Pregnancy and childbirth are among life’s happy milestones for families around the world, but the end result is not always a healthy mother and child. Sierra Leone has among the highest levels of maternal mortality in the world—young women dying as a result of the pregnancy itself or during or shortly after giving birth. The maternal mortality results from COMSA round 1 are, therefore, of particular interest. Understanding the circumstances surrounding maternal deaths is the first step to implementing effective prevention.

What we found

The Statistics

The common metric is the maternal mortality ratio (MMR), which is the number of deaths among women who were pregnant or had recently given birth, per 100,000 livebirths. The MMR from COMSA round 1 was 510/100,000.

The figure below has rates from a selection of other countries. The rate in

Sierra Leone is very high, but the 2015 census, various demographic surveys, and model-based estimates reported a rate twice as high: 1120/100,000. It is likely that the rate has been declining, as it has been around the world.

Another useful measure is the lifetime risk of maternal mortality, which incorporates the risk per birth and the average number of births per woman. In COMSA, that risk was 3.4%—or 34 out of 1,000 women of childbearing age. This also is very high in comparison to the rest of the world.

**The Causes**

In Sierra Leone, the majority of maternal deaths occurred between 20 and 30 years of age, and the most common causes were the same as in other countries (see figure):

✦ Haemorrhage: severe bleeding, mainly after childbirth
✦ Postpartum sepsis: infection after childbirth
✦ Preeclampsia leading to eclampsia: high blood pressure during pregnancy leading to convulsions

**Effective Prevention**

Almost all maternal deaths can be prevented with basic prenatal, delivery, and postnatal care by skilled health professionals.

✦ The risk of haemorrhage can be reduced dramatically by injected oxytocics immediately after delivery.

✦ Postpartum sepsis can be prevented by good hygiene and by recognizing the early signs of infection.
✦ Preeclampsia can easily be detected during prenatal appointments and managed to prevent eclampsia.

This new COMSA analysis provides the details needed to develop national and local prevention strategies, as well as a reliable baseline from which to measure progress. Saving mothers’ lives is one of the highest public health priorities in Sierra Leone and around the world.