THE INVISIBLE PILLAR:

URGENT NEED FOR FAIR COMPENSATION FOR NURSES IN ECUADOR

EL PILAR INVISIBLE: URGENCIA DE UNA COMPENSACIÓN JUSTA PARA ENFERMERAS EN ECUADOR

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the situation of nurses in Ecuador, who face low wages, work overload, and adverse working conditions. Its objective is to describe the current reality of salary compensation in this profession. The study uses a qualitative and documentary approach, based on a bibliographic review of databases such as Google Scholar, PubMed, Lilacs, and government websites (WHO, PAHO, MSP). Research from the last five years that addressed the compensation and working conditions of nursing staff was included. The results show that high workload is associated with medical errors, burnout, and high staff turnover, affecting patient care. A wage gap was identified between the public and private sectors, with higher salaries in the public sector, influenced by education and experience. Factors such as rotating shifts and long careers increase the risk of burnout syndrome. Nursing, a predominantly female profession (90%), has historically been undervalued and poorly compensated. The discussion emphasizes the need for fair compensation, highlighting that, despite their vocation for service, nurses experience deteriorating mental health and insufficient protection of their labor rights. The conclusion maintains that ensuring adequate compensation is essential, not only through salary increases, but also through financial and non-financial incentives, psychological support, and ongoing training. These measures would promote nurses' biopsychosocial well-being, optimize the quality of care, and contribute to strengthening the Ecuadorian health system.

Keywords:

Nursing, Burnout Syndrome, salary, monthly health.

RESUMEN

El artículo analiza la situación de las enfermeras en Ecuador, quienes enfrentan salarios bajos, sobrecarga laboral y condiciones de trabajo adversas. Su objetivo es describir la realidad actual de la compensación salarial en esta profesión. El estudio utiliza un enfoque cualitativo y documental, basado en una revisión bibliográfica de bases de datos como Google Académico, PubMed, Lilacs y sitios gubernamentales (OMS, OPS, MSP). Se incluyeron investigaciones de los últimos cinco años que abordaran la compensación y las condiciones laborales del personal de enfermería. Los resultados muestran que la elevada carga de trabajo se relaciona con errores médicos, agotamiento y alta rotación de personal, afectando la atención al paciente. Se identificó una brecha salarial entre los sectores público y privado, con salarios más altos en el sector público, influenciados por la escolaridad y la experiencia. Factores como los turnos rotativos y la prolongada trayectoria laboral incrementan el riesgo de síndrome de burnout. La enfermería, profesión predominantemente femenina (90%), ha sido históricamente subvalorada y mal remunerada. La discusión enfatiza la necesidad de una compensación justa, resaltando que, pese a la vocación de servicio, las enfermeras experimentan deterioro de la salud mental y una insuficiente protección de sus derechos laborales. La conclusión sostiene que garantizar una compensación adecuada es esencial, no solo mediante aumentos salariales, sino también a través de incentivos financieros y no financieros, apoyo psicológico y formación continua. Estas medidas promoverían el bienestar biopsicosocial de las enfermeras, optimizarían la calidad de la atención y contribuirían al fortalecimiento del sistema de salud en Ecuador.

Palabras clave:

Enfermería, Síndrome de Burnout, salario, salud mensual.

INTRODUCTION

The nursing profession is based on caring for people with dedication, empathy, and professionalism; this makes it essential for providing quality, caring, and safe patient care. However, the profession faces significant challenges, such as low wages, work overload, and many adverse working conditions, among others. This affects not only the nursing professionals but also impacts the quality of care they provide to patients and, in turn, the sustainability of the healthcare system.

The International Council of Nurses (2022) states that nursing, which is 90% a female profession, has historically been underpaid. Caregiving professions like nursing are often considered "women's jobs" and are therefore undervalued and underpaid, or even unpaid. Fair pay is critical for recruiting and retaining nursing professionals.

