



# Celebrating Perseverance, Courage and Grit

## A note from the Program Director



A few months ago, Born on Time staff would have been focused on completing our fifth and final year of the project – it’s amazing what can change in a short span of time.

As news of rising COVID-19 infections were reported, our teams in Bangladesh, Ethiopia and Mali began to review plans and budgets to address the urgency of virus prevention, detection and treatment, as well as to support essential service provision from being overwhelmed.

Reports of increased calls to domestic violence reporting centres, increasing rates of child marriages and decreasing food security are taking a toll on communities already struggling. Even with the knowledge we do have about the virus, we still don’t know enough about how the virus may impact maternal or neonatal outcomes in the long-term, especially when women are scared to go to facilities overrun with COVID-19 cases, or families are forced to choose between food for the day or transportation costs for health care.

It’s not only health care systems that are being stretched beyond their capacities, but women and adolescent girls are increasingly shouldering added vulnerabilities such as escalating risks of gender-based violence, including intimate partner violence and child marriage, as economic and psycho-social hardships mount.

In response, Born on Time is:

- Procuring and distributing protective equipment such as gloves, gowns, masks and hand sanitizer for frontline workers,
- Providing laboratory equipment and training health care providers to support detection of the virus, and
- Ramping up gender equality messaging through billboards, radio spots and other public announcement systems to mitigate the increased risks of gender-based violence.

I hope in the stories below you’ll find hope and courage, remembering that in crisis much of the best of humanity can shine.

In partnership with women, girls and their families for better health,

Marie

### Spread the Word!

Right before the pandemic shut down international borders, Born on Time was honoured to host Today’s Parent for a trip to Ethiopia to see programming focused on the prevention of preterm birth. The trip resulted in both print and online stories of Born on Time’s work. “The surprising reason many babies die around the world-and what’s being done about it”, ran in the magazine’s July/August issue across Canada.



Born on Time feature in Today’s Parent magazine and an Instagram post highlighting the trip to Ethiopia to see BOT programming

For the past four years, the Canadian Partnership for Women and Children’s Health (CanWaCH) has presented awards for excellence in global health and gender equality. We’re delighted to share that our very own Gender Equality Working Group, led by Dominique LaRoche at Save the Children Canada, has received CanWaCH’s partnership award! The award highlights the work the team has undertaken in gender equality across Bangladesh, Ethiopia and Mali. A strong foundation was built at the beginning of the project through a comprehensive Gender Equality Strategy, which underpinned the central role of gender equality and its critical dimensions to health for all.



Adjara prepares to meet clients in front of the maternity ward

## Adjara, Manager of Health Centre (Mali)

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit Mali, Adjara Diamoutene noticed a sharp decrease in demand for sexual and reproductive health services. As the manager of Maternity services at the health centre in Nanerebougou, Mali, Adjara was especially concerned about what this meant for women and adolescent girls at this time of increased vulnerability.

Prior to Born on Time’s work in Mali, accessibility to quality sexual and reproductive health services for women and adolescent girls in the region was limited. The project has played an important role in building up these services so that healthcare workers like Adjara can support women and adolescent girls understand their health status, seek information from trusted sources and foster their own self-confidence and decision-making abilities within their families and communities.

Admittedly, Adjara herself was fearful about COVID-19. She briefly considered suspending health centre services, nervous that she herself might even contract the disease. However, her concern for the wellbeing of women and girls in the community never wavered. As more COVID-19 information and prevention measures became widespread; along with donated supplies of hydro-alcoholic gels, and protective masks, from the Malian government and Born on Time, Adjara became more confident about her decision to keep the health centre opened.

Early and effective safety campaigns taken on by the Born on Time project in Nanerebougou, also encouraged other health facilities in the region to take on similar COVID-19 communication efforts. Community wide mobilization by health workers and community members is working to increase confidence among women and adolescent girls to continue accessing quality services during the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, Born on Time in Mali strives to provide support to every mother for a healthy, full-term pregnancy and for every baby to thrive.

*“My satisfaction is complete. At the start of the epidemic, women and girls no longer came to the sexual and reproductive Health services. Thanks to hand washing devices, hydro-alcoholic gels and protective masks, women and girls are reassured and come to me for their needs.”*

Adjara Diamoutene, Mali



## Rokshna, Manager of Maternal and Neonatal Services (Bangladesh)



*Rokshna counsels a pregnant mother*

Rokshna, a manager of maternal and neonatal services in the Rangpur District of Bangladesh, knew that she was putting herself at risk of COVID-19. In late March, after multiple positive COVID-19 cases emerged, the Government of Bangladesh ordered a lockdown of the country. Besides the impact to all community and outreach services, local health facilities, private and public clinics, as well as hospitals were also shut down. Despite this, the Union Health and Family Welfare Centres (UH & FWC) continued to provide essential Maternal Newborn Health/Sexual Reproductive Health services to women and adolescent girls in need.

