

**Country Briefing Paper**

**Women in the  
Republic of Uzbekistan**

**Prepared by**

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## Acknowledgments

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The views and interpretations in this report are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of ADB or any of the individuals named above.

## Abbreviations

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ADB	–	Asian Development Bank
AIDS	–	acquired immune deficiency syndrome
BWA	–	Businesswomen’s Association
CAR	–	Central Asian republic
CEDAW	–	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
COS	–	country operational strategy
FBS	–	Family Budget Survey
GAD	–	gender and development
GDP	–	gross domestic product
GNP	–	gross national product
HIV	–	human immunodeficiency virus
IUD	–	intrauterine device
NGO	–	nongovernment organization
PIFs	–	Privatization Investment Funds
SCU	–	savings and credit union
STD	–	sexually transmitted disease
SME	–	small and medium enterprise
UNDP	–	United Nations Development Programme

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## Executive Summary

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The post-Soviet economic transition in Uzbekistan has had a bitter impact on women. The economic hardship that accompanied this transition has resulted in less affordable education and reduced individual and family support services that provided the foundation for women to pursue education and professional opportunities in the Soviet era.

As a result, women in Uzbekistan are more at risk of poverty than men, particularly if women are divorced, widowed, unmarried mothers or have large families. The unemployment rate for women is higher than that of men (with women accounting for 63 percent of unemployed persons). Most of the unemployed women are unskilled women from rural areas trained for low-wage agricultural work. Other women, concentrated in the predominantly female sectors of the government service such as health and education, face economic hardships as the value of their wages has declined in real terms since independence in 1991. Women face additional barriers in many cases when they attempt to take advantage of new opportunities to improve their standard of living. For example, women not only lack many of the business skills required to develop small business but have also little access to credit. There is also a marked preference to employ men in private sector enterprises, partly because of the “expense” of female employees, who are guaranteed a number of rights such as maternity leave in the Labor Code.

As a result of the above changes, there are two worrisome trends regarding women’s economic and employment status in Uzbekistan. Firstly, the transition to a market economy has rendered women less competitive in the employment market, particularly in the private sector. Secondly, there is mounting concern that poverty is undergoing a process of feminization.

More generally, economic hardships pose particular problems for women in the areas of health. Since independence, the size of the health care budget has been gradually eroded to the point that people now pay for most health services—even in situations where nominally the service is free of charge. The increasing cost of health care has implications for women of childbearing age who typically have higher demands for health care and who generally have the day-to-day responsibility for their children’s health. One of the major health problems facing women in Uzbekistan is anemia, which nearly 60 percent of women suffer to some extent. Anemia is a condition closely linked to frequent births, inadequate nutrition and poor water quality. Poverty is of course a factor here, particularly in rural areas where there are greater problems of poor diet and restricted caloric intake.

Education has also been affected by the transition. Women’s participation in higher education has been falling due to a combination of factors (such as increasing cost of education and a reluctance to allow daughters to study in urban areas). Stereotyped ways of thinking about women and men’s areas of educational specialization and choice of profession remain strong. There is evidence that the current educational programs preferred by women are not well linked to the existing demand of the labor market, and thus disadvantage female professionals. There is also a shortage of vocational courses, which could provide women with skills in small business and vocational areas.

Women's participation in the formal political structure of Uzbekistan has also fallen during the transition period. Despite efforts by the Government, notably a presidential decree establishing the position of Deputy Prime Minister of Women's Affairs, women accounted for 8 percent of parliamentarians in the Oliy Majlis in 1998 (in contrast to 35 percent in the Supreme Soviet of Uzbek SSR before independence).

Independence and the growth of nationalism have also seen the reemergence of traditional gender ideologies in some quarters. Despite official decrees supporting women, the full participation of women in society is limited by gender ideologies that view men as the main economic provider. Not only do such beliefs restrict women's access to well paid jobs, but they also threaten the future investment of parents in their daughters' higher and vocational education. Unfortunately, such beliefs complement others that view a woman's status in society as lower than a man's, and thus justify men's authority over women.

Nevertheless, the impact of economic hardship on women over the past ten years has been mixed. There is a great deal of potential for the women of Uzbekistan given both the commitment of the Government to address the decline in women's status in society and also the initiative and resourcefulness of the women of Uzbekistan themselves. On a more positive note, a shift in the importance of women's economic activities, such as an increased reliance on the sale of produce grown on the family's private plot, has given some women greater authority in the home.

Also, a number of educated and professional women have resisted the threatened loss of status for women in Uzbekistan. Many of these women have turned their knowledge and experience to lead Uzbekistan's growing women's NGO movement. From this base, such women provide assistance in areas central to women's economic, social and political status (including business and vocational training, legal literacy, psychological counseling, health and domestic violence programs, assistance to women with disabilities, etc.).

This would not have been possible, however, without the support and goodwill of the Government. Uzbekistan has implemented a number of legislative reforms (for example, a new Family Code and Labor Code), and has signed a number of international conventions such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), designed to enhance the status of women in Uzbekistan. To an extent, the Government realized the threat to women's status early on and took proactive steps to address this issue when it established by Presidential Decree the Women's Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan. The Women's Committee in turn has been a major force behind the number of reforms and programs directed at protecting the rights and status of women in Uzbekistan.

Despite these and other policies designed to improve women's status and to enhance their role in society, women still face inequality in all aspects of their life. A main challenge, therefore, is to mainstream gender-awareness approaches among policymakers and the general public as well. The absence of accurate and reliable gender disaggregated data and the lack of new research methodologies in Uzbekistan is a major constraint in developing effective gender projects. Priority research areas include household surveys on the extent of poverty; gender relations in women's participation in the labor market; barriers to the implementation of laws that protect women; and qualitative research into the influence of traditional and religious cultural practices on women.