

# Unmasking Strength:

The Impact of the Strong Black Woman Archetype on Health, Coping, and Wellness in Black Women in U.S. Southern Communities



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## The Strong Black Woman Archetype (SBWA)

### WHAT IS IT?

A culturally embedded **expectation** that Black women demonstrate unwavering strength, emotional restraint, and self-reliance despite chronic stress and structural inequity.

### HISTORICAL ROOTS

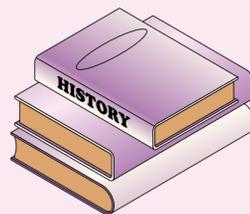
This archetype is not a recent social construct, but a culmination of centuries of imposed expectations, survival mechanisms, and distorted narratives about Black womanhood.

## STEREOTYPES OF BLACK WOMEN

- **The Mammy:** Normalized self-sacrifice and caregiving
- **The Jezebel:** Justified sexual exploitation and denied body autonomy
- **The Sapphire:** Punished emotional expression by framing Black women as inherently angry or aggressive

## MEDICAL MISTRUST & STRUCTURAL BARRIERS

- Historical medical racism and exploitation has produced deep-rooted mistrust toward healthcare and research systems within the Black community.
- Black women report lower trust in physicians and researchers, influencing how they engage in mental health and medical services



## RESEARCH METHODS

A **PRISMA-guided literature review** was used to examine how the SBWA intersects with health, stress, coping, and wellness.

**Search Terms:** SBWA, Black women, Gendered racism, health, stress, United States, South

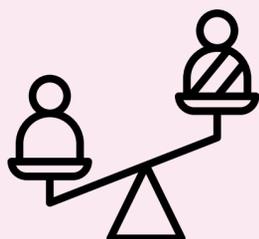
**Databases:** ProQuest, PubMed, PsycNet, Google Scholar

**Results:** 17 studies (Varied approaches including qualitative, quantitative, mixed-methods, and clinical research designs)

## RESULTS

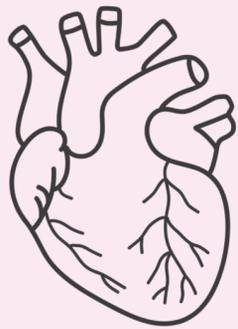
- A thematic analysis was used to synthesize the findings across the studies
- Consistent themes related to **health disparities, emotional suppression, self-silencing, and delayed help-seeking** among Black women were revealed

## BLACK WOMEN NOT CENTERED IN HEALTHCARE



- Non-Hispanic Black women have **3 times higher maternal mortality rate** compared to Non-Hispanic White women
- Non-Hispanic Black women have a rate of **42.4 pregnancy-related deaths** compared to a rate of 16.9 for all women in the United States
- **Infants born to non-Hispanic Black women** die at a rate of **10.9** compared to **4.7 for non-Hispanic White women** (per 1,000 live births)

# BLACK WOMEN NOT CENTERED IN HEALTHCARE



- **40.6% of non-Hispanic Black women** report **hypertension**, and nearly **60%** also experience **comorbid cardiovascular conditions**
- **45% of Black women** with **hypertension** have **uncontrolled blood pressure** despite treatments compared to **28% of White women** with hypertension remain uncontrolled
- Black women experience higher comorbidity, greater disease severity, and increased mortality related to hypertension and CVD

## INSURANCE-INFLUENCED HEALTH DISPARITIES (U.S. SOUTH)

Black women experience some of the highest uninsurance rates in the United States, particularly the Southern states.

- Florida, Georgia, Alabama had uninsurance rates exceeding 12%, with Florida at 18.5% in 2023

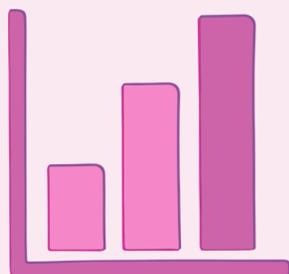


## MENTAL HEALTH OF THE STRONG BLACK WOMEN



Multiple studies revealed internalized expectations of strength were consistently linked to emotional suppression and increased psychological distress among Black women

- **80% of Black women** in one study endorsed the SBWA as a dominant cultural expectation
- Endorsement of the archetype **was significantly associated with depressive symptoms**
- **81%** of a study sample reported suppressing emotional distress to avoid being perceived as “weak”



## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1

### Respectful Maternity Care (RMC) - Global

- This framework, endorsed by the World Health Organization, emphasizes dignity, informed consent, autonomy, and freedom from discrimination during pregnancy, childbirth, and postpartum care.
- Mandatory bias-aware training for healthcare providers, standardized patient-advocacy practices, and accountability mechanisms for reporting mistreatment

2

### Medicaid-Funded Doula Care - Regional (Southern U.S.)

- Implementing Medicaid-funded doula care formally recognizes doulas as essential members of the perinatal care team
- States can expand Medicaid benefits to reimburse doula services, establish certification and training standards, and integrate doulas into existing maternal healthcare teams

3

### Community-Based Cardiovascular and Stress Prevention Practices

- These practices would include cardiovascular screening, prevention, and stress-reduction services in trusted, non-clinical settings such as community centers, faith-based institutions, college campuses, and Black women-focused organizations
- Buy-in from county public health departments, community-based and faith-based organizations, healthcare providers and public health educators, local governments and grant funding will be essential to fund, implement, and sustain these practices