World Health Day is celebrated each year on 7th April globally. The day marks the founding of World Health Organization and aims to draw attention to important health issues facing the world each year. In 2020, the theme of World Health Day is “Support Nurses and Midwives”. It is estimated that globally there are 22 million nurses and two million midwives. These two professions constitute over 50 per cent of the health workforce. Strengthening nursing and midwifery will have the additional benefits of promoting gender equity (SDG5), contributing to economic development (SDG8) and supporting other Sustainable Development Goals. Nurses and midwives are regarded as the backbone of the health care system because of their critical contribution.

This year is also designated as the International Year of the Nurse and the Midwife by the World Health Assembly in recognition of the vital roles nurses and midwives play in making health care accessible to individuals around the world and in Bangladesh. World Health Day this year also comes at a time during the global response to COVID-19 and we already see how critical nurses are to health security. They not only prevent diseases, diagnose health problems, treat diseases, and provide proficient care during childbirth, they also play important humanitarian roles. It is no wonder they are commended and applauded right across the globe for their outstanding contribution as front line workers in the fight against COVID-19. We cannot deny the fact that sufficient numbers of educated nurses and midwives are required to make health care services accessible to all.

The world needs 9 million more nurses and midwives and the largest needs are in South-East Asia and Africa regions. In Bangladesh, there are more than 54,000 nurses and 2,000 midwives registered. Even though the number of registrations will increase with the recent licensing exam, we still have a shortage of nurses and midwives. In fact, nurses and midwives are often overly stretched and overworked, having to fill in secretarial and administrative work, only being able to provide minimum care to patients.

To achieve Universal Health Coverage of providing quality health services to anyone when they need, anywhere they may be, without experiencing financial hardship, we need to fully utilize the nursing and midwifery workforce as part of the health services team. Too often nurses and midwives are undervalued and unable to fulfil their true potential and have satisfaction in their work.

Nurses and midwives are powerful advocates and innovators in their communities, clinics, hospitals, and in the health care system. It is crucial that national governments recognize the importance and long-term benefits of investing in building the skills of nurses and midwives and in sustaining their professional development.

Rotation of midwives around units as well as the nurses within health facilities undermines sustainable place of care. Midwives are trained specifically for sexual reproductive health, and we must ensure midwives can work to their full potential in an enabling environment by providing
adequate resources and support. I call attention to the local leaders and Civil Surgeons to address these challenges.

Both nurses and midwives, are the cornerstone of strong and resilient health systems. They serve as a bridge between health centers and the communities they serve. Midwifery brought us the idea of specialization in Bangladesh and my hope is to see a career path for nurses that will enable them to specialize in a specific area such as cardiology and be further trained in the specialty. This way, we can move towards providing quality care.

More investment and more opportunities can be brought for younger workforce to excel in clinical, research, administrative, and teaching.

Nurses and midwives are often the first point of contact to health services for people. They often understand the needs of the community and the people that they work with. We must put more emphasis and need to include nurses and midwives in strategic decision making and include in ministerial meetings.

I commend the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare for building a year-long plan to commemorate the International Year of the Nurse and the Midwives and hope to be able to see strategic plan to improve nursing and midwifery in the future, even without the declaration of the international year. We must make conscious efforts to continuously appreciate the work our front-line health workers provide, 24/7, at all times.

All of us, healthy or ill, have encountered a nurse in our lifetime. Some girls and women may have encountered a midwife during the past few years. I urge each one of you to thank a nurse and a midwife today who works around the clock to provide essential health services.

To nurses and midwives of Bangladesh - We appreciate you and we thank you for your dedication to the care you provide. You never ask for praise nor recognition but keep continuing to provide the best service you can to those in front and around you. That compassionate care you provide, that helpful information you provide, helps people to stay healthy. To the nurses, thank you for your work in keeping people healthy and in a good health. To all midwives, you ensure that adolescent girls, women and their families have the best possible information and care they can. Nurses and midwives, thank you for ensuring ‘health for all’, providing essential health services to everyone, ensuring ‘nobody is left behind’.

The contribution of nurses and midwives to the fight against the COVID-19 cannot go unnoticed and is not without its challenges. We know that you are leaving your families behind to care for the community and those that are in need. We also cannot forget other workers like cleaners, security guards, shop keepers, people that deliver food, who help us to stay safe at our homes during this time. This is the time that we work as one community, one Bangladesh, and together we will remain strong and come out of this, together.

WHO will continue to support the nursing and midwifery sector and work with the Government of Bangladesh and partners to progress toward the vision of ‘health for all’ and universal health coverage. We only have a decade left until the deadline of the 2030 to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals but UHC can be a reality and we can make further progress by investing in nursing and midwifery. Nurses and midwives, this is your year!

Dr Bardan Jung Rana
WHO Representative to Bangladesh