



## **AWHHE:** Implementing the Human Rights to Water and Sanitation in Armenia

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### **The organisation:**



Armenian Women for Health and Healthy Environment (AWHHE) was established in 1999 as a non-governmental women's organisation of health professionals and environmentalists. The mission of AWHHE is to promote the human right to live in a healthy environment and to address environmental pollution. Key activities include raising public awareness about environmental pollutants, conducting independent monitoring and investigations on water supply management, and promotion of the Water and Health Protocol. In recent years water and sanitation has become the main focus of the organisation. Since 1999 AWHHE has implemented more than 90 projects for the promotion of sustainable sanitation and improvement of water supply. To effectively address the water and sanitation challenges in rural Armenia, AWHHE practices gender inclusive community involvement and strengthens their participation in decision-making.

### **The situation in Armenia**

After independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, Armenia experienced a period of transition to a market-driven economy. Over the last two decades significant political, economic and institutional reforms have gradually taken place in the country. One of the major areas undergoing change is the water and health sector. While Armenia has sufficient water resources to provide the total population with safe drinking water, insufficient investment and the collapse of water supply systems have resulted in inadequate and often unsanitary water supplies. 75-85% of water is lost on its way from source to consumers because of pipe deterioration and other reasons. Over the last

decade the Government of Armenia has taken important steps to improve access, reliability and quality of drinking water and its infrastructure. The water resource balance in many parts of the country has improved and water supply in certain areas has progressed with the help of private sector involvement. However, in most parts of Armenia the institutional framework for water supply delivery remains poor. In addition, the sanitation sector had been neglected, particularly in rural areas.

The framework for addressing the human rights to water and sanitation is *the UNECE Protocol on Water and Health*, in particular through setting specific targets and timeframes to achieve these. Each country that adopts the Protocol is obliged to provide access to safe water and adequate sanitation services for all its citizens. UNECE furthermore adopted a Gender Action Plan for 2012-2013 to implement the UNECE policy for gender equality and women's empowerment.<sup>1</sup> Women are an important group to target as they often play a key role in the stewardship of natural resources, yet are often neglected in formal decision-making processes.

### **The role of AWHHE**

After Armenia had signed the UNECE Protocol on Water and Health in 1999, AWHHE became a key actor in the implementation of the Protocol. As a national NGO, AWHHE functions as liaison between the government and civil society and represents the voice of civil society to ensure that policies give due consideration to the gender dimension of water and health.

AWHHE influences policy and monitors State projects to ensure better alignment with the reality on the ground and to safeguard that the local population benefits investments and interventions. At the same time AWHHE implements projects on service delivery that yield immediate results. An important part of the work of AWHHE is to strengthen local actors, in particular women, to become active contributors to safe water and adequate sanitation in their communities.

AWHHE works with a variety of partners at the different levels that the organisation is active on. On the international level AWHHE actively participates in the processes of implementation of Children Environmental Health Action Plan for Europe (CEHAPE) and UNECE/WHO Protocol on Water and Health. At national level, besides being a trusted partner of the Government, AWHHE participates in multistakeholder settings, such as the National Council on Sustainable Development facilitated by Prime Minister of Armenia and the Steering Committee of the National Policy Dialogue on water-related issues facilitated by the Ministry of Nature Protection.

By raising awareness and building capacity of local actors, AWHHE builds partnerships for sustainable management and up scaling.

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<sup>1</sup> UNECE Gender Action Plan: Key to Regional Sustainable Development  
[http://www.unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/Gender/publication/ECE\\_GAP\\_Framework\\_website1.pdf](http://www.unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/Gender/publication/ECE_GAP_Framework_website1.pdf)

## Main achievements during the Water for Life Decade

### Policies, legal frameworks and institutional mechanisms

In 2007 the Ministry of Territorial Administration involved AWHHE in the Steering Committee of the National Policy Dialogue to draft a Financing Strategy for Rural Water Supply and Sanitation in Armenia. The minimum water supply and sanitation standards were agreed upon by the stakeholders. This involvement elevated AWHHE's profile and strengthened its capacity as policy advocate in the field.

AWHHE played a significant role in the Target setting process under the UNECE/WHO Protocol on Water and Health in Armenia. Through its public consultation processes in 3



regions and expertise in water and sanitation management, AWHHE supported the government in developing draft targets appropriate for its national and local needs. The results of NGO consultations were incorporated in the draft targets. The process of developing targets, target dates and measures to comply with the requirements of the Protocol - and thus to promote at national level the protection of life and health of the public both in terms of individual

and collective aspects, as well as to improve the management and use of water resources, including the protection of ecosystems, to improve safe water supply and discharge, and to control and reduce water-related diseases – is still on-going.

At an international level, AWHHE is lobbying to encourage neighbouring countries to adopt the Protocol on Water and Health so that the entire pan-European region practices healthy water management.

### Service delivery

AWHHE implements water and sanitation projects across Armenia resulting in more than



25 projects to date. Schools are a primary target for these projects as they are relatively easier to reach and have a larger scope, compared to individual households. AWHHE has conducted awareness raising interventions among pupils, staff and parents about environmental health risks and social injustice related to environmental pollution involving more than 2000 people. The water and sanitation related projects

implemented by AWHHE in 15 rural communities, benefit around 20,000 people.

### Women's empowerment, capacity development

One major achievement of AWHHE is the inclusion of women in the national dialogue on the Protocol on Water and Health. AWHHE has a consistent focus on women groups in all its activities. The aim is to increase the role of rural women in the decision making processes at both local and national levels. The many seminars, workshops and trainings

that AWHHE has organised enhance women's awareness and role in those communities' daily life and help women to discover their abilities and to be active participants in civil society. The implemented projects developed leadership abilities in the concerned women, resulting in their increased involvement in community problem resolution by cooperative means. Women Leaders are now actively participating in administrative life of communities of Solak and Ditak villages.

### **Spin-off**

The water and sanitation projects implemented in schools had a snowball effect on the improvement of overall water supply in Ditak, Hayanist, Fantan and Solak villages. Tens of individual households ecosan toilets were constructed in target villages resulting in improved hygienic conditions.

In pursuit of social and economic development of rural communities, AWHHE has carried out combined water and agricultural projects throughout Armenia (villages Voskevan, Solak, Ditak, Saghmusavan, Hayanist, Khachpar, Fantan). As a result, local women increased their economic activities thanks to construction of solar dryers for drying fruits and vegetable, greenhouses for seedlings cultivation, implementation of small grant programmes on beekeeping, rabbit breeding, purchasing of hens for egg production. The activities were scaled up at the local level of communities. There were organised fair exhibition of agricultural products to help increase the income of women farmers.

### **Challenges**

The multi-level activities that AWHHE is engaged with bring about a number of challenges. First, there is not a real tradition of government - civil society cooperation at local, district or national level. It takes time and effort to build the necessary trust and relationships between the government, AWHHE and the population to ensure fruitful cooperation. Secondly, the success and sustainability of projects depends on acceptance and participation of the local population. Small-scale projects that are adapted to local circumstances and take into account cultural differences have proven to be more successful than large-scale projects. The scaling-up and replication of small-scale, tailor-made projects in decentralised settings is labour intensive and requires social and cultural sensitivity as well as adequate funds. The lack of sufficient financial resources remains a constant battle for AWHHE.