At the start of the pandemic, personal protective equipment was not yet available to Rokshna and her colleagues. She observed during visits, that pregnant women and their spouses expressed anxiety and fear about infection from COVID-19. Although healthcare workers and providers like Rokshna also experienced anxiety and fear, the overwhelming sense was that maternal and neonatal services needed to continue to be provided, especially during a pandemic.

To overcome her own fears, Rokshna focused on creating “normal” delivery services for expectant mothers, as much as possible.

**“Nulufa was 39 weeks pregnant when she arrived at UH&FWC with high anxiety and already on verge of delivering. Rokshna and her colleagues, wearing the gear they had at the time, placed a mask on Nulufa’s face and instructed her to push. After a few tries, she delivered a female baby. Mother’s and baby’s conditions were well. Despite the pandemic, Rokshna tried to make the experience as normal as possible for Nulufa and her daughter. She helped them have skin-to-skin contact after the delivery and gently assisted as the new mother breastfed for the first time”.**

Shortly after the pandemic led to country-wide shutdowns, the Born on Time team began community awareness campaigns about COVID-19 and safety precautions that community members can take to protect themselves and their families.

To maintain physical distancing, BOT took the creative step of sharing COVID-19 related messaging over loudspeakers. Thanks to this initiative, the team reached large numbers of community members, with the goal of increasing overall awareness about COVID-19.

**“There is a hope in all human beings that all will live in a healthy and vigorous way and will be free from this disease. I hope one day all the people in our village will be aware on the deadly virus. By investing the cumulative effort of all of us, this epidemic will go away from the world one day and people will get used to living a normal life again”, said Rokshna.**

## Belaynesh, from Ethiopia

Belaynesh is a health extension worker in the Amhara region of Ethiopia. From her health post, Belaynesh helps women get started on a healthy pregnancy journey. From setting up regularly scheduled prenatal check-ups – providing counselling services in nutrition, personal care and well-being to identifying the health centre location where women will deliver their babies – Belaynesh is relentlessly dedicated to each woman.

While Belaynesh works a lot with pregnant women, she is also an advocate for all females and works tirelessly for gender equality. This includes working with men and various members of her community to create a more supportive environment that promotes and protects the rights of women and girls. As part of the Born on Time project, she works with schoolteachers to help them address issues such as child marriage and unintended pregnancies. Belaynesh also works with faith leaders to educate their congregations about how to prevent preterm birth and neonatal death in their communities.

Even with COVID-19 restrictions in place, Belaynesh carried on with her work, donning a mask during health consultations or facilitating men’s engagement groups and women’s discussion groups. Since personal protective equipment is not easily available, she ensures that participants practice safe physical distance from each other.

Pandemic restrictions have not slowed Belaynesh down. In the photo below, she is running a COVID-19 orientation session informing participants about virus behaviour, signs and symptoms, prevention and care.



*Belaynesh runs a COVID-19 orientation session informing participants about virus behaviour, signs and symptoms, prevention and care*

“The people in my community are aware of COVID-19 prevention methods, symptoms of being ill, and how to administer care. They openly share their knowledge with anybody outside their communities,” says Belaynesh.

## SPREADING THE WORD: Spotlighting the prevention of preterm birth on the global stage

Although all in-person conferences were cancelled due to COVID-19, the Born on Time team found creative avenues to keep profiling the work virtually:

- Born on Time presented at the Canadian Conference on Global Health an abstract entitled, “Building Climate Resilient and Gender Equitable Health Systems for Improved SRH/MNH Outcomes”
- An abstract entitled, “The Quality and Completeness of MNH data in PHC facilities and their Policy Implications, Northern Ethiopia” was presented at the Health Systems Research conference.
- The team took part in annual World Prematurity Day commemorations around the world, including a global Twitter chat with partners such as USAID, March of Dimes, the European Foundation for the Care of Newborn Infants, and the Healthy Newborn Network.



### CONTACT:

Marie Bettings, Program Director, Born on Time  
1 World Drive | Mississauga, Ontario | L5T 2Y4 | Marie\_Bettings@worldvision.ca

bornontime.org