

State of Armenian Working Migrants in Turkey

Although there is no accurate data on labor migration from Armenia to Turkey, in the absence of official diplomatic relations between the two countries, there are no governmental means to obtain in-depth knowledge about Armenian migrants in Turkey. In Armenia there is both popular and official interest in the topic of irregular Armenian migrants in Turkey. In 2009 Eurasia Partnership Foundation (EPF) conducted a study to help determine the state of Armenian migrants in Turkey, dispel anecdotal evidence, as well as will increase awareness among Armenian and Turkish stakeholders of issues related to Armenian migration to Turkey. What follows are some key findings from that research.

Eurasia Partnership Foundation (EPF) commissioned Alin Ozinian to research the state of Armenian migrants working in Turkey as part of its Armenia-Turkey cross-border program supported by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the United States Agency for International Development¹. The research included a review of existing research, in-depth interviews and focus group discussions held with key players in Turkey. The research was conducted from April to August 2009.

Key Findings

- Most of all the Armenian workers in Turkey are women.
- Schoolchildren with Armenian citizenship cannot go to public schools.
- When a child of an Armenian couple is born in Turkey, the parents can't apply for the citizenship for their child. They can't take him/her to Armenia, so the child cannot receive an Armenian passport either.
- Armenian citizens were full of mistrust to Turks before they came to Turkey. Their attitudes drastically changed shortly after they arrive.

Gender balance and work placement

According to our data, 94% of the irregular Armenian workers in Turkey are women. Many of the jobs available to irregular workers there are in professions typically carried out by women, such as housekeeping, nursing, and childcare. Jobs for irregular workers are very limited, but are also available in shoe, textile and confection factories, or, rarely, as janitors in Armenian schools or churches. Most Armenian immigrant men don't work and come to Turkey to stay with their wives, to keep them safe. Everyone mentioned prostitution, but no one interviewed as part of our study admitted to working as a prostitute. According to other studies on the subject, few to no Armenian women are involved in prostitution in Turkey.

90% of the immigrants interviewed stated they were college graduates or vocational high school graduates and none had worked in the same profession in Armenia as they do in Turkey. For example, women working here as housekeepers or babysitters clearly stated that they had never done these jobs in Armenia, and claim they would be ashamed to do this kind of work at home.

It's difficult to give information about the marital status of immigrants. Generally they introduce themselves as widowed or divorced. Some of the married women have had no contact with their husbands since they came to Turkey, so it becomes hard to say anything specific on the subject.

According to the interviews with natives of Kumkapi district (traditionally an area where Armenian irregular immigrants have lived in Istanbul), both Turkish and Armenian people think

¹ More information on Eurasia Partnership Foundation and our Armenia-Turkey cross-border programs can be found at www.epfound.am.

that the moral values of the two peoples are similar. Natives' attitudes toward Armenian immigrants versus Russian immigrants differ. According to a greengrocer who has a shop in Kumkapi district, he sees Armenian women as honest people who work to earn enough money to live. He sells goods to Armenians on account, something he won't do for other foreigners, because he says that he trusts them.

Why Turkey?

Immigration from Armenia started after independence in 1991 and continues today. Between 2002 and 2007, immigration increased. Armenian irregular immigrants enter Turkey with a 30-day visa, which they buy at border gates or airports. Some Armenian immigrants mentioned that persuading the border officers is not hard. When immigrants want to go back to Armenia, they pay a \$100-\$150 bribe, officers put a "Deport" seal (means the owner has been deported) on their passport and without being fined (due to the expiration of their visa) the migrants can leave Turkey. When they want to return to Turkey, they take a new passport with a new surname (changing it via marriage or divorce) and buy another 30-day visa.

According to the immigrants interviewed, they choose Turkey because of its proximity to Armenia and the ease of obtaining a visa. They also prefer Turkey because it is cheaper than European countries and has an Armenian minority population of 60 thousand. Armenian immigrants don't see Turkey as a transit stop on their way to other countries. Certainly, the most important coercive factor for the migration of these people is unemployment in Armenia. Yet, as mentioned above, interviewees said they wouldn't take a job going housework or childcare here because they're ashamed and don't want to stain their family's name.

Most irregular Armenian immigrants come from the Armenian countryside, especially from villages badly damaged by the 1988 earthquake. Armenian immigrants estimate the number of irregular Armenian workers in Turkey is between seven thousand and nine thousand.

The income of Armenian migrants range between 550 USD and 800 USD. Rarely, it may rise to 1000 USD. Factory workers receive the lowest income. While daily house cleaners earn 45 USD daily, house cleaners monthly earn between 550 USD and 650 USD. Generally, irregular workers stay in the houses where they're working. The immigrants who rent in the Kumkapi district live in very bad conditions. In some houses 10 people share three rooms.

The most heartbreaking subject

The situation of the children who were born in Turkey is the most heartbreaking subject. When a child of an irregular Armenian couple is born in Turkey, the parents can't apply for citizenship for their child. The child can't get an Armenian passport either, unless they go back to Armenia, but in that case the child cannot cross the border without any document. These stateless children can't go to any public school or minority school. Some young Armenians try to educate children at home, but these lessons have no continuity and stability. Most of these uneducated children spent their lives playing on the streets. They are prone to have bad habits and develop a criminal personality.

Changing stereotypes

All of the immigrants have stated that after the assassination of Hrant Dink, their worries and fears increased. While before the assassination their only fear was being deported, now they say that they're afraid of being killed. Most have considered moving back to Armenia. Most of the

Armenian immigrants also had worries before they came to Turkey; they even mentioned that they were afraid.

All of the Armenian migrants interviewed stated that their opinions on Turkey have completely changed shortly after going there. This may be an indirect benefit to irregular migration. Face-to-face communication between people from Armenia and Turkey has the potential to create a base for a dialog between two nations.