

Iranian women's political activism in the 2009 postelection events, and their usage of social media

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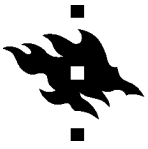
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Tiivistelmä/Referat – Abstract		
<p>This study aims to scrutinise how the 2009 postelection conflict in Iran shaped the political activism of Iranian women who immigrated to Sweden at least 6 months before interview. This research also investigates how the female actors of these events, who were interviewed, see the role of social media in their activism during the 2009 postelection struggle. Moreover, this study explores how the participants see the role of women in the protests. Narrative methodology is the method of investigation for this study because the study aims to capture the actors' point of view. The data is based on stories told by eleven Iranian women through interviewing. The women were involved in the 2009 postelection. Some immigrated to Sweden before the 2009 elections and others after the events.</p> <p>The research reviews the literature in the field of social media and activism. The theoretical framework covers controversial debates about both the role of social media in facilitating political activism, particularly in the case of the recent uprisings in the Middle East. Moreover, the study presents discussions about social media and diaspora activism. The research also reviews the literature about Iranian women's political activism and how they have resisted after the 1979 Islamic revolution with a special focus on the 2009 postelection events.</p> <p>The results of this study indicate that the 2009 postelection events were a turning point for the participants' activism lives. In addition, the events were a turning point in the participants' personal lives. The present study confirms previous findings and contributes additional evidence about women's participation and their solidarity in the postelection protests.</p> <p>The present findings seem to be consistent with other research, which found that the role of communication means other than social media is neglected in the latest uprisings. The current study found that usage of social media was more significant among the participants in diaspora. Using social media after immigration signifies staying connected to Iran while losing the presence and participation in offline communities. The research suggests that various communication strategies, such as face-to-face communication, email, text messaging and watching satellite TV channels were used by the participants. The communication tools were used for obtaining news and information, dissemination of news and notifying others. The findings demonstrate that some factors, such as the presence of authorities in cyberspace and how the activists see the role of social media, influenced the participants' usage of social media.</p>		
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1. Introduction to the research

In the 2009 presidential elections in Iran, two prominent reformists announced their candidacy. The period before the election is marked by a temporary and comparatively more democratic atmosphere which resulted in forming controversial debates and street rallies by the supporters of the candidates (Rahimi, 2011, p. 159). Some Iranian citizens who wished for change through reformist alternatives built solidarity regardless of their various backgrounds. Official announcements presented Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, as the winner of the elections with around 63 per cent vote. Soon after, protestors swarmed to the streets in the big cities of the country and organised massive demonstrations against what they called rigged elections and demanded that the votes be recounted (El-Nawawy, 2010, p. 4).

As time moved on and street protests continued, the postelection events appeared in the global news media as the 'Twitter Revolution' (Snow, 2010, p. 99). The term 'Twitter Revolution' denotes the role of Twitter and other social media in the coordination of protests on the ground and dissemination of news and information to the world (Logan, 2010, p. 98). It is said that the protestors utilised social media for various purposes and social network sites opened a new era for mediated political activism in Iran (Logan, 2010, pp. 98-99).

In addition, the remarkable participation of the Iranian women in the struggle drew the attention of media and citizens of the world in the aftermath of the 2009 elections (Afshar, 2010, p. 235). Women actively participated as journalists, protestors and mothers of the victims appeared in international media. Women's presence in the public sphere and their protests featured prominently in the news and in reports. The amateur movie of the death of Neda Aghasoltan, the female protestor, which spread around the world, is one of the pre-eminent samples of both the feminine body of the events and role of social media (Eid & Dakrouy, 2010, p. 23).

1.1 Research question and Research problem

The aim of this study is to explore the political activism of Iranian women, who are currently living in diaspora in Sweden, in 2009 postelection events, and their usage of social media during their activism. The main question of this study is: How have the 2009 postelection events in Iran shaped political activism of Iranian women who live in Sweden? The research also seeks to answer two sub-questions: first, how do the participants see the role of social media in their activism with respect to the postelection disputes? Second, how do the participants see the role of women in the events? The research is based on the stories of Iranian women in Sweden regarding the 2009 postelection in Iran through interviewing. The participants of this study have the experience of political activism in the 2009 postelection protests. Some of the women were in Iran at time of the protests and some of them had already immigrated long before 2009. A narrative method was chosen, as the focus of this study is to understand the participants' lived experiences during and after the participation in the protests.

Concentration on the particular case of the 2009 postelection events comes from my personal history. Moreover, the conflict has remained controversial and significant since its rise in June 2009. I was in Iran at the time of the protests and I was actively involved in the dissent. As a female activist, I witnessed the considerable participation of women in various spheres of the protests. Accordingly, I found it valuable to explore the issue from women's point of view, since they were active agents of the events. Further, the recent uprisings in the Middle East, including Iran, brought into existence controversy over the role of social media in political movements (Cottle, 2011, p. 649). This study is significant because it aims to contribute to the better understanding of the role of social media in facilitating political activism from the actors' point of view, which is one of the most significant current discussions in the field of media and communication.

The main concepts of this study are social media, diaspora, political activism and narrative. According to Boyd & Ellison (2008), social network sites such as Facebook, Twitter, You

Tube, Flickr and MySpace are Internet-based spheres that provide users with the opportunity to create ‘a public or semi-public profile’ and link to other users to share contents by building a communication list (p. 211). As Reis (2004, p. 43) and Vertovec (1997, p. 277) define, the term diaspora refers to a population of immigrants who are settled in a land far away from their original homeland. Diaspora people build collective identities, activities and organisations in the host countries based on the ties and shared experiences in the homeland (Vertovec, 1997, p. 278; Reis, 2004, p. 43). Narrative is a sequence of events that are meaningful and are produced for a specific audience. According to Polkinghorne (1991), a narrative is a sequence of events that are located in a plot and is meaningful (p. 136). Polkinghorne (1988) explains that the term narrative is the same as ‘story’ (p. 13) and mentions that ‘ ‘narrative’ can refer to the process of making a story, or to the result of the process- also called ‘stories’, ‘tales’, or ‘histories’ ’ (p. 13). Political activism refers to mobilisation and employing various strategies that target political matters and ‘embrace new political dimensions’ (Marsh & Kaase, 1979, p. 57). According to Marsh & Kaase (1979), the political activities vary from ‘conventional forms’ such as ‘voting, party support, and participation in campaigns’ (p. 57) to ‘unconventional forms’ such as petitions, demonstrations and boycotts’ (p. 59).

The main literature that supports the study includes theoretical discussions about social media, political activism and diaspora communities. Moreover, the history of Iranian women’s political activism after the 1979 revolution is another focus of the literature that I will outline. It is envisioned that the study will make a theoretical contribution to the knowledge in the field of social media and political activism of Iranian women both in the diaspora and inside the country. Moreover, the study provides a deeper understanding of Iranian women’s political activism after the 2009 presidential election and how their participation influenced their political and personal lives.

After the 2009 postelection conflicts in Iran, numerous studies have attempted to explain how social media facilitated both activists inside the country and the activists in exile with mediated political participation (Snow, 2010; Fisher, 2010, Hashem & Najjar, 2010, Logan,

2010). Recent evidence suggests that social media contributed to organising protests, disseminating information and following the news of the events. In contrast, literature revealed that focusing only on the role of social media leads to a one-dimensional comprehension and neglects the role of other communication strategies and the specific characteristics of each country (Ghannam, 2011; Fenton & Barassi, 2011; Attia, Aziz, Friedman & Elhusseiny; Rahimi, 2011; Christensen, 2011). However, most of the studies are based on remote analyses and they do not focus on narratives of the actors, particularly women who were actively involved in the struggle. In addition, a number of studies have concentrated on the Iranian women's political activism (Tohidi, 1994; Mahdi, 2003; Rahimi & Gheytnchi, 2008), but less has been devoted to the 2009 postelection time and how the conflict influenced the political participation of women. Therefore, this study is significant because it investigates a momentous event in the history of Iran and it focuses on the women's stories as well as the controversial subject of social media.

2.1 The structure of the thesis

This study is divided into five main parts. The first part is the introduction that presents the aim and significance of the research, research questions, main concepts and main literature as well as explaining the structure of the thesis.

The second part of this research is the theoretical discussion. The theoretical framework covers controversial debates about both the efficiency and inefficiency of social media in facilitating political activism, particularly in the case of the recent uprisings in the Middle East. This part also outlines the usage of social media by diaspora communities. Moreover, this section reviews the history of Iranian women's political participation from the 1979 Islamic revolution to the recent years.

The third part is the methodology part explains why a qualitative and narrative method was chosen as the research method. This section presents the process of data collection, which was done through interviewing eleven Iranian women in Sweden. The methodology part

also indicates the data analysis method and the process of interpretation. This section also presents the information about the participants and their backgrounds as well as the ethical considerations and validity of the study.

The fourth part presents data analysis and interpretation. This section is divided into three parts: the 2009 postelection struggle in Iran as a turning point in social and personal lives as the main plot, communication strategies for participation in the events and participants' accounts about the role of women in the protests as the two sub-plots.

The last part concentrates on the concluding remarks and discusses the findings of the research. The concluding part addresses the impact of the 2009 postelection protest and the effects of participation on the participants' political and personal lives. This section also suggests findings on participants' communication strategies and their usage of social media along with the women's role in the protests from the participants' point of view. Further, this part presents recommendations for future research and critical reflections on this study.

2. Social media and Iranian women's political participation

This chapter reviews the theoretical framework of this study. The following pages focus on the research conducted in the field of social media and political activism. Moreover, I will outline an overview of Iranian women's political engagement through various ways during the years after the 1979 Islamic revolution.

The main literature for the first part, Iranian women political activism, consists of a history of women's participation in the public sphere. In this part I will explain how Iranian women have been involved in political issues during the years after the 1979 Islamic revolution regardless of all constraints. Further, I will particularly focus on the case of the 2009 postelection struggle in Iran and how women appeared in the events.

The literature review also discusses the overall knowledge of the new era of activism with social media's contribution. Moreover, in this chapter I will elucidate how diaspora communities use social media because at least a few parts of study are related to immigration. Furthermore, I will refer to the research on social media activism and the recent uprisings in the Middle East, including Iran's 2009 conflict. Taking everything into account, the theoretical framework provides support for the study and contributes to better understanding of the subject.

2.1 Iranian women and political activism

The participation of Iranian women and their engagement in social and political activities is notable due to their historical situation. In retrospect, in the case of the Islamic revolution, women were involved in the process of the revolt that resulted in the victory of the Islamic revolution (Tohidi, 1994; Mahdi, 2003, p. 51, Ghorashi, 2003, p. 60). Soon afterward, with the discriminatory legislation and elimination of women from superior official positions, the revolution failed to emancipate women (Mahdi, 2003, p. 51). Gender segregation has been exerted in various social spheres and women have been prevented to make free personal and social choices such as the way they dress. Additionally, women have been

excluded from studying and working in specific fields and jobs such as singing, judiciary and engineering (Mahdi, 2003; Tohidi, 1994, p. 137). Despite these constraints, women have strived to be involved in social and political actions. 'Women still find the time and energy to engage in collective activities of consciousness- raising, political rallies, meetings, and social events' (Mahdi, 2003, p. 62).

The substantial political and social contribution of women, their resistance through various civil disobedience tactics and taking to the streets to protest, particularly in case of the 2009 presidential elections, have been at the centre of attention of scholars (Rahimi & Gheytauchi, 2008; Tahmasebi-Birgani, 2010; Mahdi, 2003). The participation of women in women's right movements and organising communities and campaigns are notable forms of their mobilisation. From the early days of the Islamic revolution, women objected to mandatory Hijab rule by forming mass demonstration on 8 March 1979 (Mahdi, 2002, p. 52). During the years after the revolution, particularly after the Iraq-Iran war, women gradually strived for presence in the public sphere (Rahimi & Gheytauchi, 2008). Women from various backgrounds 'have begun to show a higher level of awareness to their conditions and to demand more control over the processes of their daily living, their relations with their parents, husbands, children, and men outside of their kin' (Mahdi, 2003, p. 64). During the years after the revolution, new women's activism grew that began to follow women's issues through reformist alternatives (Tohidi, 1994, p. 132). In addition to the struggle of women for social empowerment through unofficial platforms, their requests for change through official opportunities appear in their support for the reformist party.

Women's participation became more considerable when the reformist wing in Iran began to participate in the sphere of elections. Undeniably, the victory of the reformist party in the 1997 presidential elections would have not been possible without women's participation (Rahimi & Gheytauchi, 2008; Mahdi, 2003). During the term of the reformist president, Mohammad Khatami, women obtained the right to be more involved in social activities and follow their demands by resistance (Mahdi, 2003). For instance, there was a surge in women's magazines, newspapers and publications; women began to establish non-

governmental organisations concerning the women's issues (Mahdi, 2003, p. 55). Thereafter, before the second round of the 2005 presidential elections, women's right activists held demonstrations and launched an independent women's movement by focusing on unequal regulations and discriminatory laws in the country. According to Rahimi and Gheytaichi (2008) after starting the presidency of Mahmoud Ahamdinejad in 2005, the reformist activities and the hope for transition decreased when the government enhanced the censorship.

Iranian women have also been actively involved in aftermath of the 2009 presidential elections. Their participation started in the days before the elections. However, only a few scholars have focused on the role of women as influential agents during the postelection era. A recent study by Tahmasebi-Birgani (2010) shows that during the days before the elections that were assigned for the election campaigns, women from various groups succeeded in creating unity (p. 84). They followed their demands by putting pressure on the reformist candidates to declare their position on women's matters (Tahmasebi-Birgani, 2010, p. 84). Besides, women were actively involved in street politics before the elections with peaceful tactics such as 'carnival-like marches' and 'singings' (Rahimi, 2011, p. 159).

In April 2009, a few months before the election, for the first time in Iranian history, women formed a broad coalition which brought together civil rights advocates, NGOs, political activists, and women who were active in presidential campaigns, media, and trade unions under one banner (Tahmasebi-Birgani, 2010, p. 84).

Following the elections and the beginning of dissent, which was called as the Green Movement, women actively participated in the protests. All their activities have been steps forward for the women's movement and have drawn the attention of the public and international media to women's issues in Iran (Tahmasebi-Birgani, 2010; Eid & Dakroury, 2010, p. 23).

