



Reproductive Justice is the human right to control one's body, sexuality, gender, and reproductive choices. That right can only be achieved when all women and girls have the complete economic, social, and political power and resources to make healthy decisions about our bodies, our families, and our communities in all areas of our lives.

# BLACK WOMEN, REPRODUCTIVE JUSTICE, AND ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

Reproductive Justice includes the right to have children; to not have children; and to form and raise families in safe, healthy communities.

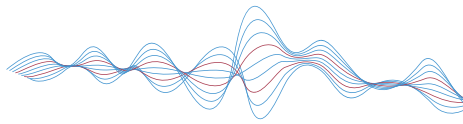
The third core principle explicitly relates to Environmental Justice (EJ): a social justice framework and movement that advances the human right to safe, sustainable, and healthy living environments. The Reproductive Justice (RJ) and Environmental Justice movements work together to address both environmental racism and harmful policies and practices that contribute to adverse health outcomes that stem from toxic emissions, chemical exposures, climate change, and the degradation of life-sustaining natural resources like clean air and water. Black women and their families and communities are disproportionately impacted by exposure to toxins and a range of connected injustices that jeopardize environmental wellness, access to basic resources, and their overall health and quality of life.<sup>1,2</sup>

## EXPOSURE TO TOXIC EMISSIONS, ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION, & COSMETIC CHEMICALS

Black women and their families are widely exposed to facilities that leak, leach, and emit harmful toxins into the environment.<sup>3</sup> Toxic emissions can come from sewer treatment plants, garbage dumps and landfills, hazardous waste sites, military sites, airports, and other industrial facilities.<sup>4</sup> Facilities that produce toxic waste are systematically and disproportionately located near Black communities, other communities of color, and areas that are characterized by high levels of income inequality.<sup>5</sup> Toxic emissions impact the air we breathe and the water we drink.

- Nearly 40% of the U.S. population gets their water from water systems that violate health-based standards established in the Safe Drinking Water Act (SDWA). An analysis of socio-demographic characteristics of communities with systems in violation of the SDWA found that, of all the characteristics analyzed, racial, ethnic, and language vulnerability had the strongest relationship to slow and inadequate enforcement of the SDWA.<sup>6</sup>
- Black people in the U.S. are three times more likely to die from exposure to air pollutants than are their white counterparts.<sup>7</sup>
- People of color comprise more than half of those who live within 1.8 miles of U.S. toxic waste facilities.<sup>8</sup> Compared to white people, they are nearly twice as likely to live within one mile of dangerous chemical facilities, putting them at increased risk of exposure to environmental toxins.<sup>5</sup>

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- Chemical facilities located in communities of color have almost twice the rate of hazardous incidents as those located in mainly white communities: 1 incident per 6 facilities, vs. 1 incident per 11 facilities.<sup>5</sup>
- A 2012 study that monitored 14 pollutants found that white people had the lowest comparable rates of exposure to 11 of these toxins, while Black people had higher comparable exposure rates for 13 out of the 14 pollutants studied.

## ENVIRONMENTAL TOXINS & DEGRADATION HAVE LONG-TERM, NEGATIVE HEALTH IMPACTS ON PEOPLE OF COLOR

Exposure to environmental toxins has long-term negative consequences for health and quality of life. Toxins in our air and water have been connected to a variety of health problems, including reproductive health complications, asthma, cardiovascular problems, lung disease, neurological conditions, birth defects, blood disorders, cancer, and others.<sup>9 10</sup>

Systematic inequality and environmental racism results in people of color being exposed to toxins and pollutants at higher rates than white people.<sup>2</sup>

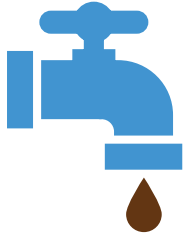
- One study found that increased levels of particulate matter and ozone (found in air pollution) are associated with increases in all causes of death; Black people were found to be about three times more likely to die from the tiny particles that create air pollution.<sup>7</sup>
- A case study of The Bronx (NY) found that individuals living near noxious industrial facilities and waste sites were 66% more likely to be hospitalized for asthma.<sup>11</sup> Significantly, these same individuals were 13% more likely to be people of color than the broader population.

Lead poisoning—one of the most well-known environmental toxins—provides a harrowing example of communities of colors' risks. Before being banned for residential use in 1978, lead was used in paint, pipes, gasoline, and many other common items.<sup>9</sup> Lead poisoning leads to steep and measurable losses in IQ and hearing, behavioral problems, dyslexia, and problems in neurological development.<sup>12</sup> These conditions can negatively impact academic achievement and a number of health and life outcomes.<sup>13</sup> Despite restrictions on lead's use, children who live in low-income communities continue to be exposed to this toxin through paint flakes, paint dust, and old pipes that contaminate water.

