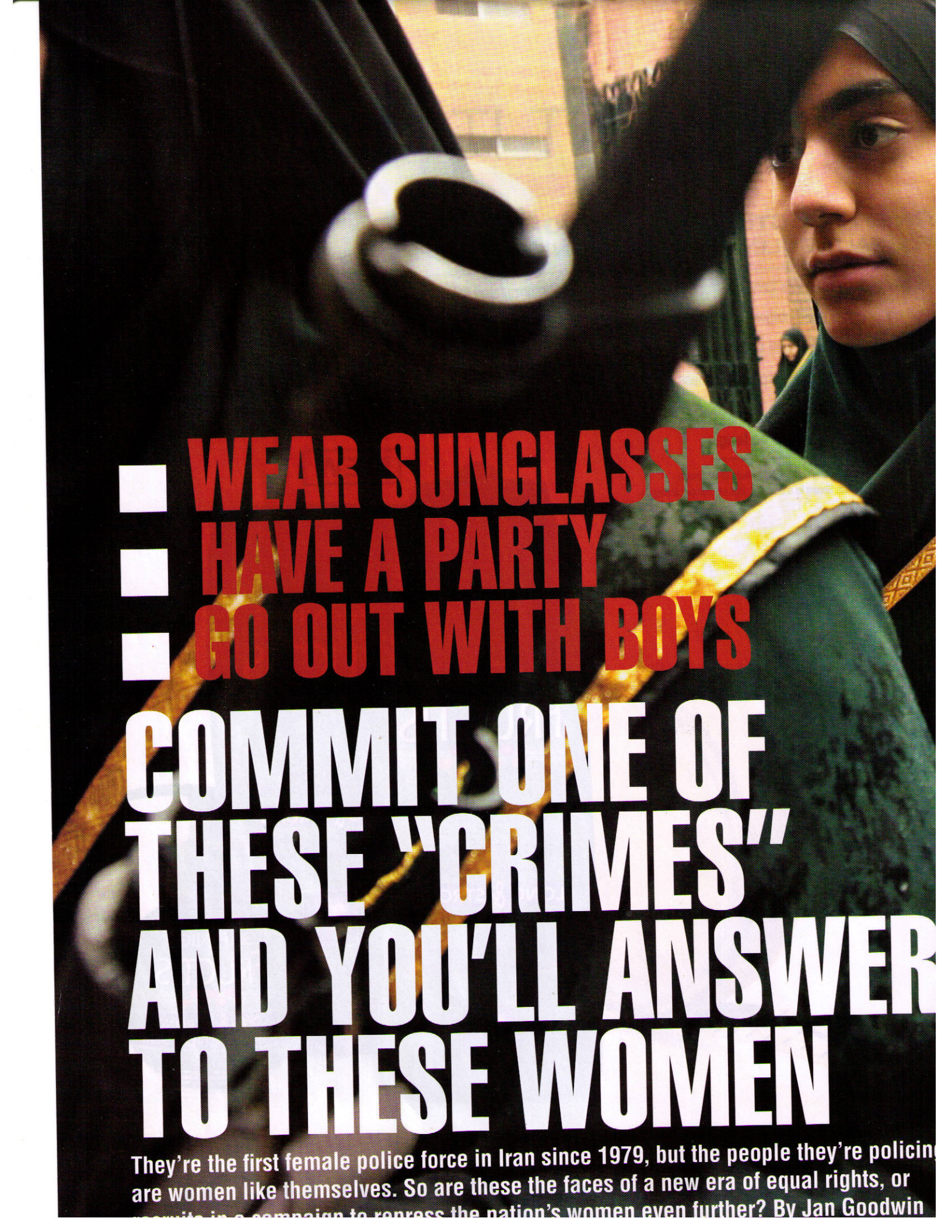


- 
- **WEAR SUNGLASSES**
 - **HAVE A PARTY**
 - **GO OUT WITH BOYS**

**COMMIT ONE OF
THESE "CRIMES"
AND YOU'LL ANSWER
TO THESE WOMEN**

They're the first female police force in Iran since 1979, but the people they're policing are women like themselves. So are these the faces of a new era of equal rights, or recruits in a campaign to repress the nation's women even further? By Jan Goodwin



At the signal, the four young women double-check their harnesses and ropes, and leap backwards off the edge of the government office block, fearless in their mission. Swiftly and efficiently, they abseil down the side of the building, Kalashnikov submachine guns strapped to their backs, their black chadors flapping in the wind, making them resemble flying nuns.

