



# Position Statement

## Women's health

### ICN Position:

Women have a right to health and well-being. However, poverty, inequitable power relationships between men and women, poor access to health care, inadequate education and a variety of social, economic, political and cultural factors adversely influence the health of millions of women worldwide.

The International Council of Nurses (ICN) endorses the health agendas set out in *The United Nations General Assembly Special Session Beijing + 5*<sup>1</sup>, the Commission on Social Determinants of Health Final Report<sup>2</sup> and the Global Strategy for Women's and Children's Health<sup>3</sup>, and believes that these strategies will contribute significantly to women's fundamental right to health.

ICN deplores sexual exploitation and trafficking of women and girls for sex work, and all forms of violence against women including female genital mutilation. ICN is particularly concerned about the growing prevalence of HIV infection in women including those in stable relationships.

ICN supports the establishment and enforcement of effective legal frameworks to address violence against women as a form of gender-based discrimination and a violation of women's human rights.<sup>4</sup>

ICN urges governments and other interested parties to ensure that reproductive and sexual health information and services, and adequate and accessible maternal care are provided as a matter of priority to address the unacceptable levels of maternal and infant morbidity and mortality.<sup>5</sup>

ICN promotes gender equity, education and empowerment of women in both public and private life; and supports fundamental social reforms to address the inequalities in power, status and roles.

ICN endorses a gender mainstreaming approach in all aspects of health, including epidemiology studies, research, decision-making, service planning and care delivery, which takes account of the fact that most of the causes of women's suffering are rooted in social, behavioural and cultural systems<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> The United Nations General Assembly Special Session Beijing + 5  
[www.un.org/womenwatch/daw](http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw)

<sup>2</sup> Commission on Social Determinants of Health Final Report  
[www.who.int/entity/social\\_determinants/final\\_report/csdh\\_finalreport\\_2008.pdf](http://www.who.int/entity/social_determinants/final_report/csdh_finalreport_2008.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Global Strategy for Women's and Children's Health  
[www.who.int/entity/social\\_determinants/final\\_report/csdh\\_finalreport\\_2008.pdf](http://www.who.int/entity/social_determinants/final_report/csdh_finalreport_2008.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> UNDAW/DESA and UNODC Expert Group  
[www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/egm/vaw\\_legislation\\_2008/Report%20EGMGPLVAW%20\(final%2011.11.08\).pdf](http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/egm/vaw_legislation_2008/Report%20EGMGPLVAW%20(final%2011.11.08).pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Commission on Social Determinants of Health Final Report  
[www.who.int/entity/social\\_determinants/final\\_report/csdh\\_finalreport\\_2008.pdf](http://www.who.int/entity/social_determinants/final_report/csdh_finalreport_2008.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> WHO Gender, Women and Health.  
<http://www.who.int/gender/mainstreaming/en/index.html>

ICN strongly supports the establishment of services that are accessible, sensitive to women's needs at all stages in the life cycle, and that provide a full range of integrated health care and health education.

ICN believes that nurses, as knowledgeable, skilled health professionals, the majority of whom are women, are the advocates and health care providers of choice for women. National nurses associations and nurses can and should contribute to health policy, service planning, practice development and research in women's health.

### **Background**

The Millennium Development Goals, a blueprint agreed to by all the world's countries and all the world's leading development institutions, specifically target the promotion of gender equality, the empowerment of women and the improvement of maternal health and reduction in child mortality.<sup>7</sup>

Women's health encompasses physical, mental and social well-being throughout the life cycle, and has a direct impact on the health of children and families.

Women and girls comprise 60% of the world's one billion poorest people. Women make up two thirds of the 960 million adults in the world who cannot read, and girls comprise 70% of the 130 million children who are out of school. Poorer women in particular are bound by harmful aspects of tradition and culture, with higher risks of maternal death, illness and injury.<sup>8</sup>

Women live longer than men. Comprising the majority of the older population in all regions, women make up around 55% of the total older population of the world with women over 60 years of age outnumbering men in that age range by about 63 million.<sup>9</sup>

Women's right to health and well-being must be protected throughout the lifespan and particularly during the vulnerable phase of the girl-child and adolescent where rights to education, health and social support are especially important. During their reproductive years women need control over their reproductive health rights.

Lack of access to services, low socio-economic status and societal values that tolerate violence, sexual abuse and other violations of women's rights continue to fuel the HIV/AIDS epidemic in women. Women represent 50% of the approximately 34 million people living with HIV globally.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> United Nations: We Can End Poverty by 2015: Millennium Development Goals  
[www.un.org/millenniumgoals/bkgd.shtml](http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/bkgd.shtml)

<sup>8</sup> UNFPA  
[www.unfpa.org/swp/2008/includes/images/pdf\\_swp/05\\_poverty\\_inequality.pdf](http://www.unfpa.org/swp/2008/includes/images/pdf_swp/05_poverty_inequality.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> United Nations. The World's Women 2010 : trends and Statistics  
[unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic/products/Worldswomen/WW\\_full%20report\\_BW.pdf](http://unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic/products/Worldswomen/WW_full%20report_BW.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> UNAIDS World AIDS Day 2011 Report  
[www.unaids.org/en/media/unaids/contentassets/documents/factsheet/2011/20111121\\_FS\\_WAD2011\\_global\\_en.pdf](http://www.unaids.org/en/media/unaids/contentassets/documents/factsheet/2011/20111121_FS_WAD2011_global_en.pdf)

Nurses can have a significant impact in strengthening women's capacity to exercise increased control over their lives and living conditions.

Nurses, including nurse educators and administrators, require formal education and training in gender sensitivity and rights and the skills to appraise, monitor and evaluate policies and programmes from a gender perspective including, for example, epidemiology studies, decision making and service planning.

**Adopted in 1996**

**Reviewed and revised in 2002 and 2012**

**Related ICN Positions:**

- Elimination of female genital mutilation
- Abuse and violence against nursing personnel
- Distribution and use of breast milk substitutes
- Breastfeeding
- Nursing and development
- Nursing Care of the Older Person

**ICN Publications:**

- Nursing Matters, Female Genital Mutilation (FGM)
- Nursing Matters, The Girl Child
- Nursing Matters, Maternal and Infant Nutrition
- Nursing Matters, Women's Health
- Nursing Matters, Women and Stroke
- Nursing Matters, Equal Opportunity: Gender Issues
- Nursing Matters, Mainstreaming a Gender Perspective into the Health Services
- Nursing Matters, Osteoporosis: The Silent Thief
- Nursing Matters, Nutrition and Older People
- Nursing Matters, Violence: A World-wide Epidemic
- Nursing Matters, ICN on Poverty and Health: Breaking the Link
- Anti-violence Toolkit

The International Council of Nurses 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 nursing care for all and sound health policies globally.