

 PregnantWoman

Phyllisa Deroze// As an African American woman who has never met my paternal grandmother because she died from postpartum hemorrhaging, and as a mother who is writing this essay while recovering from my third postpartum reconstructive surgery to repair the preventable damage caused during the birth of my daughter, I am elated to observe the current spotlight on black maternal health. When my daughter was born four years ago, my birth plan was disregarded, I was given an IV in each arm which prevented me from moving freely during all stages of delivery, and I was left traumatized, bruised, and physically impaired. I suffered mainly in silence as I endured (and still am enduring) multiple corrective procedures to repair my body. My emotional health has yet to warrant the necessary attention it needs, and so I find hope in observing the movement happening around maternal health.

The inaugural Black Maternal Health Week (BMHW) started in April 2018 by the Black Mamas Matter Alliance.[1] A few months later, in July, I was asked to share my experience at Boston University's conference on maternal health.[2] Unbeknownst to me at the time, this was one of many research projects underway across the US highlighting black women's maternal health. I discovered then that I was not alone in experiencing postpartum trauma, and my grandmother's postpartum death is a prevalent problem facing black women.

The movement to bring awareness surrounding racial disparities within maternal health is necessary because data unveils that black women have a "pregnancy-related mortality ratio approximately three times as high as that of white women." [3] Research also shows that education and income do not prevent black women from maternal death and/or complications from childbirth.[4] And, if the national statistics are not alarming enough to spark change, according to FUSION TV's documentary, *Death by Delivery*, black women living in New York City are twelve times more likely die from childbirth.[5],[6]

By publicizing the horrifying research results alongside heartbreaking stories of black women's maternal encounters, advocates have helped to garner national attention. In April 2019, Senator Kamala Harris and Congresswoman Alma Adams led efforts to officially declare April 11-17 as "Black Maternal Health Week" with a resolution brought before the US Congress.[7] Rapidly, #blackmaternalhealthweek became a trending hashtag on Twitter and Instagram transforming social media into virtual safe spaces for black women across the nation to share their child birthing experiences. Black women's stories of maternal death, childbirth trauma, postpartum, and encounters with negligent behavior by medical staff have claimed cover pages of major

newspapers and magazines. Most famously perhaps are *The New York Times* and *Vogue* articles featuring Serena Williams' near-death experiences following her daughter's birth.[8],[9] This year, some women's magazines, including *Womanly Magazine* and *Self*, published special issues on black maternal health. The Spring 2019 issue of *Womanly Magazine* incorporated a collection of scholarly articles, essays, poetry,[10] and even a guide outlining how to advocate for one's self during pregnancy and childbirth.[11]

Fortunately, the demand for change is making an impact. The movement is in motion. New York's Governor Andrew M. Cuomo created the Taskforce on Maternal Mortality and Disparate Racial Outcomes and committed eight million dollars from the 2019-2020 budget to fund initiatives to reduce maternal deaths of black women in the State.[12] Black women's maternal health was a topic of discussion during last month's 2020 Democratic Party presidential debate.[13] Senators Elizabeth Warren, Bernie Sanders, and Kamala Harris each articulated plans to address the racial disparity within the US Healthcare system.

As a woman who has been inspired by the movement to break the silence about my own birth experience, I am hopeful that with continued advocacy, policy changes will develop. I cling to hope because I shudder to think that when my daughter becomes a mother, my family could have generations of maternal death and trauma, if nothing changes.

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[1] <https://blackmamasmatter.org/bmhw/>

[2] <https://www.bu.edu/sph/2018/09/14/bridging-the-chasms-in-maternal-health/>

[3] [https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/68/wr/mm6818e1.htm?s\\_cid=mm6818e1\\_w](https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/68/wr/mm6818e1.htm?s_cid=mm6818e1_w)

[4] <https://www.propublica.org/article/nothing-protects-black-women-from-dying-in-pregnancy-and-childbirth>

[5] <https://fusion.tv/video/390130/death-by-delivery/>

[6] <https://www.essence.com/news/black-mothers-nyc-12-times-more-likely-die-childbirth/>

[7]

<https://www.harris.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Black%20Maternal%20Health%20Week%20Resolutio>

[8] <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/11/sports/tennis/serena-williams-baby-vogue.html>

[9] <https://www.vogue.com/article/serena-williams-vogue-cover-interview-february-2018>

[10] <https://www.womanlymag.com/black-maternal-health/13-ways-of-ignoring-a-black-womans->

birth-trauma

[11] <https://www.womanlymag.com/black-maternal-health/how-to-advocate-for-yourself>

[12]

[https://www.health.ny.gov/community/adults/women/task\\_force\\_maternal\\_mortality/docs/maternal\\_](https://www.health.ny.gov/community/adults/women/task_force_maternal_mortality/docs/maternal_)

[13] <https://sg.news.yahoo.com/giving-birth-not-life-death-140238195.html>