

WORLD HEALTH DAY 2020

# Celebrate, support and strengthen the nursing and midwifery workforce

2020 is the International Year of the Nurse and the Midwife. All countries must invest in nursing and midwifery education, employment and leadership to strengthen health systems and advance gender equity



POONAM KHETRAPAL SINGH

**N**URSES and midwives are central to the delivery of quality primary health services for all. Nurses are highly effective in delivering services that prevent illness, promote health, and care for the physically and mentally ill and people with disabilities. Midwives provide the essential care needed for every woman to have a positive childbirth experience, for every child to come into the world safely, and for every newborn and child to avoid disease and death. The global response to Covid-19 underscores how critical nurses are to health security. They must be supported to get the job done.

The World Health Organization (WHO) South-East Asia Region is committed to strengthening its nursing and midwifery workforce as part of its quest to achieve universal health coverage (UHC). UHC is one of eight flagship priorities in the region and the target that underpins Sustainable Development Goal 3, the health goal. In 2015, the region embarked on its Decade for Health Workforce Strengthening—a key initiative aimed at overcoming shortages and skill-gaps in health cadre across the region. By 2018, the region had increased the density of nurses and midwives to 18 per 10,000 population, up from 16 per 10,000 in 2014. In 2018, the global average density of nurses and midwives was 37 per 10,000 population. The minimum should be 40.

We must redouble our efforts: by 2030, the region will require as

many as 1.9 million more nurses and midwives. Special focus must be given to ensuring they are deployed where they are needed most—rural and hard-to-reach areas. At every opportunity, policymakers and administrators should empower female health workers—especially nurses and midwives—to reach leadership roles and to be involved in decision making. All nurses and midwives must be paid fairly.

As the world marks the International Year of the Nurse and the Midwife, we must celebrate, support and strengthen the nursing and midwifery workforce, with a focus on several key areas.

First, strengthening nursing and midwifery education. Demographic

changes are shifting healthcare needs and driving greater demand for services for non-communicable diseases (NCDs), care for older people and the terminally ill. For nurses and midwives to respond to these needs, policymakers and administrators must review pre-service education, including curriculum and faculty development and, where necessary, amend it. They should ensure all nurses and midwives are provided ongoing professional development opportunities, including in-service training, to enhance their knowledge and skills. Tomorrow's challenges may be different from today's.

Second, policymakers and administrators should ensure that the work environment for nurses and

midwives is safe, healthy and satisfying. The hours nurses and midwives work should be reasonable and aligned with national labour laws. The on-the-job hazards nurses and midwives are exposed to should be minimised and, wherever possible, eliminated. Nurses and midwives should never be subjected to violence. By providing a positive and enabling environment for nurses and midwives, policymakers and administrators will increase recruitment, retention and motivation. This is particularly important as countries enhance the quality of health services in remote and hard-to-reach areas.

Third, increased focus should be put on strengthening nursing and midwifery leadership and management.

Evidence shows that countries that have a chief nursing officer and a nursing leadership programme have stronger regulatory environments for nursing and midwifery. This helps them to ensure all nurses and midwives have adequate capacity and skills and can work effectively in interdisciplinary teams. It also means that, when developing policy, they are more likely to benefit from the knowledge and experience nurses and midwives have. Nurses and midwives must be enabled to develop their leadership potential and participate in key decision-making forums.

Additional investments are needed. The first ever State of the World's Nursing Report shows that low- and middle-income countries should invest an additional USD 10 per capita for nursing education alone. In most countries, this can be achieved with domestic funds. In some countries, development partners and financing institutions can help. By transferring human capital investments for education, employment, gender and other areas into national health workforce strategies, partners can strengthen the nursing and midwifery workforce while driving job creation, gender equity and youth engagement.

The WHO South-East Asia Region must sustain and accelerate its progress. We are now in the sixth year of the region's Decade for Health Workforce Strengthening. We must pick up the pace and drive further gains. WHO is committed to supporting all countries in the region to strengthen their nursing and midwifery workforce as together we pursue our overarching goal: universal health coverage. Health for all at all ages is possible. We can—we must—make it happen.



PHOTO: COLLECTED

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## Navigating the socioeconomic perils of Covid-19 in Bangladesh

BAZLUL H KHONDKER

**D**ESPITE the depressing state of major indicators such as negative export-import growth; large revenue deficit; falling private sector investment; rising non-performing loans recorded in the last quarter of 2019, as well as the impending fear of a global economic recession, the government of Bangladesh has been optimistic that the depressing trend of these indicators could be reversed and instead lead to another great year—with respect to growth and poverty reduction. But this optimism has now been seriously dented with the severe onslaught of Covid-19. It has virtually stalled all economic activities all over the world.

Many countries and multilateral agencies have now started to count the economic and social costs of Covid-19. The preliminary estimates emerging from a few sources are frightening. JP Morgan has slashed its USA GDP forecast for the next quarter (i.e. second quarter) by 25 percent and projected an imminent recession, despite "Herculean" stimulus measures equivalent to USD two trillion from the US government. The title of the OECD Interim Economic Assessment, published on March 2, 2020, was "Coronavirus: The world economy at risk". Similarly, Modi's government cut

India's economic growth forecast from 5.3 percent to 2.5 percent for 2020. Similar dire projections have emerged from other reports and briefs.

