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“Grannies” take Switzerland to court to demand more action on climate change

A group of older women called Senior Women for Climate Protection Switzerland has brought a case before the European Court of Human Rights to force Switzerland to do more on climate change. We talk to the group’s co-chair Rosmarie Wydler-Wälti, 73.

SUSANNE WENGER

A residential area in Basel on a very warm autumn day. The climate activist who welcomes us warmly into her home has grey hair. She has been campaigning on environmental issues for half a century. Retired nursery teacher and parent advisor Rosmarie Wydler-Wälti has eight grandchildren. She and other female peers have taken Switzerland to court because they believe Berne is not doing enough on climate change. They have given the climate debate a new twist by arguing that their rights have been violated.

Wydler-Wälti and her husband live together in their terraced house. We can see a small garden from the lounge window. Books about the climate crisis are piled up on the sofa. One of them is called “How Women Can Save the Planet”. “This house is my one climate crime,” she proffers. It is too big for two people, even if it does have solar panels. Wydler-Wälti has always tried to live sustainably. She gave up flying long ago and only buys what she needs. She also keeps “every little bag and piece of string”. Recycle it, don’t throw it away, she learned from her parents.

Duty of care

Wydler-Wälti joined the green and women’s movements when she was a young mother. She calls 1986 a “traumatic” year in which the Chernobyl nuclear disaster and the Schweizerhalle chemical accident near Basel influenced her thinking. “The children were unable to go outside, because we didn’t know whether there were chemicals in the air.” Wydler-Wälti is not a member of any political party. She has never held political office.



But when Senior Women for Climate Protection Switzerland was founded in 2016 in response to an idea by the environmental organisation Greenpeace, she jumped at the chance of becoming co-chair – a position she shares with Anne Mahrer, a 75-year-old former Green Party National Councillor from Geneva.

The group currently has around 2,500 members, all of them female, whose ages range from 64 to over 90. These women are united by one cause: Switzerland must show greater ambition in cutting greenhouse gas emissions and achieving the goals of the Paris climate agreement. The retirees are using the Swiss constitu-

Rosmarie Wydler-Wälti (left) and Anne Mahrer presenting their case during a Grand Chamber public hearing at the European Court of Human Rights in March this year.

Photo: Keystone

tion and the European Convention on Human Rights as the basis for their action, arguing that the state has a duty of care to protect the right to life. Heatwaves are becoming more frequent and intense as a result of climate change. Older people are more susceptible to their effects, they say, with older women particularly at risk of illness and death.

Deadly heatwaves

Statistics show that heatwaves are more dangerous for older women. According to a recent study conducted by the Swiss Tropical and Public Health Institute on behalf of the Fed-

eral Office of Public Health and Federal Office for the Environment, there were 474 heat-related deaths in Switzerland during the record-breaking summer of 2022, all among the over-75s, with 60 percent of fatalities being women. Excess deaths due to heat were higher in older women than in older men. There are, therefore, good legal reasons why membership of the group is restricted to older women. “It means that we are bona fide claimants,” says Wydler-Wälti.

The group took its case to the Federal Office for the Environment, then to the Federal Administrative Court, then to the Federal Supreme Court. It lost three times. According to the Federal Supreme Court, the women’s rights had not been sufficiently affected. Then came Strasbourg. In 2020, the group and four individual women took out a lawsuit against Switzerland at the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) in Strasbourg. The ECHR’s Grand Chamber of 17 judges conducted a public hearing in March this year, with Swiss government representatives and the claimants’ team of lawyers making their respective cases. In particular, the Swiss government argued that action on climate change is a complex challenge for politicians, not for courts.

“We have already lost a lot of time”

“Wow”, thought Wydler-Wälti as she sat in the courtroom. They were finally being taken seriously. Not only that, but she and her fellow claimants were potentially on the way to setting a legal precedent across the member states of the Council of Europe, of which Switzerland itself has been a member since 1963. This is because the court in Strasbourg was deciding

for the first time whether there is a link between climate change and human rights. But why were the women not trying to win majority support for their cause through democratic means in Switzerland, i.e. gain the sort of backing that saw voters approve the Climate and Innovation Act earlier this year?

“We have already lost a lot of time,” the co-chair replies. Popular votes, elections, demonstrations, lawsuits – anything that will help their cause is welcome. The “grannies” are being “played” by Greenpeace, some people have said. This is an insult as far as Wydler-Wälti is concerned. Yes, they are in contact with Greenpeace. Indeed, the environmental organisation is covering their legal costs. But the women make their own decisions. They have come together with a wealth of expertise and experience and have many years of campaigning already under their belt.

Solidarity with the young generation

Appearing at the ECHR in Strasbourg has put Wydler-Wälti and friends in the public spotlight. People have praised them for their courage and tenacity. Others have been less flattering, suggesting they should go home and look after their grandchildren. Someone sent them an anonymous email saying old women like them used to be burned at the stake. Wydler-Wälti: “Being compared to a witch is a compliment in my book. They were strong women.” A ruling from Strasbourg is not expected until 2024. Meanwhile, the women are giving talks, organising events and fielding media inquiries from around the world. They have already at-



“This house is my one climate crime. It is too big for two people.”

Rosmarie Wydler-Wälti standing in her back garden in Basel.
Photo: Keystone

tracted attention from outlets like Al-Jazeera and the “New York Times”.

The day after she spoke to us, Wydler-Wälti took the train to Strasbourg again – this time to express solidarity with another climate lawsuit taking place at the ECHR. Six young people from Portugal have taken 32 European countries including Switzerland to court. From young to old – climate action is important regardless of demographic, says Wydler-Wälti. “If we win our case, everyone wins in the end.”

Link to the Strasbourg hearing of 29 March 2023: revue.link/hearing