THE COST OF MATERNAL DEATH IS A PRICE TOO HIGH TO BEAR.

In the past two decades, Kenya has shown only minimal improvement in maternal health outcomes — far too many women are dying, and the vast majority of these deaths are preventable. This new study — conducted in an area of high poverty, high maternal and newborn mortality, and low access to quality health services — clearly demonstrates the devastating impact of these needless deaths on the well-being of families, the economic productivity of communities, the survival of newborns, and the health and opportunities of surviving children.

These findings must catalyse renewed and strengthened efforts to:

- Ensure universal access to reproductive, maternal, newborn, and child health care
- Improve the quality of health services, including emergency obstetric care
- Strengthen referral services
- Improve financial and social support for women and families facing maternal health crises

For more information, contact: fcikenya@familycareintl.org

March 2014

WHAT IS THE COST OF A MATERNAL DEATH?

When a woman dies from pregnancy or childbirth-related causes, her illness and death begin a chain of loss that deepens household poverty, disrupts the life of her family, and devastates her loved ones with grief.

Kenya must take action to reduce maternal mortality.

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New study from Kenya confirms dramatic impact of maternal death

In a study conducted in 2011-2013 in three sub-counties in Siaya County in Western Kenya, Family Care International (FCI), the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW), and the KEMRI/CDC Research and Public Health Collaboration in cooperation with the Ministry of Health sought to document the financial costs of maternal mortality to households in poor remote communities, and to explore the impact of these costs on family well-being.

In the study area, poverty is pervasive; reproductive, maternal, and child health indicators are worse than national averages; and rates of HIV, TB, and malaria are among the highest in Kenya.

Using KEMRI/CDC’s Health and Demographic Surveillance System, which has since 2001 conducted quarterly surveys of a total population of 220,000, the research team sought to identify every maternal death that occurred in the area over a period of 22 months, and to interview surviving household members. For each such ‘case’ household, an additional two control households — in which a woman had given birth at approximately the same time, and survived — were also interviewed.

Group discussions were also held with a subset of the households that had experienced a maternal death, to supplement quantitative data with more qualitative information about the impact of the death on surviving family members.
THE IMPACT OF A MATERNAL DEATH IS DEVASTATING.

THE COST OF FATAL PREGNANCY AND CHILDBIRTH COMPLICATIONS IS A HEAVY ECONOMIC BURDEN.

- Regardless of household wealth, families that experienced a maternal death reported spending approximately 1/3 of their total annual consumption expenditure to access pregnancy and childbirth care, between 3 and 6 times more than households where a woman gave birth safely.
- This approaches what WHO calls a ‘catastrophic’ cost (40% of disposable income), and suggests that some families may avoid or delay emergency care because of difficulty in covering the costs of transport and services.
- In nearly half of all cases, families needed to look outside the household for money to pay for maternity care – in many cases from sources in their communities, but sometimes by borrowing from a moneylender or even selling household property.

WHEN A WOMAN DIES, HER FUNERAL COSTS ARE A CRIPPLING HARDSHIP FOR HER FAMILY.

- Across all wealth levels, families’ funeral costs exceeded their total annual expenditure on food, housing, and all other household consumption.
- Many family members had to take time off from work during the maternal health crisis and funeral period, often losing between 16 and 26 days of productive activity and deepening the family’s economic hardship.
- Other research has shown that many families borrow money or sell household assets to pay for overwhelming funeral expenses.

THE SUDDEN LOSS OF A PRODUCTIVE WOMAN DISRUPTS THE FAMILY’S ECONOMY AND ITS DAILY LIFE.

- Families reported that women who died had contributed an average of 61 hours of household work each week, including childcare, cooking, laundry, and fetching water and firewood. Their husbands, mothers-in-law, older children, or other surviving family members had to pick up the slack: 88% of families reported that this had reduced their ability to contribute earnings to household income.
- Many of the women who died were also economically active, many working on their own or family farms, or running their own market stalls, shops, or other small businesses. The loss of their labour or income caused significant economic disruption.
- Many families reported losing crops or being forced to leave their land uncultivated because of the loss of the woman’s labour or reduction in work by surviving family members. Others were pushed further into poverty when they had to hire casual laborers to work their fields.

THE LOSS OF A MOTHER HARMS HER CHILDREN’S HEALTH, EDUCATION, AND FUTURE OPPORTUNITIES.

- Maternal death is linked to high neonatal mortality: of the 59 maternal deaths in the study, only 15 babies survived the first 60 days of life.
- Surviving children in some cases were withdrawn from or forced to miss school, because economic disruptions made it difficult to afford school fees.
- When children did continue their schooling, often their grief and new household responsibilities negatively affected their schoolwork.
- In some cases, children had to move out of the household and into foster care by extended family members.

'I am used to going to the farm early, but when she was gone it was a must that I make sure that those children have had something to drink... When I come back from the farm, I need to wash the clothes. I need to wash the children, I also need to find them food. All this on how many people? Me, just one person.'

Husband of deceased

'Truly speaking, during the time you bring in a casual laborer, and he wants a thousand... or two thousand shillings at the same time a child is sent home for exam fees, PTA money, things like that, and the money you have had been given to the hired person, it will force the child to stay at home for some time while you are still looking for the money. And if [the mother] was there, you could not have hired anybody but instead the money could have gone to school...'

Husband of deceased

'The time they are supposed to be concentrating on the book, they are still looking at how they would make something to eat. The time they are supposed to be sitted on the book, it's a must that they go to river to fetch water instead... and even if they have been given homework they would not do it all and complete. They will leave it half done, because... when it gets to 10pm the child cannot read.'

Husband of deceased

'The death gave us a lot of grief, because it got to a point where the children were not in the home, and so the home looked like gunda [a deserted home]... So when you come to the home it was so cold your heart goes far thinking about this and that.'

Mother-in-law of deceased
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Richard Lord

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