The Bangladesh economy will not be spared. The impacts of Covid-19 on economic growth, job losses and upsurge in poverty are expected to be large. The projected GDP growth of 8.2 percent for 2020 may decline by 2 to 3 percent—that is, economic growth may settle somewhere between 5 to 6 percent. Robust economic growth during the last decade helped Bangladesh to win her fight against poverty—mainly through employment generation channels. According to current projections (before Covid-19), the poverty rate will still be 20 percent in 2020, with almost 32 million living in poverty. Poverty measurement use a poverty line (PL) threshold to identify poor persons. If per capita income is lower than the PL by even one Taka, he or she is considered as poor. Like many other countries, Bangladesh adopts a low PL in monetary value compared to international poverty lines, such as USD 3.2 for lower middle-income countries and USD 5.5 for upper middle-income countries—suggesting that large numbers of the population are vulnerable even if they are not counted as poor. A reduction in economic growth, along with a rise

in joblessness, will inevitably lead to a sharp increase in the poverty rate and push more people into poverty. The number of vulnerable persons who will need assistance may rise exponentially in 2020, although perhaps for a temporary period, especially since vulnerable groups in Bangladesh lack the savings and resources required to fend off the impacts of Covid-19.

Like many other countries, the Bangladesh government has also proposed a series of measures and stimuli to buttress the consequences of the pandemic. These are welcome initiatives. Support is also being provided by the private sector, NGOs and other development partners. Addressing the health risks and the social and economic perils faced by vulnerable populations should be the main focus of the government stimulus measures. The size of the stimulus may need to be around 4 to 5 percent of GDP. Bangladesh will also announce its budget for the next fiscal year (FY2020-21) in June 2020—amid the Covid-19 pandemic. The budget should reorient its focus and channel resources from traditional sectors such as energy and physical infrastructure to social protection, poverty alleviating programmes, health insurance and universal health programmes, as well as programmes for small and medium

enterprises (SMEs). The government could increase current social protection allocation of 2.2 percent of GDP to about 5 percent of GDP during this crisis period. Employment generation and poverty alleviation programmes should also attract higher allocations of the budget. The health sector budget should be permanently increased to 3 percent of GDP from the current allocation of less than 1 percent of GDP. Along with fiscal measure (tax and subsidy) and utility measures (lower rates and deferred payments), Bangladesh Bank may create special funds to support SMEs to overcome the Covid-19 economic crisis.

A major plus point in the case of Bangladesh is that fiscal and monetary instruments are already in operation (even though they are not highly efficient), through which these stimuli can be implemented. Operations of digital finance service providers such as bKash, Rocket and Nagad will be the key conduits for fast and efficient low-cost fund transfers that avoid human contact. Another advantage in Bangladesh is the presence of effective clusters of Civil society organisations and NGOs. They, along with the government, can play an important role in beneficiary identification, delivering resources to poor and vulnerable populations, and monitoring the

stimulus implementation. Effective and timely disbursement of funds are imperative to tackle the economic and social perils of Covid-19.

Value for money of public funds is generally low in Bangladesh, epitomised by cost overrun and delay in implementation. This is the time to break this trend and have high value for money from the proposed stimulus and the measures to be proposed in the next budget. The following steps may help improve this situation—coordinated planning to pull together all resources (public, private, NGO and development partners) for maximising prioritisation and allocation; creation of a dedicated cell within the Planning Commission for Covid-19 related projects with an aim to approve projects within ten days for the speedy delivery of cash, goods and services; and extension of support from Bangladesh Bank for the quick approval of loans for SMEs and for the effective and timely disbursement of funds.

Bangladesh is well known for its resilience, and we have many times in the past, surpassed expectations and overcome all obstacles in the end. Following on those, it is presumed that Bangladesh will eventually emerge as a stronger nation after weathering the perils of Covid-19.

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**ON THIS DAY IN HISTORY**

**World Health Organization**

**ESTABLISHMENT OF WHO**  
April 7, 1948

*The World Health Organization (WHO), a dedicated agency of the United Nations that is concerned with international public health, was formed this day in 1948.*

**CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH**

**ACROSS**

- 1 Photo collection
- 6 Sign after Virgo
- 11 Baseball's Pee Wee
- 12 Basketball's Shaquille
- 13 Enter, as data
- 14 "The Duke"
- 15 Burden
- 17 A bunch
- 18 Called up
- 20 "Get-writting"
- 22 Strange
- 23 Pop's pop
- 26 Police ID
- 28 Seafood garnish
- 29 Dubai, e.g.
- 31 Near-eternity
- 32 Steamed
- 33 Hay bundle

**DOWN**

- 1 Place of refuge
- 2 Spike of film
- 3 Known to be true
- 4 Putting to work
- 5 Bill of fare
- 6 Near the ground
- 7 Queued up
- 8 To a very great
- 9 Crazy talk
- 10 Pub pints
- 16 Knight's title
- 18 Lounge attire
- 19 Genesis name
- 21 Account
- 23 Bike part
- 24 Swimming spot
- 25 Poet Sexton
- 27 Takes in at the box office
- 30 Hot brew
- 33 Floppy cap
- 34 Scout's base
- 35 Poet Khayyam
- 37 Cheering cries
- 39 Snaky shape
- 41 Big snake
- 42 Demand

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**YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS**

L	O	V	E	L	O	C	A	L	S
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**BEETLE BAILEY** BY MORT WALKER

**BABY BLUES** BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT