
PANORAMA PEOPLE

Interview with Annette Widmann-Mauz



By Chelsea Hedquist

Annette Widmann-Mauz is Parliamentary State Secretary to the Federal Minister of Health of Germany and, since 1998, a member of the German Bundestag. Since September 2015 she has been Federal Chair of the Women's Union (CDU).

What are some of the key priorities that require action if we hope to achieve a more effective and sustainable workforce by 2030?

It is clear that the world needs fit-for-purpose health and social workforces if we want to advance universal health coverage to ensure that every person enjoys the right to health. This objective is embedded in target 3.8 of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. The High-Level Commission on Health Employment and Economic Growth has played a crucial role in identifying priorities and making recommendations to help the world reach this important goal.

The Commission put forward a report with 10 recommendations in September 2016 at the United Nations General Assembly; the report has now been translated into an agreed five-year action plan. While all the recommendations are extremely relevant, I would emphasize two: creating jobs (recommendation 1) and ensuring gender equality and women's rights (recommendation 2).

How can we address these two areas and other key recommendations from the Commission?

Population growth means that the health and care sectors will play an ever greater role in our economies. This means that it is important to find an answer to the growing global demand for health and care workers and to address projected shortages. Investments that increase the overall productivity of the health sector and produce better health outcomes are a cornerstone for building strong health systems and stronger economies.

With regard to ensuring gender equality, I would underscore that jobs in the health and care sectors tend to employ large numbers of women. For example, in a sample of 123 countries, women make up 67% of employment

in the health and social sectors compared with 41% of total employment. However, women's employment, especially in health care-related work, is often not well recognized and not valued appropriately. Across the health workforce, women remain underrepresented in leadership positions. Studies also indicate that gender stereotypes persist in the health workforce and the burden of informal (and/or unpaid) health care falls disproportionately on women.

This is the important "take home" message: throughout the world, women have a key role in health and care provision and are thus a major driver of health. Women tend to take care of health in the family. Women are generally the caregivers at home and comprise a large part of the workforce in the health sector. To be very frank, most – if not all – health systems are built on a foundation of women health workers who are often informal, poorly paid – if at all – and poorly supported. Taking action on health workforce issues will mean valuing our current workforce to ensure an adequate supply of health professionals.

In the WHO European Region, the development of a framework for action on health workforce sustainability will assist in accelerating the implementation of the 10 recommendations from the Commission. I firmly believe that we need the political and paradigm shift initiated by the Commission, and supported by the framework, to promote investment in the health sector. This in turn will stimulate inclusive and sustainable economic growth, productive employment, decent work and better health for all people worldwide.

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