

The status of nursing and midwifery in the world

Two reports mark the International Year of the Nurse and the Midwife, and World Health Day, April 7, in honour of their vital work providing health services. *State of the World's Nursing 2020*, released today, is a comprehensive analysis of nursing around the world, produced by WHO with the International Council of Nurses and *Nursing Now*. The third global *State of the World's Midwifery*, building on 2011 and 2014 editions, is due in 2021, and will be foreshadowed by a May, 2020, forum for action organised by WHO, the International Confederation of Midwives, and the International Council of Nurses. These evidence-based reports are essential tools to inform international, regional, and national policy dialogues about where and how to invest in the nursing and midwifery workforces to improve primary health care, strengthen emergency response and resilience, and achieve health for all.

Indeed, without nurses and midwives there would be no health care. Both are crucial to realising the promises of the sustainable development agenda and universal health coverage. But meeting these aims will require a recalibration of education, workforce planning, and investment levels to relieve worldwide shortages of these health workers. For nurses, the *State of the World's Nursing* lays out a comprehensive compendium, providing detailed analyses of the present and future needs for supporting the diverse global nursing workforce of 27.9 million individuals. It shows vast inequities in the distribution of nurses. 90% of the global nursing shortage is in Africa, southeast Asia, and the Eastern Mediterranean. Challenges differ by region. In the Americas and Europe, the workforce is ageing and efforts must go towards attracting young people to the profession in order to maintain health-care services. In the Eastern Mediterranean and Western Pacific, the relatively young workforce must be retained, promoted, and developed into leadership roles. In high-income countries, where 15% of nurses are trained abroad, mobility must be more effectively and ethically managed.

For midwifery, recognition of their full breadth of skills, knowledge, and care of the health of women and communities remains a challenge. Midwives, and the antenatal care they provide, are crucial to

preventing the complications and illnesses that lead to maternal and child mortality. Midwifery services also go beyond assisting childbirth to caring for pregnant women, neonates, and families, as well as providing family planning and reproductive health services. These comprehensive roles have been inadequately recognised, a conclusion of the *Lancet* 2014 Midwifery Series that remains relevant today. The 2021 *State of the World's Midwifery* report should provide a picture of progress on the global call to action issued in 2014 to ensure that midwifery be supported by quality education, regulation, and effective human and financial resource management. Crucially, there remains a need to champion midwifery as a profession, and ensure that all women have access to these services.

As much as nurses and midwives are vital for delivering health for all, it seems clear that the full potential of nursing and midwifery is not being used by the global health and medical communities. An inescapable conclusion is that this is due to gender bias and the low value placed on women's work, which characterises these so-called feminised professions. Globally, 90% of the nursing and midwifery workforce are women. For nursing, male participation ranges from 5% in the Western Pacific region to 24% in Africa, but the bulk of nursing leadership positions are held by men and a gender pay gap exists. A 2019 WHO working paper shows in Europe, for example, that male nurses and midwives are more than twice as likely as females to be in the highest income category. And female nurses and midwives disproportionately face discrimination and sexual harassment at work, which increases poor health, stress, and attrition. Hand in hand with policy reform to support nursing and midwifery in delivering health for all, stronger efforts must be made to ensure the conditions and environments for decent work, fair treatment, zero tolerance for discrimination, and equal pay.

State of the World's Nursing and *State of the World's Midwifery* are essential reports—they give foundation to global conversations about caring, well-being, the value of work, and equality. Investing in nurses and midwives will deliver the health that is needed. Giving nursing and midwifery the status they deserve is long overdue. ■ *The Lancet*



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For the **State of the World's Nursing report** see <https://www.who.int/publications-detail/nursing-report-2020>

For more on **midwifery in 2020** see <https://www.who.int/news-room/detail/20-02-2020-key-dates-for-nursing-and-midwifery-discussions-in-may-2020>

For **The Lancet Midwifery Series** see <https://www.thelancet.com/series/midwifery>

For more on **gender equity in the health workforce** see https://www.who.int/hrh/resources/gender_equality-health_workforce_analysis/en/