example, I see that I share a topic in the field of the women and two of the women who know these spaces and have no information about them will repost them and inform other people. I think that it is very good and a communication bridge has been formed. I am not saying that the Internet has had an inhibiting role, the virtual sphere has been able to have a 50% effect, whether in terms of informing or other facilities provided to the movement. I don’t say that it has an inhibiting role, because if there is not such a resource, we will obtain no information. Currently, Facebook and Twitter or other similar websites are informing us, but they don’t have the same effectiveness. People read the news and ignore them, and they are not motivated to take action in the real space. In previous years, when the weblogs were of high importance, they were more effective and directed the people towards activism.”

The prime reason for her engagement is that she believes currently this space is the only information reference that is accessible and more highlighted. The most important benefit of the Internet is to inform people about the women’s movement and the groups who have met each other through it. Communication had been formed and the group continued with performing the same activity; however, the result obtained was not the one the activists had been hoping for.

“In my opinion, the Internet, like other tools, has specific advantages and disadvantages; the greatest advantage being it’s effectiveness. For example, the campaign on changing the masculine face of the parliament was developed through the Internet. We were a 10-person team who were informing the people. Since we couldn’t inform other people via telephone, we tried to gather the unknown people and then we formed an Internet group. The number of followers doubled in a short time. The site of this campaign was developed and the process of informing the people was started. After that, Internet activists began their activity and even the international space was affected. However, the cyberspace had disadvantages as well. Many people have failed in practice, but they show themselves very well in the virtual environment, while they have poor knowledge and insufficient information. For example, the topic of the reduction of working hours for women was not important for people and many didn’t want to be involved. But the virtual space turned their minds on. Regarding the above-mentioned campaign, I talked to the deputy of a department of the government who was a successful and active woman. I asked her why she was not running as a candidate for parliamentary representation, and I assured her that our campaign would support her. She replied: ‘I can’t. If my husband finds out, I’ll be beaten and he’ll make my life bitter’. I was very surprised to see how such a successful woman is weak in her home.

“It should be noted that inactivity and lack of social activism are the undeniable characteristics of the virtual space. However, activism, therefore, does not depend on [physical] presence and mobility. For example, while there is a law for wearing the hijab, and it is not observed by a vast population of women, and they’ll convince themselves that it is sufficient if only part of the body is covered. These people have obtained their information and this information has impact on them, so that Iranian society has been forced to give it to them. Therefore, the Internet is a tool that may be used in any form, and despite the fact that it can be useful and effective, it may also cause further problems. In my opinion, the much of Iranian society has yet to uncover the many advantages of the Internet and the proper use of the Internet. I think that it is highly important to provide intellectual and cultural development [opportunities] in using the Internet. We communicate with each other through the routine use of the virtual space, because it is not possible to plan a gathering at short notice. However, I prefer to be a social activist rather than an Internet activist. Of course, I never encourage people to take part in street protests as, considering the security situation in Iranian society, participation in these protests will impose costs on the people involved and they may be imprisoned; therefore, I only inform them. I actually do what is required but I never suggest to other people to do so. I argue why I participate, but I never insist them to do the same. Some people may not know the consequences or they may not intend to be involved.

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in this issue; therefore, I never suggest it to them. I only inform them.”

The interviewee here emphasises that although she is an activist and participates both online and offline, she does not encourage others to do the same due to the costs associated in Iran’s society. She merely insists others stay informed and at least have an online presence. However, the virtual space has caused isolation and anonymity in the society and created weak relations networks that are meaningless interactions. The Internet has played a positive role in the women’s movement, as it has speeded the process of informing people. Of course, the virtual space makes people good at “liking” and makes them believe that this all that is needed to create an activist. For example, the post-election fallouts in 2009 have demonstrated this issue. Many people stayed in their homes and chanted and thought that they had performed their duty to society. Also, in the One Million Signature Campaign, the virtual space was not as active as it currently is now. People gathered, talked and showed their true faces. No one could enter the space knowing nothing about it. Therefore, people who shared these concerns gathered and took advantage of one another’s knowledge. Some people on the virtual space have no knowledge about these issues, or they have obtained wrong information, and may be overwhelmed. The manner of using the Internet in Iran is not right. Iran’s society must learn how to correctly use this new tool. Unlike what most of Iranians predominantly believe, Google is not the only search engine and source of information on the Internet, believing so Iranians may obtain incomplete information and a false sense of confidence with that. Although the Internet is widely used in Iran, due to the way it is used, the opportunity for change and influence it has for the Iranian women’s movement has not been effectively utilised. Here the Iranian women’s movement must be cautious that this ungrasped opportunity does not turn into a threat for the movement.