- Black children are three times more likely than white children to have elevated blood lead levels and related health risks.<sup>9</sup>
- According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), from 1999 to 1994, 11.2% of Black children aged 1 to 5 had elevated blood lead levels, compared to 2.3% of white children.<sup>8 14</sup>
- While those numbers declined significantly from 1999 to 2004, Black children still had blood lead levels three times the rates of whites (.03 vs. .01, respectively).<sup>15</sup>
- A 2006 national survey indicates that, since 1999, there has been a large decline in the percentage of white families whose homes have serious lead paint hazards, while the percentage of Black families facing such hazards has increased.<sup>16</sup>

The environmental crisis in Flint, Michigan, provides a chilling illustration of lead poisoning's impact in vulnerable communities. Since 2014, Flint's residents have been exposed to drinking and bathing water that meets the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA's) definition of "toxic waste"<sup>12 17</sup>—with children and pregnant women experiencing the highest risks of developing lead poisoning.<sup>18</sup> Flint's contaminated drinking water has been linked to at least 12 deaths and doubling or tripling of children's elevated blood lead levels.<sup>12 19</sup> A report noted that historical, structural, and systemic racism—combined with implicit bias—were driving factors behind water safety crisis in Flint, a city where Black people comprise more than half (57%) of the residents.<sup>20</sup>

It is no surprise, therefore, that clean water is extremely important and a top political priority for Black women and other women of color.<sup>21</sup> *In Our Own Voice's* national poll found that Black women are deeply concerned about water safety and related environmental factors.<sup>22</sup> One in three of the Black women polled (32%) said they have had brown water come out of their taps at home; 37% have had to boil water before drinking it; 29% have had water come out of their taps that smelled unsafe. Alarming, two-thirds (69%) of Black women have experienced at least one of these events.



## 1 IN 3 BLACK WOMEN (32%) HAS HAD BROWN WATER COME OUT OF THEIR TAPS AT HOME.

**A slightly larger proportion (37%)** has had to boil water before drinking it.

**Nearly 3 in ten (29%)** have had water coming from their taps that smelled unsafe.

**Two-thirds (69%)** of Black women say they have experienced one of these three scenarios.

**45% SAY HAVING ACCESS TO WATER HAS BEEN A FACTOR DECIDING TO BECOME PARENT.**

### CLIMATE CHANGE IMPACTS THE LIVES OF BLACK WOMEN AND THEIR FAMILIES

Black women and their families are also particularly vulnerable to natural disasters that are being exacerbated by climate change—including hurricanes and severe heat waves. This risk is partly driven by socio-economic status and partly by geography. Because they are more likely to live in poverty and to serve as caregivers, women are more likely to die or to be displaced as a result of climate-related disasters, compared to men.<sup>23 24</sup> As a result, in emergencies, women and children comprise approximately 70-80% of those who need assistance.<sup>25</sup> In addition, poverty makes recovering from natural disasters more difficult, especially for women.<sup>26</sup>

The U.S. states at greatest risk for hurricanes are located along the Gulf and Atlantic coasts. Six of the states at greatest risk are also home to the highest percentage of Black residents: Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, and South Carolina.<sup>27</sup> Black people are also disproportionately represented among low-income urban residents, who are at greater risk of death during heat waves and may experience death rates twice that of other races/ethnicities during these catastrophes.<sup>28</sup>

### CHEMICALS IN COSMETICS PRESENT RISKS TO BLACK WOMEN & OTHER WOMEN OF COLOR

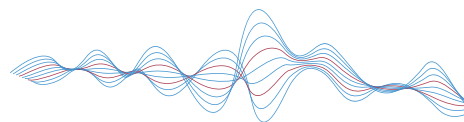
The U.S. currently does not require personal care products such as shampoos, perfumes, deodorants, and cosmetics to have approval from the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). Many U.S. personal care products contain toxic chemicals—including asbestos, lead<sup>29</sup> and talc—which have been linked to certain types of cancers.<sup>30 31</sup>

reproductive problems including fibroids, endometriosis,<sup>32 33 34</sup> and miscarriage;<sup>35</sup> diabetes;<sup>36</sup> and other health problems.

