

Policy brief – May 2022

# Gender-inclusive clean water supply and sanitation for Central Asia

## Main Findings

- Five Central Asian countries have the right momentum to build gender-inclusive WASH
- Transition can accelerate with investments into safe, resource-efficient, scale-appropriate and modern supply and sanitation infrastructure, technologies, and services
- Inclusive WASH systems are resilient when women take an active role in policy decisions at all levels and implementation

## Introduction

WASH, which stands for water, sanitation and hygiene, has come into wide use in policy domains after the introduction of the Sustainable Development Goals in 2015. The sixth goal focuses specifically on water-related issues, including supply of clean water and delivery of sanitation services. More than 90% of the population in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan is reported to have access to water for drinking, cooking and basic hygiene; however, there is plenty of room for enhancing access and tailoring WASH supply and delivery for the specific needs of women and girls.

It is essential to design WASH systems with the understanding that women are not a homogenous group. By adopting a gender equity lens, innovations in WASH would be able to address a wider range of unmet water needs and build better serving clean water supply and sanitation systems for many. The WASH related targets are also either explicitly or indirectly linked to many other SDGs. A gender-equitable and inclusive WASH approach thus impacts and benefits a

wider system of social and economic aspirations.

## Policy Issue

Women are the ideal agents of change to help improve WASH. Many women continue to carry out household chores and have responsibilities for family care. Women, in charge of family nutrition and healthcare, require clean water and adequate sanitation to decrease childhood malnutrition and infectious diseases. As users of water and sanitation systems, women have practical knowledge for user-sensitive WASH improvements and ways to operationalise them within the social context.

Being on the frontline of dealing with water issues, many women themselves are subject to water-related health risks such as contraction of diarrhoea, dysentery, cholera, typhoid and a variety of diseases caused by locally prevailing pathogens, resulting in acute and chronic illnesses, reproductive health complications, psychological and social well-being. Securing clean water and safe sanitation at their households increases women's quality of life and allows for more discretionary time



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for women to pursue their self-realization elsewhere (Bauman-Dentener, 2020).

The efforts in recognizing and fulfilling gender-related needs in water, sanitation and hygiene should be based on increasing women's meaningful participation in WASH decision-making in all sectors and at all levels. The five Central Asian countries all similarly perceive water sector professions as less appropriate for women. (Bozorova, 2020; Rasulova et al, 2020).

Women's participation in national policymaking indicates a maximum of 16.4% to 25% share of seats in national parliaments of the five Central Asia countries (HDR, 2020). The existing data on women's representation in the water sector is even more scarce; further research is needed to understand how to amplify, support and ensure women's voices are counted equally in WASH decision-making. At the local level, involvement of women in WASH decision-making varies across communities. However, many women express that they seldom take initiative to speak up in formal encounters due to lack of confidence and wariness of how well they are perceived socially.

## Policy Options

Deciding on practical roadmaps for gender-inclusive and empowering WASH is not a simple task. The options listed below emerged from an analysis of region-specific needs, as well as countries' aspirations for ensuring gender equity in existing and future water supply and sanitation systems:

## Empowering Women

Empowerment in WASH means educating and providing opportunities for women as water right-holders, including rights to water use, technical expertise and decision-making at all levels. The five countries have in place the necessary legal framework for accelerating women's representation and ensuring a more active role in expanding WASH access for women and girls. Drawing on progress and lessons learnt by countries when implementing the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), provisions of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and each country's specific gender equality goals, the design of WASH policies should apply existing, and develop new legal and institutional enablers. The UN Framework Convention on Climate Change Gender Action Plan (the Enhanced 5-year Lima Work Programme on Gender, 2019) is a tool toward mainstreaming gender considerations into climate change adaptation. Implementation of Integrated Water Resource Management (IWRM) principles and practices can further facilitate women's role in water management at all levels and in water education.

This work should result in establishing and aligning easy and effective ways to mainstream gender-inclusion in WASH design and implementation, enforceable legislation and appreciative social norms enabling women at all levels and across all domains of policymaking.

