



ADB

A Story within a Story  
**Gender and Water  
in Uzbekistan**

Asian Development Bank



## The Gender Situation

Uzbekistan boasts a rich and ancient culture that throughout history has absorbed the influences of many other traditions. With its fabled cities strung along the Silk Road—Bukhara, Samarkand, Tashkent, and Khiva—the country continues to evoke notions of a land spanning East and West. In many ways, there is a similar duality in its contemporary gender relations.

In their quest for equality, women in Uzbekistan face two major influences in their lives: the Soviet heritage and traditional customs and values. From its Soviet past, Uzbekistan inherited standards of gender equality that were among the most advanced in the world; however, the traditional view of women as primarily responsible for family and home remains deeply entrenched in Uzbek culture. This mixed heritage has led to some mixed results. Uzbek women have achieved success in a number of professional fields, but they still do most of the unpaid work at home, mainly house cleaning and child care. Their frequent need to juggle career and family responsibilities leads to gender segregation; as a result, women end up concentrated in the lower-paid and lower-status sectors and jobs.

Rural women are generally worse off than women in urban areas. While the combination of underemployment in agriculture and a growing rural population has boosted migration to the towns and cities, 64% of the population still lives in rural areas,<sup>1</sup> where conditions are especially detrimental to gender equality. Outside urban areas, there are few job opportunities in professions generally considered “suitable” for women, such as teaching and primary health care.

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<sup>1</sup> State Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan on Statistics. 2007. *Women and Men of Uzbekistan 2000–2005 Statistical Bulletin*. Tashkent.

As a result, women in rural settlements have a harder time finding work outside the home and are less likely to be in formal employment.

To make matters worse, rural women bear heavier domestic burdens than urban women because their responsibilities include tasks such as looking after family farms and livestock. Yet the types of social support that would be of particular benefit to women, such as affordable child care, are limited or nonexistent outside the towns and cities. Rural areas are also associated with more conservative values and gender norms, which retain their hold because the general lack of available information, education, and vocational training diminishes exposure to gender-equitable models of behavior.

## The Water Supply and Sanitation Situation

After achieving independence in 1991, Uzbekistan took over a well-developed water supply and sanitation (WSS) infrastructure that had been built under the Soviet regime. Water is obtained from deep bore fields located either adjacent to or far from urban areas. When the source is distant, water is distributed to the urban areas through trunk mains running within or between regions. The main national office overseeing water supplies and sanitation is the Uzbek Communal Services Agency, known as the Uzkommunkhizmat. In the provinces and districts,<sup>2</sup> that responsibility lies with state water supply and sewerage utilities (*vodokanals*).

Most households are already connected to water mains, with an estimated 94% of urban and 79% of rural residents having access to usable water as of

<sup>2</sup> The provinces of Uzbekistan are divided into administrative districts.

2008.<sup>3</sup> But this does not mean that the water situation is good. The country has problems with both the quality and reliability of its water supply. Much of the infrastructure is dilapidated and inefficient (e.g., with low pump efficiency). In the towns and cities, the mains are old, so there are frequent breaks and high incidences of nonrevenue water. In the country as a whole, many connected households have water only intermittently, a situation that leads to negative pressures in the system and to contamination.

Many consumers have simply given up on the public water utilities. Instead, they install their own rooftop tanks for storing water, buy water from trucks, or use water from nearby rivers and canals. Again, the situation is even worse in rural areas, where about 21% of the population still does not have access to safe drinking water.<sup>4</sup>

The unreliability of piped water supplies, especially in rural areas, is often aggravated by low water pressure, concentrated domestic demand during peak hours, and limited water schedules. Upstream residents tend to use potable water for their garden plots, diminishing the supply of water available to downstream residents. This misuse of water has caused conflicts, which are in turn exacerbated by the absence of water meters in homes.

