

The Gender Dimension within the Aarhus Convention



Women in Europe for a Common Future

WECF, June 2014



1. The Right (of Women and Girls) to Public Participation

“Women in every part of the world continue to be largely marginalized from the political sphere, often as a result of discriminatory laws, practices, attitudes and gender stereotypes, low levels of education, lack of access to health care and the disproportionate effect of poverty on women...” (UN GA Resolution 66/130 of 2012 (A/RES/66/130)).

This also applies to the field of environmental decision-making. The Environment and Gender Index (EGI, IUCN, 2013) measures women’s participation in environmental decision-making according to whether countries are assigning women to international environmental delegations. Research shows an average of about 30 per cent women’s participation over the period from 2008-2012 and an average of 19 per cent of women heading delegations (EGI, p. 58).

This low level of women’s participation contravenes the Aarhus Convention’s objective which states in article 1 that “in order to contribute to the protection of the right of every person of present and future generations to live in an environment adequate to his or her health and well-being, each Party shall guarantee the rights of (...) public participation in decision-making (...) in environmental matters...”.

A guaranteed right of public participation contributes to strengthening democracy as well as other inherent values and human rights. Actions to increase the participation of marginalised and vulnerable groups, such as women and girls, in policies and programmes to close the gap in the enjoyment of human rights are essential, given that lack of participation in decision-making is a fundamental cause and consequence

of inequality (see OHCHR, Statement by 17 Special Procedures Mandate-Holders of the Human Rights Council on the Post-2015 Development Agenda, 2013).

The right of public participation - the core of the Aarhus Convention (articles 6, 7 and 8) – has been enshrined explicitly for women and girls in older international legal instruments, such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, 1979 (articles 7, 8 and 14 for rural women) and the Beijing Declaration (paras. 13, 16, 19, 20, 34 and 36) and Platform for Action, 1995. The Aarhus Convention does not explicitly recognise the right of public participation for women and girls, however, the definition of natural persons includes both sexes. The only reference to women can be found in article 1 of the Aarhus Convention: “... to live in an environment adequate to his or her health and well-being...”.

2. Equal Participation: A Prerequisite for Sustainable Development

A stronger focus on women's and girls' participation in environmental decision-making is needed as they have different experiences and can provide different know-how than men. Women and even more girls are often bearing the main brunt of environmental degradation (e.g. climate change related impacts), but they are also agents of change. It is their full public participation which is "... essential to achieve sustainable development." (Principle 20 of the Rio Declaration, 1992 and para. 43 of The Future We Want, 2012).

Women's and girls' participation is needed in all decision-making bodies, from parlia-

ment to government at local, regional and national level towards the executive suites of big, e.g. chemical companies. Action is needed to eliminate discriminatory legislation and prejudices, to remove de facto barriers for women's participation and to raise awareness amongst decision-makers and the population as well as to empower women and girls. At the same time a broadening of women's access to information has to be undertaken, inter alia, by guaranteeing proper access to communication technologies for girls and women, even for those who may be marginalised, including indigenous women, women with disabilities, women from rural areas and others.



3. Recommendations

I. Capacity-building:

Engagement at local level has to be encouraged as it has provided an important entry point for women to drive and lead solutions to sustainable development. WECF's work in cooperation with local partners in Kyrgyzstan shows the following: the consideration of women's needs has made a difference to the lives of the Kyrgyz rural population, at first in relation to safe drinking water and safe sanitation. Women and girls have had to carry water from large distances to their homes. Bad sanitation facilities not only at home, but also within schools resulted in girls often not attending classes. Within established Community Based Drinking Water Users' Unions (CDWUUs) women learned how to voice their concerns and priorities, took over responsibilities and shaped the management of water and sanitation of their local community. Once empowered women were encouraged to participate also at national level in decision-making processes, e.g. within the national target setting process of the UNECE Protocol on Water and Health, 1999.

II. Equal public participation in international forums:

Women and girls have to be able to participate in decision-making at international level; this requires political

will and financial means. Women do not only have to be part of delegations to international environmental negotiations. Decision 23/CP.18 "Promoting gender balance and improving the participation of women in UNFCCC negotiations and in the representation of Parties in bodies established pursuant to the Convention or the Kyoto Protocol" which calls for "gender balance" is not sufficient. Women's and girls concerns and needs have to be heard and have to be taken into consideration in order to make a real difference.

III. Sustainable Development Goals:

The Women's Major Group's comments (dated 17 June 2014) on the zero-draft presented by the Open Working Group on the Sustainable Development Goals co-chairs on 2 June 2014 regarding the proposed Goal 5 have to be supported: "Achieve gender equality, the full realization of women and girls' human rights and the empowerment of all women and girls everywhere." Furthermore, we recommend the adoption of the proposed target 5.8. related to public participation reading "by 2020 ensure full, equal and effective participation and leadership of women and girls at all levels of decision-making in the public and private spheres, including in conflict prevention, mediation and resolution."

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