To secure water in sufficient quantity and safe quality to where and when needed, the five countries in Central Asia are in a good position and have the right momentum to modernize water supply and sanitation. More elaborate, yet



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urgently needed, research should inform investments into safe, resource-efficient, scale-appropriate and inclusive water supply and sanitation infrastructure, technologies, and services:

**Safe.** Inclusive, gender-responsive water supply and sanitation systems comprehensively address the needs for human safety. Ensuring safe biochemical parameters of water quality should be accompanied with facilitating safe and accessible uses of water facilities and equipment.

**Resource-efficient and climate smart.** The Central Asian countries are already experiencing water-related impacts of climate change: the temperature and precipitation changes are recognized, accompanied by complex effects to the natural biomes, resource-based socioeconomic systems and human habitats (OSCE, 2020). Resource-efficient and climate smart WASH adaptations in the context of Central Asia will have to operationalise endurance of water supply and sanitation infrastructure to emergencies and greater water use efficiency. Innovative solutions are required for careful water use metering, eliminating water losses, and designing and installing circular supply and wastewater treatment systems.

**Scale-appropriate.** The Central Asian region has a large variety of geomorphological landscapes and climatic zones. The potential of innovative solutions can be used for installing inclusive and resource-efficient WASH suited for settlements in remote, difficult-to-reach areas and in fragile natural ecosystems. Infrastructural modernization per se should be a transformative process, resulting in not only improved WASH

delivery but also higher women's competence in policy making.

**Gender-sensitive.** The social and professional activity of women and girls is significantly diminished by limited availability of adequate hygiene and sanitation infrastructure. Its design and operating should warrant dignity, privacy and safety for women and girls using these facilities. Comprehensive surveys about tailored standards of WASH delivery for women and girls can help identify best practices and areas for improvement.

**Data-informed and science-driven.** Beyond indicators on water quality and consumption volumes, statistics systems should foster more inclusive WASH by operationalising disaggregated and multilevel measurement of cost-effectiveness, affordability and reliability of water usage. Functional decision-support systems should be designed and made available for daily operation and strategic planning to all WASH stakeholders. Forthwith, scientists and policymakers shall work together to interpret data-generated insights and update national inventories of standards on WASH safety as well as access and accessibility.

### **Enacting systemic approaches**

It is recommended to adopt a practical, yet system-based, approach for achieving universal access to clean water and sanitation. Enacting systemic approaches means understanding WASH as a set of complex actors (individual and institutions) and assets (infrastructure components, technologies, organizational and financial models). Institutional bases for water supply and sanitation have been established in the five Central Asian



countries with legislative and executive bodies operating at all levels of governance. Further capacity-building in strengthening cross-sectoral coordination and multi-level governance will help countries to configure WASH for maintaining population health and epidemiological security of settlements and habitats.

Whilst existing policies also account for the role of clean water and sanitation in combating poverty SDGs, however, highlight WASH as interlinked with many other facets of sustainable societies. In the context of Central Asia, new conceptualization of WASH requires understanding of WASH in relation to planetary health and a wider range of socio-economic objectives. For that, an important area of success is the multidisciplinary exchange and collaboration between environmental, engineering, life and social sciences. The Central Asian countries can promote multidisciplinary research to inform WASH policies about gender-sensitive configurations to WASH design and delivery.

### *Affirming positive change*

Every positive change toward gender-inclusive WASH is important. Monitoring and evaluation of gender-inclusive WASH delivery should timely and effectively streamline lessons from both success and shortcomings. Gender-inclusive WASH will