Donors have provided substantial assistance to rehabilitate and expand the water system. ADB is prominent among them, with two WSS operations

<sup>3</sup> Presidium of the Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Uzbekistan. 2007. *National Welfare Improvement Strategy Paper for 2008–2010*. Uzbekistan.

<sup>4</sup> According to the National Welfare Improvement Strategy Paper for 2008–2010, “on average, 6% of urban residents and 21% of the rural population do not have access to safe drinking water.”



currently ongoing at a total cost of \$288 million. The investment program covers 11 districts in the provinces of Bukhara, Navoi, and Fergana (the last including the towns of Kokand, Margilan, and Rishtan); the project focuses on Surkhandarya province. Both operations include investments in the rehabilitation and expansion of WSS systems (including sewers) to improve public health and hygiene.

Although most Uzbeks are connected to water mains (however spotty the service), some households, clinics, and schools in the ADB project areas are still without piped drinking water. Instead, they use standpipes in the streets through which water comes daily. In principle, the water is made available according to set schedules, but service is frequently interrupted. It is worth noting that female teachers are required to take care of water deliveries for their schools, to the detriment of their main professional responsibilities.

Some people in the ADB project areas have installed small hand-pumps from which they get hard, salty water originating 15 meters underground. The water is mainly for domestic use and livelihood activities, but it is sometimes used for drinking, which is unsafe. In general, the daily consumption of water for drinking and domestic purposes in these locales is lower than the recommended 110 liters per day.

ADB WSS operations in Bukhara, Navoi, and Fergana will help improve the lives of up to 3 million residents. By 2018, water-service coverage will increase to more than 95% (along with meter connections), the duration of water supplies will improve from the current 2–8 hours per day to more than 20 hours per day, and energy loss will drop to less than 30%. Sewerage coverage will increase to 70%. All in all, the beneficiaries of this project will include about 11% of the country's total population and more than 31% of its urban residents.

The Surkhandarya project will improve living standards and public health for 340,000 people living in that province. The duration of water-supply service will increase from the current 6–16 hours a day in urban areas and 2–10 hours in rural areas to 20 hours a day by 2014, and then to 24 hours by 2020. Unaccounted-for reductions in the water supply will drop to below 40%. Customer complaints will be promptly recorded and addressed. The overall outcome will be safe, reliable, inclusive, and sustainable water and sanitation services, as well as improved community hygiene.

These operations are also upgrading sewerage systems and wastewater management in the provincial capitals of Bukhara, Navoi, and Fergana, as well as in parts of Surkhandarya. Improvements include (i) the rehabilitation of wastewater treatment plants or construction of least-cost wastewater treatment facilities; (ii) the rehabilitation and expansion of the sewerage networks; and (iii) the rehabilitation of sewerage pumping stations, including the replacement of inefficient pumping machinery. The operations are also providing sanitation and hygiene education at local health clinics, schools, and women's group meetings to prevent disease and ensure maximum health benefits from improved WSS services.

While both operations focus mainly on building and rehabilitating water systems, they also address other important facets of water supply management, including planning, project management, cost recovery, vodokanal management, financial controls, and capacity building of local organizations responsible for water management, which is critical to the sustainability of infrastructure investments. The projects have also adopted strategies for increasing women's involvement in, and benefits from, investments in the construction and rehabilitation of water systems. Capacity-building efforts in local councils push for women's membership in water user associations. Other organizations concerned with water administration, such as *makhallas*

(neighborhood associations) and *khokimiyats* (local government bodies), now welcome women into their management committees. Such practices not only strengthen women's voices in decision making on water use but also help legitimize women's participation in decision making on all issues.

## Water, Sanitation, and Gender

ADB pays special attention to the water needs of women, especially rural women, and for that reason has integrated gender-related issues into its WSS projects. Foremost among these issues is the need to improve access to safe water and sanitation. While safe drinking water and good hygiene will improve everyone's health and living standards, they are especially important to women, who are usually responsible for maintaining household water supplies and sanitary conditions, and for taking care of sick family members.

