

There are organizations in Uzbekistan that help people with disabilities to feel in demand and needed by society.

As in most other Central Asian countries, it is difficult for people with disabilities in Uzbekistan to survive. In addition to problems with health and social adaptation, it is difficult for them to find employment and feel themselves needed by society. Despite the adopted state laws and support programs, most cities and districts lack mechanisms for their implementation, as well as adapted infrastructure, accessible environment and employment system.

People with disabilities find it difficult to find work

According to the latest country [review](#) “Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities. Uzbekistan” World Bank, as of the end of 2019, 693,900 people with disabilities (295,500 women and 398,400 men) in Uzbekistan were receiving pensions and social benefits, including 111,300 children under the age of 16 (48,800 girls and 62,500 boys).

The World Bank survey describes the many challenges faced by persons with disabilities in Uzbekistan, one of which is the problem of employment.

“People with disabilities are about 4 times less likely to find employment than people without disabilities. In 2019, only 8.9% of men and 4.4% of women with disabilities aged 16-59 and 16-54 respectively, or only 7.1% of persons with disabilities, were officially employed. In rural areas, the percentage was even lower, at 5.8%,” the report says.

Nigina Mukhtarova, head of the Center for Social Protection of Disabled People, a non-profit organization operating in southern Surkhandarya Province, confirms this data, saying the situation has not changed much since 2019.

According to her data, more than 75 thousand people with disabilities live in their region. Among them are persons with disabilities of the first, second and third groups and persons with disabilities since childhood. But there is no systematic employment of people with disabilities in the region, Nigina Mukhtarova told CABAR.asia.



Nigina Mukhtarova at work. Photo CABAR.asia

The Center for Social Protection of Disabled People, a non-governmental non-profit organization, was established in 2019 in Termez. The center has branches in every district. This organization helps to employ people with disabilities by training them in various professions. Now more than two thousand disabled people are members of this organization.

At the center, citizens with disabilities are taught, depending on their interests and abilities, to make various handicrafts, such as making soap molds, flowers, sewing, design and other professions.

But due to the lack of systematic funding from the state, the center's opportunities are limited.

"We only train. Because if we hire them, we can't pay their salaries. It's not like we are state-funded. We work on the basis of various grants and sponsorship. Products made by people with disabilities are given to a store opened with the help of the administration at the farmers' market in Termez. We take them there and sell the products, thus helping our wards," Nigina Mukhtarova said.

Finding a permanent job in Uzbekistan is very difficult for people with disabilities. Despite the adopted law "On the Rights of Persons with Disabilities", the [law](#) is not applied in practice, Mukhtarova emphasized.



One of the beneficiaries of the "Center for Social Protection of the Disabled" at work. Photo by CABAR.asia

"According to the law, organizations with 30 employees must employ 3 citizens with disabilities. But, in fact, healthy people work at the workplaces allocated for the disabled. Because it's hard to hire people with disabilities. It is also difficult to find a job for disabled people with higher education. There is no regular system of employment of disabled people. No one is interested in their employment. Many disabled people live only on state benefits. And how to live on 65 dollars? Or, if he has a child, can he support him? Think for yourself..." complains Nigina Mukhtarova.

"I realized my mom's dream."

But there are positive examples in the country of how employment of people with disabilities can be addressed.

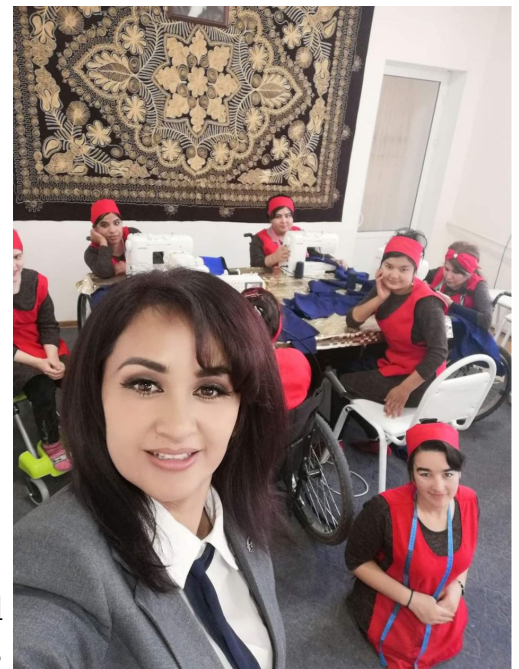
One such organization, Gulbahor Nurli Kelajak LLC, has been operating for 10 years in the heart of Surkhandarya province, Termez. It is headed by **Dilafruz Karimova**. She trains and successfully employs people with disabilities, mostly women.

