

Culture

The secret lives of us

Iranian women photographers investigate their society through the lens, challenging western assumptions. By *Kate Connolly*

Newsha Tavakolian, 26, from Tehran, points to one of her photographs, of a woman in a scarf with swollen, bruised eyes and a plastered nose. "What do you see?" she asks me. I'm not sure, I say – a woman who has been beaten up, maybe by her husband? "I met her in a doctor's surgery," Tavakolian says. "I thought something dreadful had happened to her, but she told me she had had the works done – a nose job, liposuction, the bags under her eyes, even a boob job, all in one go – to make herself more beautiful."

Tavakolian hopes to challenge western preconceptions about Iran, particularly about Iranian women's lives, through her work. This photograph, far from being a portrait of domestic abuse, illustrates the Iranian national obsession with beauty. "You often hear the saying, 'Kill me, but make me more beautiful,'" she says.

As with all her photographs, Tavakolian has worked to bring out the virulent colours of the bruising and the blood, "to show that Iran is a colourful country, even if the outside view is that it's a grey and miserable place".

She offers me another picture of a downcast young woman, enveloped in a white cape like a Carthusian monk, sitting beneath an image on a wall showing the face of a sultry, long-haired beauty. The downcast woman looks unhappy and trapped; perhaps she is about to enter an arranged marriage.

Again, I'm wrong. "She's 27," Tavakolian says, "she's in love with her fiance, but she's been in the beauty salon since 5am, preparing for her big day, and she's simply bored and exhausted."

In the privacy of her own home, Tavakolian says, the woman will take off the cape and look more like the picture of the beauty on the wall. "Within our homes, we can be exactly who we want to be. In Iran, there's a big divide between the outside and inside worlds."

Tavakolian has worked for newspapers since she was 16, and last year won a major international award from the National Geographic Society for "indigenous and underrepresented photographers". Along with six other women photographers born in Tehran between 1974 and 1981, her work was on show in Berlin.

These women belong to a generation that has little, if any, experience of the time before the Islamic Revolution of 1979, but who are not fully part of the modern world. The search for identity is central to the work of all of them.

Until a few decades ago, photography in Iran was solely the preserve of men. Women first began to emerge as press photographers during the Iran-Iraq war, and in recent years increasing numbers of them have graduated from Tehran's Art University.

These women are using photography to investigate aspects of Iranian society, rather than simply to document it, something that has been compared by



Socially acceptable vanity . . . Mehraneh Atashi, above, records herself with men of the *zourkaneh*, a fitness centre where virility and religion come into play; Newsha Tavakolian makes a portrait of a plastic surgery patient, left

critics in Germany to the Weimar Republic. In Germany in the 1920s and early 30s, many women photographers used the camera as a tool to help them define their place in a rapidly changing society.

Perhaps the most arresting photographs on show this month at the Cicero Gallery for political photography in Berlin were those of Mehraneh Atashi, 27, who offers a highly unusual insight into a *zourkaneh* or "power house" – a spiritual fitness centre for Iranian men in which virility, religion and the powerful symbolism of the Persian hero all come into play. Atashi's pictures of sweaty, bare-chested men are not what you might expect from a young female Islamic photographer.

Atashi, who graduated from Tehran's University of Art in 2002, gained access only after months of persuasion. She was finally given permission to photograph on condition that the men would not be naked. Atashi decided to put herself in her pictures, placing a mirror between herself and her subjects,

'At home we can be who we want to be. There's a divide between outside and inside worlds in Iran'

so that the image we get is of a chador-clad woman watching the half-naked masculine spectacle. The contrast is strange and fascinating.

"It wasn't me, but the power of my camera to freeze them in time that persuaded them to let me in," says Atashi. "I wanted to place myself as both object and subject of the picture, because I wanted this to be more than just documentary. Their narcissism and desire to show off their sexuality, as well as the competition they feel between each other, made it possible."

Katajun Amirpur, an Islamic expert at the University of Cologne, points out that Iran is still a society "in which girls can be married at the age of nine, where women can be punished for having premarital sex, where they cannot become judges or presidents, they are banned from football stadiums, and where the wearing of the chador is obligatory".

"At the same time, a third of the workforce is female, two-thirds of students are women, there are female MPs, doctors, mayors, policewomen and taxi drivers. Karate is the most popular female sport, and 97% of women can read and write. The reality is that women are exceptionally self-confident members of Iranian society."

Despite an active political movement, led by President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, which would like to keep Iranian women suppressed, Amirpur argues that they now play too significant a part in Iranian society to be "brought back to the stove".

The reason has much to do with the Iran-Iraq war from 1980 to 1988: "The war led to women taking over many of the roles previously held by men, including that of the photographer," she says. "Women's photography in Iran is part proof that you can't put the lid back on the pot – Iranian women are out there."