Among households without a source of drinking water on the premises, most (61%) relegate the chore of collecting water to an adult female, while about 33% give that responsibility to an adult male. It is relatively rare for girls under the age of 15 to collect water (4%).<sup>5</sup> Thus, in most of these households, it is usually the women who collect, buy, store, and manage water for family use, regardless of who is the head of the family. This practice can cause hardship for many women. In some regions, obtaining water is time-consuming, and women may need to collect water two or three times a day, traveling several kilometers while carrying heavy loads. About 2 or 3 hours per day are spent collecting water. In some areas,

<sup>5</sup> UNICEF and State Statistical Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan. 2007. *Uzbekistan Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey 2006*, Final Report. Tashkent. [www.childinfo.org/files/MICS3\\_Uzbekistan\\_FinalReport\\_2006\\_Eng.pdf](http://www.childinfo.org/files/MICS3_Uzbekistan_FinalReport_2006_Eng.pdf)

the average time can amount to 3.6–5.3 person-days a month.<sup>6</sup> Households that get their water from street pipes or neighbors tend to spend less time collecting water than those that get their water from nearby canals and open reservoirs.

Even when households have piped water, the water may be unsafe to drink or the supply may not be guaranteed. For instance, urban families living in apartments usually have piped water, but service is often interrupted in winter, when the electric water pumps stop working during power outages. These families then have to carry water up several flights of stairs and use toilets outside their buildings.

More than 90% of urban residents boil their water before drinking. But many end up using unboiled water during gas and electricity shortages, causing the spread of water-borne diseases such as diarrhea (and children under the age of 5 are especially vulnerable to that disease). In households with piped water, the incidence of diarrhea is 5–7 times lower than in households that consume water from open reservoirs.<sup>7</sup> In rural areas, people frequently consume water from irrigation and drainage canals, which are polluted with chemical fertilizers. This water has high concentrations of minerals and other harmful impurities that can cause infectious diseases, kidney diseases, stomach problems, and other ailments.

<sup>6</sup> ADB. Poverty and Social Assessment of WSS project in Bukhara, Navoi Provinces and Fergana Valley. Consultant's Report. (Unpublished, 2010). Manila. (TA 7240 UZB, see p. 57)

<sup>7</sup> ADB. Poverty and Social Assessment in the Towns of Galaasiya (Bukhara province), Karmana (Navoi province), and Termez (Surkhandarya province). Consultant's Report (Unpublished, 2009). Manila. (TA Report/Project No 40007/UZB). This report was based on social surveys and focus group discussions conducted by the Tahill Center for Social Research.

Illnesses have also increased due to unsanitary conditions. The chronic water shortages make it difficult for women to clean their houses often enough to maintain good hygiene. While the incidence of hepatitis A is relatively stable, children in rural areas often suffer from helminths, as well as from diarrhea. Data from recent surveys suggest that women and girls bathe less often than men and boys, who (unlike females) are able to bathe publicly in rivers and canals.<sup>8</sup>

In some regions, youngsters in preschools, schools, and universities drink unsafe water because potable water is not widely available. There are no school canteens, as the water supplies are inadequate and do not meet catering and sanitary norms. Even when schools have latrines, these are often unisex and have no piped water or hand-washing facilities.

Along with the gains in hygiene and sanitation, WSS infrastructure projects offer the following gender benefits:

- (i) Women spend less time on water-related activities such as collecting water, cooking, washing, and housework.
- (ii) It becomes possible to bathe more frequently, which is particularly important for women.
- (iii) The incidence of waterborne diseases decreases among women and men (as a result of hygiene-awareness seminars) and among children (through good hygiene habits taught at schools), thus reducing the time women must devote to caring for sick family members.

<sup>8</sup> ADB. Poverty and Social Assessment of Fergana Valley. Consultant's Report. (Unpublished, 2010). Manila. (TA 7240 UZB, see p. 57–58)

- (iv) Women receive information on efficient water use, hygiene and sanitation, and other issues that can affect gender equality, along with instruction in practical life skills. For instance, the project in Bukhara, Navoi, and Fergana has so far reached about 1,140 people through booklets on hygiene distributed to schoolchildren and women's groups.

