

**THE INSTITUTE OF THE COMMISSIONER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS
(OMBUDSMAN) OF THE REPUBLIC OF AZERBAIJAN**

**EFFECTIVE PRACTICE IN ELIMINATING PREVENTABLE
MATERNAL MORTALITY AND MORBIDITY**

Since the adoption of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in the UN Summit of 2000 numerous activities were implemented and positive achievements were gained for reaching all MDGs in Azerbaijan. In order to achieve MDG 5 (Maternal Mortality), various measures were taken at the state level as well as by the Institute of the Commissioner for Human Rights of the Republic of Azerbaijan. The work carried out exemplifies effective practice for decreasing the rate of maternal mortality and morbidity in the country. It should be noted Ombudsman as National Human Rights Institution is involved into MDGs covering maternity and mortality issues. For implementing MDGs, the Ombudsman cooperates with governmental bodies, the Scientific-Research Institute of Maternity and Gynecology of the Ministry of Health, as well as with Azerbaijan Women and Development Center which is the only organization in Azerbaijan with the consultative status of ECOSOS, also with Ombudsman's resource centers functioning within this organization.

- First, for reforming maternal and infant protection system the “State Program on the Protection of Maternal and Child Health” (2006 - 2010) was adopted. It covered the following areas: organization of the population's reproductive health protection and ensuring safe maternity; strengthening maternal and technical base of medical facilities providing obstetric/pediatric services and supplying them with contemporary medical diagnostic equipment; improvement of obstetric, gynecologic and neonatal services; better provision of obstetric facilities with medicine; organization of country interregional centers; training of personnel in the spheres of

obstetrics, gynecology and pediatrics as well as advancing their qualifications.

- Furthermore, with the aim to combine, organize and efficiently realize all measures the Ministry of Health approved the National Strategy on Reproductive Health (2008 - 2015). The strategy is targeted at improvement of reproductive health of all population groups and has such directions as maternal and infant health; reproductive choice (family planning and safe abortion); prevention of STDs (including cervical cancer) and HIV/AIDS; reproductive health of adolescents; as well as gender-based violence and sexual exploitation. Along with MDG 5, the strategy covers attainment of MDGs 3 (promote gender equality and empower women), 4 (reduce child mortality rate) and 6 (combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases).
- In accordance with the strategy and state programme special concepts and protocols on maternal health were prepared upon the decree of the Ministry of Health. Moreover, monitoring of medical facilities was conducted, and trainings for health workers, especially for midwives and gynecologists, were carried out. Sufficient work was implemented regarding the improvement of reproductive health and rights of adolescents within the National Strategy. It included the conduction of legal education among teenagers, their parents as well as appropriate health workers via dissemination of appropriate brochures as well as organization of round-table discussion and seminars. Besides, for ensuring gender equality issues of gender-based violence are included into the content of textbooks on reproductive health for the students of medical higher educational facilities and postgraduate education. Also, the Ministry of Health defined numerous healthcare facilities as centers of providing assistance to victims of sexual exploitation.

- It should be mentioned that the Commissioner for Human Rights has made a contribution to the reduce of maternal mortality and morbidity as well as to the implementation of the National Strategy on Reproductive Health as well as the State Program on the Protection of Maternal and Child Health.
- First, upon the initiative of the Commissioner, the public discussions on the law on “Protection of Reproductive Rights and Family Planning” were launched. With the view of promoting the adoption of this law the Commissioner organized round table discussions dedicated to the given legislation as well as meetings for lobbying purpose with participation of parliamentarians, representatives of appropriate state agencies, UNICEF Baku Office, healthcare services, NGOs and mass media. Although the law has not been adopted yet, the Commissioner continuously emphasizes the importance of its adoption, provision of services on family planning and implementation of the reproductive rights. In addition, in order to improve the situation of reproductive rights in the country, the Commissioner regularly submits recommendations to the Parliament, Cabinet of Ministers and other state agencies. The recommendations cover such issues as adoption and improvement of the legislation regarding reproductive rights; collection of appropriate statistic on maternal mortality and morbidity; expansion of educational work on reproductive health and family planning (especially among refugees, IDPs, ethnic minorities and rural areas of the country); development of healthcare services for mothers and infants; strengthening the cooperation between relevant state agencies as well as NGOs, cooperation with appropriate UN treaty bodies.
- The Ombudsman Institute as NHRI cooperates with the Ministry of Health, also in connection with advertising and awareness-raising on reproductive health of adolescents. The Commissioner together with the Ministry’s Department on Combating HIV/AIDS has conducted trainings in Baku and