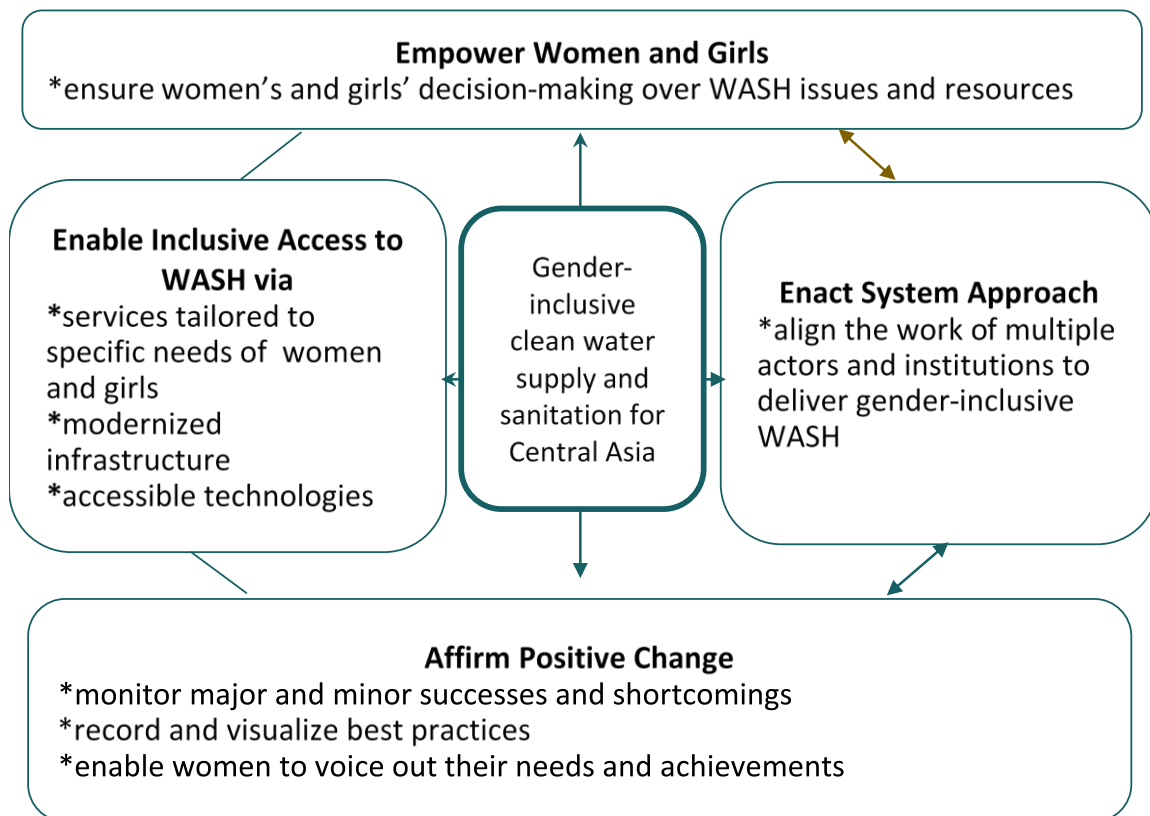
accelerate when awareness about the WASH issues and solutions are shared by all. The gender-inclusive WASH systems can only function well if all actors sensitize each other to foster gender inclusion.

### **Recommendations**

The gender mainstreaming process must effectively address persistent misconceptions that by increasing the share of women water experts, parliamentarians and other decision-makers, policies and programmes are immediately gender-sensitive.

Simultaneously realizing the four policy options listed above can foster delivery of gender-inclusive, clean water supply and sanitation services in Central Asian countries. The gender-inclusive WASH approach empowers women to take part in policy design and implementation as water users, managers, and decision-makers. Innovations in WASH technology and infrastructure should deliver tailored solutions for women and girls, which require institutional alignment, greater awareness of gender-issues in WASH and more intense exchanges and collaboration between scientists and policymakers.

Figure 1. Women empowerment in WASH



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## Authors

**Aliya Tankibayeva**  
Research Fellow, DKU  
ORCID 0000-0003-0341-0032

**Alice Bouman-Dentener**  
CANSU-SITE, Royal Academy of Science International Trust

**Rachel Fisher Ingraham**  
Gender Consultant, Denver, USA  
ORCID 0000-0003-3562-3542

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