Socio-economic welfare of nurses: a statement from the International Council of Nurses

This report outlines a position statement by the International Council of Nurses (ICN), advocating equality, a fair and comparable wage and appropriate workplace environments for nurses.

THE ICN Position: ICN and National Nurses Associations (NNAs) advocate a workplace that is safe and allows for excellence in nursing practice. Nurses have a right to practice in an environment that is conducive to quality care, offers a fair and comparable wage and promotes the occupational safety and health of its employees. In addition, nurses need to work in a family-friendly environment.

The work of nursing personnel and its importance for the life, personal safety and health of persons in their care demand measures that encourage and promote the full development of negotiating mechanisms between employers, nurses and their representatives. A formal procedure for the hearing of grievances should be available to nurses and their employers in the health services.

The principles of equal pay for work of comparable value and pay equity should be applied. These principles should be supported by gender-neutral job classification and performance evaluation tools, and non-discriminatory access to education and promotion opportunities. Nurses' associations have a responsibility to:

- Establish, promote and maintain programmes to enable nurses achieve a level of economic and social recognition commensurate with their contribution to society.
- Promote sustainable opportunities for the development and support of nursing career options, including entrepreneurship.
- Define nursing work and participate in the development of appropriate evaluation tools.
- Encourage nurses to recognise, value and explain their work.
- Develop and maintain mechanisms that support the negotiating rights of nurses, provide protection from exploitation and balance equity and employment issues.
- Create an effective network to share information on professional and labour questions.
- Develop training programmes that adequately prepare association representatives, nursing leadership and nurse employees in the practice of the various negotiation methods for resolving employment concerns as appropriate in each country.
- Initiate and support studies to identify possible wage discrepancies and promote salary reviews.
- Lobby for legislation and public education supporting pay equity.
- Encourage government to ratify relevant International Labour Organization (ILO) conventions and monitor that the principles are put into practice.
- Support other NNAs seeking government ratification of relevant ILO conventions.

Background

The vitality of a nation is dependent on the health of its citizens in general and its work force in particular. The right of access to health care has been internationally recognised and is dependent to a substantial degree on the availability of adequate numbers of sufficiently trained health personnel and the ability of health services to retain them in active employment. Freedom of association and negotiation of
employment and conditions of work are internationally recognised by the ILO Declaration of Philadelphia and ILO Conventions (for example 100, 111), and in particular Convention 149 on nursing personnel.

Current compensation structures are often based on gender and not on the value of the job to society. The undervaluing of the crucial role nurses play in the delivery of health care, coupled with a generalised discrimination against women, has resulted in inappropriately low economic and social conditions for nurses. There is an increasing number of substantiated reports of discrimination within the nursing profession itself.

Research indicates that 75 per cent of all classifications/grades are sex-segregated – defined as a predominance of 70 per cent or more of one gender in the classification or grade (Finny et al).

The ILO has acknowledged that the relative value and degree of remuneration attributed to a certain occupation still seems to be influenced by the predominance of women in that occupation. In fact, comparable worth studies have shown that, on average, female dominated jobs are paid 15 per cent less than male dominated jobs which require comparable levels of skills, effort and responsibility (ILO 1992).

Once established, relationships between wages paid to different jobs (or relativities) change very little over time, so historical inequities remain unless deliberately changed. Pay equity must be encouraged world-wide.

Many job evaluation systems are gender-biased and fail to capture or value the work of nurses and other women workers, thus perpetuating existing wage inequities.

A recent investigation confirmed that nurses were underpaid because evaluations revealed that job-related skills were not treated as skills but as qualities intrinsic to being a woman. (AJN 1991, ILO 1992) It is important that the nursing profession define the nature of its work and assist in the development of relevant evaluation tools.

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