In Uzbekistan, the Women's Committee is the main organization representing women's interests nationwide. Chaired by the deputy prime minister, this organization has female deputy *khokims* (local administrators) in every regional, district, and municipal government. The public-consultation and awareness-raising mechanisms associated with ADB projects cooperate with the deputy khokims at every level. The Women's Committee has also set a minimum quota of 30% for women's participation in political parties, and this quota is now being replicated in such sectors as energy, roads, and water. ADB projects related to these sectors also apply the 30% quota, especially projects concerned with training and capacity building.



## Dr. Bahtigul Satinbaeva lives in the Konimekh district, Navoi province.

Konimekh is in a desert area, so everyone, from kids to the elderly, knows the value of water. The water we use is very salty and coarse. The name of our neighborhood, Shurtepa, reflects the region where we live: “shurtepa” in Uzbek means “salty mount.” I remember that, since I was very little, my parents never allowed us to drink unboiled water. At the time, there were many adults who had colon and bowel diseases. Of course, the availability of fresh drinking water would have solved many problems.

These days, in order to make our bed sheets white, we need to wash them a couple of times. Because the water is coarse, the dirt doesn’t go away completely, and we have to spend a lot of time boiling the sheets. Imagine how much energy, time, and health a woman sacrifices if she doesn’t have a faucet in her house, or if she can’t go to collect water even when it’s available! And most of our families are large, with many children. The lack of good water is hard on the family budget, not to mention the fact that our hot climate makes it hard to have proper hygiene. The water we use to bathe has a bad effect on our skin. But, more importantly, the lack of water makes it impossible for us to bathe every day.

As a doctor, I am a member of the water user association of our neighborhood, and I am always educating people about the proper rules of hygiene and sanitation. I explain the benefits that a supply of fresh water will bring us after the WSS construction is done, and how much time will be saved, especially for the women.









## Mehriniso Rahmonova is a teacher who lives in the Karmana district, Navoi province.

The news about the rebuilding of our water system was greeted by our neighborhood with great approval. Indeed, all of our water pipes are worn out. The pipes have corroded because of the water's coarseness, and people suffer as a result. I am 55 years old and have five children—two sons and three daughters. Imagine how much laundry piles up every single day, especially in our hot and sticky weather. Some people have never had a water pipe in their yards or houses. They have to walk many times a day to the closest water supply tank.

In school, we always tell the children that it is dangerous to drink tap water, but you cannot look after them all of the time. This results in disease and stress. Now, when I talk to my neighbors, I find that many of them dream of buying a washing machine, and not just any washing machine, but an automatic one. For them it's a blue dream,<sup>9</sup> as many of them still wash their clothes by hand, and the clothes become dull and grey.

We have learned about cleanliness since our childhood, and at each house, the garden is clean and tidy, as well as the streets nearby. But the lack of a constant water supply makes it difficult to do one's tasks because much time and energy is spent bringing the water from afar. What is really frustrating is the fact that we cannot bathe whenever we want, or without fearing what the water will do to our skin and our health. Also, the time it takes to obtain water for the family could be used for treating ourselves, engaging in a favorite hobby, learning a new skill, or getting involved in the community. These are the dreams that we have for a fresh water supply, and we cannot wait until the WSS construction is finished.

<sup>9</sup> "Blue dream" is a Russian expression signifying a "pipe dream."

## Dilorom Sobirova is an entrepreneur who lives in Furqat, a village near Kyzyltepa, Navoi province.

Thanks to the WSS project, which is providing the people of Navoi province with clear, fresh water, life will be much easier for us. But it will be especially easier for the women, who will be able to solve their household problems and follow the rules of good hygiene and sanitation.