Tahmassebi- Birgani (2010) argues that the participation of women in the Green Movement resulted in peaceful objections and non-violent actions (p. 83). She states that the attendance of women at the demonstrations is evidence of their equal existence in the public sphere along with male dissidents (p. 79). Although official reporting was impossible at the time of the uprisings due to censorship, amateur videos and pictures showed female protestors next to men with the courage to struggle with police and encourage male protestors to avoid violence (Washington Times, 2009; Huffington post time, 2009). As a matter of fact, Iranian women attracted the attention of the world and media as the consequence of their mobilisation preceding and after the 2009 presidential elections in Iran.

Furthermore, online activism has been another way for Iranian women to express their disagreements, particularly after targeting offline social movements after the presidency of Ahmadinejad in 2005 (Rahimi & Gheytauchi, 2008). According to Rahimi & Gheytauchi (2008), the *One Million Signatures Campaign*, a campaign which was shaped by Iranian women's activists in 2006 in order to repeal discriminatory laws in Iran, is a sample of how they utilised Internet based activities by establishing a website. On their website, the information about the campaign is provided and people have the possibility to support the campaign by signing the petition online. As another example, 'on International Women's Day 2004, prominent Iranian feminists from all over the world used the Internet to discuss issues related to women and science, art, politics and sexuality' (Ghorashi & Boersma, 2010, p. 685).

Unquestionably, political participation of Iranian women has not only been the cause of the women who live inside the country, but also women who live outside the country because they want to keep their connection to their home country. Some studies have focused on Iranian women's political activism beyond the borders (Bauer, 2000; Graham & Khosravi, 1997). Bauer (2000), in a study about Iranian communities in Germany and Canada, asserts that many Iranian women who left the country are politically active especially with respect to women's issues (p. 205). In his point of view, 'immigrant and refugee women have

multiple communities of cultural reference and engagement, non-Iranian and Iranian, in their countries of exile residence and back home' (Bauer, 2000, p. 182).

There are several types of communication that Iranian women refugees and immigrants have, some of them connect with Iranian local networks while others prefer to act within other networks of the Iranian Diaspora (Bauer, 2000, p. 184). Similarly, Graham & Khosravi (1997), in their study about Iranian diaspora in Sweden argue that Iranian people, including women in diaspora, turn to political activities in the host country as actions that could 'preserve their cultural identity and signify a hope of return, a turn to the real life' (p. 118). As Bauer (2000) argues, Iranian women have more possibilities to express their identities outside of the country due to more democratic situations in the host countries. In his account, women try to build communities and expand their social relations by working in different women's groups or refugee organisations in the host countries. Women in exile also communicate not only with the communities of the same culture as themselves, but also with organisations and people of the host countries in order to progress their cause (Bauer, 2000).

In both Canada and Germany, women refugees (and immigrants generally) have been active in developing and participating in any number of community groups to assist other refugees, to foster the communication of Iranian culture among Iranians, and to pursue individual rights for Iranians in the larger society (Bauer, 2000, p. 183).

In conclusion, regardless of all the constraints that Iranian women confront, women have sought better situations through various ways, such as using official opportunities, street protests and organising campaigns. Their endeavours for transition appeared recently after the 2009 presidential elections and the ensuing events. In addition, most of the previous studies about Iranian women in diaspora and their political activism were conducted by narrative methods. This is mainly due to the fact that focusing on life stories is the proper method to present the 'untold stories' (Ghorashi, 2007, p. 117).

2.2 Social media and political activism

There is a large volume of studies examining the role of social media on social changes, and how new social media have provided a platform for marginalised opinions and transnational activism (Bennett, 2003; Carroll & Hackett, 2006; Cottle & Lester, 2011). Computer-mediated participation is nowadays noteworthy both on a local and global scale. 'Internet may be deployed in a democratic and emancipatory manner by a growing planetary citizenry that is using the new media to become informed, to inform others, and to construct new social and political relations' (Kahn & Kellner, 2004, p. 88). It is said that anti-war demonstrations and the Battle of Seattle, the two well-known global movements that occurred on a large scale, were facilitated by the global network (Bennett, 2005; Kahn & Kellner, 2004, p. 88). Bennett (2005) particularly refers to global activists and how they could advance their goals through mediated political activism that assist organising protests and campaigns. New social sites contribute to the dissemination of information on the protests such as 'slogans' and 'gathering points' (Bennett, 2005, p. 207).

The most prominent reason for considering the Internet to be a platform for activism is its structure. The Internet is structured differently than traditional media because it costs less, there are fewer editorial filters and less control, which facilitates the possibility for activists to exchange ideas readily in a more democratic public sphere. In contrast to the mainstream media, new communication networks are not directed by a central operator and this makes cyberspace more democratic than previous means of communication such as radio and TV (Bennett, 2003, p. 20). Therefore, activists are able to plan protests on a non-hierarchical widespread scale, independently from mainstream media (Bennett, 2003, p. 20). For instance, *Indymedia* has been utilised by activists to disseminate information regardless of geographical boundaries (Bennett, 2003, p. 24; Kahn & Kellner, 2004, p. 91). Alternative, less formal online platforms create new forms of activism by providing individuals with the possibility to discuss subjects and discover unity and common ground (Akdogan, 2012, p. 130). One of the social sources that form social media activism are groups whose aims and interests bring them together in the struggle with the mainstream power and consequently

their voice is removed from the mainstream media (Carroll and Hacket, 2006, p. 85). Therefore, mass media have failed to marginalise dissimilar approaches and voices, thus dissidents resort to cyberspace to contest them, communicate with public and create protests on the ground (Carroll & Hacket, 2006).

When it comes to the Internet, social media are even more different from other ways of communication that the Internet facilitates, such as exchanging email. Akdogan (2012) explains that new application and social media are more efficient, and since activists began to use them, they have not confronted difficulties they had previously faced, regarding the planning of events (pp. 142-143). Earlier means of communication via the Internet such as email were time-consuming. Nowadays, activists benefit from the advantages of new media to encourage other citizens to engagement in their causes (Akdogan, 2012, p. 143). Another contribution of social media to activism is that activists use these media for presenting and saving their offline activities, such as movies and photos on Facebook or You Tube (Askanius & Gustafsson, 2009, p. 29). Additionally, social media have facilitated the developing the activists' knowledge as a result of interaction with other activists beyond the borders and connection to the global environment (Akdogan, 2012, p. 129).

The Internet and other technologies such as cellular phones and digital video, enable people to organize politics in ways that overcome limits of time, space, identity, and ideology, resulting in the expansion and coordination of activities that would not likely occur by other means (Bennett, 2003, p. 20).

Global activism and expanding the movements from a local level to a universal scale is at the heart of our understanding of the role of social media. Several studies indicate that cyberspace is a universal and common platform for activists on a global scale (Bennett, 2003; Kahn & Keller, 2004; Cottle & Lester, 2011). Social media are the vital tools for activists around the world and it contributes to social and political mobilisation regardless of time and geographical boundaries (Cottle, 2011b; Cammaerts, 2007). The anti-Iraq war global protests, demonstrations against genocide in Darfur and the global call to action

against poverty are some examples of how social media mobilised people on a global scale (Cottle, 2011b). As Bennett (2003) says, activists use social media to organise activities and shape transnational demonstrations, and they have not just been able to communicate with each other by using social media, but can get their voices heard by mass media (p. 31). As can be seen, the new media ecology contributes to the dispersion of political protests from the local to the global scale and results in global concern on issues; accordingly it increases the influences of events (Cottle & Lester, 2011). People of the same interests now have the opportunity to find the community in which they are able to cooperate and communicate with others who share a common approach and goal (Bennett, 2003, p. 28). In a study of a Danish political movement, Askanius and Gustafsson (2009) state that activists used various forms of alternative media, especially young activists, which resulted in the extension of the movement beyond the country's borders.

Considering the Internet as a platform for eliminating geographical boundaries for political participation, the next part addresses the issue of how diasporic communities use social media for political activism when it comes to the political matters of their homeland.

2.2.1 Social media and diaspora communities

Several studies have revealed that the global network has provided a public sphere for people in the diaspora and has facilitated citizens' ability to express their political views, shape their communities and organise mass protests (Bauer, 2000; Wahlbeck, 2002; Bernal, 2005; Graham & khosravi, 2010; Shakhsari, 2011). A recent study about Kurdish diaspora in Europe by Wahlbeck (2002, p. 225) argues that the Internet functions as a tool for dispersed Kurdish refugees to stay connected to the Kurdish communities around the world, and to follow the development regarding the Kurdish identity. In contrast, Negal & Staeheli (2010) in their narrative study of Arabs' political identity in the US oppose the idea that new technologies are the means for those in diaspora to stay politically and emotionally connected to their home country. They claim that it is more probable that new media are used by the Arab diaspora for other reasons such as cultural activities regarding their

difficulties that result from their culture and identity in the US (Negal & Staeheli, 2010, p. 20). The authors argue that Arabs allocate various websites to build communities and promote information around the identity and concept of ‘Arabness’ (Negal & Staeheli, 2010, p. 18). The interviewees of the previously mentioned study see themselves as activists who are involved in anti-discrimination actions and those who attempt to change policies of the US government and attitudes of Americans towards Arabs (Negal & Staeheli, 2010).

Many Iranian citizens from diverse groups have left the country due the 1979 revolution and the emergence of the Islamic republic and the Iraq-Iran war and its consequences (Ghorashi & Boersma, 2010, p. 674; Graham & Khosravi, 2010). Iranian people living abroad have used new media to stay connected to their home country politically, culturally and emotionally. In the recent years, there has been an increasing amount of literature on the usage of cyberspace by Iranians in diaspora, especially by those who are politically oriented (Garham & Khosravi, 2010; Shakhsari, 2011). A study of Iranian diaspora bloggers by Shakhsari (2011) points to the increasing amount of Persian blogs by Iranians in diaspora. The global network is a free platform for political exchange and transnational discussion and it functions as a community for marginalised groups, including women, inside the country. Ghorashi & Boersma (2010) refer to the offline and online activism of Iranians and confirm that Iranians use cyberspace and virtual networks not only to develop communities on a local scale, but also for transnational communications.

New transnational networks, partly enabled by the Internet, now served as a bridge to connect large groups of Iranians worldwide to efforts to reconstruct their country of origin. In this way the content of transnational activities for many changed from exclusively political to more inclusive and with a humanitarian bent (Ghorashi & Boersma, 2010, p. 683).

A growing body of literature has focused on new media technologies including social media and how they are used by diaspora communities at the time of conflict in home

countries (Pantti & Anden-Papadopoulos, forthcoming; Newland, 2010). Newland (2010) highlights the influential activities of diasporic communities in the country of settlement. He refers to social networking sites as well as other elements of the Internet that diasporic communities employ in the pursuit of their aims. A study of media work on Syrian diaspora activists by Pantti & Anden-Papadopoulos (forthcoming) emphasises the role of Syrians in exile for advocacy. While Syrians inside the country confront the crackdown on the media, activists in exile act as a bond between the dissidents inside the country and international media and organisations in addition to utilising new media for their offline involvement (Pantti & Anden-Papadopoulos, forthcoming).

Using media for diaspora advocacy dates far back before blogs and Facebook posts to tried-and-true methods such as letter-writing campaigns, newspaper op-eds and radio interviews, and demonstrations staged with an eye to the TV camera (Newland, 2010, p. 10).

The case of 2009 postelection conflict in Iran is a well-known example that reveals how social media has been used by Iranians outside the country. A considerable amount of literature has been published on the global solidarity of Iranians with protestors inside the country and how they spread their advocacy through social media (Graham & Khosravi, 2010; Eid & Dakroury, 2010; Allam, 2010; Fisher, 2010). Some of the supportive activities that are facilitated by social media are: holding memorial events for the victims, and organising supportive actions for imprisoned dissidents. Further, Iranian people in the diaspora applied social media to shape protests around the globe, expand their cause and diffuse the information of the contention in order to raise the awareness of the citizens and politicians of the world (Paris et al., 2010; Eid & Darkrouay, 2010, p. 20). Horz (2010) provides an overview of the news coverage of German newspapers with regard to the 2009 elections in Iran. The Iranian people in exile contributed to the dissemination of news about Iran at that time by translating of Persian social media pages and websites into German for the usage of the German media (Horz, 2010, p. 76).

The recent uprisings in the Middle East brought into existence the controversy over the role of social media in political movements. In the next part I will discuss the recent literature on the issue.

2.2.2 Social media and the recent uprisings in the Middle East

There is a rich body of literature that offers findings on the new media landscape and communication networks and how they spread historical events around the world, especially in the case of the new uprisings in the Middle East (Cottle, 2011a; Attia, *et al.*, 2011, Graham & Khosravi, 2010; Ghannam, 2011). Social media such as YouTube, Facebook, Flickr and Twitter have played a substantial role in the recent movements and uprisings in the Middle East as alternatives for the state owned media (Cottle, 2011; Attia, *et al.*, 2011). The new social media are employed by dissidents, and their functions that differ from other communication tools mark them as essential tools. The main functions of social networking websites for dissenters are: coordinating protests and events, interacting with other activists, expanding protestors' cause, broadcasting news and information to the outside world in order to draw the attention of international communities (Cottle, 2011a; Newland, 2010, p. 11; Rahimi, 2011; Christensen, 2011, p. 243).

The latest unrests have been quoted as the 'Twitter revolution' in Iran and 'Facebook revolution' in Egypt (Cottle, 2011a, p. 649; Christensen, 2011, p. 234). In the case of the Egyptian revolution, Attia, *et al.* (2011) consider social networking sites as the key causes of the uprising, particularly Facebook which is amongst the most popular websites in Egypt (p. 370). Moreover, Khamis, Gold & Vaughn (2012) offer an overview about the mediated political participation in Egypt and claim that the popularity of social media in Egypt started to increase in the years before the revolution. But, during the uprising there was a surge in the usage of social media, particularly when it comes to utilising these media to promote movements (Khamis, *et al.*, 2012, pp. 3-4.). The authors consider a number of functions for various social media platforms, for instance:

Facebook was effective as a means of finding others with similar political views and planning street protests' and You Tube were mostly used for promoting citizen journalism by broadcasting activists' videos which were then picked up by satellite television channels and seen around the world (Khamis, et al., 2010, p. 5).