For its part, the International Labour Organization (2023) reports that longer working hours do not translate into better wages for nurses. In fact, low wages have been a growing concern among at least a third of key workers worldwide, including nurses and midwives. ILO estimates in 31 countries reveal that low wages remain significant in some countries, affecting many of these health professionals in both low- and high-income countries.

In Ecuador, the healthcare system faces challenges regarding fair compensation for healthcare professionals, including nurses. Disparities in compensation and economic conditions influence burnout and negatively impact patient care. Based on the above, this paper poses the following questions: What is the current reality of nurse compensation in Ecuador? Why is fair compensation imperative for nurses? Are there applicable salary models?

Paying attention to nursing salary disparities is of great importance, as this generates personal and family well-being, allowing them to work with greater enthusiasm and peace of mind, thus having an appropriate impact on patient care. Therefore, the general objective is to describe the current situation of nursing compensation in Ecuador.

This research is scientifically relevant as it addresses issues related to the quality of healthcare, which has an impact on public health and the current labor inequalities among nursing staff. Fair compensation improves the quality of service, ongoing staff education, and aspirations for continuous improvement for the well-being of the general population.

It is of academic relevance as it contributes to the current literature on the salary situation of nurses, as well as aspects of working conditions and examples of fair compensation and its beneficial impacts on the system. It is also of contemporary relevance as it addresses a current issue of labor justice and its implications for the health system.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study takes a qualitative approach and describes the economic inequalities of nursing staff and their impact. "Research Approaches" represent theoretical and methodological frameworks that guide the research process, providing direction and coherence to the search for answers to scientific questions. These approaches, which can range from quantitative to qualitative, or integrate both perspectives, are fundamental tools for the design and execution of high-quality research (Vizcaíno Zúñiga et al., 2023).

The type of research is documentary since a bibliographic review was carried out in databases and indexed journals such as Google Scholar, Pubmed , Lilax , among others, in addition to international and national government websites such as WHO, PAHO, MSP, among others. Theoretical methods make it possible to process the results obtained through the use of empirical methods, systematize them, analyze them, explain them, discover what they have in common, in order to reach reliable conclusions that allow solving the problem (López Falcón & Ramos Serpa, 2021).

For the selection, a search for titles was carried out according to the inclusion criteria, reviewing the abstracts to exclude those that did not meet the identified criteria. Once selected, the full text was reviewed to confirm its entirety and corroborate its inclusion.

The inclusion criteria included:

» Scientific studies of the last 5 years.

» Articles on nurses' workers' compensation.

» Articles related to the working conditions of nurses.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The main findings indicate that a high workload is associated with an increased risk of medical errors, burnout, and staff turnover. Furthermore, work overload was observed to negatively affect patients' health status, including an increase in mortality and complications (López Pereyra et al., 2024)(Table 1).

Table 1. Current reality: Challenges and compensation of nurses in Ecuador.

Author – year	Qualification	Fountain
(López Pereyra et al., 2024)	"Nursing workload, patient health status, and risk of healthcare-associated infections (HAIs)"	LATAM
(Quito et al., 2024)	"Comparative review of the income gap between the public and private sectors in Ecuador from the perspective of equalization policies"	Scielo

(Vaca Auz et al., 2024)	"Psychoemotional impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on nursing professionals in Ecuador: a cross-sectional study"	PubMed
(Fuenzalida Wong, 2023)	"Nurses: A rare and underrated combination of angel and human"	Confluence
(International Council of Nurses, 2022)	"New reports reveal that nurses are underpaid, undervalued, and suffer a larger gender pay gap than in other sectors."	CIE

In Ecuador, health workers are divided into public and private workers. Reviews of various articles show that the results obtained suggest the existence of a gap between the public and private sectors, where public sector salaries are relatively higher than those in the private sector. Furthermore, education and experience positively influence income levels, the latter being the most determining factor. The decomposition of income gaps by sector shows that the wage gap responds to differences in human capital endowments and discriminatory components of the workforce (Quito et al., 2024) .

