

Time Out

New York

Divorce Iranian Style

Dirs. Kim Longinotto, Ziba Mir Hosseini. 1998. N/R. 80mins. In Farsi with subtitles. Documentary.

Despite the fundamentalist theocracy that still wields tremendous power in Iran, divorce is legal. But that doesn't mean it's easy to come by, especially for women. In their compelling, if depressing, documentary, Longinotto and Hosseini look at the system and chronicle the cases of a few women. The bureaucracy begins outside the door of the Tehran government building where divorce cases are heard. At separate entrances, men are searched for weapons and cell phones, and women are checked to make sure they're wearing the proper clothing and very little makeup. (There are supplies of cold cream and extra black veils for scofflaws.) The office itself is a Kafkaesque maze of bureaucrats who routinely lose files and tell couples who've already agreed to divorce to try to work things out.

The film's most heartbreaking tale involves a woman who gave up custody of her two daughters in order to obtain her divorce—and now has changed her mind. Her ex-husband has taken custody of the older girl and wants the four-year-old, too. The woman keeps returning to the office to persuade officials to let her younger

daughter return to her. In one scene, the child looks at the camera and says, "I don't want to go to my father's house." In another, the filmmaker interviews a woman who has recently taken custody of her daughter, who says, "I don't want to go to my father's office, says

Divorce Iranian Style is a compelling, wrenching documentary that you can't see, but it has flaws. Statistics about the divorce rate, information about how the situation changed under the Revolutionary government and an indication of future prospects are all lacking. Then again, the film's abrupt ending is a reminder of how hopeless the situation seems to be. (Now playing; Film Forum)—Susan Jackson



FAMILY TIES A mother and child in the documentary *Divorce Iranian Style*.

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Divorce Iranian Style
Directed by Kim Longinotto and Ziba
Mir-Hosseini
At Film Forum
Through December 22

BY AMY TAUBIN

A SMALL, DIRECT, tantalizing documentary, *Divorce Iranian Style* challenges preconceptions about what life is like for women in Iran. The most startling thing about the film is simply that it was made. The filmmakers—Kim Longinotto, who codirected the fabulous *Dream Girls*, and Ziba Mir-Hosseini, an Iranian anthropologist who is divorced herself—set up their camera in family court and follow the cases of three women who are attempting to divorce their husbands. Although Iranian religious law frowns on divorce, a man is allowed to claim the privilege without needing to show cause, provided he pays his ex-wife compensation. A woman, however, can only sue for divorce if she can prove that her husband

is sterile or mad, or if he agrees to let her out of their marriage contract. In the last case, the compensation becomes the bargaining chip: the man will sometimes give his wife her freedom if he doesn't have to pay.

The women are assertive, demanding, and persistent to a degree that confounds stereotypes of oppression. They challenge the judge, badger the uncooperative clerk for misplaced files, chew out their husbands and their husbands' families. At one point, the judge tells a little girl (the daughter of the court stenographer who has been a fixture in the court from the age of two months) that he has a man picked out for her who's "not like the riffraff that come in here." The girl has a more radical plan: "I won't marry ever, now that I know what husbands are like." ▣

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Having Their Day, or Not, in Court

By STEPHEN HOLDEN

Filmed mostly on location in a tiny, crowded Teheran divorce court, Kim Longinotto's extraordinarily intimate documentary, "Divorce Iranian Style," reminds you that marital discord knows no geographic boundaries. What varies from place to place are only the laws allowing couples to officially dissolve their unhappy unions. In Iran, when a woman wants a divorce the only legal grounds are a husband's insanity, impotence or inability to provide for her financially.

If you imagined that Iranian women, following Islamic teaching, tend to be mute, subservient acolytes to their conjugal lords and masters, you would be wrong. Glowering under their chadors, the women shown petitioning for divorce are angry, discontented, thoroughly modern-sounding wives who don't mince words when describing their unhappy situations. To the excruciating embarrassment of their husbands, they also can be bluntly candid about sex. But since insanity is one of the only grounds for divorce, their testimony often sounds as if the signs of a husband's hostility have been amplified and exaggerated to try to fit a legal definition.

This is not to suggest that the women who are the focus of the movie, which opens today at Film Forum, don't have every reason to be frustrated in their often arranged, loveless marriages to men who appear to be a pretty sorry lot. Consider the plight of a wife whose husband is pathologically jealous and restrictive. After she describes a situation in which she is virtually a prisoner in her own house (she is not even permitted to make personal telephone calls), the judge calmly instructs her to make herself more attractive for her husband and "tempt him back."

Then there is Ziba, a teen-ager who was contracted in marriage at the age of 15 to a man of 37. A year after their wedding she argues that she was too young to foresee the consequences of her marriage. Now she is locked in a relationship that is

DIVORCE IRANIAN STYLE

Directed by Kim Longinotto and Ziba Mir-Hosseini, in Farsi, with English subtitles; director of photography, Zahra Saiezdadeh; edited by Barrie Vince; released by Women Make Movies. At the Film Forum, 209 Houston Street, South Village. Running time: 80 minutes. This film is not rated.

physically unsatisfying and frustrating in other ways since her husband refuses to let her go back to school. Hoping to find a legal loophole she asks the court what the legal age is for marriage in Iran; she is told that it is puberty, which can be as young as 9. For as long as her husband wants to stay married to her, Ziba appears to be trapped.

The most complicated case involves Maryam, a fiery young woman who successfully divorced her first husband and married for love.

Now claiming that her first husband is neglecting their young daughter, she seeks custody of the girl, who by law automatically remained in his care. Maryam pleads, harangues and weeps, and out of sight of the camera even physically attacks her first husband. She rips up his court order and lies to the judge, saying he was responsible.

Observing all this turmoil is the very young daughter of the court secretary. After a session has been closed, the smart, articulate little girl climbs into her father's chair and scaldingly addresses an imaginary husband, asking him why he treats his wife so badly. When asked if she hopes one day to get married, she says no, because she knows what husbands are like. After watching this documentary, many will undoubtedly share her distaste for an institution that in Iran can be brutally unfair to women.



An Iranian identified as Maryam seeks custody of her daughter.