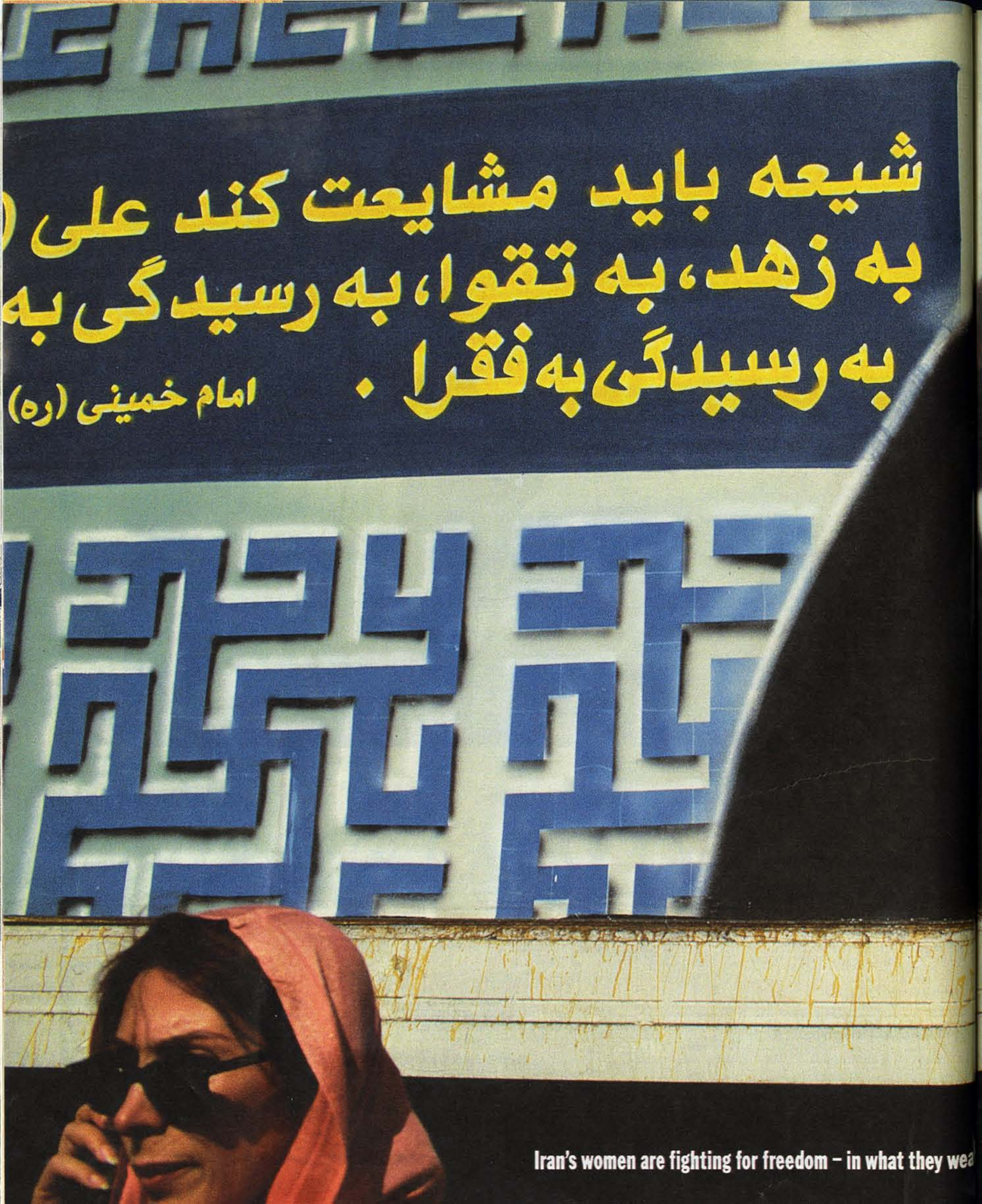

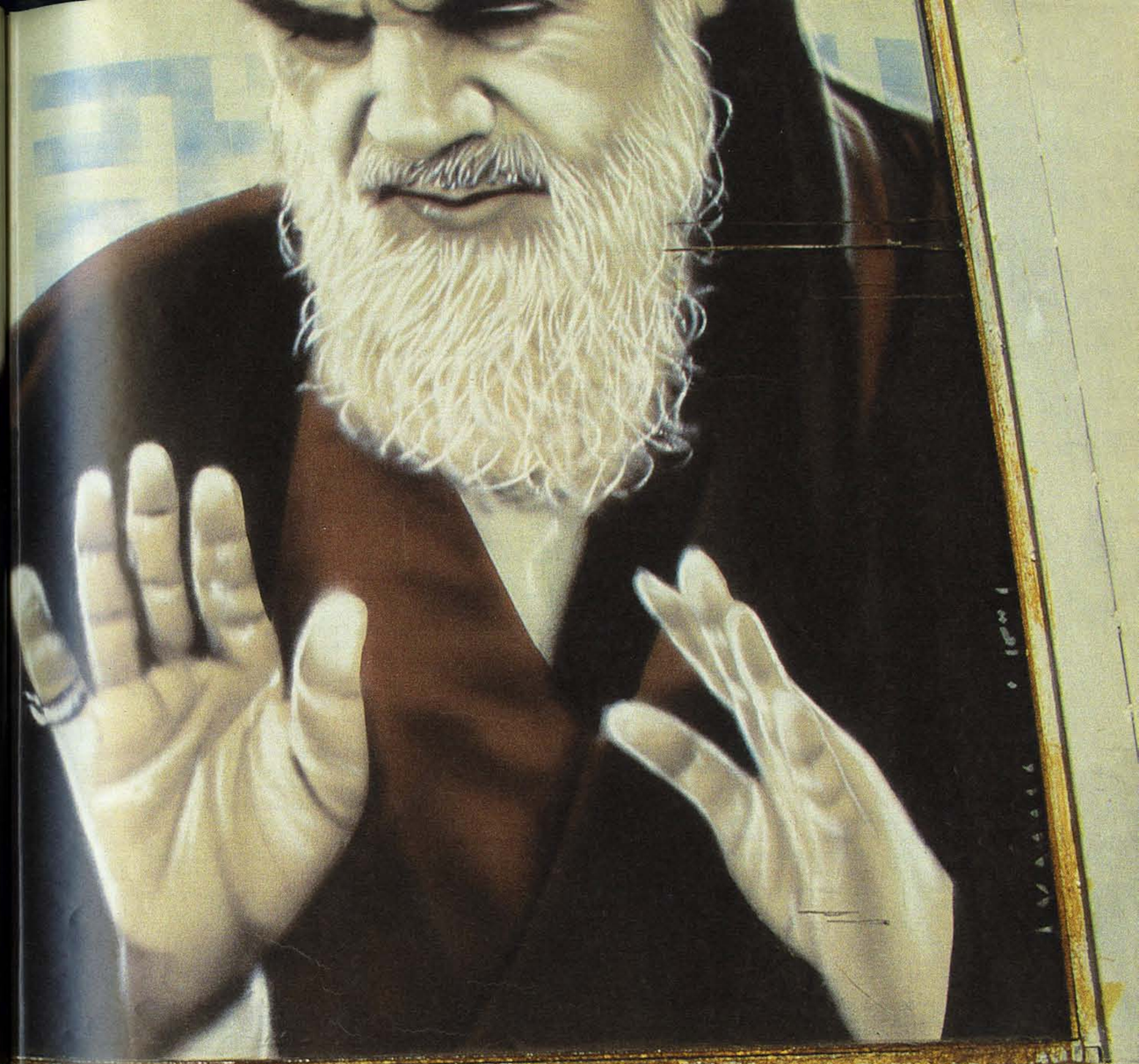

VEILED THREATS

Iran's women are fighting for freedom – in what they wea

and how they live. But will they be crushed by the Muslim regime? Report: Christine Toomey. Photographs: Harriet Logan

Previous pages: a headscarf instead of a chador, sunglasses, and the ubiquitous mobile phone, mark the march of progress in Iran. Opposite: Mar Yam Ajam, 19, is one of the many women in Iran who opt for plastic surgery, choosing permanent change to get around a ban on make-up. Below: teenager Matti indulges in a manicure

At first, it is a shocking sight. Women with bruised eyes, their faces swathed in bandages and framed by dark headscarves or the floor-length black Iranian veils known as chadors, are a regular sight on the streets of Tehran. Are they victims of domestic violence? Have they been hit by the city's maniacal drivers, who force pedestrians to play chicken with speeding traffic every time they cross a road? The interpreter, Lily, bursts out laughing. "Don't worry. It's okay," she says. "They've either had a nose job or a face-lift. Plastic surgery is big business. Since women can only expose their face and hands in public they make the most of what they have."