Now more than 50 people with disabilities live and work at this enterprise.

In an interview with CABAR.asia, Dilafruz said that it was her mother who taught her to help people with disabilities.

"Our mother always emphasized the need to help those in need, so we grew up with that attitude. She was very fond of helping people with disabilities. My mother's name was Gulbahor, so I named our company after her - Gulbahor Nurli Kelajak," she says.

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Dilafruz Karimova with her employees. CABAR.asia photo.

After becoming a master tailor, Dilafruz Karimova began teaching others to do the same.

“I started receiving various orders, and later, to expand my activity, I took on more apprentices. One day, a girl in a wheelchair came up to me. She expressed her desire to learn the secrets of tailoring. I took her on as an apprentice. After that, other people with disabilities started coming,” she said.

Dilafrooz said that as she watched them closely, she set a goal to teach each of the women according to their specific needs. It may be difficult to teach a person with a disability how to sew an entire garment, but they can perform a certain operation.

“In the beginning, the girls may make mistakes. But later they learn well and don’t make mistakes. Everyone is assigned a job within his or her capabilities. For example, when one’s hands are shaky, he is assigned to clean threads from an article. Or, for example, ironing laundry,” she said.

A bumpy road to success

But the road to success was not easy. Gulbahor Nurli Kelajak had to go through a lot of difficulties and change a lot of buildings and offices before it could fully earn its living. And all of them were not suitable for people with disabilities.

The organization started its activities in Jarkorgan district of Surkhandarya province, located 38 km north of Termez. Because the enterprise employed people with disabilities who came from other districts but did not have their own dormitory, the authorities relocated them to the Manguzar microdistrict of Termez district.

Having studied the activities of the enterprise, the authorities promised to create conditions for people with disabilities. But for a whole year no assistance was provided. Later this building was also resold at auction. For the fourth time, the enterprise was relocated to an abandoned building in Termez’s Marifat neighbourhood, which also lacked the necessary amenities.

“Here, no one discriminated against each other, did not talk to each other to their faces about their disabilities, and were not ashamed of their disabilities”

Despite the hardship and unsettledness of the building, about forty girls with disabilities, along with Dilafruz, began living and working there.



Employees of Gulbahor Nurli Kelajak LLC. Photo by CABAR.asia

“Of course, in the beginning our female employees were very sad because of the lack of funds. We started working despite the fact that we had no toilet, no dormitory, right in the workshop people with disabilities lived and worked together. But they were okay with it, because here no one discriminated against each other, no one talked about their disabilities to their face and no one was ashamed of their disability,” says Dilafruz.

“After my appeal in the social network, the prosecutor of Surkhandarya region provided us with practical assistance”

In 2019, when the city of Termez hosted the Open South International Business Forum. Based on the order of the mayor of the city, “Gulbahor Nurli Kelajak” enterprise was also assigned to participate in this forum. According to the requirements, it was necessary to make banners and booklets, prepare uniforms for women.

At that time, the organizers assured them that they would be contracted at this forum and, thus, they would be reimbursed for all their expenses. However, this did not happen, the enterprise was on the verge of bankruptcy.

“We participated in the forum. We fulfilled all the stated requirements. But no contracts were concluded with us. We spent all the funds in our account for that forum. After that our work stopped for two months,” says Dilafruz.

Out of desperation, she posted a video message on her social network page asking for help from the managers as the company’s activities were stopped.

The Surkhandarya Region Prosecutor’s Office responded to her appeal on social media.

