

MEASURING IMPACT & SAVING LIVES

AN INTERVIEW WITH CANWACH'S 2018 MEASURING IMPACT
AWARD WINNER, DR. JENN BRENNER



CanWaCH

Canadian Partnership for
Women and Children's Health



Photo Credit: Ashley Anderson

Dr. Jenn Brenner is a pediatrician and Clinical Associate Professor in the **Cumming School of Medicine**. She has a passion for global health with expertise and experience in maternal, newborn and child health programming. Over the past two decades, she has been the Canadian lead for a number of implementation, research and policy-related health and development projects in East Africa through international university partnerships, including **Healthy Child Uganda** (with Mbarara University of Science and Technology in Uganda) and **Mama na Mtoto** (with the Catholic University of Allied Health Sciences in Mwanza, Tanzania).

Can you tell me how you got your start in your field?

I was introduced to concepts of global development and career opportunities during undergraduate studies. My medical and pediatric training offered field opportunities where I was fortunate to meet gifted and inspirational Canadian and international mentors who inspired broader 'global' thinking about health. I feel so fortunate to have such an interesting career that enables me to work with fascinating and motivated people every day.

Two decades ago, I was supporting clinical care on a busy pediatrics ward in Mbarara, Uganda. At the time, child deaths from preventable illness happened daily, and were so hard to reconcile given my Canadian health care background. One day, I was approached by a team of local doctors (led by my visionary colleague and now counterpart director, Dr. Jerome Kabakyenga) looking for funding for an already prepared project proposal. They had an idea to train community health workers who could help address root causes of illness for children under five in some nearby high-needs villages. Thus began a long series of initiatives that we build on in our partnership work today.



Photo Credit: Rick Castiglione



Photo Credit: Ashley Anderson

How are you or your organization leading for women and children's health?

Our Canadian consortium works in partnership with universities and districts in East Africa (Mbarara, Uganda and Mwanza, Tanzania) on various reproductive, maternal, newborn and child health (RMNCH) related projects and programs. Local partners know and understand their communities well; they propose initiatives to address priority gaps and opportunities. We collaborate on technical aspects as needed. Our partnerships are dedicated to transparent and ongoing evaluation. We develop and implement MNCH programs through a critical lens. We document what works and what does not and widely share and integrate our experiences, best practices and lessons learned to inform future MNCH programming.

What are you most proud of in your work?

We have great teams. I feel privileged to work with and learn from talented, passionate and effective people. Through two decades, I have seen so many capable leaders emerge – in universities, communities, health facilities and throughout districts. I enjoy working with diverse teams who are all motivated towards tangible results and common goals. At the end of the day, working toward better health for women and children makes all challenges manageable.

I also love visiting the field. I am so inspired by local innovations and initiatives; with the right tools, communities and individuals are very capable of addressing their own health problems. At the core of Healthy Child Uganda and [Mama na Mtoto](#) success is a strong (7000 member) network of volunteer community health workers (CHWs).

"Every meeting with a community health worker leaves me smiling for days!"

These volunteers are amazing ambassadors and change agents in their own communities. And their activities don't end with project training and support. Our follow-up studies suggest more than 4 out of 5 volunteers continue as health and development leaders years after the project funding ends.

What do you want Canadians to know about global women and children's health?

The past several decades have seen **great progress towards** survival for women and children globally. Canada continues to play an important role in this global effort. Together with global partners, there is great potential in the coming decade to accelerate progress for better women and child 'survival'. Importantly, women and children in Canada and internationally have much to gain from Canadian global MNCH investment and engagement—especially through partnerships towards shared MNCH goals.

What more does Canada need to do to support women and children's health?

Canada's leadership is important – we need to build on strong partnerships and provide a loud advocacy voice highlighting the value of investment in MNCH. To reach the Sustainable Development Goals targets set by the United Nations, programming needs to be strategic and focused to ensure the most marginalized communities and families are reached. This is challenging and requires a concerted effort by Canadian and international partners.

"Canada's leadership is important—we need to build on strong partnerships and provide a loud advocacy voice highlighting the value of investment in maternal, newborn and child health."



Photo Credit: Evangeline Hammond