In recent years, a large and growing body of literature has been devoted to the better understanding of the role of social media in the aftermath of the 2009 elections in Iran and how 'the Internet played the role of a powerful alternative space for opposition' (Rahimi, 2011, p. 165; Christensen, 2011; Rahimi & Gheytauchi, 2011). The functions of social media inside the country could be identified by the following roles presented by Paris at al. (2010): it facilitated protestors to interact inside the country and across borders (p. 162). Social media enabled 'various groups, ranging from women's rights organisations to reformist religious factions' to form a platform for disagreements and debates over the electoral fraud (Rahimi, 2011, p. 165). Rahimi & Gheytauchi (2011) confirm that in the 2009 postelection time in Iran, social media changed into a stage for Iranian dissidents to express their disagreement, and resulted in a worldwide awareness and unity about Iran's situation.

Coining the term 'Twitter revolution' for Iran's case was the result of the vital character of Twitter in promoting the opposition and publicising the news of events around the globe as well as providing a tribune for solidarity actions and messages of support (Cottle, 2011a; Snow, 2010; Fisher, 2010, Hashem & Najjar, 2010). Rahimi (2011) discusses how social media could enable Iranian people to bypass the constraints during both 2009 preelection and postelection time in Iran. One of the inclinations that Rahimi (2011) quotes for mediated political activism is 'transparency' (p. 168) which refers to the notable role of social media 'for posting clips and photos of street protests' (p. 168). Another trend that is mentioned by the author is the usage of social media as a platform for unity of dissenters (Rahimi, 2011, p. 169). As can be seen, 'in this manner, social media platforms enable new ways in which to think and act political engagement—ways that facilitate political

participation and mobilise grassroots groups or individuals against common goals' (Fenton & Barassi, 2011, p. 181).

2.2.3 Contrary ideas on the efficiency of social media

In contrast to the above-mentioned discussions about the competence of new social media and the Internet in general, questions have been raised about what have been the real experience in various countries. Critics have also claimed that the role of traditional and other forms of communications has been neglected in recent movements and uprisings (Ghannam, 2011; Fenton & Barassi, 2011; Attia, et al., 2011). Social media are not effective in changes without other elements in society (Bennett, 2003, p. 26). According to Fenton & Barassi (2011), the individualistic feature of social networking communications 'can challenge rather than reinforce the collective creativity of social movements' (p. 180). In such a way, the authors affirm that 'self-centred participation promoted by social media can present a threat for political groups rather than an opportunity' (Fenton & Barassi, 2011, p. 183). One of the interviewees of their study notes that Facebook might be considered as a supplement or promoter of offline activities, but not as a replacement (Fenton & Barassi, 2011, p. 186). Therefore, activists prefer to employ other tools 'such as their printed magazine, website, and newsletter' as more collective ways of communication rather than the individualist oriented social networking websites (Fenton & Barassi, 2011, p. 188).

There has been a controversial debate over the difficulties regarding the conditions of access to global networks in the case of the recent conflicts in the Middle East. At the first stage, when talking about the 'Twitter Revolution' and the 'Facebook Revolution', it should be taken into consideration that there are still obstructions concerning hardware facilities. For instance 'there were just over 19,000 Twitter users in Iran out of a total population of just under 80 million' (Christensen, 2011, p. 238). It is said that there is a gap that is called the digital divide that results from the inequalities in access to new communication technologies (Giltin, 1998, p. 168; Khamis et al., 2012). As Thamasebi-Birgani (2011)

states, ‘the glorification of the Internet as the revolutionary tool for political change ignores the fact that digital divide is a reality in Iran’ (p. 16). In Egypt, there is inequality in having access to global networks due to the high price of the Internet connection and difficulties in having access to the hardware facilities (Khamis et al., 2012, pp. 6-7). In addition, the homogeneity of social media users in Egypt and Iran, and the fact that most of the online activities are performed by the educated urban youth, causes suspicions in whether social media are used by all layers of society (Khamis et al., 2012, p. 6; Howard, Agarwal & Hussain, 2011, p. 230; Tahmasebi-Birgani, 2011, p. 16; Rahaghi, 2011, p. 168).

Aside from the above -mentioned limitation, it has been indicated that in the case of recent struggles in Iran, Egypt and Syria, that the authorities resorted to a crackdown and filtering of the Internet that made access to cyberspace almost impossible (Rahimi, 2011; Attia et al., 2011; Pantti & Anden-Papadopoulos, forthcoming). In the case of the 2009 postelection uprisings in Iran, activists confronted obstacles as the consequences of censorship and shutting down of the network connections by the government (Rahimi, 2011, Howard, et al., 2011). According to the OpenNet Initiative report (2013, p. 4), in the aftermath of the 2009 elections in Iran, the state intensified surveillance and censorship which began from the early 1990s. Some of the English news websites, several weblogs and social networking sites such as Facebook and You Tube were filtered (OpenNet Initiative, 2013, p. 12). The climax of the state’s control on the Internet in Iran appears in the form of a cyber army. ‘Iran’s cyber army is another method whereby a state (or non-state actors supporting the regime with or without explicit state support) can fight its own information war and project ideas that are favourable to its national ideology’ (OpenNet Initiative, 2013, p. 7).

Further, cyberspace is not only the space of dissidents and democratic activities, thus it is becoming increasingly difficult to ignore the presence of authorities and non-democratic activities in the global network (Christensen, 2011, p. 234; Rahimi, 2011; Kahn & Kellner, 2004, p. 89). Although the global network has facilitated mediated political activism, ‘cyberspace involves spheres of strife (protest) and hegemony (power)’ (Rahimi, 2011, p. 161). As cyberspace is also the sphere for presence of the supporters of power, they might

distribute wrong information or might misuse social media platforms for tracking information about protests (Hashem & Najjar, 2010; Paris et al., 2010). In such a way, it is not only mainstream media that are under control and censorship of the authorities. 'In times of political uncertainty, rigged election, or military incursions, ruling elites are sometimes willing to interfere with information infrastructures as a way of managing crisis' (Howard et al., 2011, p. 220).

Face-to-face communication is still a substantial communication strategy for activists. As Commaerts (2006, p. 7) argues, face-to-face communication strategies such as meetings and discussions are significant because as they build more reliable communications and are therefore more effective. In the case of recent movements in Iran, Egypt, Syria and Libya, the role of face-to-face communication is noticeable. The Internet was filtered by governments of the countries, but it did not result in the discontinuation of the movement and this fact highlights the role of communication strategies that activists employed. Attia, et al. (2011) in their study about social networking and Egyptian revolution affirm that, even after blocking the Internet by Egyptian authorities, the movement continued because of effective face-to-face communication and other traditional media (p. 372).

The role of other communication means such as satellite TV and text messaging was also considerable in the latest unrests. Ghannam (2011) remarks that Tunisian activists disagree with considering their revolution a 'Twitter Revolution' (p. 16), but they refer to other media such as 'Arab satellite' (p. 23). Short message service and word of mouth were also significant means of communication in the case of Iran's conflict and Egypt's revolution (Rahimi, 2011, p. 159; Howard, et al., 2011, p. 217; Khamis, et al., 2012). Inevitably, dissimilar results of the movements such as failures of mass demonstrations in 2006 in Belarus, red shirt uprising in Thailand in 2010, and 2009 in Iran denote the ineffectiveness of social media (Attia, et al., 2011).

Additionally, it is discussed that social media are advantageous tools for covering the news after the event but not effective as incentives for inviting people to take action (Rahimi,

2011, p. 168; Rahaghi, 2011, p. 168). According to Rahimi (2011), it is more probable that social networking sites act as platforms for ‘dissemination of news in the form of street journalism’ rather than ‘mobilisation’ of protestors (p. 168). It might be claimed that the majority of usage of social media during the uprising was from outside Iran rather than from inside the country, but inevitably it was social media that spread the events globally (Rahaghi, 2011, p. 168).

As a matter of fact, for a more profound understanding of today’s new media, other elements in various circumstances should be taken into account. Khamis, et al. (2012) present a comparison between the Egyptian ‘Facebook Revolution’ and Syria’s ‘You Tube Uprising’. In the study, they address the differences and similarities of cyber activism in these two countries. They consider various factors which affect online activism such as political structures of the states, the extent of constraints by authorities and the involvement of Syrians and Egyptians in exile during the conflict in their home country (Khamis, et al., 2012). Pantti & Anden-Papadopoulos (forthcoming) quote precisely why we should understand the role of new media in the recent uprisings with more precise vision:

The recent series in the Arab world share many of the same characteristics, but are nevertheless different due to the distinctive nature of the governance structures, media structures and communication and assembly freedoms in their respective nation (Pantti & Anden-Papadopoulos, forthcoming).

In this part of the study, I reviewed the literature with respect to Iranian women’s political activism after the 1979 Islamic revolution and how they have been involved in political sphere since 1979. The theoretical framework presents previous findings on the local and global mediated political activism as well as social media and diaspora communities. Further, I also concentrated on the recent uprisings in the Middle East, including the case of 2009 elections in Iran and the controversy over the role of social media. The above-mentioned literature supports the body of research. Furthermore, the reviewed literature

provides various, dissimilar and controversial approaches, thus it contributes to a better understanding of the subject and gives a multi-dimensional perspective. The following chapter gives an account of the methodology that I chose for answering the research question, and I will clarify the process of data collection and analysis of this study. The next part also presents the information on the participants of this study. I will also indicate the ethical considerations, validation and limitations with respect to the research.

3. Methodology

For this study a qualitative rather than a quantitative research method of investigation is chosen because the research does not include counting and dealing with numbers and the result cannot be explained by statistics. According to Walliman (2006) the information such as people's ideas, experiences, world-descriptions and feelings are qualitative data which could be described by qualitative research and concentrating on people and individuals (p. 54). 'People's opinions, feelings, ideas and traditions need to be described in words. Words cannot be reduced to averages, maximum and minimum values or percentages' (Walliman, 2006, p. 54). Additionally, Denzin & Lincoln (2005) define qualitative approach in the following way:

Qualitative research involves the studied use and collection of variety of empirical materials- case study, personal experience, introspection, life story, interview, artefacts, cultural texts and productions, observational, historical, interactional and visual texts- that describe routine and problematic moments and meanings in individuals' lives (p. 3).

Qualitative methodology has been conducted by social scientists to obtain a deep and meticulous observation. Applying a qualitative research method could contribute to a more profound understanding of a social phenomenon (Silverman, 2001, p. 35). In contrast, quantitative studies emphasise the measurement and analysis of casual relationships between variables, not processes (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 10).

To sum up, the focus of this study are individuals' life stories and the information that I collected is based on actors' stories, accounts and word-descriptions by Iranian women. Advocates of qualitative methods argue that, due to the nature of the data collection method such as 'detail interviewing and observation' this method is appropriate if one wants to 'get closer to actor's perspectives' (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 12). Over the past two decades, conducting narrative methodology through interviewing has been in central attention of social scientists as a significant qualitative method (Elliot, 2005;

Squire, Andrews & Tamboukou, 2008; Lieblich, Tuval- Mashiach & Zilber, 1998). In the following paragraphs I will indicate the rationale behind choosing the narrative research method for this study.

3.1 Narrative methodology

The nature of narrative studies is based on the stories of the individuals and people's accounts. The focus of this study are the narratives of the Iranian women, who immigrated to Sweden, and their lived experiences around the 2009 postelection events Iran. For this purpose, a narrative methodology seeks to investigate the research question. As I will indicate in this chapter, a narrative research focuses on various types of stories such as 'an extended story about a significant aspect of ones' life such as schooling, work, marriage, divorce, childbirth, and illness, a trauma, or participation in a war or social movement' (Chase, 2005, p. 652). As Elliot (2005) claims, understanding of the meaning of the human behaviour and experiences from their own standpoint is at the heart of social science (p. 5). One of the earliest narrative research within sociology is the book 'Interviewing: Context and Narrative' by Elliot Mishler from 1986 (Elliot, 2005, p. 5). The study brought into existence 'the need to listen to individuals' stories in the context of qualitative interviewing and cautioned researchers to take care not to suppress such stories' (Elliot, 2005, p. 5).

There are some factors that lead to choosing the narrative method as a research method over other qualitative approaches. Chase (2005) designates five analytic elements that help us to distinguish the narrative method from other methods of qualitative research: first, 'narrative researchers treat narrative -whether oral or written- as a distinct form of discourse' (p. 656). This element suggests that narratives are meaning-making and this feature differentiates a chronology and a narrative. Chronology is reporting events over time. But 'a narrative communicate the narrator's point of view, including why the narrative is worth telling in the first place, thus, in addition to describing what happened, narratives also express emotions, thoughts, and interpretations' (Chase, 2005, p. 656). The second factor is that in a narrative approach, the participants are empowered and the stress

is on their voice because, in the process of narrating, they construct reality and they express themselves and their experiences (Chase, 2005, p. 656). Giving a chance to marginalised people to talk about their stories is a significant reason to conduct narrative research, which is unlikely through other research methods (Ghorashi, 2007, p. 119; Elliot, 2005, p. 656). As was mentioned in the introduction, most of the studies on the 2009 postelection events are distant observations and the researchers do not give the actors a chance to express themselves. Thus, I aimed to provide opportunities for the women to express themselves, talk about their stories and interpret past events.

The fact that the reality and the self that are constructed through narrator's voice is affected by the social circumstances in the third element mentioned by Chase (2005, p. 657). This element stipulates that cultural and historical backgrounds of the participants affect their storytelling (Chase, 2005, p. 657). Bearing in mind the second and third elements, Walliman (2006) clarifies data in the following way: 'They may be a true representation of a situation in one place, at a particular time, under specific circumstances, as seen by a particular observer' (p. 50). For that reason, in this narrative study, the research aims to scrutinise the truth that participants make from their own perspective and their experiences as they lived them.

The fourth factor is that 'researchers emphasise that the narrator's story is flexible, variable, and shaped in part by interaction with audience' (Chase, 2005, p. 657). Chase (2005) elucidates that told narratives differ in accordance with the aim of interviewing and the interview's circumstance such as the difference between an interview with a news reporter and an interview with a researcher. The fifth aspect indicates that narrative researchers are also narrators themselves since they introduce interpretations and choose how to present the analysis (p. 657). I found narrative qualitative approach suitable for the purpose of my research as the study is based on personal experiences and stories.

According to Creswell (2006), the procedure for conducting narrative research consists of five steps. The first step is to ensure that narrative research is adequate for answering the

research problem and question (Creswell, 2006, p. 54). I previously clarified the logic behind choosing narrative research. The second step is selecting individuals who have stories and experiences to tell around the subject, and recording the stories (p. 55). It is important to note that, when participants talk about their experiences, they also provide interpretations on how they now understand these past experiences (Riessman, 1993, p. 15). I sought women who have the experience of political activism in relation to the 2009 postelection events, and for this reason I considered having the experience of political activities in the aftermath of the 2009 elections, even in a short period, as political activism. The women immigrated to Sweden at least six months before the interviews took place, in autumn 2012.