The water in Kyzyltepa is very salty and unfit for drinking, so many people have to buy imported water for their families. Of course, in order to do that, you need to have lots of containers and pots. Sometimes you need to buy bottled water, which has a notable effect on the family budget, especially for large families. Not to mention the water for bathing and washing! After our baths, our skin becomes rough and very unpleasant.

We hope that consuming fresh water will lead to fewer bowel diseases in children and adults, as well as to bigger family budgets and more financial stability. Most importantly, the project will benefit medical institutions, schools, and the government, whose personnel will become strong and healthy.







## Salima Kasimova is a homemaker from the village of Gala-Osie, Navoi province.

My apartment consists of three rooms on the second floor of a two-story house. There is no centralized water supply or sewage system. I am retired, and my husband died in 2009. I have five children, three of whom live elsewhere with their own families. My twins, Fatima and Khasan, born in 1991, still live with me.

Water is currently available for 2 hours in the morning and 2 hours in the evening. At other times, people have to find other ways to get their water. Some walk to the nearest spring, and those who can afford it buy imported water.

Lavatories are located in the streets, and in order to keep them from overflowing with feces, people in the neighborhood collect money to bring in cesspool trucks and empty out the lavatories into them. In spite of our desire to keep clean, the lack of water makes it hard for us to abide by the norms of sanitation and hygiene. Of course, if water were readily available, we could build a small bathhouse for ourselves or connect the water pipes to our houses and build a shower in each apartment. This is exactly what my neighbors and I dream about, since with fresh water you can be clean and have a clean home.

## **Nigora Rahimova is retired and lives in the Romitan district, Bukhara province.**

Our house consists of four rooms, and we have 6 acres of land. Our family includes three children—two married daughters who live elsewhere and one married son who lives with us. For many years, our family has been using the water pipe connected to our house, but we experience many difficulties because the water supply is very limited. Water is available for only 2 hours a day, and if you aren't there in time to get it, you will face a lot of hardship.

Our son is at work all day and, as my husband and I are elderly, we find it hard to walk anywhere far to get water. Since we are both retirees, buying bottled water isn't always an option because of our tight budget. But the water we get through the water pipe is coarse and salty, so we have to distill it first and then boil it.

My neighbors and I hope that a constant water supply will allow us to build a bathhouse and buy washing machines. I will finally be able to drink as much water as I want. And my daughter-in-law will have more time for herself because she will spend less time gathering water, hand-washing clothes, and watering the flowers. She wants to be a seamstress and make wedding gowns, but you need to learn the skills first. The families in our neighborhood are all very large, so there are many weddings. My daughter-in-law would always have work, and she could get a license and start a small business. It will be good for her and for others. All this can be possible only if there is water. When there is water, there is motivation for people to improve their lives and to develop themselves.







## Oyhon Chulieva, a water supply specialist with the Clear Water Company, lives in Navoi province.

I have been working for the Clear Water Company for over 25 years, and it brings me great joy to see the improvement of our material base, especially the new modern machinery that was brought in during construction.

With the help of ADB loans under the WSS project, we have renovated more than 5,400 locations in Navoi province in just 6 months. We also conduct educational seminars to inform people about the project. The seminars take place at an information center created under the project, with participation by NGOs (nongovernment organizations), water agencies, and community-based organizations. The seminars inform people about the benefits of drinking clear, fresh water; the amount of time and money people will save when good-quality water is regularly available; and how their hygiene and sanitation will improve. We also tell people that the rate at which the loans are paid back will depend on how quickly they pay their water bills.

I work with the project's information center, and I'm gratified to see that people understand the information they receive there. I am also glad when they tell us that, if there is fresh water, they will pay for it on time (especially since we plan to install new water meters).

As a woman, I am happy about two things. First, my family and I, and the people of the region as a whole, will be healthier. Second, the water canals will create jobs for women. Under the current economic conditions, this chance to work would mean a lot for many women. They could be financially stable, and will be able to spend more money on their children's education and clothing. Of course, household necessities require a lot of money. So, really, this project will bring not only the benefits of fresh water but also economic stability when new job openings are created.

