

WOMEN, WATER AND THE QUALITY OF LIFE

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I live in Kyrgyzstan, a small mountainous country with a population of 5 million.

Kyrgyzstan is located in Central Asia and has common borders with Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. Our countries have also had many common challenges during the decade--a long period of transition to a market economy. Kyrgyzstan has very rich water resources--lakes, glaciers, mountain rivers, springs and underground water. Water has many dimensions for Kyrgyzstan. It is used as energy resource, irrigation of agricultural fields, industry and personal consumption. Having a lot of fresh and ecologically pure water, people in Kyrgyzstan face many challenges in accessing water. The problem is not the lack of water, but the poor water management at various levels. Traditionally, during several decades we used to have quite good sanitary norms and standards for drinking water. The poverty of the last decade has led to a decrease and loss in the quality of water management facilities for drinking and irrigation. Water facilities have deteriorated tremendously. There is an increase in such diseases like virus hepatitis, typhoid and diarrhea. Access to safe drinking water remains a key development issue in the densely populated Ferghana Valley, shared by Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. Around 60 percent of the 10 million people in the valley have no safe water supply. About only 70 % of Uzbekistan was provided with safe water (Report on the Status of Women in Uzbekistan, 1999). In places with inefficient or absent water infrastructure, the burden of bringing heavy water containers from a far distance is on women. Very often in a village, there is only one water standpipe for the whole area. Women's workload increases because in our society, cooking, washing, childcare and care of the elderly are all considered to be women's work. All of these responsibilities require water. At the same time, this work is unpaid home work. Women are the invisible victims of a poor water management system.

Water is not a problem in Kyrgyzstan and at the same time, it is a huge problem. Having water resources has not led to meeting people's water needs. Our pure ecological drinking water may be an excellent export product. But at this moment, even the local population does not have water at a satisfactory level. Water is also a source of danger to people's health. Why? Because the water management system and its facilities need investment and proper maintenance. Kyrgyzstan with its tiny budget is unable to maintain effective water management system. Rivers and lakes are polluted by

anthropogenesis and natural sources. People who suffer from a lack of access to fresh drinking water are not investing much of their time and energy to solve the problem. There are, however, local initiatives, supported by external donors, to address this issue. Among them is a women's NGO in the Djalal-Abad province of Kyrgyzstan "Kairymdyluk", Central Asian Alliance for Water. With the CAAW project in the village of Yambarak, the situation changed immensely after the CAAW built a water supply system there in 2002. "The number of cases of diseases is going down yearly and in 2003 there has not been any cases". Ecological NGOs raise their concerns about water pollution (Green Women, Environment Protection Foundation of Kyrgyzstan). Recognition of water issues as part of the national poverty reduction program is an important step.

Destroyed water infrastructure is now being reconstructed. Let me give you one example. According to the UN report (2003) based on the survey of target villages in Kyrgyzstan, 27 % of internationally funded projects for rehabilitation of social-economic facilities were focused on water management facilities. This percentage shows the depth of the water problem. Local rural people can not bear themselves the full costs of radical repair of drinking and irrigation water facilities. This makes people highly vulnerable and dependent on external assistance. From a gender perspective, the water issue is closely connected to the increased exploitation of women at home. A specially disadvantaged group is the rural poor women. Poverty doubles the burden of deteriorated health caused by the lack of fresh drinking water. Poor families do not have money for proper medical diagnosis and treatment.

Kyrgyzstan has enough water for producing hydroelectric power. At the same time, in many villages and towns, people lack access to fresh drinking water, and water for irrigation they also experience frequent cuts in electricity. Naryn is a province town near the biggest hydro electro station in Kyrgyzstan. During the whole year, people are limited to several hours of electricity. Who suffers the most in families? Definitely women do because of their domestic roles. Women actually suffer from the intersection of poverty, patriarchal traditions and low access to decision making. Women's perspectives and experiences are not reflected in many country's programs and projects. Their voices and experiences are not heard and taken into consideration because women comprise only 7 - 10 % of major national, political and economic decision makers in Kyrgyzstan.

Once again I would like to say that having enough natural water does not automatically lead to an efficient water management system. It is strategically important to incorporate women's experiences, perspectives and vision into decision making on water issues. Last year's experience in Central Asia showed that civil society organizations and women's NGOs play key roles in the mobilization of the population to address community needs concerning water