The third step is to ‘collect information about the context of these stories’ (Cresswell, 2006, p. 56). In this step ‘narrative researchers situate individual stories within participants’ personal experiences (their jobs, their homes), their culture (racial or ethnic), and their historical contexts (time and place)’ (Creswell, 2006, p. 56). In the data analysis chapter, I will indicate, according to narratives of the participants, how I place their stories with respect to their historical context or their background. The fourth step is to analyse the stories and restory them. According to Creswell (2006, p. 56) ‘restorying is the process of recognising the stories into some general type of framework’. Collaborating with participants and involving them in the research is the final step. In this study collaboration took place in the data collection and data analysis steps when I occasionally reverted to the participants for confirmations and details.

3.2 Data collection method

For this study individuals’ experiences and their stories are the data, thus the method for collecting the data were face-to-face semi-structured interviews. In qualitative studies it is common to interview a small, relatively homogeneous sample of individuals living in a specific geographic area (Elliot, 2005, p. 22). In semi-structured interviews the researcher proposes questions according to a guide and the topics that should be covered, and the

questions are open-format (Walliman, 2006, p. 92; Bryman, 2008, p. 473). Open-ended questions allow interviewees to be flexible in answering them (Walliman, 2006, p. 90). Recording interviews helps the researcher to maintain eye contact and pay attention to the narrator's story rather than waste it on note-taking (Elliott, 2005, p. 33; Lieblich et al., 1998, p. 264). Finally, transcribing is needed in order to analyse the data. As can be seen, 'all we have is talk and texts that represent reality, partially, selectively, and imperfectly' (Riessman, 1993, p. 15).

I interviewed eleven Iranian female activists of various age in three cities in Sweden: Gothenburg, Lund and Stockholm. I attempted to find the participants in Finland. But, due to the small community of Iranian immigrants in Finland, I did not succeed. The participants include women who immigrated to Sweden for studying, working or after their marriage, as well as the refugees. I chose women randomly without any criteria except for considering political activism experience and involvement in relation to the Iranian 2009 postelection uprising. I chose Sweden as the geographical area for collecting data because I spent three months in Gothenburg as an exchange student and I found it a good opportunity to collect the data for my study. Obviously, due to the sensitive topic of the research, collection of data in Iran was impossible. I conducted interviews during September, October and November 2012, about four years after the 2009 elections. Eight of the participants live in Gothenburg, one of them lives in Lund and two of them live in Stockholm.

I used several ways to find the participants. I became a member of various Iranian Facebook groups of Gothenburg such as *Iranian student of Gothenburg*, *Iranian people of Gothenburg* and *Iranian students of the University of Chalmers*. Then I wrote ads about my research, that I needed some female participants for my master's thesis who have the experience of political activity with respect to the 2009 Iran's postelection struggle. I left my email address along with the statement so that women could contact me privately. Furthermore, I joined Iranian student groups and attended their events where I presented myself privately to a few randomly chosen women, and I gave them my contact

information. In addition, I asked Iranian friends to introduce me to participants. Aida (not her real name) was the only participant that I knew in advance because she is my friend. I had an interview of approximately 45 minutes with each participant, at a mutually agreed location. I explained to all the participants that it was a casual discussion and there was no need to be stressed because it was a friendly chat. I met most of the participants at the University of Chalmers, two of them at the University of Gothenburg, one of them at her home and four of them via Skype.

I conducted the interviews in Persian language, thus it might be challenging to translate the language to English specially in the case of expressing feelings and sayings. In a study of Iranian diaspora in Sweden by Shahidian (2001), he affirms that ‘any process of translation involves some degree of reduction, addition, and distortion’ (Shahidian, 2001, p. 75). If we even expect all the participants to have sufficient knowledge in English language, conducting interviews in a language other than their mother tongue causes limitations for participants to express themselves, particularly in case of narratives of individual stories and experiences.

I interviewed nine of the participants through face-to-face communication and four of them via Skype due to distance in three cases, and due to time limitation in one case. Live Interviewing such as face-to-face or via Skype help the researcher to ask spontaneous questions if it is needed (Kalof, et al., 2008, p. 126). It happened through the interviews that I asked some unplanned questions in accordance with each participant’s personal narratives. According to Walliman (2006), telephone interviews are applicable to overcome the space barriers and when contacting participants entails physical movement and travelling (p. 92). Using Skype did not have the limitation of a telephone interview because it is possible to have visual communication. Bertnard and Bourdeau (2010) explain that utilising Skype contributes to building a relationship of trust between the interviewee and the participant as the advantage of virtual communication (p. 74). On the other hand, they argue that the possibility for the participant to also see herself may be disrupting (Bertnard & Bourdeau, 2010, p. 75).

In a mediated Skype interview, the eyes look at the middle of the screen where it's possible to see the interviewees' face, the eyes are always turned toward a point under the line of natural glance. Neither the interviewee nor the interviewer ever glances at each other (Bernard & Bourdeau, 2010, p. 76).

The other advantage that Skype offers is the flexibility of time and place in conducting the interview (Bernard & Bourdeau, 2010, p. 75). The case of two participants of this study illustrates that how Skype helps the researcher to overcome space and time limitations. Arranging interviews with Sima and Parisa (not their real names) was challenging due to time limitations. Parisa was often busy, therefore we arranged an interview while she was waiting in her daughter's school. I recorded all the interviews with the participants' permissions, and then transcribed them.

3.3 Information on participants

The participants of this study include eleven Iranian women who are currently living in Sweden. Some of them immigrated to Sweden before the 2009 postelection period. Some of them immigrated during the years 2009 to 2012. They all have experience with political activism in the aftermath of the 2009 presidential elections in Iran. The following list presents the participants' backgrounds such as their political activism background, their occupation and when and why they immigrated to Sweden.

- 1- Aida is a 27-year-old Master's student of gender studies in Lund. When she entered the University of Tehran, she organised students' and women's rights activities such as collecting signatures for eliminating the limitation for female students in dormitories. As a result, she got an education suspension sentence. She was also convicted of one year suspended sentence for a period of three years. She has been arrested four times with overall 20 days of detention. Aida has been a member of the *One Million Signatures Campaign*, which is a campaign for repealing of

discriminatory laws in Iran. She left Iran in September 2011, mostly because of the tough economic and political situation. Aida chose educational way of emigration because she did not want to be a refugee and wanted to have the opportunity to go back to Iran with more experiences. The interview with Aida took place via Skype.

- 2- Jaleh is a 41-year-old woman studying pedagogy at the University of Gothenburg and working in an elementary school. Jaleh studied philosophy in Iran and was a successful employee at Azad University. She has done other jobs such as private teaching and broadcasting radio programmes for children. Although she has been passionate about political and social issues, she had not had the experience of political activism before the 2009 Iranian uprisings. After getting married and having no perspective for their educational and occupational future, she left Iran for Sweden in 2004. A friend introduced Jaleh to me, and we met at the University of Gothenburg for the interview.
- 3- Tara is completing a Master of civil engineering degree at the Chalmers University. She is 33 years old. Tara came to Sweden in 2009 for further education, and her family was living in Sweden. She had not had any political activities before the 2009 uprisings, although she used to distribute illegal books which was a dangerous action. I met Tara at a student event. I went to her and asked if she thought she could be a participant. Participation in the 2009 uprising in Sweden was her first experience of political activity. We met at the University of Chalmers.
- 4- Yasi is 30 years old. She graduated with an industrial engineering from University of Linköping. She Left Iran for Sweden in 2008. She was a student in Iran at Amirkabir Technology University, one of the Universities with a political atmosphere. Yasi was involved in activities related to student newspapers such as writing articles, printing and editing. Moreover, she was a member of cultural communities- she was a theatre actress and director. Yasi mostly sees her activities in Iran as social and cultural

activities. She started her serious political activities four months before the elections and now she is not able to go back to Iran. I met Yasi through an Iranian friend. I contacted with her through Facebook and met her at the University of Gothenburg.

- 5- Nasim is the youngest participant, she is 24 years old. She is studying Masters of electronic engineering at the Chalmers University. In Iran, She was a student at Amirkabir Technology University and was familiar with the political environment. She was engaged in students' discussions and meetings. She began her political participation for the 2009 presidential election in the shape of active participation in Mir Hosein Mousavi's election campaign and in elections' marches. Although she was awarded a place Master's degree programme without an entrance exam because of her good academic status, she could not continue her education as a result of her participation in the 2009 postelection events. She left Iran in 2010 and has continued her activities in Gothenburg. I met Nasim through an Iranian students' Facebook page, I met her at the University of Chalmers.

- 6- Bahar is 49 years old and has two children. She has a Master's degree in nursing and management and a Bachelor degree in laboratory sciences. She became an opposition activist and member of illegal leftist political communities after the Islamic revolution in 1979. She was prosecuted and arrested after the revolution, and left Iran in 1983. After wandering in many countries, Bahar settled in Sweden in 1990. She was a member of the Swedish leftist party and a candidate for Parliament in 2002. She was in charge of the refugees and the women's committee of the leftists in Gothenburg. Further, she has been active in feminist communities in Europe while staying connected to feminist communities in Iran. Bahar is one of the founders of *Iranian Women's Union for Democracy*¹. She was doing voluntary jobs in youth and family committee of the City Council of Gothenburg while she was working as a

¹ IWUD is a union with the perspective of democracy and promoting Iranian women's for political power.

nurse. She is now collaborating with the Swedish Liberal party. I knew about Bahar through media, and asked an Iranian friend about her. He gave me her phone number and I met Bahar at her home.

- 7- Negar is 35 years old, and is studying a Master's degree in chemistry at the Chalmers University. She has a child. She left Iran in 2009 with her husband in pursuit of education. They decided to stay in Sweden, one of their reasons is the current situation in Iran. Life in Iran was problematic for them due to the social and occupational circumstances. She had not had any political experience before the 2009 postelection struggles and before her emigration. I knew Negar's husband and he introduced her to me. We met each other at the University of Chalmers.
- 8- Sara is a 31-year-old Master's student of media at the Stockholm University. She is an author and a journalist. She was a journalist at the CHN news agency and Kalameh news agency in Iran, also she was the correspondent of Mirhosein Mousavi's election campaign. She received her Bachelor's degree from the Tehran University and used to write critiques against the government. Sara has been interested in social issues and has focused on social problems in her weblog. She left Iran in 2010 to continue her education. She is working as a journalist in Radio Zamaneh, a Persian language radio. Although she has been concentrating on her job as a journalist, she had not been involved in political activities before the 2009 elections. I knew Sara through mutual friends, and I contacted her through Facebook. We talked via Skype.
- 9- Mina is a 53-year-old refugee in Gothenburg. She is divorced and has a son who is living in Iran. She was actively involved in the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran. Early after the revolution she joined the leftist opposition groups. Thus, she was a defector until her arrest in 1981 and was in prison for four years. After being released from prison, she continued her activities by joining various women's communities.

Moreover, Mina was involved in environmental activism and actions for street children and child labour. Being involved in the release of Mansour Osanloo, a leading trade union activist, in 2007, she was arrested and was in 12 days of detention. She left Iran in 2011. An Iranian friend introduced Mina to me, and we met at the University of Chalmers.

10- Parisa is a 50-year-old well-known journalist with 18 years of work experience in the field. She studied political science at the Tehran University. Parisa lives with her daughter in Stockholm. She worked for reformist newspapers in Iran and has belonged to the Nationalist-Religious Coalition of Iran². She was arrested in December 2010 at the office of Shargh newspaper and was in prison for two months, including one month of solitary confinement. She left Iran for Sweden in 2010 by invitation of a press organization. She is now working as a freelance journalist. Yasi introduced me to Parisa, so I called her and we met via Skype.

11- Sima is 52 years old and has been living in Sweden since 1985. She was a social and political activist and was involved in printing and distribution of newspapers to people in Iran. She was expelled from university because she refused to join the Islamic association of the university. Sima came to Sweden and studied technology science. She is now working as a project manager with a technology company. Sima continued her activities in Sweden, such as teaching computer skills to immigrants and holding exhibition regarding Iranian culture and artefacts. I found Sima through an Iranian Facebook community, and we met via Skype.

² Nationalist-Religious Coalition of Iran is an Iranian political opposition party, which represents a number of smaller parties, political activists, writers and intellectual figures.

3.4 Data analysis

According to Creswell (2006), the general strategies of data analysis in qualitative methods include: preparing and organising data for analysis, making transcripts, reducing them into codes or memos, combining codes into broader categories, identifying patterns and themes by finding the links between data and bringing the data together and finally presenting them in discussions (p. 148). The process of data analysis in a narrative study as well as other qualitative approaches is a dynamic process. As Creswell (2006) says, 'to analyse qualitative data, the researcher engages in the process of moving in analytic circles rather than using a fixed linear approach' (p. 150). Hence, data analysis is a constant interaction between theory and data collection. According to Riessman (1993), the process of doing a narrative analysis consists of the following steps: attending experience, telling about experience, transcribing experience and finally analysing and reading the experience.

As Creswell (2006) indicates, the first step to conducting a narrative analysis is to create and organise files for data. All the data collected for a study might not be useful for analysis, thus the data should be reduced (p. 148). The data reduction process is a sequential and continuous procedure (Walliman, 2006, p. 129). The second step is reading through the text, making notes and forming initial codes, 'coding helps you to organise your piles of data and provides a first step in conceptualization' (Walliman, 2006, p. 133). The third step is describing stories or experiences and looking for 'patterns appearing across several observations that typically represent different cases under study' (Babbie, 2007, p. 379). Classifying refers to looking for dimension of information, identifying stories and contextual materials. The researcher looks for patterns by using pattern coding in order to develop an understanding of the situation for answering the questions.

The fourth step is interpretation and making sense of the data. As Creswell (2006, p. 154) states 'in the process of interpretation, researchers step back and form larger meanings of what is going on in the situations or sites'. Riessman (1993) describes that 'the challenge is to identify similarities across the moments into an aggregate, a summation' (p. 13).

Recognising common elements among participants' stories is important in thematic analysis (Riessman, 1993, p. 3). Thematic analysis is one of the models of narrative analysis that is introduced by Riessman (1993) and it is the pattern that I adopted in this study. The experience of participants about the 2009 postelection struggle and its impact on participants' lives is the main theme. The other themes are communication strategies of the participants and women's role in the protests from the participants' perspectives. The final step is writing the study and presenting it in different ways; figures, tables or sketches (Creswell, 2006, pp. 156-157).