It is not what you would expect in a country run by clerics. Twenty years after the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini deposed Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlevi from his peacock throne, denouncing the evil forces of imperialism and westernisation, and ordering every woman to cover herself, women are changing the face of Iran; in some cases literally. They are at the forefront of the move for modernisation and reform. But some are paying a heavy price; suicide and drug addiction among young women is soaring.

"All the pressure they have put on women to make them retreat behind the chador has not succeeded in changing their thinking," says Majid Navab, one of the country's top plastic surgeons. "Women have been the first line of resistance against the revolution." One activist, who won't be named for fear of reprisals, is blunt: "Those who are the most oppressed and restricted become the most dangerous to any regime. In Iran, the most oppressed are women, the young, and intellectuals. They are behind the revolution for reform. In the end, I believe, they will succeed."

The reformist president, Mohammad Khatami, was voted in three years ago on a wave of overwhelming support from female voters and the young; Iranians can vote at 15. But he is bitterly opposed by conservative mullahs, who pull the levers of real power by controlling the religious institutions that run parallel to, and oversee every arm of government. His own brother has been charged with insulting Islam, and one of his closest friends was shot in the head by fundamentalists. Over 20 liberal newspapers have been shut down this year, hundreds of reformers jailed, and others killed. Many caution me against trumpeting too loudly any advances women are making, fearing a further crackdown. Those fears are not unfounded. Three female activists were recently imprisoned. Now out on bail, Shahla Lahiji, a publisher, and Mehrangiz Kar and Shirin Ebadi, prominent lawyers, face a range of serious charges, including endangering national security, because of their war against Iran's labyrinthine justice system. It is in the courts that women face the worst discrimination; there is a feudal attitude that rates them inferior and, legally, equivalent to half a man.

Over 20 liberal newspapers have been shut down, hundreds of reformers jailed

Yet there are female success stories. After a battle with bureaucracy, I am granted a brief audience with Iran's first female vice-president, Massoumeh Ebtekar, a professor of immunology who is also the environment minister, and arguably the most powerful woman in the country. It is an uncomfortable encounter, cut short by mention of an episode from her past she would rather not talk about.

Enveloped in a black chador worn over a pale, coffee-coloured *roopoosh* (an obligatory, calf-length shapeless coat), Ebtekar has the air of a mother superior. The circles under her eyes are darker; otherwise her face has changed little from her radical student days when, dressed head to toe in black, she was dubbed "Sister Mary" by the American press. Then, she was one of the revolutionaries who stormed the American embassy in Tehran in 1979, seized 52 hostages, and held them for 444 days. She appeared regularly on news broadcasts, listing the captives' alleged crimes and denouncing them as spies.

The hostages, held in a cellar in the embassy compound, were periodically paraded blindfolded in front of the cameras. Although all were eventually released, some had been beaten on the soles of their feet with electrical flex. It was one of many dark chapters in the early days of the revolution, and led to diplomatic ties between the United States and Iran being cut. The resulting economic sanctions continue to cripple Iran's economy.

Ebtekar makes no apology. "I don't think a person could look back and regret an action taken to preserve independence, integrity and dignity... It was not an act of revenge," she says in American-accented English. It was the fact that she had spent part of her childhood in Philadelphia, while her father was studying there in the 1960s, that led her captives to regard her with particular bitterness. "The global media was against the revolution from the beginning. There has been a tendency to see Iran as a rogue state. There have been many stereotypes about Iranian women being backward... oppressed."

After the hostage crisis, Ebtekar studied for many years, became a professor, and co-founded a centre for women's studies. She also briefly edited both a women's magazine and an English-language daily newspaper. Head of the publishing house that produced it was Khatami, then a little-known cleric, who appointed her one of Iran's six vice-presidents after he took office.

"Frankly, I did not ever conceive that I would have such a responsibility," she says, in a conference room at the environment ministry, where there is a stuffed peacock nailed to the wall. "But the fact that so many people ask how it came to be that a woman was appointed to this position means there is a serious lack of understanding about the trends that are going on in this country." Much of this misunderstanding, she argues, stems from the regime's insistence that women wear the veil. "I remember at the beginning of the revolution, Imam Khomeini was constantly questioned by reporters, 'What is going to happen to women?' They were predicting something similar to what the Taliban did to women. But on the contrary, not only were women not oppressed, they were brought into the mainstream of development and education."