As officials and family members look on, they sail past a poster of Supreme Leader

on their feet to a round of applause. It's graduation day at Teheran's Police Academy and a proud moment for the cadets. After years of gruelling training, these women have joined an elite few to become combat machines ready to fight to the bitter end in the service of their country. In the process, they're also making history, being the first female police officers to take to the streets of Iran in 26 years.

Their outfits may look cumbersome, considering the activities they're undertaking, but these new recruits want you to know they mean business. Which they emphasise by

blindfolded, in less time than it takes them to dress in their mullah-mandated hijab veils.

"Graduating as a fully qualified police officer is one of the best days of my life," said 20-year-old Souzan Jejod Nejad during the lavish ceremony in March this year, as she and her colleagues prepared to troop past then president Mohammad Khatami. All the women in the 400-strong graduation class were awarded the rank of second lieutenant and received postings to police stations throughout the nation.

The last time Iran saw women in the force



At the Teheran Police Academy graduation ceremony this year, new recruits display some of the skills they've acquired, such as abseiling (left), shooting (top), legal studies (above) and fighting (right).

Ayatollah Khomeini overthrew the Westernised Shah of Iran, Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, and turned the country into the world's first Islamic theocracy.

Under Khomeini, a hardline religious dictator, thousands of Iranians were executed, while women were robbed of many of the freedoms they had previously enjoyed. Overnight, in the cities, feminine attire such as miniskirts and stilettos disappeared, to be replaced by what looked like small black tents. A woman's right to do paid work became subject to the approval of her husband.

The existing female police force was disbanded and its officers moved to administrative jobs, a situation that only changed six years ago, when the first batch of female cadets were admitted for training.

The skills these women acquire are part-military and part-policing. They learn to shoot guns, wield knives, master various martial arts, read maps, abseil and lay landmines.

Many would envy the new officers, not least for their regular income in a nation with a struggling economy and more than one-third of women unemployed. In Iran, most people scrape by on wages that went into free-fall following the departure of the Shah. In fact, these jobs are like gold dust and are

The instruction female cadets undergo is the same as that of the male recruits, except that women aren't taught how to use heavy weapons

to insiders. "Policewomen's jobs, like most employment with the government, invariably go to relatives of the ruling mullahs," says Iranian activist Soona Samsami.

To be accepted into the force, applicants must be between 17 and 21 years old, more than 163cm tall, academically bright and able to pass health and fitness tests. During their training, they live in spartan army-style barracks that they're required to keep rigidly neat.

The instruction they undergo is the same as that of the male recruits, except that women aren't taught how to use heavy weapons, such as mortar launchers, anti-aircraft guns and heavy machine guns, explains female commander Mohtaram Masoud-Manesh, who sees nothing odd in wartime weapons being used by the police force.

She admits, however, that there has

of policewomen by the men in the force. "But non-acceptance by male colleagues is also a problem that policewomen face even in the West," she points out.

Before the 1979 Islamic Revolution, under the Shah's rule, Iran's female police officers wore smart Western-style uniforms rather like those of airline pilots, another field women were permitted to work in at that time. While chadors have become the standard attire, policewomen are not always required to wear the all-enveloping outfit. To allow them greater freedom of movement when they're on the beat, women can now wear specially designed long, black ponchos over pants and headscarves, which still meet the regime's strict, "Islamically modest" dress code. During dangerous operations, they add customised bullet-proof vests.

But although they appear equal to their male counterparts, there's a big difference with this police force. The new female recruits will be confined to handling crimes by women and children. Some will work as body guards for female foreign dignitaries or Iranian women politicians (there are nine of them in parliament, although women may not run for president). Others will arrest women and monitor or guard them in detention houses (when



stations and inspection posts. Officially, however, their major responsibility is to further the “campaign against social corruption”.

This is the phrase that’s worrying women’s rights movements – for instead of the female police force being an embodiment of a liberalisation of attitudes towards women in Iran, activists are concerned that they have been recruited specifically to repress women further by policing them directly. After all, one of the main reasons that policewomen were brought back, says Masoud-Manesh, citing official statements, was that “more and more crimes are being committed by women”.

The question is, what are these crimes? According to a study conducted by Iran’s Law Enforcement Forces, the most common

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“social corruption crimes” by women offenders are “immoral acts, and deserting their homes”. This usually translates as being caught chatting to a man or wearing Western

It also encompasses women running away from an abusive husband or a forced marriage – an increasing problem. When Khomeini took power, he reduced the legal age for marriage from 18, declaring nine and even seven, in special cases, to be old enough for a woman to become a wife. Boys, he proclaimed, reach maturity at the age of 15.

