

Armenia: Male Exodus From Rural Communities

Author: [Inna Mkhitarian](#)

Gegharkunik has highest rate of labour migration anywhere in Armenia.

In the villages of Armenia's Gegharkunik region, women describe themselves as "almost-husbands", since they have to do the tasks once performed by their now absent menfolk, as well as their own work.

Around eight per cent of this eastern region's population of 240,000 travel abroad every year as seasonal labour, mainly in Russia. According to the national statistics agency, Gegharkunik has the highest proportion of economic migrants of any region in Armenia.

Some of the migrants return every autumn, while others, like Shushan Hovakimyan's husband, barely come home at all.

Hovakimyan, a teacher in the village of Nerkin Getashen, lives with her two sons and her 66-year-old mother-in-law, while her husband is away in Russia most of the time.

"My husband was last home two years ago – he can't come that often," she told IWPR. "He could at least come and see his aging mother. I'm not important. I really worry about losing my husband, but what can I do?"

Hovakimyan's husband sends money home now and again, but it is rarely enough to support them. She says that by the time she gets her monthly wages, "I've already built up so many debts that I don't know how to distribute my salary."

It is hard for men to make a living in Gegharkunik. In this mountainous environment, winter lasts the best part of six months of the year, and there are few jobs around apart from farming, which is barely profitable.

Samvel Ghazaryan, 50, is one of the few men living all year round in Nerkin Getashen. He spent 15 years as a labour migrant abroad, but returned to care for the family 12 years ago when his wife Larisa fell ill.

Inna Mkhitarian is a freelance photojournalist in Armenia.

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