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Nursing and midwifery

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Key facts

- There are an estimated 29 million nurses worldwide and 2.2 million midwives. WHO estimates a shortage of 4.5 million nurses and 0.31 million midwives by the year 2030 (1).
- That will bring the a global shortage of health workers estimated for 2030 to 4.8 million nurses and midwives, with the greatest gaps found in countries in Africa, South-East Asia and the WHO Eastern Mediterranean Region, as well as some parts of Latin America (1).
- Nurses and midwives play a pivotal role in improving health and contributing to the wider economy. Investing in them is imperative to achieve efficient, effective, resilient and sustainable health systems. They not only provide essential care but also play a critical role in shaping health policies and driving primary health care. Nurses and midwives deliver care in emergency settings and safeguard the sustainability of health systems globally.
- Globally, 67% of the health and social workforce are women compared to 41% in all employment sectors. Nursing and midwifery occupations represent a significant share of the female workforce.
- More than 80% of the world's nurses work in countries that are home to half of the world's population. And one in every eight nurses practices in a country other than the one where they were born or trained.
- Higher levels of female nurses are positively correlated with health service coverage, and life expectancy and negatively correlated with infant mortality.

Overview

Nurses and midwives are central to Primary Health Care and are often the first and sometimes the only health professional that people see and the quality of their initial assessment, care and treatment is vital. They are also part of their local community – sharing its culture, strengths and vulnerabilities – and can shape and deliver effective interventions to meet the needs of patients, families and communities.

WHO response

WHO's work relating to nursing and midwifery is currently directed by [World Health Assembly resolution WHA74.15 \(2021\)](#) which calls on WHO Member States and WHO to strengthen nursing and midwifery through the [Global Strategic Directions for Nursing and Midwifery \(SDNM\) 2021–2025](#). The SDNM is an interrelated set of policy priorities that can help countries to ensure that midwives and nurses optimally contribute to achieving universal health coverage (UHC) and other population health goals .

The SDNM comprises four policy focus areas: education, jobs, leadership, and service delivery. Each area has a “strategic direction” articulating a goal for the five-year period, and includes between two and four policy priorities. If enacted and sustained, these policy priorities can support advancement along the four strategic directions: 1) educating enough midwives and nurses with competencies to meet population health needs; 2) creating jobs, managing migration, and recruiting and retaining midwives and nurses where they are most needed; 3) strengthening nursing and midwifery leadership throughout health and academic systems; and 4) ensuring midwives and nurses are supported, respected, protected, motivated and equipped to safely and optimally contribute in their service delivery settings.

WHO engages ministries of health, the Government Chief Nurses and Midwives (GCNMOs) and other relevant stakeholders to enable effective planning, coordination and management of nursing and midwifery programmes in countries. The Global Forum for the Government Chief Nurses and Midwives, established in 2004, is organized by WHO and meets every two years. It is a Forum for senior nursing and midwifery officials to develop and inform areas of shared interest. WHO also engages with academic institutions specialised in nursing and midwifery. Forty-seven academic centres are designated as Collaborating Centres for Nursing and Midwifery with WHO. The academic centres are affiliated to the [Global Network of WHO Collaborating Centres for Nursing and Midwifery](#).

WHO has established a Nursing and Midwifery Global Community of Practice (NMGCoP). This is a virtual network created to provide a forum for nurses and midwives around the world to collaborate and network with each other, with WHO and with other key stakeholders (e.g WHO collaborating centres for nursing and midwifery, WHO Academy, Nursing and Midwifery Associations and Institutions.) The network will provide discussion forums, a live lecture programme, opportunities to develop and share policies, WHO documents and tools, and facilitated innovation workshops, masterclasses and webinars.

The Nursing and Midwifery Global Community of Practice is free to join and available to nurses and midwives everywhere. From May 2022 it will be possible to access the virtual community via a smartphone, by downloading the Nursing and Midwifery Global Community of Practice App Nurses Beyond the Bedside_WHO_CS66 Side Eventavailable for Android and IOS system via the APP store.

A 2017 Report on the history of nursing and midwifery in the World Health Organization 1948–2017, demonstrates how WHO, since its inception, has given this workforce a voice, and highlights the critical role nurses and midwives play in improving health outcomes across the world.

References

1. Boniol M, Kunjumen T, Nair TS, et al. The global health workforce stock and distribution in 2020 and 2030: a threat to equity and ‘universal’ health coverage? *BMJ Global Health* 2022;7:e009316.

WHO resolutions on nursing and midwifery

- WHA64.6 - Health workforce strengthening
- WHA64.7 - Strengthening nursing and midwifery
- WHA59.27 - Strengthening nursing and midwifery