



UK Black Maternal Health Equity Act

Improving Maternal Healthcare outcomes and addressing disparities in care

Key Policy Recommendations

- **Establish** a national target to eliminate disparities in Black maternal health outcomes.
- **Implement** a comprehensive evaluation and impact assessment framework for maternal health equity initiatives and interventions.
- **Integrate** the voices of Black mothers into healthcare policy and practice improvements.

The impact of a UK Black Maternal Health Equity Act

- Establishing a **national target** for eliminating Black maternal health disparities ensures **focused efforts and accountability**. This would drive significant policy and practice changes, leading to better resource allocation and prioritization of maternal health issues.
- Implementing an evaluation framework allows for the **systematic assessment of interventions**, ensuring the identification of effective strategies and dissemination of best practices. Using a framework and validated tool ensures rigorous evaluation of healthcare practices. This can lead to improved patient outcomes, and in turn drive improvements to care standards and practices.
- Enhanced data collection and analysis **improves understanding of health disparities**, guiding targeted interventions and resource allocation. This leads to more effective and personalized and equitable care, helping with understanding the root and intersecting causes of disparities, such as socio-economic factors and implicit biases, enabling more precise and impactful interventions.
- Greater transparency and regular reporting on progress **foster trust and engagement with** Black women, improving communication between patients and healthcare providers. Building trust is crucial for encouraging Black women to seek timely care and to adhere to medical advice. According to Black British Voices (BBV), 87% of the 11,000 Black participants believe that Black people receive a substandard level of healthcare because of their race.
- Implementing an evaluation framework to assess the effectiveness of equity training for Black maternal health, co-produced by healthcare professionals and Black women. Multiple training programmes have been developed across the NHS and via community models to improve care, but very few in the UK have completed robust evaluations to assess efficiency and impact for women. This evaluation can ensure that **training programmes are tailored to the specific needs of Black women and mothers**, effectively reduce racial biases and stereotypes, and lead to more equitable, and culturally sensitive care, ultimately improving maternal health outcomes and patient satisfaction.
- Integrating successful interventions into national policies ensures **consistent implementation across the healthcare system**. This contributes to systemic changes that support equitable maternal health outcomes. Policies informed by successful interventions can lead to widespread improvements in care quality and equity, reducing overall disparities in maternal health for Black women.

The case for action

Despite significant advancements in healthcare, Black women in the UK face disproportionately higher risks of adverse maternal health outcomes. These disparities are driven by systemic racism, socio-economic inequalities, and a lack of culturally competent healthcare services. Furthermore, Black women often feel unheard and mistrusted by healthcare providers, exacerbating their trauma, and leading to negative health outcomes.

Black women in the UK are nearly four times more likely to die during pregnancy, childbirth, or in the postpartum period compared to white women (MBRACE-UK, 2021)

The Momnibus Act in the US serves as a comprehensive legislative package aimed at addressing similar disparities by providing targeted funding, enhancing data collection, and improving access to quality maternal healthcare services for Black women. This Act has highlighted the importance of a structured and multi-faceted approach. Adopting a similar initiative in the UK is crucial to address these disparities effectively.

The Women and Equalities Committee (2023) has made recommendations to improve measures of success and impact on tackling Black maternal health disparities. Specifically, the Committee recommends that the Government should publish measures for gauging the success of the Maternity Disparities Taskforce and providing updates to the Committee on a six-monthly basis. However, no standardised evaluation measurement tool or framework for assessing the impact of equity and equality programmes on maternal health disparities exists.

Evidence base

Data consistently shows that Black women experience higher rates of birth trauma, maternal mortality, and mental health issues during the perinatal and postnatal periods.

Factors such as socio-economic status, access to healthcare, and systemic racism contribute significantly to these disparities.

A recent study led by Dr. Darko, supported by the Stephen Lawrence Research Centre and the Centre for Reproduction Research, involved 60 one-to-one interviews and a survey of 110 women (aged 18-55) who had or were due to have a baby during and since the Covid-19 pandemic. This study provides critical insights into maternal health inequalities among Black and ethnic minority women in the UK. Key findings include:

- **98% of Black women reported dissatisfaction with care, access, and follow-up services.**
- **Lack of personalization, racial empathy, and continuity of care** were major concerns.
- 60% of respondents did not feel they had **adequate access to mental health wellbeing services**, and 98% of Black women specifically reported inadequate access.
- **Cultural insensitivity and direct racism were prevalent**, with misconceptions about ethnicity, religion, and cultural practices leading to inappropriate assumptions, differential treatment, birth trauma, baby loss and mental health conditions.
- 70% of respondents were **unhappy with healthcare visitor support**, and 60% were **dissatisfied with midwifery services**.
 - Multiple disadvantages and vulnerabilities due to intersecting positions and experiences were often ignored, **exacerbating health disparities**.

Implementation

The following steps are key to any future framework seeking to address disparities:

1) Set a Definitive Target

This would be established and overseen by a coalition of expert bodies including NHS England, the NHS Race and Health Observatory, The Motherhood Group, Tommy's, the Women and Equalities Committee and the Leicester NIHR Biomedical Research Centre.

Annual reviews will track progress, and the target will include specific, measurable goals to drive focused efforts and ensure accountability.

2) Scoping Review and Evaluation Impact Assessment Framework

A scoping review of existing maternal health equity frameworks will identify best practices, gaps, and opportunities for improvement in evaluating maternal health equity initiatives, led by Dr. Darko and colleagues. An Evaluation and Impact Assessment Framework will then be co-designed with Black women and mothers, in collaboration with key stakeholders.

Grounded in the lived experiences of Black mothers, this framework will provide a standardised tool for evaluating the effectiveness of interventions and ensuring that successful strategies are scaled and disseminated across the healthcare system.

3. Policy and Practice Integration:

A working group, led by Dr. Darko to oversee the integration of evaluated interventions into national maternal health policy. The group will consist of key stakeholders, including e.g NHS Trusts, NHS England, the National Maternity Transformation Programme (LMS), Tommy's, The Motherhood Group, and the Royal College of Midwives.

The working group will monitor its delivery and develop an implementation strategy, ensuring interventions are integrated across the healthcare system, enabling healthcare providers to meet national targets.

4. Amplifying Black Maternal Voices:

Led by Dr. Darko, a platform will be developed to enable Black women to co-design maternal health programs. This initiative will involve partnerships with The Motherhood Group, Tommy's, the NHS Race and Health Observatory, and NHS Maternity Voices Partnerships (MVPs).

Continuous feedback mechanisms will enable healthcare providers to adapt and improve maternal services based on the lived experiences and needs of Black mothers, ensuring these integral voices are a part of shaping healthcare policy.

5. Research and Data Collection:

Research led by Dr. Darko will explore Black maternal health disparities, focusing on how multiple layers of black women's experiences and identities (e.g race, socioeconomic status, and geography) intersect to impact outcomes. This research will develop equity-specific indicators to guide policy decisions and ensure they are grounded in accurate data.

The findings will inform national maternal health policy, ensuring that data-driven, targeted actions are implemented to address Black maternal health disparities and support more equitable, evidence-based care across the healthcare system.

This policy briefing paper was produced by Dr Natalie Darko, Associate Professor Health Equity, Director of Inclusion NIHR Biomedical Research Centre (BRC) and Clinical Research Facility (CRF), with the support of the University of Leicester Institute for Policy.



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