Ebtekar argues that most Iranians support hejab – as covering oneself is known – as symbolising a "code of decency". "We don't think that the western model of social and legal rights for women is applicable to Iran. We think that has its own problems and shortcomings. We think the pillars of the family in the West are seriously shaken. In eastern societies we have a different perspective on family ties and bonds. We think that keeping those important emotional and spiritual values is something the West has neglected in its paradigm of development for women." But she admits there is room for improvement, and stresses that strengthening women's rights is one of the "core elements" of the changes initiated by President Khatami. Yet when I try to discuss the "great advances" she says are being made, I am told my time is up. The ⋙→

vice-president pulls her chador tightly around her and sweeps out of the room.

Elaaheh Kolahi is a director of Tehran university, one of 11 female MPs, and the first female legislator to refuse to wear the chador in parliament. Instead, she wears a *roopoosh* and a shoulder-length head covering called a *rousari*. Under the Islamic dress code, breaching hejab is an offence punishable with jail or 74 lashes. Under Khatami's more lenient regime, this combination is accepted as an alternative by all but the most conservative. Kolahi's stand on dress won her enemies: her view, shared with other reformists, that Iran should be transformed from a country ruled by religion to a more secular society is far more controversial. "We always wanted a civil society, but in the beginning of the revolution we were very focused on changing the political setup of the shah's regime. Now it is time to return to our original goals – to stress the importance of social factors. But we have to watch the speed of our progress. We must be very careful." After an hour talking vaguely about social reform, she whispers apologetically to the interpreter: "You know how it is. I can't really say everything I want to."

Her reticence is understandable. Two weeks before in Tehran, club-wielding vigilantes had beaten those marking the first anniversary of a student pro-democracy rally that had sparked six days of the worst urban unrest in 20 years. This is a pivotal time. Conservative clerics will not cede power without a fight. Some reformers believe the only way to proceed is almost by stealth. "They want to make the process durable – a slow train that can't be run off the tracks, rather than a fast train that can be derailed," says the political scientist Hadi Semati. Key to deciding whether such a slow policy will be given time to work are women, particularly the young; 60% of Iran's more than 65m people are under 25; 53% are female. "For the first time in the past two years, women are beginning to develop their own political identity, regardless of whether they are religious or secular," he says. It is a result of better education: this year more women than men will enter university. "The great paradox is that by forcing women to wear the chador, the clerics removed the reservations religious families felt about sending their daughters to school." Under the shah, some schools did not allow girls to cover their heads, so families were kept at home.

The front line of the fight is in the courts. If a man kills a woman, her family must pay blood money to his if they want him punished; under Islamic law, men bear sole financial responsibility for their families, so there must be compensation for the loss of a breadwinner. If a father murders his child, he is required only to pay compensation to the bereaved mother, as he legally owns his children. A mother guilty of the same offence faces the death penalty. If a man sees his wife committing adultery with a married man, and can produce witnesses to the fact, his wife can be stoned to death; a woman whose husband commits adultery must seek redress through the courts. Some of these laws were observed under the shah's reign. But a fundamental post-revolutionary change was a cut in the age of maturity for girls to nine, although, like boys, they can't vote until they are 15. So they can be married off by their families; this is rare now in cities, but still happens in some rural areas. It also means that a girl of 9 convicted of theft will receive the same jail sentence as a man of 40.

The most controversial laws, or at least those that affect the lives of the greatest number of women, concern divorce and child custody. Once, only men had any rights regarding divorce; they could divorce their wives at any time for no reason. They were automatically granted custody, once a boy reached two and a girl, seven. These laws are slowly being amended, however, partly due to the appalling torture and eventual death of one little girl called Arian.

