

## **Poor Job Prospects Drive Armenians Abroad**

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Yerevan sociologists say government unemployment figures are concealing the true scale of a problem which is showing little sign of improving

Experts say unemployment levels in Armenia are reaching epidemic proportions, forcing hundreds of thousands to leave the country in search of work.

It is thought that around a million Armenians have emigrated abroad over the past decade -although some opposition sources claim the total may be double that - draining the former Soviet republic of vital human resources.

The Yerevan study group Sociometr claims the unemployment rate for men is as high as 40 per cent while nearly 70 per cent of women are without jobs. Government figures, however, show just 175,000 people registered with the labour exchange - around nine per cent of the working population.

Aaron Adibekian, director of Sociometr, said that the official statistics do not include workers who are registered as employees of industries which have long ago ceased to function.

"The reality is that their products are not needed and they don't get paid for years," said Adibekian.

Astghik Mirzhakhanian, advisor for the International Labour Organisation, pointed out that the government figures also fail to take into account jobless people who do not register with the labour exchange because they have no faith in the organisation's ability to get them a job.

"Not all unemployed people register themselves with the National Employment Service," she explained. "The service can't provide them with jobs or satisfactory financial support."

Ruzanna Galumian, 34, from Yerevan, would not disagree. She has been looking for a job since 1996 when the research institute where she was working closed down.

"In all this time, I haven't been able to find anything suitable," said Ruzanna. "There are thousands of people like me waiting in the queue at the job centre. They say I'll have no trouble finding a job if I'm prepared to work as a striptease dancer or a cleaning lady at a men's toilet."

Ruzanna's predicament is typical of the legions of highly-trained Armenian workers whose qualifications are now superfluous to requirements.

Prior to independence, the Armenian labour pool was geared to the demands of Soviet industry, feeding a network of factories and enterprises which themselves formed part of the Soviet production chain.

Few of these businesses actually produced finished goods which meant that they were unable to survive the collapse of the USSR. The last decade has also been overshadowed by economic and trade embargoes imposed by Azerbaijan and Turkey.

Consequently, qualified workers either have to accept an unskilled job or pin their hopes on finding a position with a joint venture company. The number of vacancies offering a salary of more than \$100 a month has increased recently with the appearance of several companies set up with foreign investment. These include a cigarette factory opened with Canadian money and a French-funded brewery.

Job-seekers can also turn to the growing number of private employment agencies in Armenia. But even the 13 existing outlets make their clients few promises.

David Hairapetian, director of the Albion employment agency, said, "This year the demand for workers has dropped twofold." And, although applicants with financial, computer and language skills were always in demand, openings for drivers and waiters attracted the fiercest competition.

Hairapetian went on to say that one in two job-hunters on Albion's books boasted a higher education whilst 60 per cent were computer literate and 20 per cent spoke a foreign language.

Meanwhile, the so-called "shadow economy" continues to attract the desperate and the dispossessed. The number of Armenians working illegally is thought to total around 120,000. Others resort to forms of self-employment - with 1999 figures for "one-man-band" businesses up 15.5 per cent on 1998.

Although the official average salary in Armenia is less than \$35 a month, living on unemployment benefits is not an option.

Only 20 per cent of those registered unemployed actually receive government subsidies while the current figure for benefits is equivalent to \$7 a month, paid up to a year after the applicant has been granted official status.

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