But the social climate is changing, and in the past couple of years, young women have been pushing against the repressive restrictions laid down by the fundamentalist clergy who run the country. Close to an astonishing half of the 69 million population is now under 25, and with magazines, newspapers, TV and radio strictly censored, the advent of the internet and satellite TV, which are harder to monitor, enables Iran’s youth to see the freedoms enjoyed by its counterparts throughout much of the rest of the world.

Legally, women must still adhere to the rigorous dress code – no make-up, only face and hands showing – but young people are pushing the boundaries, wearing less constricting veils and starting to date and party, albeit in secret. It’s this rising rebellion that the new female police will crack down on, repeating raids such as the one last April, when police

CRIME AND PUNISHMENT

■ “Stoning to death [for adultery] is necessary to uphold the sanctity of family,” says Zahra Shojaii, Iran’s deputy minister of women’s affairs.

■ According to an Iranian religious decree, single female prisoners are routinely raped before execution, because virgins go to heaven.

■ “Men’s superiority over women was designed by Mother Nature. Women must accept the reality that they need men to control their lives. Man replaces God for a woman,” declared Morteza Motahhari, a revered Islamic intellectual who was killed in 1979.

■ Women in Iran may not work or even leave the house without their husband’s permission.

■ For women, laughing loudly in public is frowned upon.

■ Wearing make-up or nail polish is forbidden and women must be completely covered in public, except for their face and hands.

■ Those who don’t adhere to the dress code can be lashed or labelled “unbelievers” and executed.



“The extremist factions will increase suppression and misogyny,” says one activist. “Women and girls will face more brutality in all walks of their lives”

Top to bottom: cadets conduct a mock arrest drill; 16-year-old Ateqeh Rajabi was hanged for having sex outside marriage.

Ateqeh Rajabi was charged with “crimes incompatible with chastity” – having sex with a man outside marriage – and publicly hanged from a crane in the city centre. Yet Ateqeh was not only a minor, she was also intellectually disabled, and had no access to a lawyer during the trial. The local religious judge was so outraged by her “crime”, he personally placed the noose around her neck. The man she slept with was lashed and then released.

In October, Zhila Izadi, a 13-year-old schoolgirl, was sentenced to death by stoning after falling pregnant with a child believed to have been fathered by her older brother. He was flogged and freed; she awaits execution.

As horrifying as this sounds, Ateqeh and Zhila were actually sentenced during a “liberalised” period in Iran. Now, campaigners fear the worst, as the power of the female police force coupled with the policies of new hard-line president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad means convictions like these look set to increase. Ahmadinejad, the 49-year-old former mayor of Teheran and an ultra-conservative fundamentalist, declared upon being elected in June that he wants to reverse any liberalising reforms and revive the Islamic Revolution. Prior to becoming head of state, his biggest claim to fame was having been a commander of the brutal Revolutionary Guards who, just a few years ago, specialised in terrorising women by riding around the capital on motorbikes and removing lipstick from their faces with razor blades.

“With Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in power, the most extremist factions of the mullah’s regime are now in control,” says activist Soona Samsami, “and they will increase suppression and misogyny inside the country. Women and girls will face more brutality in all walks of their lives.” Samsami, executive director of the Women’s Freedom Forum in Washington, DC, lives in exile because, as a former representative of the opposition National Council of Resistance, she has been targeted by Iran’s government for execution if she returns.

The future for Iranian women looks bleak, claims Samsami, and its female police are going to be at the forefront of enforcing increasingly restrictive laws. “The new women’s police force is specifically designed to control every aspect of the personal life of a woman – to get her fired from work, for example, because of a dress infraction. They may beat her and arrest her. They are just one more tool to curtail the

women. “The police will act against the models of corruption in public places, and against those whose conduct does not respect Islam,” announced Teheran’s police chief, General Reza Zareie, at the time.

Under Iran’s extremist interpretation of Islamic law, it is forbidden for people of the opposite sex to be seen together, unless they are related. Couples are randomly stopped on the street to ensure they are related. But teenagers, yearning to lead normal lives, occasionally hazard walking hand in hand, something they wouldn’t have dared to do just a couple of years ago.

Atoosa, a 23-year-old office worker, was stopped by the authorities when she and her boyfriend were walking home together. “The guards wanted to know who he was,” she says. “They took me to their headquarters. It was terrifying. I didn’t know what was going to happen. But I was lucky. After about four hours, my parents came to get me. They had to sign papers [promising] that I would never see this boy again. I think they paid a bribe. You can’t trust anyone in the government. They are very, very cruel. They could have done a virginity check. Then I would have gone to prison, or worse. If the government finds out you’re having sex, they can imprison you, hurt you, even stone you to death.”

Atoosa isn’t exaggerating. In August last