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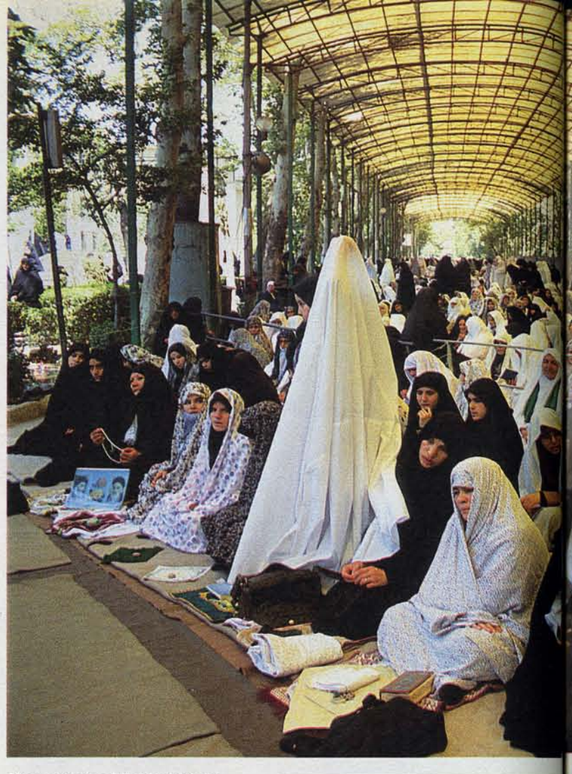
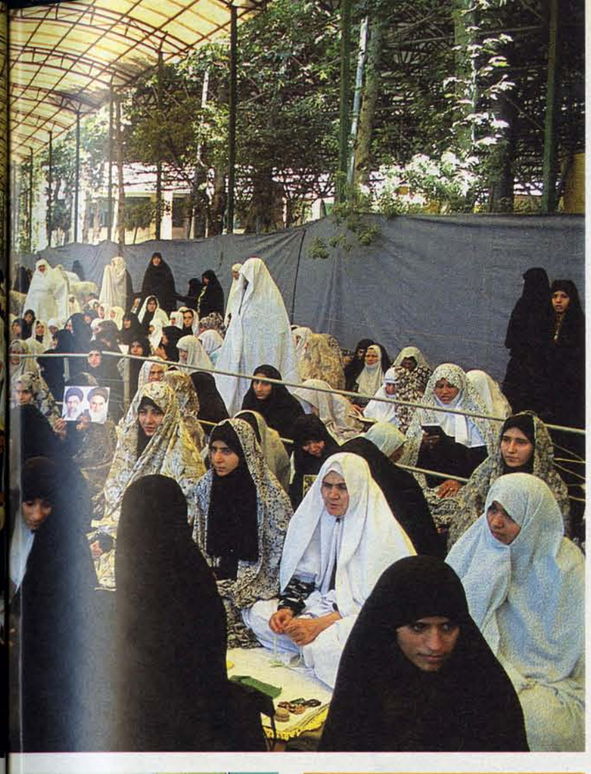
Nahid Najibpour cradles a pink plastic folder as we speak in the stifling sitting room of her small apartment. The folder contains a thick pile of press cuttings about her daughter's death. Each has a flap of paper neatly stuck over the photographs they contain, so that Nahid doesn't have to see what Arian looked like when she died. The eight-year-old's emaciated body looks like that of a famine victim. Burn marks cover her face and body. Both arms are broken.

Nahid has been married and divorced twice, both times losing custody of her children. Both men, she says, divorced her after taking up with younger women. Her first husband won custody of her eldest daughter when she was 7½. "He was a good man. I knew he would look after her," she says. The second one was another matter. Ali Golshani was a drunk and a drug addict. He regularly beat Nahid, their son, Armand, and daughter, Arian. As his mother talks, Armand gets up from the sofa. He cannot bear to listen.

When Golshani divorced her, Nahid says she showed the court police records of his violent behaviour. Still he was awarded custody of Armand, then 4, and Arian, 3. He married again, and the children went to live with their stepmother and their father's two sons from an earlier marriage. Nahid was allowed to see her children every other week for four hours at the local police station. "I often saw evidence that they were being tortured. I asked the police to open a file. They would not. One day I saw Arian's fingers were blue. When I asked Armand what had happened, he said, 'When you come to see us, they beat us more. Please don't come. We will come to see you when we are grown up.' It





Above: wrapped tightly in their chadors, up to 5,000 women flock to Tehran university each Friday for prayers. Right: a six-year-old waits to hear her fate as her parents battle for custody in the Iranian capital's family courts. Far right: Nahid Najibpour, with a portrait of her daughter Arian, who was kicked to death by an older stepbrother while living in her father's custody

was the last time I saw my daughter alive." Armand, now watching television, interjects: his father, he says, locked them in the bathroom for weeks at a time.

One day in 1996 Golshani brought Arian to hospital, saying she had fallen. In fact, she had been kicked unconscious by one of his elder sons, Ramtin, and died soon after. On the basis of Armand's testimony, Ramtin was convicted of murder and sentenced to death. Golshani and his new wife were each sentenced to two years' jail and three years' exile to a remote area – not for what they had done to Arian, but because the publicity surrounding the case was held to have brought Iran into disrepute. Nahid has custody of Armand, but no sentence has yet been carried out. She must pay her ex-husband about $5,000 for the loss of his elder son. She doesn't have it, but is trying to raise the money. If she does not pay soon, the sentence will lapse and Ramtin will be released.

