

UNFPA'S SUPPORT TO ECUADOR GHANA IN THE AREA OF HUMAN RIGHTS

The case of the Free Maternity Law

The Free Maternity Law adopted in 1998 is implemented through a national programme supported by the government as part of the health strategies aimed to universalize women's access to maternal health. The law includes the establishment of User Committees (CUS) entrusted with encouraging citizenship co-responsibility for promoting maternal/child health and the follow-up and monitoring of the application of the Law. Their specific functions are, among others, to:

- a. Comply with information related to health services;
- b. Identify and prioritize community needs and aspirations;
- c. Participate in the local evaluation of activities in cooperation with the operational units;
- d. Channel people's health requirements;
- e. Bring cases of alleged abuse, negligence, discrimination, wrong use of assigned funds or any other type of action or omission involving non-fulfillment of the Law to the Local Solidarity Health Fund Management Committee;
- f. Notify the operational units regarding cases of maternal and infant death taking place in their communities.

UNFPA, among others, has provided support for the implementation of the Free Maternity Law and the establishment of User Committees. While in 2001 the existence of 11 User Committees was known,¹ at the present time 89 User Committees in 43 cantons in 13 provinces² are registered in the National Council of Women (CONAMU). It is also probable that others exist but have not been registered.³

Within the framework of the Law, UNFPA has supported government initiatives to deliver maternal health services through the country. Particular efforts have been developed to train health providers for the improvement of the services. Special attention is devoted to health services in indigenous areas, where women are usually excluded. In these cases, UNFPA has worked along with health providers to identify and overcome cultural barriers and bias within the health system.

In five provinces, UNFPA also focuses its support to government efforts to reduce maternal mortality, preventing HIV/AIDS, and in places where the population is largely indigenous, establishing an indigenous intercultural health model.

¹ Six in the province of Loja in the Pan American Health Organization PAHO's "Healthy Spaces" Program; four in Guayas promoted by the Ecuadorian Women's Political Coordinator (CPME) and the National Council of Women (CONAMU); one in Cotopaxi, also promoted by the CONAMU. Of these eleven committees, at that time only seven were acting directly in the fulfillment of the Law. (Systematization, 2001)

² Ecuador has 210 cantons (municipal jurisdiction) and 22 provinces. Every canton is divided in urban and rural parishes. Rural parishes elect 5 members to the Parish Boards, the smallest local level authority. The municipalities are run by mayors and the provincial councils by elected prefects.

³ Information provided by Carolina Posso who is in charge of User Committees in the National Council of Women (CONAMU).

At the local level, UNFPA also supports the promotion of the Free Maternity Law and works with peasant, community and youth organizations, by encouraging the integration of gender concerns.