## Sanitary Facilities in Homes, Clinics, and Schools

Most households in the ADB project areas in Uzbekistan do not yet have improved sanitation facilities, so they have to use cesspits. Many clinics and schools are not yet connected to the centralized sewerage system, so they resort to cesspools. More than 50% of households there have no bathrooms or showers, and only a few have bathrooms with running water.

While each school in the ADB project areas has a toilet in the schoolyard, only 40% of the toilets are functional. None of the schools have modern toilets with flushing mechanisms, sewerage, and ventilation. The average distance from school buildings in Uzbekistan to the toilets is more than 200 meters, even though the state requires that toilets be at most 50 meters away. The school toilets are not equipped with basic hygienic supplies: 98% have no soap, 94% have no toilet paper, 93% have no wastebaskets, 72% have no disinfectant supplies for cleaning, and 83% have no hooks or locks on the toilet doors.

Project 1 of the WSS investment program in Bukhara, Navoi, and Fergana covers 56 schools, including 31 schools in Bukhara province and 25 in Navoi. The Surkhandarya WSS project covers 41 schools in that province. At selected schools, the two projects are building a total of 26 toilets with separate facilities for female and male students (as well as for female and male teachers). These separate facilities will especially benefit girls approaching puberty, and may even result in better attendance. So far, 4 of the planned 10 toilets under the Bukhara, Navoi, and Fergana project and 4 of the planned 16 toilets under the Surkhandarya project are in place. The newly installed toilets have already begun to improve the sanitary conditions for both students and teachers.





## ADB's Achievements

ADB's WSS projects in Uzbekistan are providing adequate WSS and sewerage systems for households and better toilets for schools, thereby improving the health and living standards of people in the participating communities. The projects' hygiene and sanitation activities have also reduced the risk of epidemics, exposure to certain waterborne diseases, and the costs of medical treatment.

There has even been a salutary effect on local governance. The funds that ADB contributed to these projects have made it possible to reallocate a portion of local budgets to other urgent development needs, thereby adding to the social capital of the leaders of the makhallas; reducing conflict within communities; and increasing the level of confidence in public bodies, district and regional authorities, and in the efficacy of local residents' participation in decision making.

Finally, ADB's WSS projects are addressing the gender issues related to water supply and sanitation, mainly by having women participate in project design and monitoring, and by reducing the time women must spend on getting water for their families. The projects have also engaged women in hygiene-awareness and capacity-building programs to enhance the benefits of improved water supplies. These training programs are extending the positive social impact of improved water and sanitation to these women's families and to their communities.





## **A Story within a Story**

### Gender and Water in Uzbekistan

ADB's water supply and sanitation projects are addressing the gender issues related to water supply and sanitation, mainly by having women participate in project design and monitoring, and by reducing the time women must spend on getting water for their families. The projects have also engaged women in hygiene-awareness and capacity-building programs to enhance the benefits of improved water supplies. These training programs are extending the positive social impact of improved water and sanitation to these women's families and to their communities.

### **About the Asian Development Bank**

ADB's vision is an Asia and Pacific region free of poverty. Its mission is to help its developing member countries reduce poverty and improve the quality of life of their people. Despite the region's many successes, it remains home to two-thirds of the world's poor: 1.7 billion people who live on less than \$2 a day, with 828 million struggling on less than \$1.25 a day. ADB is committed to reducing poverty through inclusive economic growth, environmentally sustainable growth, and regional integration.

Based in Manila, ADB is owned by 67 members, including 48 from the region. Its main instruments for helping its developing member countries are policy dialogue, loans, equity investments, guarantees, grants, and technical assistance.

Asian Development Bank  
6 ADB Avenue, Mandaluyong City  
1550 Metro Manila, Philippines  
[www.adb.org](http://www.adb.org)