I considered the above-mentioned steps by Creswell (2006) and Riessman (1993) for the data analysis process as well as the following process by Emden (1998, p. 35): At the beginning, in order to comprehend the transcription of the interviews, one needs to read them several times. Second step is 'deleting all interviewer questions and comments from the full interview text' (p. 35). The third step is removing the utterances that are not related to the key idea. The fourth step is 'reading the remaining text for sense. Step five refers to repeating step three and four several times, also 'returning to the full text as often as necessary for rechecking' (p. 35). Step six is recognising the key themes or subplots. Step seven is connecting together the themes in order to construct a core story or stories. The last step is asking the participants for confirmation.

After transcribing and reading the texts several times and removing irrelevant utterances, I started to restory the narratives. Thus, I looked for similarities among the individual stories, which resulted in interpretation. I created a core plot based on the main theme and two subplots based on the two other themes that I mentioned before. Identifying a plot or core story is a way of making a single shorter story from multiple long told experiences (Emden, 1998, p. 35). Organising themes that identify the significance and the role of individual events is normally called the plot of the narrative (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 18).

I divided the told stories of the participants to three plots: the participation in the uprising and its impacts on political and personal lives, communication strategies of the participants

and participants' accounts about the role of women in the protests. Their narratives have a chronological order from four years ago, 2009, to the recent times, 2012. Within these years, participants talk about their experiences and feelings and provide interpretations in some cases.

3.5 Ethical considerations and validity

Ethical considerations are more substantial when the participants are people and the researcher must be respectful both to them and to their information (Walliman, 2006, p. 147; Elliot, 2005, p. 134). Walliman (2006) introduces two perspectives on ethical issues: 'The value of honesty and frankness and personal integrity' (p. 148), and 'ethical responsibilities to the subjects of research, such as consent, confidentiality and courtesy' (p. 148). What is most significant is that the interview and research should 'minimise any long-term negative effects on the participants' (Elliot, 2005, p. 137). A key ethical consideration in a narrative study is the confidentiality of the individuals with respect to their privacy. Interviewees of this study had a clear understanding of what the study is about and they participated and talked about their experiences with confidence. In this study all the participants appear with pseudonyms due to the sensitive subject of the study. It is a sensitive topic because it covers a political subject that is still significant. The participants who travel to Iran are afraid of being prosecuted because of their stories and participation in the events. Sensitive topics are more discussed in intimate relationships such as among families or friends, or they can take place in particular discourse and relationships such as researchers or doctors (Hydén, 2008, p. 125).

Taking into consideration some elements during interviewing helps the researcher to overcome the challenges of conducting research on a sensitive topic that reminds participants of past traumatic experiences. Building trust between the interviewer and the narrator is the first step in abolishing the gap between the researcher and the participant. Building a relationship based on trust would also result in a more equal position between the interviewer and the respondent. Hydén (2008) argues that 'dealing with sensitive topics

you are always at risk of your interviewees positioning you as superior to them' (p. 123). If the participants consider the researcher to be at a higher position than themselves, it holds the risk of censorship. According to Hydén (2008, p. 123) 'this is mainly due to the fact that they might be telling you about issues they are ashamed of, issues that might be rated culturally low, or events that have left them vulnerable'. The solution is for the interviewer to consider a 'conversational space' and act as a collaborator (Elliot, 2005, p. 10).

Talking about the protests, past bad feelings or traumatic experiences with regard to the participation in the postelection events could be unpleasant for the participants. For instance, I observed that some of the participants became upset or anxious when they talked about the past. One of the participants cried during the interview when she was talking about how she was worried in Sweden about her sister who participated in the protests in Iran. However, talking and expressing these feelings is not always a disadvantage, but instead it could be reliving and positive as the result of talking with a good listener (Elliot, 2005, p. 137; Hydén, 2008, p. 123).

The researcher should also be able to manage the interview in order to gain rich and relevant data. According to Elliot (2005) if the participant provides too much detail, the data would be irrelevant, on the other hand if the participant does not present enough details it might lead to a misunderstanding (p. 10). Although conducting interviews requires a certain amount of questions to be prepared beforehand, the researcher should consider a flexible set of questions. In this study, it was likely that during the interviews I came up with detail questions according to participants' individual stories. Moreover, at the end of the interviews I asked the participants what they thought needed to be mentioned. All the above-mentioned factors that are called internal validation criteria by Elliot (2005) ensure the collection of valid data.

In terms of data analysis and interpretation, what should be mentioned is that whatever stories the participants narrated are the accounts of their own lives. Therefore, 'a personal narrative is not meant to be read as an exact record of what happened nor is it a mirror of a

world ‘out there’ (Riessman, 1993, p. 64). As Elliot (2005, p. 27) argues, generalisability of qualitative evidence refers to the external validity. External validity results in an accurate or valid representation of reality; this issue is controversial and little has been said about it (p. 27). In this study, the interpretation of data refers to the participants’ stories and the shared experiences among them, therefore I did not generalise the findings to all Iranian female political activists.

Since the data of this study is based on interviews, following validation criteria by Polkinghorne (2007) arise ‘because the language descriptions given by participants of their experienced meaning is not a mirrored reflection of this meaning’ (p. 10). According to Polkinghorne (2007), the above-quoted issue is anchored in four factors: 1, ‘although the meaning people experience about a situation is influenced by the conceptual structures inherent in their language, the experience itself is more intricate than can be articulated in language’ (p. 10). Encouraging participants to show their complex experiences by figurative expressions may reduce the limitation of the structure of a language. 2, ‘another reason that felt meanings about a situation are always greater than what can be said about them is that not all of the meaning one has about a situation is available in awareness’ (p. 11). Thus, the interviewer should assist the participants by giving them time to think. In this research, sometimes, during the interviews participants paused and thought deeply about the details in order to remember them correctly. Also, they asked about some details such as the date of events or names of people, newspapers, and websites. Then I tried to guide them or tell them some points to remind them of the forgotten parts. 3, it is likely that the researcher in a narrative study looks for the information that she/he expects. As I mentioned, the subject of this study is related to my personal history and I experienced the similar stories as these women. However, I acted as an outsider and researcher who expected any kind of respond to the questions. 4, returning to participants for elucidation is a way to check interpreted meanings and descriptions (Polkinghorne, 2007, p. 12). I did not check the transcripts or the analysis with the participants, but I returned to them whenever I had doubts about some details in their stories that might lead to misconceptions.

4. Iranian female activists and the 2009 postelection conflicts

The stories of the participants are organised in one main plot and two sub-plots regarding the research questions: the 2009 postelection struggle in Iran as a turning point in social and personal lives as the main plot, communication strategies for participation in the events and participants' accounts about the role of women in the protests as the two sub-plots.

The first plot includes four parts: shared turning points in political activism, shared turning points in personal lives, activist life after 2009 postelection times and activist life after immigration. In the first part, the participants narrate how the struggle formed a new time of activism for them. The second part presents turning points in the personal lives of the participants as the result of involvement in the contention. The third part continues with the aftermath of elections in which participants explain how they were involved in the dissent. In the last part- Immigration- the respondents talk about their activist life after the immigration, which was a significant result of their participation in the protests.

The second plot illustrates various communication strategies and consists of two parts: Iranian women in diaspora and usage of social media and social media strategies of the participants. In the first part, women talk about their usage of social media in Sweden. In the second part the women narrate their usage of social media during the time and talk about efficiency and inefficiency of social media from their own perspectives.

The third plot is about the role of women in the protests and how women dissidents shaped the protests from the participants' point of view. Participants also talk about how they see the role of their gender in their participation.

4.1 The 2009 postelection struggle, a new era in political and personal life

In the 2009 presidential elections in Iran Mir Hosein Mouavi and Mehdi Karoubi, two prominent reformists, introduced themselves as the reformist presidential candidates. A hope for a change arose among Iranians, who hoped for a transition in the political system.

There was a shared excitement among participants about participating in the elections and voting for the reformist presidential candidates to alter Iran's situation step by step, through reforms. Nasim talks about her desire to vote and to encourage others to vote: 'My friends and I persuaded some people, who had not voted for 30 years, to vote in these elections.' Those participants who were already in Sweden thought that the situation would improve after the elections and they would have the opportunity to go back to Iran. Yasi left Iran in 2008 as the first period for presidency of Ahmadinejad started because she could not continue her activities. She was a theatre director and an actress in addition to being the manager of a student newspaper. She hoped that Mousavi would become president and that she would be able to go back to Iran and continue her activities.

During the bustle days before the elections that were allocated to the election campaigns, the supporters of all candidates, followed the discussions between nominees, swarmed the streets to form carnival-like marches and discussions about elections. During the days before the elections, the political atmosphere became comparatively free for critical activities and discussions while government decreased constraints (Rahimi, 2011, p. 159). The new atmosphere helped the supporters of reformist candidates to contest against Ahmadinejad's policies and to debate with his supporters through forming rallies in streets with their slogans and songs (Rahimi, 2011, p. 159). Nasim's story about those days in Tehran illustrates the lively days before the elections. Nasim and her friends attended the election campaign of Mousavi and distributed CDs and leaflets to bystanders in streets. They spent three hours every night in the streets, standing at Enghelab or Valiasr square, two main squares in Tehran, to make conversation with other supporters. However, Aida grasped the preelections relatively open political and social atmosphere for other intentions beyond the election. Aida was in Iran and supporting Karoubi:

I knew that Karoubi would not win the election, otherwise I did not vote for him. My friends and I aimed to misuse the electoral and political atmosphere to support our imprisoned friends or to collect signatures for our campaign [One Million Signature Campaign for repealing discriminatory laws in Iran].

Likewise in Sweden, participants shared the enthusiasm for participation in the elections. Yasi was in Sweden and began her activities for the elections approximately four months before the 2009 elections by organising a student campaign based in Gothenburg along with four other Iranian students. She states that ‘We succeeded in bringing voting centres for Iranian people in Gothenburg by regularly calling the embassy of Iran in Sweden.’

Some participants predicted that electoral fraud would occur and Ahmadinejad would take the presidency for the second term, because they assumed that the elections would not be held in a democratic way. After the elections and the official announcement of the results, activists of the study could not believe the victory of Ahmadinejad. Soon after, all of the participants’ hope for changes turned into disappointment because they faced the failure of reform which was the only possibility for transformation. Participants expressed their fear and anxiety along with depression about the time after announcing the results. Sara was a correspondent at Mousavi’s election campaign:

At the night of counting the votes we started to feel the repression, we were fearful. We had a number of calls from the campaigns of other cities to provide them with news about the results, but we did not have anything to say.

4.1.1 Shared turning points in activist life

The 2009 postelection events in Iran attracted ordinary participants to political engagement, reactivated former activists and modified the trend of motion for some of the participants. Commencing postelection protests, some participants experienced political activism for the first time. Although Sara has been a journalist, she had been inattentive to various movements before the Green Movement because she thought that all the movements in Iran were naïve. In addition, the uprisings changed the direction of the activities for some participants who had been involved in social and cultural actions. Their activities switched to the field of political activism as the political issues took on priority. They saw the significance to boost their previous activities without fear. Parisa notes that ‘My country,

my friends and my interests were in danger. Thus, I did not see any reason to hide my ideas. I started to write my articles in a radical and frank way.’ Some participants had the background in students’, women’s and children’s rights activities, publishing student’s magazines and being members of cultural communities. After the 2009 elections, they began to concentrate mostly on political involvement. Aida assumes that political activism was imposed on social activists after the elections:

The dominance of the political matters as well as the repressions made social issues marginalised. Even when we tried to return to the field of social activities such as children’s and women’s rights activities, it was impossible.

Returning to the political activities applies to the participants that immigrated to Sweden a long time before the 2009 elections and dropped political and social activities when they left Iran. The language barrier, living far away from Iran’s social context, and personal life issues such as studying and working were the core causes for dropping activities and becoming passive. In the aftermath of the 2009 elections, the participants embarked on a new, more dynamic life. Sima lost her connections to Iran when she moved to Sweden, 17 years ago. During the first years of her immigration she was engaged in cultural and social activities, such as holding exhibition of Iran’s handicrafts and teaching computer skills to immigrants as a voluntary activity. She began over the political participation in the 2009 postelection controversy, although for a short period. She states that ‘I had been busy with my life in Sweden, I had become disappointed in the hope for any change in Iran before the postelection events.’

4.1.2 Shared turning points in personal lives

For the participants, the 2009 postelection protests and their participation in these events were a turning point in their personal lives. Becoming unemployed, arrested and expelled from universities were consequences of involvement in the protests. Large numbers of journalists were arrested or unemployed after the government seized the reformist

newspapers. After being arrested at a demonstration, Aida lost her job at the City Council. Nasim was not allowed to continue her education as a consequence of her participation in the protests. In addition, some officials kept calling her mother to report her activities and her mother was worried about the security of her daughter, thus Nasim decided to leave Iran. Parisa also got imprisoned for two months. She had to leave Iran, although she had not had any will for emigration:

As a journalist in the field of politics my income was provided through journalism and my life depended on the job. There was not the context to do journalism and it was unacceptable for me to become an ordinary journalist.

Having no security, no occupational or educational prospects after the electoral fraud as well as the repressions, participants found that Iran was not an appropriate place to live anymore and they decided to leave the country. As can be seen, moving from Iran was not entirely an act of free will for them.

The other shared turning point that most of the participants refer to is change in their personal feelings and approaches. The unexpected results of the elections as well as repression, arrests and violence after the elections resulted in psychological drawbacks for some participants. The participants practiced optimistic and enthusiastic activities before the elections, but voting day was the last day of happiness. After that, stressful days began, their friends got arrested and all the news were disappointing. The movies and photos of the protests, which showed the violence and suppression, were saddening. On the other hand, the participants were motivated by gaining further knowledge. Some of them started new reading habits and became passionate in the social and political themes. They also became more involved in the debates among both their intimate relationships and Swedish society. The participants think that they have new responsibilities and commitments as activists to follow Iran's contemporary issues and to learn and improve their knowledge. Mina states that the 2009 uprisings made her confident about what she really wants to change. She began to understand why people's protests did not result in a transformation, she believes

that people should become conscious of their basic demands and form local communities. Moreover, Jaleh comments that:

I gained the impetus to enhance my Swedish language knowledge in order to be able to integrate in Swedish society and discuss about Iran's issues. The contemporary situation of Iran has been a motivation for me to know more about the world around me.