regions, informed the population about AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases, organized special trainings for teenagers and youth at secondary and boarding schools, disseminated prepared placards, posters, brochures, and spread the information in collaboration with authorities, NGOs, TV and mass media. The Scientific-Research Institute on Obstetrics and Gynecology of the Ministry of Health has provided the Institute with useful information on reproductive health which was used during educational campaigns among the population of various regions as well as in preparation of brochures. With the aim to support the campaign of the Council of Europe on combating violence against children started at the end of the previous year upon the initiative of the Commissioner the discussions on violence against children, early marriage, reproductive right, fight against HIV/AIDS and other relevant topics were conducted. The events were carried out together with the Scientific-Research Institute of Maternity and Gynecology of the Ministry of Health at the Buta Youth-Friendly Clinic Center with the involvement of children and parents. Also, the Commissioner cooperates with the State Committee on Family, Women and Children Affairs and organizes joint meetings, participates at numerous events as well as exchanges with available data and information on reproductive rights. The Commissioner considers that the strong cooperation is a key for improved and integrated implementation of all human rights. Along with that, upon the proposal of the Commissioner the Council of Europe Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse was signed by Azerbaijan on 17 November 2008. Now, the Commissioner is lobbying the ratification of this Convention by the Parliament. It should be mentioned that the Commissioner will raise the problem of adoption of this Convention at the event to be organized by the Parliament on April 4, 2011.

- Another best practice of the Commissioner is the collaboration with international organizations. The Commissioner maintains relations with the

UNFPA, UNICEF, UNAIDS and the NHRIs of other countries. By means of these organizations and institutes, the Commissioner learns the international experience on provision of reproductive rights and prevention of maternal mortality and morbidity, the legislation adopted in other countries, actions carried out and mechanisms implemented. The Commissioner periodically meets with the UNICEF and UNFPA local office directors and discusses a variety of matters on human rights.

- The Commissioner regularly organizes conferences, round-table discussions and other events on reproductive rights, reproductive health, importance of family planning as well as prevention of HIV/AIDS and STDs. Parliamentarians, representatives of state agencies, NGOs, international organizations, and mass media take part in these events. Such meetings raise attention to the above-mentioned issues, produce useful recommendations, further improve implementation mechanisms of the appropriate legislations as well as national strategies, and unify efforts of relevant structures on the provision of reproductive rights.
- Furthermore, for conduction of the monitoring on promotion of the National Action Plan on Protection of Human Rights (NAP), the Commissioner has carried out public hearings in 58 districts of the country. During these public hearings, among other areas of provision of human rights, the Commissioner paid special attention to informing the population on reproductive health, nutrition of infants, maternities, family planning as well as spread of HIV/AIDS and other STDs. During the trips to regions the Commissioner also observed the conditions and services in local hospitals and polyclinics as well as provided necessary recommendations on their improvement. With the aim to address the needs of the above-mentioned facilities with necessary equipment regarding the provision of reproductive health, the Commissioner applied to the appropriate state agencies and could solve the

problem. It is noteworthy to mention that the Commissioner continues examination of medical facilities, organization of educational events for people of rural areas and submits recommendations to the state bodies.

- Special importance should be attached to the conduction of the VIIth Baku International Conference of Ombudsmen titled “Bioethics, human rights and new technologies: legal and ethic aspects of reproductive health and family planning” and devoted to June 18 – Human Rights Day in Azerbaijan and 200th anniversary of the Ombudsman Institution was held in Baku jointly with the UNESCO from June 17 – 19, 2009. The conference has gathered the Ombudsmen from all over the world and contributed to the strengthening of their cooperation. The Conference covered such subject as bioethics and the protection of human rights and dignity in the field of biomedicine, realization of principles of the UNESCO Universal Declaration on Bioethics and Human Rights in CIS countries, national legislations of the CIS Member-States in the field of bioethics, bioethical problems of reproductive health, ethical aspects of transplantation of human organs, etc. Moreover, two seminars were organized within the event. First seminar gave the participants, specialists in the field of medicine and bioethics, the opportunity to get acquainted with the experience of the most active national bioethics committees, to share knowledge about new technologies, to discuss the issues regarding the protection of human rights and dignity in the context of the modern bioethics as well as practical steps for establishing local ethics committees in the Republic of Azerbaijan. The Second seminar gathered the NHRIs, ombudspersons and experts in the field of human rights and raised for the discussion the new institutions and mechanisms of the protection of human rights. At the end of the conference, Baku declaration was adopted by the participants. Improvement of the collaboration with the country Parliament, and relevant bodies, as well with NGOs for more efficient protection of human rights in relation to bioethics, realization of