3. Conclusion:

The findings outlined in this article indicate that the cyberspace has been instrumental in increasing self-esteem and the sense of independence of Iranian women. Without worrying about the patriarchal attitude of Iranian society, they talk about their social problems and life much more easily than in the past. It has also been shown that the Internet has changed the traditional beliefs and thoughts of Iranian women. This transformation may undoubtedly be an effective factor in the revision of the traditional ideas about women’s problems, which may result in a transformation in the existing social structures. Today, women have left their traditional roles in Iranian society and want more of an effective presence in society. The Internet has helped them discuss their demands and make their presence stronger with the support of others. On the other hand, cyberspace has provided the opportunity for engagement and discussion for Iranian women. As for those who need to express their feelings and ideas (due to experiencing social pressures and difficulties), the virtual space gives them the possibility of uncensored presence and expression and the ability to find solutions for their problems through discussion with others.

In Tilly’s theory, the most fundamental needs of social movements include active forces who are engaged in activities. The Internet meets these needs. The Internet provides the possibility to organizers to coordinate and plan actions amongst different sections as well as at great geographical distances, including outside the geographical boundaries of a country, via the Internet. Contrary to the views on the impact of the virtual space on social movements to the effect that the Internet carries people away from the present and facilitates passivity, this study of the Iranian women’s movement shows that being active in the virtual space can complement and reinforce mutual interaction in the real world. In fact, cyberspace has been able to represent an effective substitute for the old forms of activism, and plays a significant role as a variable in mobilization and collective action. It has provided a possibility for the women’s movement to eliminate despair and disappointment through this new form of interaction. The Iranian women’s movement shows that, despite governmental repressions, the Internet has provided relatively new resources for women, resulting in their new ability to accelerate mobilization and collective action.

However, suppression in the process of mobilization is more effective and less costly than suppression in the process of action. Although the Iranian government blocked the mobilization of women through legal means, they were not fully aware of the potential of the Internet as a tool of mobilization and organization against the
When the government confronted it, and adopted certain strategies to suppress and control it, it was not able to do so completely as the Internet provided the movement with different avenues to circumvent control. As soon as a website or weblog was blocked, new avenues were provided to the members of the movement to restart their activity. Supporters of the women’s movement outside Iran made new Internet routes to prevent the stopping of resistance activities. On the other hand, global assemblies were informed of the suppressive measures of the Iranian government, so that more pressure was imposed on Iran’s government and as a result, suppressions were minimized. Therefore, through turning the social sphere into a political one and providing uncensored news, the Internet has become a platform for negotiations, lobbying and fighting which will all be used to bring about social changes via social coalitions

As a result, the empirical study of Iranian women’s use of cyberspace indicates, as some analysts say, that although the Internet and cyberspace do not completely provide freedom speech they are an effective tool towards obtaining it. As some claim, the limited number of Internet users in relation to the total population in the social movements does not imply that the importance of cyberspace for the social movements is negligible. Cyberspace, as a means of mobilisation and organisation of resources, is important when it is provided to the organisers of a movement. It plays the role of a communication interface between leaders and the active sections of the population. Apart from organized movements, significant numbers of ordinary Iranian women have access to the Internet. Housewives generally use the Internet more than working women. From this viewpoint, cyberspace cannot be the only valuable variable for the process of communicating resources to mobilise and cannot solely provide the solution and method for attaining the goals of the social movement. Social challengers have access to this new facility, and it provides them with the opportunity to accelerate the process of mobilisation and collective action.

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