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“Health is a human right that cannot be delivered without nurses” - International Council of Nurses

Human Rights Day and Universal Health Coverage Day highlight global inequities

Geneva, Switzerland; 9 December 2021 – The International Council of Nurses (ICN) has called for investment in the nursing workforce and protection of nurses’ rights, supporting the themes of [Human Rights Day](#) and [Universal Health Coverage Day](#). The theme for Human Rights Day on 10 December is *Equality – Reducing inequalities, advancing human rights*. On 12 December, Universal Health Coverage Day will use the theme: *Leave no one’s health behind: invest in health systems for all*.

Dr Pamela Cipriano, ICN President, said:

“The world has been taught a hard lesson by this pandemic: we must invest in health to prevent future pandemics and we must prioritise equity and non-discrimination. In this globalised world, no one is protected until we are all protected. Universal Health Coverage (UHC) is now an imperative.

“With a nursing workforce that is 90% female, gender equity is of utmost important to the delivery of healthcare around the world. Gender inequality has been exacerbated by the pandemic and protecting and respecting the rights of women – including nurses – is essential in both delivery of UHC and to help find a way out of this pandemic. Governments must heed the calls for protection, fair pay and decent work conditions for nurses whose rights have been violated during the pandemic.

“Without a strong, resilient health workforce, we cannot have health for all. Gender equity and investment in nursing needs to be at the heart of the COVID-19 response and recovery plan. The time has come for us to grasp this opportunity to make equity a positive legacy in the aftermath of the suffering so many have endured as a result of this pandemic.”

Howard Catton, ICN’s Chief Executive Officer said:

“Health workers’ rights are human rights, and right now *both* are at high risk. We need extra diligence, attention and investment to protect these rights. Nurses and other healthcare workers are already physically and mentally exhausted and the Omicron variant is now compounding the situation. When our healthcare workers are crushed, our health systems crash.

“While many countries are now giving booster jabs, in other countries, healthcare workers, are still waiting to be fully vaccinated. Inequity on this global scale is not just morally repugnant but self-defeating as we will not defeat the virus or deliver access to healthcare without respecting the rights of everyone. Health is a human right that cannot be delivered without nurses, and nurses’ rights are human rights.”

Dr Cipriano added:

“Nurses have the right to work in a safe environment, free from abuse and violence. They have the right to have access to vaccines and personal protective equipment, the right to adequate pay and

mental health support. ICN supports nurses' rights and calls on governments to fulfil their obligations to respect and protect human rights, and to adopt and uphold legislation to ensure equal access to healthcare, vaccines and protection, not only within their own countries, but worldwide."

During the pandemic, nurses and other healthcare workers have taken on enormous workloads, often with a lack of personal protective equipment, which has led to the deaths of over 115,000 of them. Nurses are exhausted and traumatised. A shortage of six million nurses existed before the pandemic and will continue to grow as long as there is a lack of investment in the profession. This will result in increased inequities, continued pandemics and weakened health systems. Health workers need investment, decent working conditions and protection of their rights now.

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Note to 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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