

Kurdish Women Resent New Passport System

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A law requiring women to have a male guardian sign their passport application angers women in Iraqi Kurdistan.

A few months ago, Rezan Muhammad Ali was invited to stay with a relative who lives in England. Excited about the prospect of a trip to Europe, Ali rushed to apply for a passport so she could travel to the British embassy in Jordan to attend an interview for the entry visa required.

But at the local passport office, the 34-year-old was told that to apply for a passport, she would need a male guardian to support her application.

Ali shook her head in disbelief. "I almost cried," she said. "I'm not a child who needs to ask a guardian's permission."

Reluctantly, Ali asked her husband to sign a document vouching for her and is now waiting to receive her passport.

For years, the authorities in Iraqi Kurdistan have overlooked a piece of Iraqi legislation which states a woman who applies for a passport first has to have her father, uncle or brother's written permission.

In the past, women in this part of the country simply applied and were given a passport without fuss.

But the introduction of the new G edition passport in March 2007 - which is electronically read and difficult to forge - means that all passports are now issued on a special printing machine in Baghdad where the law is enforced.

Women's groups in Iraqi Kurdistan are now campaigning to abolish the legislation: they're gathering a petition and have taken their case to the government.

Moves to introduce the new passport were set in motion in January 2007, when Swedish immigration officials said that the Iraqi embassy in Stockholm had issued thousands of passports based on false information.

The Swedish government decided to disallow the use of Iraqi S edition passports, which lack up-to-date security features and are easy to forge, as the information they contain is handwritten and the holder's picture is attached with glue.

Other countries, including the US, the UK, and Jordan, followed suit and now only let Iraqis into the country if they carry a new G edition travel document that meets international anti-forgery and security standards.

The enforcement of this controversial law, which was previously ignored in Iraqi Kurdistan, is not the only problem created by the new passport system.

Staff at the passport office in the Kurdish city of Sulaimaniyah have to take applications 330 kilometres to Baghdad.

They face many risks on the perilous journey to Baghdad, where they wait until the passport is ready before bringing it back.

Colonel Salih Osman, the director of Passports and Residency in Sulaimaniyah, says that each month his office sends an officer and two policemen to Baghdad to process travel documents.

"We are constantly in touch with them because both the journey to Baghdad and the situation inside the city are extremely dangerous," he said.

A further problem caused by the new system is that the Baghdad passport office - which serves the whole country - can only process 250 to 350 applications a month, said Osman.

"Priority is given to government delegations and organisations whose members go abroad," said Osman.

Many Kurds say the system is open to bribery. But with the application process taking weeks or even months to complete, it's no surprise that people are prepared to pay extra to speed it up.

"I received my passport within two weeks after I paid several hundred US dollars [in bribes]," said a young man from Sulaimaniyah.

A Kurdish worker for a local NGO, which requires him to travel abroad, said he had to pay more than 1,000 dollars to get a passport within a week.

These sums are apparently divided between several people, including the driver who takes the application to Baghdad and returns with a passport, and officials in the city's passport office.

But what has caused the greatest concern by far is the fact that under the new system, women now need a male guardian to vouch for them before they can apply.

Women's Kurdish groups say the law discriminates against them and is in breach of their human rights.

They point out that it goes against the Iraqi constitution which guarantees every citizen the right to travel both inside and outside the country, and also contradicts Iraqi legislation in place since 1959 which states there are no restrictions on women applying for a passport to travel.

Last month, Nazaneen Rasul, 45, wanted to apply for a visa to a European country to visit her husband's relatives, but, like Ali, she was asked to have guardian consent to approve her passport application.

"I'm a guardian to my kids and now I'm required to have guardian consent for my passport," she said, incredulously. "Why is it I cannot get a passport at this age on my own?"

Those women who don't have a guardian to sign their form are prevented from applying altogether.

Sroosht Wahbi, 36, a lawyer, had been sponsored to go on a business trip to Turkey and Saudi Arabia. Wahbi, who has no father or brother and is not on speaking terms with her uncle, was unable to apply for a passport, and as a result, she missed out on the trip.

"There is no legal or social justification for this," she said.

Nasreen Muhammad, a Kurdish women's rights activist, said women's groups have taken their concerns to the Iraqi parliament, "We will never let women be degraded, and we will continue to criticise the law until it is abolished."

The groups are collecting signatures to put pressure on the ministry of interior. Roonak Faraj, head of the Women Media and Cultural Centre in Sulaimaniyah, said in the first week of their campaign they had gathered 1,000 names.

Faraj said they will take the signatures to the Kurdistan regional parliament, the interior ministry in Baghdad and the Iraqi parliament, "We want women to have a united voice on this issue."

Osman from the Sulaimaniyah passport office confirmed that the restrictive law had been in place even when they were issuing the S edition of the passports. "We were just ignoring it," he admitted.

He said they have taken the women's concerns to the ministry of interior in Baghdad, writing to them twice and requesting that they deliver a machine that prints the new passports to the Kurdish region.

Barham Salih, the Iraqi deputy prime minister, is said to be working on the issue, and the word is that a machine will be brought to the north this summer.

Until then, Salih advised, women will have to be patient.

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