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Gender equality and nursing leadership top the billing at ICN Congress

High level speakers call for nurse leaders to take the nursing message into politics

Geneva, Switzerland, 3 November 2021 – United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet, US Congresswoman Lauren Underwood and Seychelles Health Minister Peggy Vidot spoke at the International Council of Nurses (ICN) Congress today, honouring nurses for their contributions during the pandemic.

Nurses around the world were lauded for the care and treatment they have provided for patients with COVID-19 over the past 18 months and urged to take their voices into the realms of policymaking and politics to have the biggest impact on patients' outcomes.

Introducing the session, ICN President Annette Kennedy said gender inequalities contribute to higher female mortality across the life course, and affect the health of infants and children, and by extension, the whole family and community.

United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet, who was part of the panel session on *Gender equality and empowering women: making life better for everyone* said:

“Thank you for taking up the cause of gender equality and women’s empowerment, issues that are inextricably linked to the rights of nurses, and which are crucial to many other sectors of the economy, and to all societies everywhere.

Dr Bachelet said the world sees the courage of nurses when they are confronted by the most extreme situations, including in conditions of conflict, in disasters, and during the current pandemic.

“We see your courage, your determination, your commitment for principles, your defence for human rights, and no words can suffice to express our thanks to each one of you. The pandemic has taught us that robust, resilient and inclusive health systems are key to build resilient, fair, equal and successful societies. This is a lesson that every decision maker needs to learn: universal health coverage is not a cost, it is an immediately effective investment in development, peace and wellbeing.

‘Nurses continue to face many challenges: we know this is a highly gendered reality, with women the majority in the nursing workforce. And despite your importance to healthcare, nurses are frequently underpaid and disregarded, your views, needs and rights neglected.

‘Empowering healthcare workers as human rights defenders can prevent human rights violations occurring in the care of patients, it also promotes and protects the rights of healthcare workers, reduces power asymmetries, contributes to decent working conditions and builds a climate of respect.

“This brings me to a critical point that connects both gender equality and the rights of nurses – participation and leadership. Initiatives such as this congress are key to building our forces for this central issue: solidarity and sisterhood are critical to face the discrimination, resistance and even hostility that women often face in healthcare settings, especially in decision-making spaces and when assuming positions of power.

You, who are fully aware that your work protects rights and saves lives every day, know how vital it is that we dismantle the deeply rooted inequalities, discriminatory social norms and gender stereotypes that obstruct our initiatives and seek to silence or ignore our voices, and deny our stories and experiences.

‘Our struggle for equality has made powerful progress in many respects, but although women hold around 70% of jobs in the health workforce globally, almost 70% of the world’s health organisations are headed by men. Only 20% have gender parity on their boards, and just one quarter have gender parity at senior management levels.

‘Addressing gender inequality in the health workforce must be a priority because health systems will be stronger when women have an equal say in the design of national health plans, policies and systems, because better health systems build stronger economies and better, fitter and more equal societies.

‘That is why we must continue to press for gender equality: it is well past time, for governments to address these crucial issues with concrete and focused leadership. Nurses and healthcare workers must have a full and equal seat at the table in reforming policies and designing and implementing health response for the benefit of everyone. I view your work as essential for human rights, and I thank and support you for caring for your patients, and their rights, and for working to build stronger and more resilient and equal public health systems for your communities. I, and the United Nations, stand with you in your work.”

High Commissioner Bachelet was joined by Dr Roopa Dhatt, Executive Director and Co-Founder of Women in Global Health; Mariam Jalabi, Representatives of the Syrian opposition Coalition to the United Nations and co-founder of the Syrian Women’s Political Movement; and Dr Nomafrench Mbombo, Western Cape Minister of Health, South Africa.

In a plenary session on nursing leadership, **Seychelles Health Minister Peggy Vidot** said the pandemic had proven that nurse leadership in public health is more vital now than ever. Ms Vidot, who is a nurse and midwife who trained in the United Kingdom, challenged nurse leaders to look beyond their usual horizons and take the nursing message into health and social care policy, and into politics.

Ms Vidot said: “As a nurse and a politician I am very aware of the enormous impact of health policies on the whole of society. All players in health are being called on to exercise the highest level of leadership during this pandemic. Nurses occupy a special position as the interface between the community and the health system. They are therefore well placed to have first-hand knowledge of how health policies impact the individuals, families and communities.

“Nurses need to venture into areas not traditionally associated with nursing, they need to become engaged in politics to drive change. Nurses need to move beyond the confines of the health border at times. We need to have nurses in politics, to bring the nursing voice to policies which influence the economic, environmental and social determinants of health. We need to have nurses sitting at the tables that matter. Nurses need to be politicians in parliaments where political debates are taking place on social political issues and where legislation is being passed. I believe that nurses are vital agents of change, given the right environment.”

She spoke about important lessons she had learned on her journey from nurse and midwife to Minister for Health that could be useful for nurse leaders everywhere.

“As nurse leaders, look beyond nursing and health. Look for opportunities, be ready to consider the environment and look for the bigger picture. Align our values and create the right culture, build partnerships and look for meaningful networks. Be persistent and steadfast in one’s vision. There will be different moments in one’s leadership, so be ready to respond to changes in the healthcare environment, including organisational expectations and changes to local, national, regional and global policies. Trace out the different prejudices that come up and manage resistance to nursing leadership. Always work to build a system and to develop others to take over from us. Look for patterns and opportunities for growth and create leaders in nursing. Use the nursing and health lens to see other sectors and transform leadership in public health. Create the system that you desire, and which will be most valuable to the people we serve.”

United States Congresswoman Lauren Underwood, who is also a nurse, praised the world’s nurses for their bravery and tireless contributions during the pandemic, and urged them to ensure that public healthcare is modernised to meet the needs of all communities.

Ms Underwood said: “The pandemic has shown what nurses do in hours of great need: we show up, we serve, and we save lives. To make the type of transformative change that we know is needed, nurses must be on the front lines of decision-making processes that will shape our future health systems.”

Ms Underwood encouraged nurses to contact their elected officials to inform them about what they have seen and experienced during the pandemic and what need to be done to be better prepared for the next public health emergency.

She also said nurses should consider running for office themselves: “Whatever form it takes, our leadership is needed now more than ever. The choices we make today will shape the global health systems of tomorrow. Nurses’ skills, training and passion will help us to not only defeat COVID-19, but to emerge from this pandemic stronger than before with a renewed commitment to the health and wellbeing of our communities, especially the most vulnerable among us.”

The Congress concludes tomorrow with further high profile speakers including Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, Director General of the World Health Organization, and Guy Ryder, Director General of the International Labour Organisation

To access recordings of the plenary sessions, and the rest of the ICN Congress go to: <https://congress2021.icnevents.online/>.

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Note for Editors

The **International Council of Nurses** (ICN) is a federation of more than 130 national nurses associations representing the millions of nurses worldwide. Operated by nurses and leading nursing internationally, ICN works to ensure quality care for all and sound health policies globally.

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