Black women and other women of color are at higher risk from these potentially dangerous products.<sup>37</sup> Black women “spend four times more than white women on hair care products, in part because they face steep social and professional costs if they do not conform to beauty standards based on European characteristics.”<sup>38</sup>

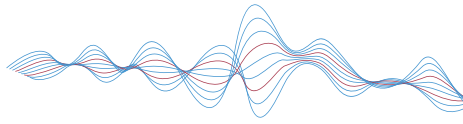
Further, studies have found that products marketed to women of color (for example hair relaxers) are among the most toxic. An analysis of 1,177 beauty and personal care marketed to Black women found that 1 in every 12 of these products contained “highly hazardous” ingredients; this is a much higher rate than that in products marketed to the general population.<sup>39</sup>

- Johnson & Johnson knew about the risks from its baby powder for many years, but continued to aggressively target women of color, such as through outreach at Black churches and on Spanish-language radio.<sup>40 41</sup>
- Breast Cancer Prevention Partners (BCPP) analyzed personal care and found that one product—Just For Me Shampoo—a shampoo for Black girls, contained 24 harmful ingredients, including 4 carcinogens, 6 developmental toxicants, and 19 hormone-disrupting compounds.<sup>42</sup>



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*Environmental toxins threaten many aspects of Black women's lives, including their ability to maintain their personal bodily autonomy, decide whether or not to have children, and to parent in safe and sustainable communities.*



## FEDERAL LEGISLATION TO ADVANCE ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

Environmental toxins threaten many aspects of Black women's lives, including their ability to maintain their personal bodily autonomy, decide whether or not to have children, and to parent in safe and sustainable communities. An Environmental Justice framework is critical to ensure that Black women can live free from exposure to dangerous toxins in their bodies and communities and be protected from the dangers of climate change.

Several pieces of federal legislation would help advance Environmental Justice and the health of Black women and their families; all have been endorsed by *In Our Own Voice*:

- **Water Affordability, Transparency, Equity, and Reliability Act (S.611):** would fund infrastructure projects to make water service safer, more affordable, and more accessible for both urban and rural communities. It would also provide funding to replace lead service lines that carry water into homes and remove lead pipes and plumbing from school facilities.
- **Personal Care Products Safety Act (S.1113):** would require cosmetics companies to register their facilities with the FDA; submit cosmetic ingredient statements with the amount of each ingredient to the FDA; and require companies pay a facility registration fee based on the annual gross sales of cosmetics, which would be used for cosmetic safety activities.
- **Children's Product Warning Label Act (H.R.1816):** would mandate that all cosmetics marketed to children are demonstrated to be free of asbestos or, otherwise, carry a warning label.

Women and children are the most deeply affected by environmental toxins, environmental degradation, and the negative impacts of climate change; they must be at the center of efforts to advance Environmental Justice.<sup>43</sup> A national strategy is essential to reduce industrial and natural threats to Black women's health and well-being.

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# voice

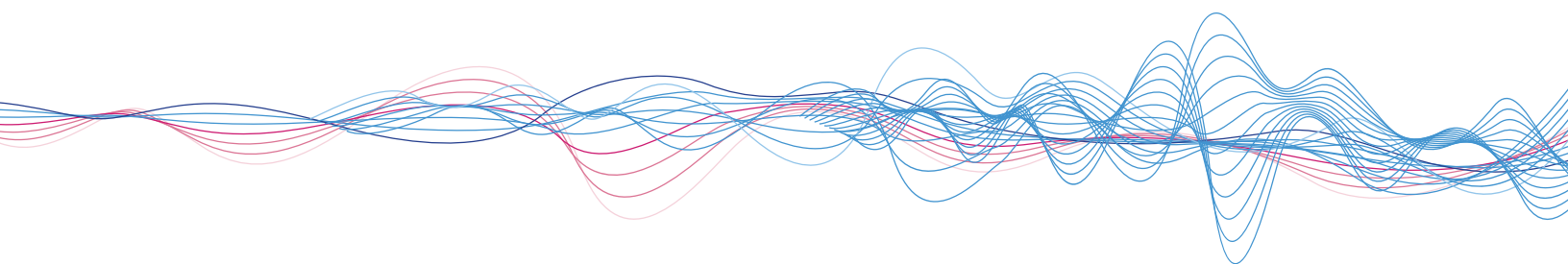
IN OUR OWN

National Black Women's  
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## IN OUR OWN VOICE: NATIONAL BLACK WOMEN'S REPRODUCTIVE JUSTICE AGENDA

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In Our Own Voice: National Black Women's Reproductive Justice Agenda is a national Reproductive Justice organization focused on lifting up the voices of Black women at the national and regional levels in our ongoing policy fight to secure Reproductive Justice for all women and girls. Our eight strategic partners include Black Women for Wellness, Black Women's Health Imperative, New Voices for Reproductive Justice, SisterLove, Inc. SisterReach, SPARK Reproductive Justice Now, The Afiya Center and Women With A Vision.



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