

Grannies take Switzerland to court on behalf of climate change

by Susanne Wenger Swiss Review December 2023

"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.

They have given the climate debate a new twist by arguing that their rights have been violated.



Verein KlimaSeniorinnen Schweiz and Others v. Switzerland (no. 53600/20)

Grand Chamber hearing - 29 March 2023

<https://www.echr.coe.int/w/verein-klimaseniorinnen-schweiz-and-others-v-switzerland-no-53600/20-1>

Rosmarie Wydler-Wäiti (left) and Anne Mahrer presenting their case during a Grand Chamber public hearing at the European Court of Human Rights in - 29 March 2023.



Photo: Keystone

Wydler-Wälti joined the green and women's movements when she was a young mother in the 1980s. So when *Senior Women for Climate Protection Switzerland* was founded in 2016, 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.

This group of 2,500 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 constitution 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 Swiss Federal agencies there were 474 heat-related deaths in Switzerland during the record-breaking heat of 2022, all among those over 75, with 60 percent of fatalities being women. Excess deaths due to heat were higher than in 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, unsuccessfully, to various Federal venues including the Federal Supreme Court, which said the women's rights had not been sufficiently affected.

In March of 2023, the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) conducted a public hearing in the Grand Chamber of 17 judges where the Swiss government representatives and the claimants' team of lawyers made their respective cases. In particular, the Swiss government argued that action on climate change is a complex challenge for politicians, not for courts

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."