In addition to this, Vaca Auz et al. (2024)refer to other challenges that nurses are subject to due to various factors, such as work shifts (particularly rotating shifts, including morning, afternoon and night), increased monthly working hours, advanced age and extensive professional experience (between 10 and 20 years in the same service) that seem to be linked to a higher risk of burnout syndrome in nursing staff.

Basically, nurses, even though they dedicate much of their time to improving the health of their patients and the world in general, do not receive equivalent treatment in return. In other words, nurses provide care, but no one cares for them. In fact, they are not even respected or valued for their hard work, as every profession deserves, with labor rights and financial compensation commensurate with their training and duties (Fuenzalida Wong, 2023).

The International Council of Nurses (2022) has highlighted two recently published reports on salaries and gender, which show that nurses, a predominantly female group, are underpaid for their services and earn on average 24% less than men (Table 2).

Table 2. Value of nurses.

Author – year	Qualification	Fountain
(Vaca Auz et al., 2024)	"Psychoemotional impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on nursing professionals in Ecuador: a cross-sectional study"	PubMed

(Zurita Avalos and Inca Ramos, 2024)	"Stress among nursing professionals in Ecuador: assessing the impact on their labor rights "	LATAM
(Gómez Salgado et al., 2022)	"During the COVID-19 Pandemic in Ecuador: Association with Work Engagement, Work Environment and Psychological Distress Factors"	FLACSO Ecuador Repository
(Bustamante Velasque, 2021)	"Work Overload and Work Performance of Nursing Professionals in Emergency Services"	Google Scholar
(Calderón Macías et al., 2020)	"Working conditions of Ecuadorian nursing professionals"	Synapse

While it's true that the profession is chosen as a vocation for service, there are situations in which nurses must give their all. An example of this was the high demand for care for patients with COVID-19, which placed increased workloads on nurses due to the increased demand for care and the shortage of medical supplies and protective equipment (Vaca Auz et al., 2024).

Previous research has shown insufficient implementation of labor rights, exacerbating this situation. Factors such as high workloads, long working hours, and staff shortages contribute significantly to the stress experienced by nursing professionals. This translates into chronic fatigue, physical and mental exhaustion, and lack of access to adequate resources, such as personal protective equipment and essential medications, further exacerbates the situation, jeopardizing both patient care and staff safety (Zurita Avalos & Inca Ramos, 2024).

During the pandemic in Ecuador, healthcare professionals have experienced a significant deterioration in their mental health. Their sense of coherence has been associated with work engagement and psychological distress. They have perceived a worsening of the quality of care and working conditions compared to those existing before COVID-19 (Gómez Salgado et al., 2022).

Added to this challenging reality, despite the fact that five years have passed, fair compensation and labor agreements have not been sufficiently examined. Workload overload affects the time a nurse allocates to various tasks. Under workload overload, nurses may not have enough time to perform tasks that can have a direct impact on patient safety (Bustamante Velasque, 2021).

Calderón Macías et al. (2020), in their study conclude that nurses in Ecuador cover 50% of the demand, in accordance with what is recommended by the World Health Organization, the working day is developed in

conditions similar to other public service professions, the monthly remuneration they receive is double the cost of the basic basket, considered adequate, finally, the lack of postgraduate training and the fragmented union representation can influence the development of the profession (Table 3).

Table 3. Applicable Models.

Author – year	Qualification	Fountain
(Morales Gómez de la Torre et al., 2024)	Determination of the socio-laboral situation of nursing staff	Central University of Ecuador
(Health Canadá, 2024)	"Nursing Retention Toolkit: Improving the Working Lives of Nurses in Canada"	Government of Canada

Although there are good examples of applicable models, there is little literature on them, among these examples are:

The current Nordic model has four main features: (i) significant public investment in family policies (universal parental leave and childcare), education, and health services; (ii) highly coordinated wage setting within and across sectors; (iii) substantial social security spending to protect against income loss due to unemployment, disability, and illness; and (iv) high and progressive taxation of labor income, complemented by subsidies for services that support employment.

