Promoting gender equality for rural women through health workforce policies to develop, attract, recruit and retain health workers in rural and remote areas

Michelle McIsaac
Economist
Health Workforce Department
World Health Organization

Support them so they can support you!
Almost half the world’s population live in a rural or remote area.

**Low health workforce densities**

Only 1 in 3 nurses work in rural areas.

In some rural areas access to health workers is 10 times lower than urban areas.

**Health systems outcomes**

2 billion people with limited access to essential health services in rural areas.

**Socioeconomic disadvantages**

8 out of 10 of world’s extremely poor live in a rural area.

Higher rates of unemployment and underemployment.

Far-reaching consequences on:
- health
- global health security
- development

Developing, attracting, recruiting and retaining health workers in rural and remote areas to deliver PHC and UHC.

Unmet health needs:
- Decreased life expectancy
- Higher under-5, maternal and preventable mortality

There is a mismatch between the need for, demand for and supply of health workers in rural areas.
Gender and the rural health workforce

• Almost 70% of the global health workforce are women

• Gender dynamics play an important role in the rural health sector:
  • gender norms and stereotyping
  • educational and training opportunities
  • living and working conditions
  • unpaid care
  • safety and security
  • employment and workplace bias

“Considering race, gender, ethnicity, language, sexuality, disability and sociodemographic background of community and health workers is an important component of the acceptability of care” – WHO, 2021
Overarching principle for the formulation of policies:

Acknowledge the pervasive gender dynamics and resultant occupational segregation by gender in the health sector and respond accordingly to ensure that women in the workforce are adequately valued, supported, protected and promoted.

Good Practice Statement and Recommendations

Interventions should be interconnected, bundled and tailored to the local context

• Whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach
• Consider gender, equity and rights, along with the roles and responsibilities of health workers and rural communities
• Consider impact of policies on different health workers and sociodemographic characteristics including gender, age, class, ethnicity, migration status, civic status, language, sexuality, disability and religion

Education – 5 recommendations
- Selection, development and training of students

Incentives – 1 recommendation
- Financial and non-financial incentives

Regulation – 4 recommendations
- Regulatory and government policies

Personal and professional support – 7 recommendations
- Policies to protect, support and assist rural health workers

Source: WHO (2021)
https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/341130
Dialogue and actions

Selection of an appropriate bundle of strategies based on:
- Relevance
- Acceptability
- Feasibility
- Affordability
- Effectiveness
- Impact

Investment in the rural health workforce

1. Develop
2. Attract
3. Recruit
4. Retain

Protection of rural health workers

Recommended strategies

Guiding principles for formulation of policies

- Gender, equity and rights – e.g. include women in decision making, consider policy impact on gender
- Strengthen human resources for health management
- Harmonize with national health plan
- Monitor and evaluate selected bundle
Ensuring that women in the workforce and students undergoing training are adequately valued, supported, protected and promoted will be highly beneficial to rural and remote communities.

The gender implications of these outcomes:

- Selection of rural background girls/women for health training
- Training closer to communities
- Fair remuneration
- Supportive working environment
- Flexible working condition
- Protection from all forms of violence
- Decent work
- Career development pathways

Health outcomes: 3 Good Health and Well-being

Gender equality dividends: 5 Gender Equality

Development dividend: 8 Decent Work and Economic Growth
Conclusion

A need for action and an opportunity for inclusive economic development

• National and global health and sustainable development goals cannot be achieved with health workers.

• Most health workers and carers are women

• Women in rural health workforce are essential to achieving UHC and SDGs
Dear health and care workers,
With gratitude and respect
for your dedication in delivering
health and care.

Thank you!