4.1.3 Activist life after the 2009 elections

From the day the results were announced, protestors created demonstrations for opposing, what they called, the rigged elections and presidency of Ahmadinejad. Streets had never seen such large numbers of people and there had not been any event with this significance since the 1979 Islamic revolution. The constant objection is known as the Green Movement. At the beginning of the protests, there was hope for recounting and changing the election results. On the other hand, few of the participants state that they participated in the protests to be able to express themselves or oppose the whole political system. Mina says that the 2009 postelection conflict was a struggle among the main political powers in Iran and people used the opportunity for protesting, not just to oppose the results of the elections. Aida comments about why she was involved in the protests:

I did not believe that the protests might change the situation or the result of election. I used the opportunity of protesting to enhance and exercise democracy and improve the culture of civil protests.

Although the rigged elections resulted in the failure of reform, creating mass demonstrations against the government was another hope for transition. The hope for change also arose among participants in diaspora who joined the protests in their host country. They thought that they would be able to go back to Iran. They organised and participated in rallies in their cities of residence in order to show their support for Iranians inside the country and to express their sympathy and solidarity. There were gatherings and

demonstrations as a result of the realisation that a vital event was happening and they had to contribute. There were demonstrations almost every day or at least two times per week in front of the library building of Gothenburg and the city centre square in Gothenburg. Tara also talks about the demonstrations in Stockholm; she was student in Uppsala at that time and went to Stockholm to participate in the events.

Participants in Sweden attempted to inform the international community, citizens of Sweden and human rights organisations such as Amnesty International and European Union about the violations of human rights in Iran. Their actions included creating protests, singing in the streets, writing petitions and collecting signatures to condemn the violations of human rights and support imprisoned protestors. Participants attempted to find proper ways such as distributing leaflets and carrying banners in English as well as discussing with their non-Iranian friends in order to raise awareness outside the Iranian society. The above-mentioned activities are also noted by Newland (2010) as the main actions of diaspora communities to take part in the conflict of their homeland. Sima was not a member of any political community, but she discussed with other activists to change the tactics of the informative actions. Sima did not agree with the usage of violent scenes of the uprising as the symbols during the marches in Gothenburg because she believed that these kinds of informative actions would not attract Europeans: 'I was with one of my Swedish friends in a rally and when my friend saw the banners [such as the bloody face of Neda], she turned her face.'

Regardless of all the endeavours for supporting Iranian people inside the country, there is a shared feeling among the participants who were already in Sweden that the real activity was happening inside the country while they were witnessing the events from outside in safety. From their point of view, their actions were compensation for their absence from Iran's protests. Tara says, 'You feel that you should do something! Your friends are in streets and in danger of being killed, but you are watching TV!' Yasi also states that 'I felt that I was escaping from the situation in Iran, I thought that I should join my friends.' The feeling of guilt felt by Iranian political activists in Sweden is cited by Graham & Khosravi (1997, p.

118). The authors discuss that the participants of their study turned to political activities in Sweden to relieve the feeling that they abandoned their relatives and friends with the crisis in the home country (Graham & Khosravi, 1997, p. 118). Similarly, a study on the diaspora Syrian activists by Pantti & Anden-Papadopoulos (forthcoming) shows that Syrians in exile felt guilty for their absence in Syria's protests and living safe and far away from the conflict.

Most of the participants refer to the great solidarity between dissidents and diverse opposition groups that had nothing in common. Leftist, reformist, Islamic intellectuals and women's rights groups formed alliances to protest. Additionally, during the postelection protests, participants began to make new ties, they created small friendship communities to accompany each other and attend the protests. Some of them made new friends and developed close relationships with their previous friends. Participants shared the feeling of empathy and solidarity with others under the influence of the repressive situation. Aida and her friends used to go to Aida's home in the city centre, they changed their clothes and went to demonstrations, she continues in the following way:

We [women's rights activists] collaborated with the groups that we had never worked with, such as the Islamic intellectuals, reformists and leftists. Leftist groups have always criticised us and they have not considered women's issues as their priority.

Also divisive changes occurred concerning relationships and personal networks. Participants refer to their struggle with people who supported Ahmadinejad. As a consequence, participants cut off their relationships with the friends and relatives who supported the government and took for granted that Ahmadinejad is the president. Nasim was a student in Tehran and she regularly visited her mother and travelled to her home city to meet her mother:

I did not see any protest in my home city. When I went to my mother's place, I struggled with the neighbours and they expressed the same ideas of the governmental media. Therefore, I broke my relationships with them.

Accounts of few participants denote that the protests were popular among educated urban populations and the 2009 postelection protests were not widespread events that amount to all ranges of people. Negar states that she was working in a factory and most of the workers supported Ahmadinejad. Further, Mina says that in the protests she saw the same former well-informed activists. Considering the participants' observations, it might be claimed that the 2009 postelection protests were not widespread events that amount to all ranges of people.

According to the participants, as time moved on and the protests continued, the government increased the repression. News organisations faced crackdowns, protests were repressed, and activists were arrested, and many activists changed their homes constantly or left Iran due to the insecure and dangerous circumstances. As a consequence, the physical political participation decreased at the meetings, seminars and friendship discussion groups. Moreover, few of the participants dropped out of their political engagements. Iranian students of Gothenburg occasionally organised other gatherings and events. For example, when Mousavi and Karoubi went on house arrest on 14 February 2011 or when Sane Jaleh, an Iranian student, was shot to death by repressive forces and when protests took place against house arrest of opposition leaders in 37 countries around the world on 12 March 2011.

4.1.4 Activist life after immigration

As was quoted before, the participants who were in Iran during the protests in aftermath of the elections did not see any prospect for their lives and decided to emigrate. Moving to another country resulted in a new era in their lives. For almost all the participants, migration led to a more passive life in terms of political participation. They suppose that it

is common that moving to another country results in being distracted from Iran's issues. Therefore, for the participants, living in Iran and within the social and political context means being actively and lively involved. From Mina's point of view, financial support is the most effective action that activists in exile could offer: 'In Iran at least I could have conversations with women in my work place, on bus and in my neighbourhood to inform them.' Parisa differentiates doing journalism in the most prominent reformist newspapers in Iran and doing journalism for news websites after immigration, she assumes that becoming less active is the typical consequence of immigration:

When there are opportunities of having communications, one could be more dynamic and stay up-to-date about political issues. Finding new communication networks is time-consuming and requires more efforts and energy, perhaps in the future I would be able to expand my interactions in Sweden

The language barriers and living in a different political and social context than Iran are other factors that led to less participation in political activities. Aida clarifies that she has not considered herself to be an activist since she moved to Sweden. She believes that she is more similar to a person who is concerned about following Iran's issues. Aida could not be involved in her previous activities after immigration because:

The priorities of Swedish activists, who I have met so far, are not my priorities. They mostly talk about the social matters in the academic environment rather than taking action. Also, they consider social matters as exciting and amusing subjects while I experienced them in reality and in my daily life.

The social and political security that the participants acquired in Sweden was beneficial for some of them and ineffectual for others. Parisa does not think that Sweden contributed to her progress in journalism and Aida still feels insecure about both her online and offline political activities. Aida practices self-censorship because she believes that the being

involved in political activities in Sweden requires the acceptance of living in exile forever because she would be prosecuted by authorities if she went back to Iran.

Nevertheless, the influences of immigration have not been restricted to the disadvantages. The participants suppose that they have gained valuable experiences since they moved to Sweden, and these experiences would be advantageous and practical if they return to Iran. Changes occurred in the participants' approaches toward their activities; they are now more single-minded and inclined after immigration. Sara reckons that she is now able to follow her interests because she has not been afraid of anything and she has not practiced self-censorship since she moved to Sweden. Sara states that 'I am now able to take part in events without fear, I have at least the opportunity to write about Iran's political and social situation in the academic environment.' Nasim mentions that her activities in Iran were to some extent naive and radically oriented. She believes that living outside Iran has provided her with the opportunity to take a detached view of the issue:

My activities in Iran were radically oriented, for instance, I [as well as other protestors] used the chant "I will kill who killed my brother". But now, I am critical of these kinds of slogans and pro of non-violent protest.

4.2 Communication strategies for participation in the dissent

The interference of government with the global network began since the usage of the Internet expanded in the country in the late 1990s (Rahimi, 2011, p. 165; OpenNet Initiative, 2013, p. 4). After the 2009 presidential elections, when the postelection protests commenced, a new wave of censorship and crackdown on the Internet arose. Authorities shut off Internet access by blocking various websites and minimising the downloading speed. News websites and social media that were available before the 2009 unrests were filtered, including English news websites, Facebook, Twitter and You Tube (OpenNet Initiative, 2013, p. 12). Of the participants who were in Iran at the time of the uprisings, all of them refer to the difficulties in having access to the Internet. They mention that in their

occasional access to cyberspace, they faced technical hitches and had to employ proxy servers to unblock foreign news websites such as BBC in order to watch videos and photos of the protests. Various software technologies were generated by hacktivists outside the country for Iranian protestors to bypass the filtering (Rahimi, 2009, p. 170). Moreover, the disruption in landlines and mobile phone networks caused communication troubles for protestors. Therefore, for the participants who were in Iran during the protests, face-to-face communication and gathering in public places was the easiest way to bypass the boundaries. The participants went to streets every day to join the protests and acquire information about forthcoming demonstrations and events. They claim that in each protest it was noticeable what was going to happen next. As Howard, et al. (2011) argues, 'in the absence of information about the crisis, others took the streets, eager to find out what was going on' (p. 217). Aside from the constraints caused by authorities, almost all the participants who lived in Iran at the time of the protests did not have an account on any social media during the first months.

Furthermore, associating with communities, such as small meeting at universities, family and friendship parties and workplace were shared tactics for almost all the participants to interact and form conversation with others. The participants used to go to their university or workplace to meet other activists and students during the first days. Parisa was working at Shargh newspaper, a prominent reformist newspaper, which was a place for gathering of social and political activists. Hence, she was involved in a political atmosphere due to her occupation. She quotes that 'Most of the Green Movement's activists have been my close friends. Moreover, the newspaper's office was a place in which we were able to meet other political activists.' In the student campaign in Gothenburg, members met each other at the campus of the Chalmers University and some members were always available at the church which is located at the University and is open for 24 hours. Yasi talks about those days:

There are small numbers of Iranian people who are students and activists in Gothenburg. Therefore, it was easy to find them and stay in touch with them in the meetings. Also, some people came from other cities to join us.

In addition, text messaging was a crucial means of communication during the first weeks for the participants who were in Iran. Rahimi (2011, p. 159) also refers to Short Message Service as an essential communication tool before and after the 2009 elections. Likewise, text messaging appeared effective during the Egyptian revolution as it provided protestors with a movable means of communication (Khamis, et al., 2012, p. 5). The ones who had access to news via several means could spread information to others through word of mouth. Although it was not easy to have access to satellite TV broadcasts in some areas due to microwave noise frequencies and troubles in watching, the other medium that some participants used to gain information and news was satellite. The participants who were able to watch satellite TV channels such as BBC Persian or VOA Persian notified others. Aida went to meet her brother and father in Ghom city and she had the opportunity to watch satellite TV channels there. As can be seen, protestors turned to various means of communication to interact with other activists, inform others about the events and distribute news. Mina states that:

During the first days of protests, I read news about the upcoming events from the board outside of the Etemad-e Meli newspaper's office, a reformist newspaper belonged to an opposition leader- Karoubi.

Some participants, who were in Sweden at the time of protests, talk about the early days of struggle and their worries about their families, relatives and friends who were in Iran and participated in the protests. They used phone calls as a high-speed way of communication to follow the events inside Iran and to relieve their concerns about their acquaintance. Yasi kept calling her friends to check who was arrested; she says that:

My sister was participating in the protests, whenever my mother called me from Iran, I thought that something happened, someone was killed or shot. I answered her phone with anxiety, and I burst into tears.

The connection through landline or mobile phones did not last long due to security matters. Participants found that phone connections were insecure. Bahar says that 'I called one of my friends, she answered the phone and she said I don't know you and she hung up the phone on me.' Aida was in Iran and she talks about the fears of the first days due to the lack of security and the large number of arrests:

We were all shocked and scared, activists changed their places and phone numbers constantly. Although I was working and it was problematic to change my phone number regularly, I also changed my phone number two times.

Sending email, particularly through Gmail, was a way to disseminate news to friends and anonymous users and communicate with other activists until they found that email based connection was insecure. There was an assumption among some participants that the Ministry of Intelligence were monitoring the emails of activists. Besides, the fact that arrested activists were interrogated about the content of their emails and their connections with other activists confirmed the assumptions. This confirms the argument of several scholars about how cyberspace acts as a sphere for presence of dissents and also as a surveillance system by authorities (Rahimi, 2011; Christensen, 2011; Fenton & Barassi, 2011). The common method of communication through email among participants was establishing email groups to exchange information and news and notifying each other about the upcoming events. The email groups had a person in charge and members participated either with their real identities or as anonymous, sharing the news and contributing to the free dissemination of information. Negar was a member of an email group:

There were some people who had access to news websites, they wrote the news or other kinds of contents in papers and made a scan, then sent them to the person in charge to be distributed among other anonymous users.

Bahar was in Sweden and used email to stay connected with activists inside Iran:

I remember that some of my friends and activists, who were arrested, were asked about their communication with me through email. I can say that the government has succeeded in cutting off our interaction through email, particularly after Neda Aghasoltan's death.

The most noteworthy function of emails for the participants in Sweden was distributing news to protestors inside Iran who faced constraints on having access and had no time to check all the news sources. They selected the essential news and articles from various websites and blogs and emailed them to others. This kind of action could be helpful for Iranians inside the country. Yasi and her counterparts in the student campaign excogitated the idea of one-page newsletters, aggregated news from consistent news websites, made a PDF format in one page and disseminated them to Iran through email lists. Each member of the campaign was responsible for sending emails to a hundred people daily and enhancing the number of members in the email groups.

4.2.1 Iranian women in diaspora and their usage of social media

While participants in Iran faced the crackdown on the Internet and connecting to social media was only possible through proxy servers on some occasions, the participants outside the country used social media for various purposes. They followed the events, watched alternative films and photos on You Tube and social networking sites, interacted with other activists, organised events and disseminated information to draw the attention of the international community and citizens of Sweden. To strengthen this notion, a study of Syrian diaspora by Pantti and Anden-Papadopoulos (forthcoming) shows that the Syrian activists in exile played a substantial role in supporting the dissent in Syria during the conflict by disseminating their voices across borders. Moreover, according to Rahaghi (2011, p. 168) the Twitter stream during the postelection days was mostly directed by Iranians outside the county.

