

One in seven pregnant women could die in Ebola-hit countries, say charities

Fears that maternal death rates in Sierra Leone, Liberia and Guinea could increase 20-fold as health facilities collapse

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A Liberian woman washes her hands from a bottle of chlorine water to curb the spread of Ebola. Photograph: Ahmed Jallanzo/EPA

One in seven women in countries hit by the Ebola epidemic could die in pregnancy or childbirth because hospital services are overwhelmed, say charities.

Sierra Leone, Liberia and Guinea were among the countries with the highest maternal mortality rates in the world before Ebola broke out, but they were improving - women were more likely to go to a health facility to give birth and be delivered by a skilled health worker or midwife and their care was free of charge.

But hospitals and clinics have collapsed under the pressure of the outbreak – many have become exclusively Ebola treatment centres. Pregnant women are also afraid to visit hospital because of the fear and stigma around the disease, which means they are also unlikely to get the antenatal checks that could pick up potential problems.

According to charities that are part of the [Disasters Emergency Committee \(DEC\)](#), the death rates will soar unless the situation is turned around. The UN Population Fund estimates that 800,000 women across the three countries will be due to give birth within the next 12 months and 120,000 of those are likely to face complications, such as obstructed labour or infection which could kill them if they do not get specialised medical help.

If none gets the care they need, the maternal mortality rate could rise to 15%, which is a 20-fold increase in the rate now.

Korto Williams, head of ActionAid in Liberia, said: “One in seven women dying in childbirth because of Ebola is an absolute worst case scenario. But we know that many women have had to give birth on their own because people were afraid they had Ebola and women have died because of a lack of care.

“We have to do more to stop this horrendous prediction coming true. We have to ensure that pregnant women get the care they urgently need or we will see the rate of maternal deaths skyrocket. Ebola has taken enough lives already.”

There have been reports of women giving birth in the street alone, with nobody to help. There

Charities are running campaigns to persuade women to go to hospital. In Liberia, Save the Children has trained more than 250 care givers and midwives and provided protective and sanitation supplies so that they can work safely.

The charity's chief executive, Justin Forsyth, said: "Ebola is having a huge impact on wider health issues like maternal healthcare. No children have gone to school since March and pregnant mums are avoiding health clinics and hospitals. One clinic I went to said the admissions had plummeted from 80 a day to 20 – a worrying stat when the UN estimates that 800,000 mums will give birth in the coming year across the region."

There have been reports of a drop in the numbers of new Ebola cases in Liberia, but Médecins Sans Frontières is warning against complacency, saying the outbreak is far from over. New hotspots are emerging around the country all the time, said MSF and in Guinea, where there were two significant dips in cases, the numbers have risen again.