joint projects with universal and regional international organizations including National Human Rights Institutions etc were reflected in the Declaration. The document stressed the necessity of improvement of science, modern technologies and biomedicine, provision of respect to human rights in the context of biomedical researches, promotion of ethic norms and standard envisaged in international legal acts on human rights. International experts and Ombudsmen appreciated positively innovative activity and initiatives of the Azerbaijani Ombudsman in human rights sphere.

- During trips to regions, the Commissioner as well as members of the Institute staff held meetings and trainings with the population, including women of reproductive age, for informing them on reproductive health, contraception, family planning, significance of breastfeeding, as well as on HIV/AIDS and ways of its protection. A special emphasize was made on the informing of attendants about the negative consequences of early marriage for the health of future mother and called population to eliminate such cases. At these meetings, the Commissioner had numerous conversations with women which let her learn their problems regarding reproductive health, family planning and infants feeding. These trainings and meetings covered various strata of the population, especially IDPs, refugees, young families, representatives of ethnic minorities and people living in rural and boarding areas, as well as different educational facilities. The regional centers of the Commissioner are also successful in organization of trainings for local women, provision them with free consultations and sending complaints to the Head Office. Besides, the Commissioner regularly invites the UN experts to regional offices for conduction of events on human rights, including reproductive rights.

- The Commissioner contributes to the implementation of the National Action Plan on Family Planning by providing community based services implied by the mentioned strategy. The main aim of the community based services is to raise the awareness of the population, especially fertile women, on family planning, importance of intervals between pregnancies, harm of abortions, and contraceptive methods.
- Additionally, as a National Preventive Mechanism, the Commissioner regularly visits detention places of women. Here, the Commissioner also informs women prisoners about their reproductive rights as well as learns the conditions and state of pregnant women. Upon revealing any violations, the Commissioner addresses the administration of the prison or the state agencies. Following the recommendations of the Commissioner, the gynecology cabinets started functioning in detention facilities of women in order to protect their reproductive health.
- One of the other best practices of the Commissioner is the cooperation with relevant NGOs on promotion of reproductive rights among the population. As it was stated before the Commissioner invites NGOs to round-table discussions, meetings, conferences and similar events on reproductive rights. Moreover, in order to ensure the sustainability of the collaboration with NGOs, in April, 2003, the Council of Independent Experts was established at the Ombudsman. Members of influential non-governmental organizations and civil society dealing with protection of human rights, including reproductive rights, are represented at the Council of Experts. The Commissioner has built effective work with the Azerbaijan Women and Development Center (AWDC). Together with the Institute of the Commissioner there were conducted joint conferences and seminars with involvement of parliamentarians, experts on women's rights, staff members of the ministries and committees as well as community members. In order to

attract wider audience, including population of state's regions and remote areas, women among refugees/IDPs, young families and youth, the Center translated the Beijing Platform of 1995 for Action and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women into Azerbaijan Language and submitted complementary report to the CEDAW. In this regard various meetings were held with the participation of women from remote areas and other representatives of the society. In order to expand the enlightenment work in the given sphere, infant mothers and baby friendly centers were jointly created in some of the healthcare facilities. Upon the initiative of the Commissioner as well as with the support of the center's staff mother-to-mother assistance in breastfeeding was initiated. It is important to mention that within the AWDC Resource Center for Old People and Azerbaijan Child and Youth Peace Network are functioning. Both of them are resource centers of the Commissioner targeted at two groups of the population: aged women and youth. The resource centers constantly carry out informative activities in remote areas, raise awareness of people on family planning, harm of abortions, contraception methods as well as the importance of regular consultation with professional gynecologists.