

Sands Briefing for oral question on the maternal mortality rates of Black, Asian and minority ethnic women and their babies.

House of Lords, 29 July 2024

Introduction

No baby should have an increased risk of dying because of their race or ethnicity. However, stark and persistent inequalities in baby loss remain in England

Black babies are over twice as likely to be stillborn as white babies – and Asian babies are over 50% more likely to be stillborn. Black and Asian babies are also more likely to die shortly after birth compared with white babies.¹

If, in the period 2017-2021, stillbirth and neonatal death rates for Black and Asian babies had been the same as for white babies, 1,704 babies would have survived.²

The Government must take urgent action and commit to tackling inequalities in pregnancy and baby loss.

Inequalities in pregnancy and baby loss

In December 2023, alongside MBRRACE-UK's confidential enquiries into the deaths of Black and Asian babies, Sands published the [Listening Project Report](#) which heard the lived experiences of Black and Asian bereaved parents.

Half of the parents who took part believed that they had received worse care or been treated differently by healthcare staff because of their ethnicity.³ Asian parents discussed being dismissed as overly anxious or prone to exaggerating health concerns. Several Black parents described how racist stereotyping assuming them to be 'strong', or 'feisty' or 'dramatic' had prevented professionals from recognising when they were at their most vulnerable.

"I think they just could not recognise in me actual fear. They just saw this feisty, strong, brown woman. And actually, I was so scared I couldn't speak." - Mother to a baby born at 26 weeks who died neonatally (Mixed white and Black Caribbean)

The report provided the following practical recommendations for the Government:

- Set out long-term, funded plans aimed at eliminating inequalities in pregnancy loss and baby deaths.
- Ensure that maternity services have the staff capacity, skills and resources required to assess and care for women and birthing people effectively, so that the risk factors affecting each individual are recognised and their impact reduced.

¹ [State of the nation report | MBRRACE-UK \(le.ac.uk\)](#)

² [Sands Listening Project Report Publication of Findings 2023.pdf](#)

³ [Sands Listening Project Report Publication of Findings 2023.pdf](#)

- Initiating and funding a research programme to inform the development of effective interventions to address health inequalities and save babies' lives.
- Take steps to ensure that all maternity safety improvements schemes include a focus on tackling inequalities, with action, progress and impact monitored.

Questions to raise:

- **At the end of last year, the baby loss charity Sands released the Listening Project – a study of Black and Asian bereaved parents' experiences of care. Half the participants in the project believed they had received worse care, or were treated differently, by healthcare staff because of their ethnicity. What plans does the Minister have to make care safer for Black and Asian parents, and ultimately save more babies lives?**
- **The baby loss charity Sands has calculated that if, between 2017 and 2021, stillbirth & neonatal death rates were the same for Black and Asian babies as white babies, 1,704 babies would have survived. Will the new Government consider designing a long-term, funded plan to eliminate inequalities in baby loss and save more babies' lives?**
- **As part of their recent Listening Project, the baby loss charity Sands spoke to Black and Asian bereaved parents about the maternity and neonatal care they received. Sadly, the report revealed alarming instances of racist stereotyping, behaviors and language. Will the Minister explain what action the new Government will take to challenge systemic racism in maternity and neonatal care?**
- **In the UK there are persistent inequalities in baby loss by ethnicity. The latest data from MMBRACE-UK reveals that, in 2021, Black babies were over twice as likely to be compared with white babies – and Asian babies were over 50% more likely to be stillborn. What plans does the new Government have to tackle this inequality?**

Parent Open Letter

Sands believes the Government must take urgent action and commit to tackling inequalities in pregnancy and baby loss. We are supporting bereaved parents Amber, Darren, Vaishali, Bhavna and Vijay who have written an [open letter to the Government](#) to raise awareness of inequalities and systemic racism in baby loss.

Their letter outlines some of the problems they experienced in maternity care and why urgent action is needed.

"We trusted in a system that failed us profoundly, leaving us questioning if our treatment would have been different had we been from a different background. It's disheartening to realise that racial disparities may have contributed to our tragedy." (Amber and Darren)

Sadly, we know these examples are not isolated instances, but part of a well-documented problem of systemic racism experienced by many Black, Asian and mixed ethnicity families when navigating maternity and neonatal care.⁴

In 2015, the Government announced maternity safety ambitions to halve stillbirths and neonatal deaths by 2025 relative to 2010. These ambitions must be renewed and extended to include an ambition to eliminate inequalities in pregnancy and baby loss.

Questions to raise:

- **Through their #EndInequalityInBabyLoss campaign, bereaved parents and the baby loss charity Sands are raising awareness of the higher rates of baby death in Black and Asian communities. Will the Minister note the campaign and outline her department's plans to renew the national maternity safety ambitions beyond 2025 and extend them to include reducing inequalities?**
- **The charity Sands is working with bereaved parents Amber, Darren, Vaishali, Bhavna and Vijay to raise awareness of inequality in baby loss. Their open letter has already accrued over 2,000 signatures. Will the Minister consider meeting with these parents, and speaking to them about what can be done to end inequality in baby loss?**

About Sands

At Sands, we work to save babies' lives and ensure that when a baby does die anyone affected gets the care and support they need. We provide bereavement and peer support to grieving families. We support and promote research to better understand the causes of baby deaths and save babies' lives. We raise awareness of baby loss and work with governments, the NHS and healthcare professionals to make saving babies' lives and improving bereavement care a priority.

Contact: Public Affairs and Campaigns Team at Sands, campaigns@sands.org.uk

⁴ Systemic racism, not broken bodies, Birthrights 2022, The Black Maternity Experiences Survey, Five X More 2022, Invisible: Maternity Experiences of Muslim Women from Racialised Minority Communities, Muslim Women's Network UK 2022, Black people, racism and human rights, Joint Committee on Human Rights 2020