

Key Messages from The State of the World's Nursing report, 2025

Introduction

We must strengthen nursing capacity at this time of economic uncertainty, climate change, and persistent health inequities.

Without immediate intervention, the slowing progress in key health indicators and reversals in UHC progress suggest a looming crisis in global health service delivery.

Nurses can drive progress on SDGS, delivering universal health coverage, advancing health equity, and ensuring the resilience of health systems.

SoWN 2025 provides the data to derive the needed policy actions and investments.

Leadership

The gap between the existence of nursing leadership positions and their actual authority represents a missed opportunity for health system strengthening.

While 82% of countries report having a Government Chief Nursing Officer, many lack the resources and authority to effectively influence policy.

Leadership development programmes are available in only a quarter of low-income countries, requiring substantial investment to build the next generation of nursing leaders.

The Health Workforce Context

The global health workforce shortage is projected to reach 11 million by 2030. Countries must react and revise their approach to workforce planning and investment accordingly.

Traditional approaches focusing solely on education or recruitment are insufficient; countries must adopt comprehensive health labour market approaches that address both supply and demand factors.

Cross-sector collaboration between health, education, finance, and labour ministries is vital.

Nursing Roles and Contributions to Health

The expanding scope of nursing practice in promoting, providing, and protecting health presents both many opportunities to drive progress in health-related SDGs.

While nurses increasingly take on advanced roles in many settings, health systems often lack the regulatory frameworks and support structures to optimise these contributions.

Countries must modernise regulatory frameworks and enable working environments to fully leverage nursing capabilities in addressing contemporary health challenges.

Jobs/Employment

While global stock is growing and the shortage is decreasing, the pace of progress has slowed and masks diverging trends across and within regions.

Employment patterns reveal dangerous inequities that threaten global health security.

The concentration of 78% of nurses in countries with 49% of the population indicates systemic market failures requiring coordinated international action.

Systemic market failures require coordinated international action to address cross-border nurse migration; source and destination countries must collaborate to prevent further strain on vulnerable health systems.

Without intervention in both source and destination countries, migration patterns will further weaken already vulnerable health systems, particularly in Africa and the Eastern Mediterranean regions.

Education

Graduation rates will have to increase to offset current and future shortages, fueled by population growth and ageing of the nursing workforce.

Countries need comprehensive education system strengthening strategies that include faculty development, technology integration, and innovative clinical training models.

Issues such as faculty shortages, limited clinical training sites and supervisors, and infrastructure constraints cannot be solved through isolated interventions.

The trend toward bachelor's degree requirements must be aligned with the ability to capitalize on differentiated and optimized roles.

Service Delivery

Working conditions and regulatory frameworks show concerning variations that affect both quality of care and workforce retention.

The lack of mental health support systems (reported by only 42% of countries) and wide wage disparities suggest a need for global standards for decent work in nursing.

Advanced practice nursing roles, while promising for expanding access to care, require more standardised approaches to education, regulation, and scope of practice.

Policy directions through 2030

Adapt and extend the 12 global strategic policy priorities by 2026–2030 across four domains of employment, education, service delivery, and leadership.

Mobilise targeted investments and multisector collaboration by engaging finance, labour, and education ministries, plus educators, regulators, employers, associations, and civil society to support workforce forecasting, expand training capacity, improve working conditions, and ensure equitable nurse distribution.

Elevate five emerging priorities including advanced practice nursing, gender equity, digital health technologies, climate-health action, and tailored support for nurses in fragile, conflict-affected, and vulnerable settings to meet evolving health system and population needs.

Conclusion

Although the global nursing stock is rising, many countries face declining nurse densities due to attrition, retirement, migration, and population pressures, undermining progress toward UHC.

There is an urgent need for health labour market planning to expand education/training capacity, create sustainable jobs, improve working conditions, and strengthen governance—leveraging GCNO authority and standardizing APN roles.

Uptake of the policy priorities in SoWN 2025 can help close service gaps and advance SDG targets, while spurring economic growth by creating decent jobs and enhancing women's workforce participation.