It is essential that governments and institutions implement labor policies that mitigate the effects of intensive work and promote the well-being of health personnel to ensure both their health and the quality of the care they provide (Morales Gómez de la Torre et al., 2024).

Another example is Canada, where numerous initiatives are underway across Canada to support nursing retention. The toolkit provides a framework that can be used as a key resource for employers and organizations to improve current nursing working conditions and describes many of the initiatives (Health Canadá, 2024).

Among the various studies presented, it was noted that the call to action is important: investing in our nurses is investing in health. The International Council of Nurses (2025)states that nursing professionals, essential to the provision of health care, increasingly face insurmountable challenges that undermine their well-being and threaten their ability to provide high-quality care. Chronic staffing shortages, unsafe working conditions, and inadequate compensation have led to widespread burnout, as well as high attrition rates and the migration of scarce qualified professionals to countries with less harmful working environments.

That is to say, despite having trained personnel who can improve the quality of healthcare in the country, they are forced to migrate due to inadequate compensation

and, in addition, excessive work hours due to a lack of government regulations and policies. Furthermore, according to López Pereyra et al. (2024), work overload has been linked to a higher incidence of medical errors and adverse events; which can cause adverse events or even sentinels in patients; in whom not only the vocation is reflected but also the good treatment of employees, in this case the nursing staff.

The future of nursing compensation must go beyond simply raising salaries. By implementing a range of financial and non-financial incentives, such as tuition reimbursement, flexible scheduling, housing support, and wellness benefits, healthcare organizations can create a more sustainable, attractive, and rewarding profession. These innovative compensation models can address current challenges of nurse retention, burnout, and shortages, while ensuring nurses feel valued for their critical role in healthcare (Perez, 2024).

The wage disparity and informality of employment emphasize the need for policies that guarantee equitable working conditions tailored to the demands of healthcare in the region (Sánchez et al., 2023). These include the models presented in this paper, including the " Scandinavian Compensation Model," which blends capitalism with social democracy and, although characterized by high taxes, offers strong social welfare, high investment in human capital, and robust labor protection. Similar to the initiatives in Canada.

It adopts policies not only for adequate compensation, but also a nursing retention plan, implementing a salary adjustment kit, allowing for nursing student development, among other benefits based on both experience and specialization, valuing nursing work in patient care. Although it may seem like a utopia, New Zealand has a comprehensive Wellness Program, which emphasizes its support not only in fair compensation, but also in evaluating nursing staff holistically, offering psychological support and ongoing training, with a focus on employee mental health.

The International Labor Organization (2022), in a study, states that health professionals suggest reviewing the salary scale to recognize training and experience and generate incentives to retain staff. The rotation and rest processes should also be improved to avoid overload and work-related stress. Similarly, Quito et al. (2024) argue that in Ecuador, the inequality between public and private employees in income primarily affects private sector, indigenous, and rural employees. The gap is present at the income level, as it is the main source of household income and depends on the level of human capital and years of experience of the worker.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, nursing staff, as providers of holistic health care, must maintain biopsychosocial well-being. Therefore, there is an urgent need to establish fair compensation for nurses in Ecuador, for the reasons

already described in the research. This is presented as a critical need that goes beyond simple economic remuneration. Nurses are the invisible pillar of the health system, playing a fundamental role in patient care. However, their work is often not adequately valued or rewarded, which impacts their well-being, motivation, and, ultimately, the quality-of-care patients receive.

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The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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Lorena Virginia Villacis-Carpio: Conceptualization, data curation, formal analysis, investigation, methodology, supervision, validation, visualization, writing – original draft, and writing, review, and editing.