

Kyrgyzstan: Disabled Workers Written Off

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Restrictive legislation and a lack of special workplace provisions have combined to keep job-seeking invalids at home.

Disabled people in Kyrgyzstan are eager to get to work to support their families - but current legislation is stopping them from earning a living.

The Bishkek authorities recognise different levels of disability, with the most serious, such as paraplegics and amputees, being written off as "unfit for work".

It is illegal for any company to hire so-called grade one or two disabled persons - even though many of them are able and willing to work.

During the Soviet era, the state provided an adequate pension and level of care for people with disabilities, but since Kyrgyzstan gained its independence in 1991, these handouts have fallen to a negligible amount - as little as ten US dollars a month.

As a result, the majority of invalids find it almost impossible to provide for their families and are becoming increasingly eager to enter the workplace.

The changes in society since independence - including the emergence of an entrepreneurial culture and a corresponding drop in reliance on the state - have also encouraged them to play a greater role.

Asipa Musaeva, the head of the National Independent Association of Disabled Women, NIAIW, said, "We can work on computers, sew, cook and do handcrafts. We don't want to depend on the state and live like we do now. We are capable of looking after ourselves."

However, even if grades one and two were allowed to rejoin the workplace, the majority would face serious difficulties in getting into their offices.

Tursunbek Abdylbaev, a former truck driver who lost both legs in an accident, finds it impossible to feed his family of four on his state pension of nine dollars a month.

"I want to find work," he told IWPR. "But even if a company broke the law in order to hire me, I wouldn't even be able to get into the building because of access problems."

Kyrgyzstan's track record of providing wheelchair ramps, lifts, handrails and other easy-access facilities is so poor that when disabled people gathered to celebrate the International Day of Disabled on December 3, they were unable to get into the concert hall where the event was being held.

"The incident was an insult and it made us feel inferior and useless," said the NIAIW's Musaeva.

The authorities are slowly beginning to realise that measures have to be taken to improve the lives of disabled people - more than 25,000 are reliant on wheelchairs or crutches, 17,000 of them children, according to the official figures.

Uktomkhan Abdullaeva, deputy labour and social welfare minister, told IWPR that the government was pleased that the disabled were keen to work. "We need to introduce quotas so that they can be employed, and the first step is to make amendments to the law," she said.

Legislation is already in place to tackle some of the problems the disabled face. A social protection law passed 1991 and amended in October 1998 makes provision for convenient access to public transportation and parking. But NIAIW and the Union of Invalids of Kyrgyzstan claims this has yet to be fully implemented.

Government architecture committee head Kalybek Sultanaliyev denies this, saying, "All new buildings are built with ramps and railings. All projects have to pass an examination before being approved by us and we monitor the quality of the implementation."

However, Abdullaeva admits that a lot of work has to be done, blaming the authorities' lack of cash.

"In Soviet times buildings were constructed without taking into consideration the needs of people with physical disabilities," she said. "The government simply hasn't got the money to rectify this problem."

The problem is exacerbated by ignorance surrounding current legislation. Many people are unaware that they are required by law to cater for people with disabilities when setting up new a new enterprise.

Valery Kim, who owns a Bishkek grocery shop, said, "We simply weren't aware of these rules. It would have been easy for us to add ramps and railings to entrances and exits had we known."

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