When Arian's fate was publicised, women stormed the family courts in protest. The law has now changed: mothers may retain custody if they can prove the father is unfit. Nahid's case and the constant lobbying for divorce-law reform is said to have led to a slow change in judicial attitudes. To see if this is so, I am finally granted access to Family Court branch No 7, a sprawling, dilapidated complex of buildings on the corner of Ark Square in downtown Tehran.

Every corridor is lined with huddles of women clutching their black veils tightly across their mouths. At some distance are groups of haughty men who eye suspiciously passers-by. Ostensibly, their arrogance is well-founded. As with all government offices, any woman who enters the court building must do so through a side entrance; the front door is reserved for men. Old women pass judgment on every female visitor's dress, roughly jerking head coverings lower down on foreheads, before letting them pass inside. But behind the drab courtroom doors, everything is not going the way some men believe it should.

Take the drama unfolding in the room presided over by Hadi Hadipour, a family court judge for more than 30 years. Hadipour, a thin, stooping figure in a well-worn suit, argues that more cases are being resolved in favour of women than has been the case for the past 20 years. "Women have more rights now," he says. Torabi v Torabi illustrates his point. Ali Torabi, a retired army colonel, wants custody of his 14-year-old son from his former wife. The balding 66-year-old left his wife, son and two elder daughters for another woman. Once, it would have been an open-and-shut case. He would have won. But Hadipour gives him a long lecture: "Why do you want to take the boy now? You are remarried, aren't you? Having the boy is only going to cause you problems. You will only have him for a year, then he can decide for himself."

As Torabi's son sits sulking beside his mother and sisters, eventually the colonel gives in; the boy can stay with his ex-wife. As she leaves with the children in tow, Col Torabi shakes his head and fingers a string of worry beads.

"Ever since Khatami came to power wherever women go they are the winners," he says. "It's no good. Men are becoming oppressed now."

Not quite. In another case, Hadipour shouts at a mother seeking to retain custody of her daughters, aged 6 and 14: "Just because your husband beats you doesn't mean he can't be a good father." The girls sit with their heads bowed, the youngest scuffing her shiny red shoes against the floor. Their parents trade insults across the courtroom. The father, Mostafa, dressed in tight jeans and sneakers, calls his wife, Badrieh, a prostitute. He says she is too old for him now – she's 48, he's 46. He wants a younger wife. Badrieh, shaking with rage and crying, accuses him of beating her and says he has become a drug addict.

Eventually the couple leaves, and the judge tells me what his verdict will be: both girls will be allowed to stay with their mother for the time being, although the younger could be handed over to her father when she is seven, unless his wife can prove he is unfit. This proviso is considered a legal advance.

Other legal advances include limited rights for women to divorce their husbands – on grounds such as impotence, insanity or severe physical abuse. All divorces now have to be registered with the courts; before, a husband simply had to tell his wife he was divorcing her. So, in theory, the courts decide what financial compensation a wife is entitled to. "When some men find out how much it is going to cost them, they change their mind about getting divorced," says Hadipour. Some simply refuse to pay, such as the husband of a 56-year-old woman found wandering the corridors of the family courts in tears.

Worried about being caught complaining, Dolat whispers brief details of her story. She was 14 when she married her husband. Forty-two years later, her 80-year-old spouse decided he wanted a younger wife because Dolat was failing to satisfy him sexually. "We had three children," she says. After telling her he was divorcing her, he moved a younger woman into their house. First, he bricked up a small back porch where he said Dolat could live. Then he beat her up and said he wanted her out altogether. "The court sent a social worker to investigate," says Dolat. "But the social worker wanted me to pay her taxi fare to my home. I couldn't pay, so she never came. Now I don't know what to do. I've come here to complain, but nobody is listening to me."

When I try to raise Dolat's case with Farah-Naz Khosro-Shahi, one of Iran's most senior female judges, she says she cannot comment on an individual case, but "according to the Koran, men are not superior to women. They are equal before God". Then, she explains that she cannot pass a verdict in any case. All

They can be MPs, but not go out after dark without their husband's consent

women working as judges under the shah were dismissed. Since then, women have only been allowed to act as assistants, known as "sitting judges". She is hopeful that women will be promoted to the more senior position of "standing judge" soon: "Things are changing now. Women are demanding more."