Those participants who were already in Sweden thought that the dissemination of news through various channels was their responsibility as the only effective action to influence the situation in Iran. This mostly resulted from the situation in the homeland, ‘the government may also effectively control the media at home, so that Diaspora communities become the only effective platform for advocacy’ (Newland, 2010, p. 7). According to Pantti & Anden-Papadopoulos (forthcoming), Syrian activists expressed the same experience as follows: ‘They shared the idea that they have been ‘forced’ to become journalists in order to expose the suffering of the Syrians and the crimes committed by the regime’ (Pantti & Anden-Papadopoulos, forthcoming). Participants in Sweden read news on different news websites and Facebook, and then posted them on Facebook to contribute to the dissemination of information. In the student campaign of Gothenburg, there were some members in charge of distributing news through various websites and social media. They spent about 15 hours every day on the news-sharing project. Yasi intended to return to Iran, she talked to her friends about her desire to join the protests inside the country, but her friends encouraged her to stay in Sweden and support the dissemination of news. Furthermore, participants thought that their news sharing projects would help their Facebook friends in Iran because: firstly, protestors in Iran were engaged in street protests and faced time constraints. Secondly, they did not have proper access to social media. Tara thought that sharing and posting news on Facebook was the only contribution during the first weeks of protests: ‘I thought that I had the responsibility of a news agency during the first days, which seems funny to me now.’

The participants address the efficiency of social media and its advantages compared to other facilities of global network. Using social media as a means of disseminating news was an alternative to reading news through various news websites, which is time-consuming. Moreover, social media is considered as a fast tool for the flow of information. In addition, participants shared the idea that on Facebook one can have access to the most significant news that are repeatedly shared by others. Jaleh comments that:

I could find more information on Facebook, the speed of distributing news is faster on Facebook and noteworthy news is repeated many times. For example, instead of reading 400 news, I have been able to read 40 news which are the most substantial.

The other advantage of Facebook mentioned by the participants is the large number of targeted audiences for their ideas and the news that they posted on Facebook. Bahar assumes that due to the large number of her friends on Facebook, she has the opportunity to express her point of view by posting her articles and critiques. She has two Facebook pages, one with more than 5000 friends and the other with more than 500 friends. Bahar comments that 'If all the 5000 friends of mine on Facebook do not read my posts, at least 200 of them do.'

The utilisation of social media, particularly Facebook increased after immigration of the participants who were in Iran at the time of struggle and emigrated later. This is mostly due to two key factors: free access to the Internet and losing face-to-face communication and physical participation in the events. Free access to the global network provided the participants with the opportunity to be engaged in online communities, acquire information about Iran's current state of affairs, interact with other activists and find new communication networks. In addition, participants' application of Facebook has faced some modifications since they moved to Sweden. However, these modifications are not fixed among the participants. Some participants started using Facebook for communicative and collective actions. Negar stresses that immigration and having access to free Internet opened a new window for her. Moving to Sweden has been an opportunity for her to use free Internet in order to accumulate information about Iran's present-day political and social situation and the 2009 uprisings.

Using social media after immigration signifies staying connected to Iran while losing the presence and participation in offline communities. Aida has been feeling isolated since she came to Sweden and started to add or accept a large number of friends on Facebook because she has been thinking that she will likely lose her connections with Iranian society.

Social media have provided her with the possibility of communication with people who are physically dispersed from her. Facebook has helped her to stay in touch with Iranians in order to not to feel like she is one of the Iranian immigrants who is not familiar with the actual situation in Iran. Nasim supposes that when she is far away from Iran and her friends, Facebook is a fast and easy communication tool to stay connected to Iran. She has found email to be time-consuming and slow when it comes to connecting to other activists in Iran and Sweden:

I used to post on my Facebook and ask others to explain what happened in the protests, I could receive feedback from at least five people. If anyone of my friends was arrested, I could follow their situation on Facebook by asking others.

4.2.2 Participants' accounts of the role of social media

Almost two years after the elections, nothing happened in the streets and participants began to use the Internet and social media, particularly Facebook, for various purposes such as reading news and views, and following the experts and scholars outside the country. Ending the street protests resulted in the increase in usage of social media inside the country: firstly, because of the better access to the Internet than before and because the limitation regarding the speed of the Internet decreased. Secondly, due to the decreased participation in street events, the time that participants could spend on the Internet increased. Moreover, as the applicability of social media grew among participants in Iran, the ones who lived in Sweden reduced their usage because spreading news was not as important as before and their news distribution projects has lost their audiences. Yasi was involved in distributing news of the postelection struggle in the student campaign of Gothenburg:

When people inside the country obtained the time to be involved in disseminating news themselves, we changed our activities to create audio and video clips and save the reminiscence of the events, victims and imprisoned people one to not forget them, these are the only things that we could do.

As a matter of fact, Facebook was used for various purposes according to several events and occasions from 2009 to 2012. In the case of several events such as murdering a protestor and arresting an activist, some participants changed their profile pictures to photos of the victims, opposition leaders or activists. Negar considers this kind of informative action efficient in raising awareness among non-Iranian people:

When Hale Sahabi³ passed a way, I changed my profile picture to her picture, and it resulted to inquiry of some of my non- Iranian friends on Facebook about the picture and the event.

However, few of the participants have never used social media with respect to political participation in the aftermath of the elections due to insecurity and feeling unsafe in cyberspace. Mina could not use Facebook in Iran for political purposes because of her records of political activities and lack of security on Facebook. She says that ‘Even when I sent some emails to my friends concerning environmental problems in Iran, my friends cautioned me about the risk of the activity.’ Parisa is a prominent journalist and thinks that usage of social media could threaten her security. She refers to the irrational basis of the activities on Facebook and believes that it is impossible to participate in social media and doing professional journalism simultaneously. She preferred to do her job such as writing controversial articles, rather than partake in social media. Although Aida is involved in several online activities using an anonymous identity, she considers offline communities more secure than online communities:

³ Haleh Sahabi was an Iranian humanitarian and activist who died at her father’s funeral. She was arrested on 5 August 2009 and temporary released for her father’s funeral in May 2011. From accounts of people presented in the funeral Hale Sahabi was beaten by security forces and died as the result of the injuries caused by arguments and physical violence. The government claims that her death was a natural accident.

In the offline communities, I know my friends who I discuss with, and I know how to act. But, in cyberspace, I usually do not trust on people consider and I still feel worried about my passwords. I always think too much what I could comment and what post I could like on Facebook.

In addition, few participants believe that relying on Facebook as the only means of protest is not a proper way. For instance, Negar has never used Facebook for serious political activism because she thinks that relying on Facebook activities makes activists passive and gives them the illusion of satisfaction. Negar states that ‘Social media are like anodyne, they transform information, but do not lead to changes in behaviour or action.’ Further, Nasim believes that if communication networks are confined to Facebook, it may lead to misconceptions and unrealistic imaginations about the current situation in Iran. She has met some Iranians who have lived in Sweden for a long time. She talks about their unrealistic views about Iran and how they constantly want Iranians inside the country to protest against the government:

People outside Iran stick to some issues which are trivial for the Iranians inside the country, they overestimate the problems and bad situation while people in Iran are still living their life, the Internet draws a false image from the country.

It is also important to note that except for Bahar, none of the participants think that social media have been tools that provide them with more opportunity for participation regarding the 2009 postelection protests as female activists. They all mention that they have had the courage to act in the offline world along with male dissidents and social media have not been extra advantages for them. However, Bahar claims that she has always faced elimination from opposition mainstream media as a female expert because the media are accustomed to having more male experts than female ones. She says that ‘Some women have written noteworthy articles about the Green Movement, but mainstream media do not pay attention to them and they mostly turn to the male experts’. In addition, she also claims that since the 2009 uprisings, the mainstream media have been a tribune for mostly

reformists. She continues that 'I used to have a discussion programme in VOA Persian every Monday before the Green Movement, after the uprising I have faced elimination from mainstream media such as BBC Persian or VOA Persian.' Nevertheless, she has been able to express her ideas through social media and her website.

4.3 Participants' accounts of the role of women in the protests

Almost most of the participants refer to the challenges that Iranian women face in Iran. They claim that the mainstream power has been against women's progress. However, the participants state that, despite these limitations, Iranian women have strived for their rights. As Tahmasebi-Birgani (2010) asserts 'since the 1990's various women's NGO's, magazines, web publications and specific campaigns such as One Million Signatures and Stop Stoning Forever Campaign have worked relentlessly to advance women's rights in different spheres' (p. 79). The participants approve that women in Iran have always been present in public sphere and they have not accepted the force of power. This is why they expressed that participation of women in the aftermath of the elections is considered to be a crucial phenomenon.

Momentous participation of women in the postelection events is one of eminent characteristics of the events. As a result of their presence in the protests and observing videos and photos of the actions, participants cited the involvement of women from dissimilar backgrounds. Educated women and housewives, old traditional and young progressive women as well as women with various beliefs, including women wearing veils and the others who are negligent towards the Islamic Hijab, were involved in the demonstrations. Consequently, the pluralistic participation of women broke the stereotypes about women from certain groups. The involvement of women from various ranges after Iran's presidential elections in 2009 is mentioned by Tahmasebi-Birgani (2010); 'we saw women, religious and non-religious, traditional and secular, young and old, rich and poor, in fact women from all walks of life, at the forefront of these protests, at times even outnumbering men' (Tahmasebi-Birgani, 2010, p. 78).

Most of the participants state that Iranian women have played substantial roles in society throughout history, and the 2009 postelection period was not the first time that women appeared in the public sphere. For instance, the women's movement had started long time before the Green Movement. Nonetheless, most of the respondents believe that the aftermath of the elections highlighted the women's endeavour to fight for their rights, drew the attention of the public to women's issues and women have been more determined to struggle for their demands. Women's striking presence in the protests was unexpected and astonishing even for women themselves. Aida says that 'Although the principal structures for women's participation were provided and it was a normal phenomenon to see them in the streets, it was hard to believe it.'

Additionally, women's involvement in the protests had its remarkable influences. Most of the participants refer to the non-violent nature of the protests as the outcome of the influence of women on the street protests. Participants observed that, in the protests, women strived to relieve the rage of male protestors when they resorted to violence against repressive forces, and encouraged them to shape peaceful and nonaggressive demonstrations. Moreover, women used their negotiation skills to convince security forces to release arrested protestors. Women attempted to act as messengers of peace for both security forces and male dissidents and this formed a different contention (Tahmasebi-Birgani, 2010, p. 83). Negar states that:

Women showed their courage by partaking equally along with men, they did not throw stones, they did not resort to violence and they succeeded in expressing themselves regardless of the constraints.

Some participants make a comparison between the presence of women in the postelection protests and previous political events such as the 1979 Islamic revolution and claim that women's participation in the demonstrations differed from what had happened formerly. In their point of view, female protestors did not follow men and they participated equally with the male protestors, and even sometimes they showed up in the front positions of

demonstrations. Sara describes the difference between the 1979 Islamic and the 2009 movement: ‘If you see pictures and videos of protests for the Islamic revolution, it seems that women somehow followed men, but in the 2009 uprising women were at the centre of the events and news.’ Aida believes that the attendance of women in the uprisings dismantled gender segregation. As an example, she refers to the event when the opposition joined the weekly Friday prayer by Muslims, with green symbols: ‘I saw that women and men were standing together in streets for praying and they overthrew the common Islamic segregation.’

Aside from women’s participation in street protests, they have been actively involved in other actions such as writing articles, journalism and holding speech in media concerning the postelection crisis. Parisa, as a well-known journalist and columnist, has found her activities, such as writing about political subjects more effective than joining street protests:

I have succeeded in drawing attentions to my articles due to the following reasons: firstly, I have written about political and strategic subjects that have been the preserve of the male journalists, and secondly, people find my pictures with Hijab.

Further, participants mention the role of women as mothers, wives and sisters, who have had a member of their families in prison. These women have been involved in spreading news and being interviewed by foreign media about the situation of the imprisoned people. The prominent activities of women as mothers appear in the campaign of Mourning Mothers, a campaign organised by mothers of the young people who were arrested or murdered during the protests. They have organised their community, they have held sit-ins and gatherings in parks and streets, and have regularly met families of other victims.

In fact, participants think that considerable participation of women presented the constructive expression of Iranian women to the world in spite of the limitations that they confront. The postelection events highlighted female symbols such as Neda Aghasoltan, the female protestor whose death in the street was documented in an amateur video that spread

around the world. In addition to this, mothers of the victims such as Sohrab Aarabi's⁴ mother have been at the heart of news, thus some of the participants comprehend the movement as a feminine one. Sima asserts that:

Mousavi and Karoubi, the opposition leaders, disappeared soon, probably because of their restrictions and home arrest, but there have been mothers of victims who have shaped the news during these years.

However, some of the participants have a critical point of view; they believe that the presence of women in the street protests lacked gender awareness. Women were reproducing old slogans such as 'Allahu Akbar' (God is great) and 'Down with dictator' or the patriarchal chants such as 'my martyr brother, I will retake your vote' along with men instead of chanting their own slogans. Aida talks about her experience in the protests:

I saw that protestors were carrying Neda's picture and they chanted the old slogan: 'My martyr brother, I will retake your vote' I told them that at least Neda is your sister!

On the other hand, the participants talk about the presence of women's rights activist in the protests as a positive factor that led to the emergence of dissimilar slogans. Aida notes that 'We [women's activists] tried to bring our feminist slogans, whenever I heard a dissimilar and feminist slogan; I saw the women's activists or Mourning Mothers that have brought their slogans.'

Regardless of all the restrictions and barriers that Iranian women confront, that target women's involvement in the public sphere, none of the participants considered their gender identities as obstacles for their political actions in the 2009 movement. Their gender has

⁴ Sohrab Aarabi is a 19-year-old protestor who disappeared during a protest on 15 June 2009. After about a month of searching by his friends and relatives, it was revealed that he was killed by a shot to the heart.

never stopped them from following their interests in various decisions of their lives such as studying, working and political participation. In some cases, their gender even gave them momentum for participating in the protests. Some of them expressed that when it is a matter of freedom and equality, they consider themselves to be the same as other Iranians. A few of them assert that, when they see that they are mentioned by others and media as prominent female activists, it shows that the society is under the influence of their gender. Nasim and Aida assume that it is likely that their gender identity affected their participation, because they thought that they are under more pressure and discrimination in society and they were tired of the situation. Therefore, they thought that they should take actions for themselves and other Iranian women for a better situation. Nasim was in Iran during the protests and talks about her experience as a female protestor:

When people heard the news about raping to political imprisoned people in the prisons, families got worried about her daughters and they tried to prevent them to join the protests, I was also afraid.