“After this video appeal of mine, we received a lot of practical help. Our building was renovated by the staff of the prosecutor’s office. All conditions were created. Sports equipment was brought for us. We were provided with modern equipment, conveniences were created. It was a big step for the development of our enterprise. We were given advice and a lot of practical help to develop our activities,” says Dilafruz. - says Dilafruz.



Women of “Gulbahor Nurli Kelajak” at work.
Photo by CABAR.asia

“We have become one big family”

Today, the Gulbahor Nurli Kelajak enterprise is known in the region as an organization where people with disabilities can be employed. About fifty of them work here.

“We produce more than ten garments. We sew various women’s dresses, military uniforms and various special uniforms for workers. We have become a big family. We live together, work together and draw strength from each other. We travel to different districts of our region. I try to please my employees by organizing various events for them. Now there are all conditions for my employees. Our ranks are growing day by day,” said the head of the company.

Students continue Dilafruz Karimova’s work

A big event for her was the opening of a similar enterprise in Kitab District, Kashkadarya Oblast, by her student, 23-year-old Gulshoda Sharipova, who also has a disability.



Gulshoda Sharipova. Photo by CABAR.asia

Gulshoda Sharipova opened the Hidayat Chevarlari tailoring studio in Kitab district (323 km north of Termez) in 2021. More than 20 women with disabilities have found permanent employment here.

Gulshoda says she was a 9-month-old baby when both legs were amputated due to severe burns. After receiving 9 years of education at home, at the age of 20 she went to Termez to learn the secrets of tailoring from Dilafuz Karimova.

Three years later, she returned to her home in Kitab district and opened her own atelier. Gulshoda trained girls and women with disabilities for free and provided them with steady employment.

“Now we are working as a family with over 20 people with disabilities employed. I invite all women with disabilities living in Kashkadarya to work. Depending on their work, I will pay each of our employees about 2,000,000 two million soums (US \$200) a month,” Gulshoda said.

In the future, she intends to establish a special educational center for people with disabilities.

“I began to feel happy. My interest in life has increased”

After getting a job, in addition to a steady income, women have self-esteem and their health improves. They feel happier and strive to achieve better results.

Zuhra Hasanova, 35, has been working at Gulbahor Nurli Kelajak for five years. She is a disabled person of the first group, unable to walk due to a genetic disease. In addition to Zuhra, her two sisters suffer from this disease in the family.

Zuhra’s success story is very indicative for other women with disabilities. After five years, she went from a girl who was shy to go out because of her disability to a cheerful and successful person.



Zuhra Hasanova. Photo by CABAR.asia

She is now a student at Termez State University, where she is studying fashion design.

She still remembers the times when she decided to live at home, shutting herself in four walls because of her disability.

“Because I was ashamed to go out on the street, I hated myself. In 2017, my nephew told me about Gulbahor Nurlie Kelajak LLC and said that there were girls with disabilities there. I came to Termez city in search of this company. I came to this company and started working,” Zukhra says.

Living with girls with disabilities like her and working here gives her great pleasure.

“I became more confident that I can benefit people. Forgetting loneliness and illness, my interest in life grows every day. When we sewed medical masks for our citizens during the pandemic, there was pride and confidence in my heart that we were benefiting the community. I have been living and working here for 5 years now. I also draw different dresses and then sew them. I am very happy. On average I earn about 2,000,000 two million soums (\$200) per month. In addition, since I am disabled, I receive a disability allowance of 700,000 soums (\$66) from the state,” said Zuhra Hasanova.

Success stories such as these show that efforts to support people with disabilities bring positive results both for those with special needs and for society as a whole.



Shoira Isakova at work. Photo by CABAR.asia

Psychologist, **Shoira Isakova**, has seen in her practice that when people with disabilities engage in activities, there are positive changes in their mental state.

“I know several people with disabilities who have made great achievements as a result of such activities. Their interest in life has also increased because of their constant participation in their favorite activity,” she said.

Dilafruz Karimova said her life’s goal has been to establish enterprises for women with disabilities in all regions of the country to provide them with permanent employment and improve their quality of life.

How can people with disabilities find employment in Uzbekistan?



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