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The gap between what women want and what they are allowed is still huge. This drives many, particularly the young, to take drastic action. In the past 10 years, there has been a fivefold increase in female suicides; the favoured method is self-immolation. The problem is particularly acute in rural areas and small towns, where female expectations have been raised by education and moves towards reform, but where male attitudes have remained in the Middle Ages. In most countries women account for only one in four suicides: in Iran they make 80% of attempts, and most are successful. The average age is 25.

Female drug addiction is also rising. Said Madani, a state-employed psychologist, says it is now "a very serious problem". Between a quarter and half of Tehran's 2m drug addicts are women. Many are turning to hard drugs such as heroin, and the average age of addiction is falling.

Prostitution, officially punishable by death, is also increasing. Sometimes it is dressed up as "temporary marriage", a loophole sanctioned by Islamic law which gives men the right to an officially recognised union, even if it only lasts half an hour. But this is not often the case. Madani mumbles that official figures are "very confidential" and refuses to be drawn, but Iranian press reports say that the average age of female prostitutes has fallen from 27 to 20. Although reluctant to admit the scale of the problem, the authorities, instead of sentencing these women to death, have set up state-funded rehabilitation centres. The increase is partly due to a threefold rise since the revolution in households headed by women – 1.37m last year. Many of the women were widowed during the Iran-Iraq war. Few single mothers, other than a small proportion of war widows, receive any state support. In the past decade, divorces have risen from 10% to 15%. In five years, one in five marriages is expected to fail.

A mantra among the devout is that Islam holds the institution of the family sacred. Such statistics are therefore damning. Conservative clerics claim that a loosening of the rigid religious control of society lies at the root of these ➳

social problems. Reformers argue they stem from repression and society's failure to respond to changing social conditions, such as worsening unemployment and women's greater expectations. One such person is the Ayatollah Mustafa Mohaghegh Damad, who claims descent from the prophet Mohammed. His impeccable religious credentials and position as head of Islamic studies at the Academy of Science give him considerable influence, and he has supported many female-friendly family law changes. If he had his way, hejab that includes the floor-length veil would stop. "The veil is not Islamic, it is an Iranian custom. In ancient documents of Persian history women wear the veil... but I think in future it should be changed. Women should still cover themselves, but if we continue to insist on the veil I think people will rise up against hejab. People will become very angry," he says. "According to the Koran, it is man's duty to keep his eyes from looking at women. But the public view is that it is only up to women to keep themselves covered. In my opinion, the dress of women is a private matter. The state should not impose it."

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The irony of the chador is that it was widely adopted as a sign of protest by those opposed to the last shah, whose father banned wearing the veil in a bid to force a secular-style, quasi-western autocratic regime on a deeply traditional country. But when the mullahs made the veil mandatory after the revolution, it became viewed by many as a sign of oppression. Yet even if it were entirely voluntary, many would still opt to wear it. As one dark-robed woman working on Tehran's fledgling stock exchange argues: "When I wear hejab I know I am simply coming to work to do my job. Before it was compulsory, women would dress fashionably and treat coming to work as an opportunity to show off."

"According to our religion, God does not want women, while in wider society, to dress in such a way that they are provocative to men. Only within the confines of the family should a woman attempt to look beautiful," Fatimeh Arshi, a worshipper at a Friday prayer meeting in the grounds of Tehran University, explains patiently. Smiling, she adds: "You know, in our religion it is important that both men and women should smell good too." The Ayatollah Khomeini, she says, was very fond of Chloé perfume.

In reality, however, the more you conceal and mystify women the more intriguing they become to the opposite sex; the more obsessed men seem with catching a glimpse of what lies behind the veil. The irony of this is clear to women who are not devout and who argue: "Hejab turns women into anonymous soldiers who must obey." Others feel there are more important battles to be fought. Since Khatami took power hejab is less strictly applied, anyway. Although girls over nine must observe it, from autumn students will be allowed to wear brightly coloured coats and headscarves instead of the traditional grey and black; it was felt dark colours were affecting their mood and performance.

Many women have already taken to wearing bright headscarves that they push further and further back on their heads. Some also wear heavy make-up. If stopped by conservative vigilantes or "vice patrols", they can still be fined; it is one reason those who can afford it choose to permanently alter their appearance with cosmetic surgery. Behind closed doors some dress far more provocatively than many of their western contemporaries. The micro-mini has never gone out of fashion, nor have dresses with the most daring décolletage. Young women remove their veils, and enjoy dancing and socialising with young men, even though they know the party could be raided by vice squads. They will sometimes pay off the neighbourhood snoop in advance.