In this part of the study, I interpreted the narrative stories of participants and looked for the shared elements among their stories. The women's stories included accounts of their participation in the 2009 postelection events in Iran in various spheres of contention such as partaking in street protests, journalism and campaigns. They explained how the events resulted in changes of their political and personal lives, and narrated their political lives after immigration. They also talked about the communication strategies such as social media, webmail service and face-to-face communication, which they employed in order to participate in the struggle. The women reflected on the presences of women in the protests and explained how they think their gender influenced their participation. In the next part, I will address the concluding discussion and the findings of this study.

5. Concluding discussion

I divided this part into three main categories of findings according to the research questions. The first part presents the findings about how the women of study participated in the 2009 postelection struggle both inside the country and in diaspora. The study explores that how the 2009 protests shaped political activism and the personal lives of the women and what were the consequences of their participation. The second part suggests the results about the communication strategies of the women and how they see the role of social media in their political activism. The last part discusses the findings on how the participants see the role of women in the protests, they also talk about how they see the role of their gender in their participation. This part also presents a critical reflection on the research as well as recommendations for further research.

5.1 The transition of political and personal lives

The participation of the women in this study began days before elections by partaking in discussions, election campaign marches and organising communities. The hope for change arose among the participants. The anticipation for change through voting and reform failed as a consequence of electoral fraud. However, the postelection protests were also seen as optimism for transition and improvement of social and political circumstances.

In the aftermath of the elections, the participants were actively engaged in the protests. According to participants' accounts, the days after the elections were remarkable due to the alliance among a variety of groups such as religious intellectuals, leftists, and women's right activists under a common cause that signified the magnitude of the events and the need for unity. The participants who were in Iran were actively involved in street protests, journalism and meetings. The participants who lived in Sweden at the time of the events were engaged in supportive activities, rallies, writing statements and collecting signatures in order to draw the attention of international communities and non-Iranian citizens of Sweden. Therefore, this study confirms the previous research on the significant role of diaspora communities during conflicts in their home countries (Pantti & Anden-

Papadopoulos, forthcoming; Khamis, et al., 2012; Newland, 2010). Moreover, this study verifies that the diaspora's involvement in the arguments in relation to their home country is associated with the feeling of guilt and solidarity, that was previously argued by Pantti & Anden-Papadopoulos (forthcoming) and Graham & Khosravi (1997, p. 118).

One of the most significant findings to emerge from this study is that the events in the aftermath of the 2009 elections were a turning point for political activism for the women in the study. Some of the participants became politically involved for the first time in their lives. Some of them faced changes in the trends of their activities and concentrated on political activism as their main concern. These women were involved in social activities before the 2009 elections, such as writing in newspapers and being members of student communities. Moreover, some of them returned to political activism after a period of being inactive as the consequence of immigration. All the above-mentioned transformations show the significance of the postelection conflicts and how the occasion brought into existence the need for focusing on political matters.

This study has shown that participants' involvement in the protests also had influence on their personal lives. Becoming unemployed, arrested, banned from continuing education and immigration were the consequences of their participation. In addition, the results of this investigation show that changes also occurred in terms of the participants' individual feelings and their perspective on life. The overall atmosphere after the elections, particularly after the extensive repression and arrests were drawbacks and resulted in bad feelings such as fear, anxiety and depression for the participants. On the other hand, the consequences were not limited to the disadvantages. The events and participants' involvement were inspirations for them to gain further knowledge, particularly in political fields. When they began to apply themselves as activists, they identified more responsibilities and accountability for their progress.

In addition, it is interesting to note that the events had influence on the participants' relationships and personal networks. They strengthened their previous relationships or

made new communication networks with people who shared the same approaches towards the conflict. On the other hand, division between the supporters of the regime and those who had contrary ideas was mentioned by respondents. The gap between dissimilar opinions that were reported by participants might indicate that the events were not widespread among all ranges of people.

5.2 Diverse communication strategies

This study produced results which corroborate the findings of a great deal of previous work on the role of communication means other than social media in the recent political movements (Ghannam, 2011; Fenton & Barassi, 2011; Attia, et al., 2011). Social media were not the main means for political participation of the participants. Instead, they attempted to employ several means of communication for political participation. The Internet was shut down and social networking sites were filtered. In addition to the increased limitation on the access to the internet, most of the participants who were in Iran did not have accounts on social media during the first months after the election. The events following the 2009 elections in Iran were called as ‘Twitter revolution’ in the western media, but the participants of this study never used Twitter. Christensen (2011) cites that ‘there were just over 19,000 Twitter users in Iran out of a total of population of just under 80 million’ (p. 238). The participants could have access to news websites occasionally and by utilising proxy servers. All the participants, both in Sweden and Iran, turned to other means of communication for various purposes such as communicating among each other, obtaining news of the events and protests and passing on the information to others.

One of the main ways for the participants to interact with other activists was attending the communal places where they could easily communicate with other protestors or their friends. These places included the universities, workplaces, friendship and family gatherings and streets. The results of this study show that face-to-face communication or word of mouth was popular among participants as it was the easiest way to share information. It is notable that the participants used to spend lots of time in public places

during the days before and after the election, but had less participation in online communities. The above-mentioned findings confirm the argument of Howard et al. (2012) about the Egyptian revolution that ‘in the absence of information about the crisis, others took to the streets, eager to find out what was happening’ (p. 217). However, it is important to note that the participants of this study were determined to take action, and they did not attend the protests only because of curiosity about what was happening. In addition, the participants who were in Sweden also understood that face-to-face communication was efficient for interaction inside the city of settlement, although they did not face the limitation with respect to social media.

Another significant means that was largely used by the participants to disseminate the information and news to personal networks or a large number of anonymous people was sending emails through the Gmail webmail service. Forming email groups was a common way to bypass the limitation of the flow of information. However, the assumptions about the lack of security in sending emails prevented participants to continue the dissemination of information through this channel. In addition, during the first weeks, participants in Sweden communicated with their friends and families in Iran through phones. Soon after, they also found that the communication through this medium was insecure. Text messaging and watching satellite TV channels were another useful media during the first weeks in Iran.

The utilisation of Facebook among participants who were in Iran increased when the street protests decreased. When there was nothing to happen in the streets, the sphere of participation changed to online communities. Following discussions and news, changing profile pictures to specific items such as pictures of victims and contributing to the diffusion of information have been the main activities on Facebook from almost 2 years after the elections. The participants in Sweden used mainly Facebook, to organise events in support of protestors, follow the conflict in their homeland and spread the news. Therefore, the above stated notions substantiate Rahimi’s (2011) point of view that social media might

be principally used for dissemination of information, but not to facilitate ‘mobilisation’ (p. 168).

A reason for the unpopularity of social media among the participants lies in the fact that social media is not the preserve of the dissidents, but also they might be used as surveillance systems by the government. Christensen (2011) argues that there is suspicion about the effectiveness of social media in the recent uprisings due to the application of social media ‘by authoritarian regimes for the purpose of surveillance and repression’ (p. 234). Some of the participants refer to the fact that they have not used social media for political activism because of their insecure nature. The cases of Aida and Mina demonstrate how the feeling of fear and insecurity might affect online political activism. Mina did not use Facebook for any kind of political activism when she was in Iran due to the fear of being tracked by the government. Aida also practiced self-censorship in her online activism even in Sweden because she was afraid of Iranian authority’s surveillance of cyberspace. Fenton and Barassi (2011) state that ‘everyday struggles, fears and problems that activists face in the promotion of their messages via Web 2.0 platforms’ is a reason why we should take a detailed look at the capability of cyberspace in providing a more democratic platform (p. 185).

In addition, some participants suppose that social media are ineffective changing behaviour. In their point of view, usage of social media does not result in taking action and gives an unrealistic perspective about the situation in Iran. It is also important to mention that almost all the participants believe that social media do not provide them with different opportunities for political activism as female activists. Their core stage of activism for making changes and expressing their ideas is the offline world.

Most of the participants who used social media during the first months of the protests were the ones who lived in Sweden at that time. Further, the online and offline activities of the participants, who were already in Sweden, show the significant role of diaspora communities during the conflict in their homeland. The above-mentioned results are similar

to the findings by Pantti & Anden-Papadopoulos (forthcoming) about the substantial role of Syrian diaspora activists and how they acted as a bridge between dissidents in Syria and outside world by using new media.

Moreover, for the participants who immigrated after the 2009 postelection protests, immigration led to the utilising social media more than when they were in Iran because of the free access and feeling of security. They began to employ Facebook in order to stay connected to Iran and its political issues. This result, as well the above-mentioned result about usage of social media by the participants who were already in Sweden, confirms the significant role of social media among diaspora people. Using social media after immigration signifies staying connected to Iran while losing the presence and participation in offline communities.

Segebergy & Bennett (2011) discuss that social media such as Twitter and Facebook should not be considered as exceptional communication tools that play a fixed role in various circumstances (p. 201). Otherwise, we will fall into presumptions about the efficiency of social media instead of exploring the issue (Segebergy & Bennett, 2011, p. 199). Although the recent uprisings appear with the same features in the eyes of the outside world, according to Pantti & Anden-Papadopoulos (forthcoming) '[They] are nevertheless different due to the distinctive nature of governance structures, media structures and communication and assembly in their respective nations'. This study has found that deliberating about the role of social media in the recent uprisings, particularly Iran, begs a reconsideration of the role of other communication strategies and how the presence of the government in cyberspace has influence on online political activism.

5.3 Understanding women's role in the postelection events

The present study succeeded in giving voice to Iranian women in diaspora to express themselves and narrate their stories. The findings of the current study are consistent with those of Mahdi (2003) & Tohidi (1994) who found that Iranian women have been actively

involved in political events and public sphere despite the restrictions. Moreover, this study confirms previous narrative research by Bauer (2000) and Graham & Khosravi (1997) that suggest that Iranian women continued their political activism with respect to political issues of their home country after immigration and in diaspora.

This study was geared towards enhancing our understanding of the political activism of women in the 2009 postelection dissent. According to the participants' remarks and their eyewitnesses, women from various backgrounds were successful in building solidarity and creating non-violent protests. They showed up in the demonstrations as the messengers of peace for both male protestors and repressive forces. These findings corroborate the ideas of Tahmasebi-Birgani (2010) and Rahimi (2011) who suggested that women of various backgrounds employed peaceful tactics for participation in the events before and after the 2009 presidential elections and created solidarity.

According to the participants' accounts, the pluralistic participation could dismantle gender segregations among protestors and the stereotypes about women from certain groups, for instance the women with veils or the ones who are careless to Hijab. As the participants narrated, female protestors participated in the events equally with men, not as the followers of male protestors. However, some participants highlight the lack of gender awareness among female protestors; they mostly refer to the old and patriarchal slogans that were used by both male and female protestors.

According to the participants, women were actively involved in the international media as journalists, activists and relatives of the victims such as the Mourning Mothers campaign. This is why some participants refer to the events as a feminine movement. Participants cite the presence of women as a positive factor for attracting the attention of the public and media to the women's issues in Iran. Furthermore, participants of this study do not see their gender identities as hindrances to their involvement, but as impetus to take actions for transformation.

5.4 Recommendations for further research and critical reflections

The current findings add substantially to our understanding of how the 2009 struggle in Iran influenced political activities and personal lives of the Iranian women. The current research was not specifically designed to evaluate the impact of postelection dissent on the personal networks and relationships of the women. It would be interesting to assess the effects of the 2009 postelection conflicts on personal ties of the actors. Moreover, the question of whether the 2009 postelection struggles resulted in the solidarity of dissimilar political groups and how this happened should be rephrased.

The findings show that future research is needed to investigate how participation of women could affect social issues related to gender among protestors. For instance, how the presence of women in the protests could demolish gender segregations among the protestors. It is important to mention that most of the participants live in the city of Gothenburg. With a small sample of Iranian women political activists in a specific geographical area, caution must be applied, as the findings might not be applicable to all female political activists.

This research has raised many questions in need of further investigation with respect to the role of various communication tools during the postelection events in Iran. The current investigation was limited to focusing on social media. Future work needs to be done to deeply investigate the role of satellite TV, text messaging and webmail services in the 2009 postelection protests in Iran.

Conducting research based on the remote observations might lead to misunderstanding and generalising. Considerably more work will need to be done to determine how social media contributed to the postelection protests in Iran and more significantly how the actors, including ordinary protestors, activists and journalists used social media. Further narrative research is highly recommended to explore the past events regarding the 2009 postelection conflicts in Iran and why activists turned to online communities or why they avoided

mediated political participation. Further research on the role of social media should take into consideration some elements such as the presence of the government in cyberspace, the extent of repression and how activists see the role of social media in political mobilisation.

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Appendix

Interview questions

Could you tell me about your background? (Age, education and family status, work, studies etc...). Also, briefly explain the story of your immigration. When, why and how did you leave Iran?

Briefly explain your political activities before the 2009 uprisings. Where you involved in any other kinds of political activism previously? Give some examples.

Could you talk about how you were involved in the 2009 uprisings? What actions, projects have you participated in? Give some examples. Also talk about your goals in the uprisings (why were you involved).

How have you been in interaction with other activists? What are the ways which you have used for interaction? Give some examples and explain why have you used these ways?

What kinds of media have you used to participate in the activities during the uprising? And explain how and why you used these media (What is particular about them)? What role social media (such as Facebook) played in your participation in the uprisings? Please talk about the contribution of social media to your political activities.

How do you perceive the role of women in the uprisings? How has their presence contributed and led the uprising? How (if at all) do you feel being a woman influenced your participation in the uprisings? What connection do you see between your gender identity and your participation?

How has your involvement with political activism during the uprisings influenced your choices regarding career/studies etc...? How have these activities influenced other aspects of your life?

How do you see the impact of the 2009 uprisings on your political activism? How have the uprisings shaped your political activism? Have the uprisings led your political activities in a particular direction? Give some examples.

Could you explain to me the impact of immigration on your political activities generally and as a female activist particularly? Please talk about similarities or differences of your political activities between your home country and the destination country. Does immigration make it easier to be an activist for you as a woman in two different countries? Explain about these two different contexts (Iran and Finland/Sweden).

How do you think social media influenced your participation in the uprisings as a female activist? Do social media make it easier for women to become activists and participate in protests? Give some examples.