Other freedoms slowly being granted include playing music and singing, if only in front of other women. In the immediate post-revolution years, a girl heard playing the piano by neighbours would be disqualified from university. One who found such restrictions unbearable is Khatereh Parvaneh, one of Iran's most famous female vocalists. Now a striking-looking woman of 73, she had performed before many European and Middle-Eastern heads of state.

"For 17 years I was silent. I thought everything was finished. I was so depressed," says Parvaneh, who interlaces her speech with quiet, melancholy songs. "But one day in 1997, after Khatami was elected, an official knocked on my door and asked me to perform a concert for female university students. As I started to sing to them they broke into tears." She now gives private lessons to girls, one of whom sits quietly listening. "At the moment I only sing to myself at home," the girl says. "But who knows what will happen in the future?"

Some of Iran's most famous film directors are women. They fight a constant battle between artistic freedom and Islamic correctness, while winning many international awards for their work. Tahmineh Milani, 40, banned from making films for five years, has won critical acclaim with a series exposing daily problems women face. "Things are better than they were before," she says. "But it is not enough. The changes that have taken place so far have been like prescribing aspirin for a raging fever."

Some are even more pessimistic. Nazri fled Iran after being sentenced to death at 24 for being an atheist and campaigning for women's rights. After her father successfully lobbied for the sentence to be reduced, she was sent to jail for eight years, tortured, and temporarily paralysed. "The changes that are taking place in Iran are barely scratching the surface of injustices against women," she says. "Women are still regularly sent to prison if they do not believe in Islam. They are still tortured and stoned. What sort of freedom is that?"

Iran's vice-president Massoumeh Ebtekar, once among revolutionaries who stormed the US Embassy, says the hejab is a pillar of Iran's 'code of decency'

Many see escape as the only solution. This has led to a boom in "marriage by mail", where young women seek marriage proposals from Iranian men already living abroad. "Some people joke that Iran's biggest export is young women, but it is really very sad," says one graduate. Others prefer to stay and fight for change. One group of bright, articulate teenage girls have no plans to leave Iran, yet: "This is my country, leaving is not a solution," says 17-year-old Setareh. "We have to stay here and work for a better future." As they talk enthusiastically of their ambitions to become writers, film directors, painters, and vets, shrieks can be heard from a large communal swimming pool outside. The temperature this particular day is edging towards 40C. But all those enjoying the water are men and boys; girls over the age of nine are not allowed to use the pool as this would violate hejab. I am furious as the girls explain this. They just laugh: they get around it by jumping in, fully clothed, late at night, even though this breaks the official curfew that demands all girls be home by 9pm.

The micro-mini has never gone out of fashion, nor has daring decolletage

Compared with other countries in the region, such as Saudi Arabia, where women cannot drive, or Afghanistan, where they cannot work, or receive medical care or education, Iranian women do enjoy greater freedom. But their lives are full of contradictions. They can work beside men, but not socialise with anyone to whom they are not related. They can be MPs, be vice-president, but cannot go abroad or out after dark without their husband's consent. Married couples can be arrested for holding hands in public. On buses, there is strict segregation. It is sexual apartheid: women sit at the back.

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It is twilight high above the smoggy streets of Tehran, in the foothills of the saw-tooth Shahran Mountains. Girls pile out of an old pick-up truck, carrying bulky backpacks. Clambering to the top of a high ridge, they unfold multi-coloured parachutes, let the wind catch the billowing nylon, lift their feet and jump. For the next 10 to 15 minutes they paraglide down towards the outskirts of the city, looping back and forth until they hit the ground running.

The girls, most of them in their teens, only have time for one jump each. The summer light fades fast and they cannot come any earlier because hejab makes the heat unbearable; they wear headscarves tucked under crash helmets and calf-length black coats. People call them *parandehgan* (birds). They prefer their official title: Tehran Women's Flying Committee. So why do they choose this extreme sport? "They like the fact that this is one sport where girls and boys can participate together," their coach, Azar Farahani, says. "This gives them the opportunity to show that they are equal."

As dusk falls and the lights of the city below form a vast, shimmering carpet, the girls gather round. "We like to show that we are courageous. When you are up there you have the feeling that the world is at your feet," says Aida, 15. "Any problems that you have seem very small," says Naghmeh, 19. Then Linda, 17, the most talkative, says: "When you are alone up there you have a great feeling of freedom. Nobody can tell you what you should or should not do."

As this generation grows up there is no doubt they will demand far greater freedom. Those who deny them this, risk relegation to the realms of history ■