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"Those Who Commit the Murders Write the Reports": Misogynoir, Weathering and the Disenfranchised Grief of Black Women Under the American Moral State

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Abstract

In her 1893 address "Lynch Law in All Its Phases," Ida B. Wells observed that "those who commit the murders write the reports." This article takes Wells's indictment as a genealogical key for reading the United States as a moral state: one that establishes and justifies norms through its institutions and records, deciding whose suffering counts as a public wrong. Its objective is to examine how the state's 2025–2026 actions affect Black women and how they resist, analyzing federal vital statistics and legal documents alongside independent data (Institute for Women's Policy Research, Violence Policy Center, NAPAWF–Ipsos) and reading from a womanist standpoint that names the harm as misogynoir, linking weathering to disenfranchised grief, hypothesizing that unrecognized grief is itself a chronic stressor. This article examines how Black women experience interconnected losses across five areas: health (Black women dying from pregnancy-related causes at 3.2 times the rate of White women), employment (widespread job losses and displacement), voting rights (greater difficulty proving racial discrimination in voting districts), historical memory (efforts to erase or undermine historical and scientific evidence), and violence (weakened police accountability). These losses accumulate as physiological wear, and the state that produces them disenfranchises the grief they cause. The article traces womanist practices of counter-reporting, collective mourning, and restorative rest, and recommends restoring federal data systems, disparate-impact enforcement, and the Voting Rights Act.

Keywords: misogynoir; weathering; disenfranchised grief; womanist theory; Ida B. Wells; moral state; Black women; civil rights; cumulative stress; genealogy

1. Introduction

On 13 February 1893, Ida B. Wells stood before an audience at Tremont Temple in Boston and explained why the atrocities she had spent the previous year documenting remained largely unknown beyond the counties in which they occurred. "The details of these horrible outrages seldom reach beyond the narrow world where they occur," she said. "Those who commit the murders write the reports, and hence these lasting blots upon the honor of a nation cause but a faint ripple on the outside world" (Wells 1893). Wells was naming more than a problem of press bias. She was naming a structure of authority in which the same social order that produced Black death also controlled the official account of it, the coroner's verdict of death "at the hand of parties unknown to the jury," the newspaper that supplied the justifying narrative, the legislature that declined to act. Her insight anticipated what later theorists would call the moral state: a state that establishes, justifies, and maintains norms through institutional structures, policy, and

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cultural discourse, and that thereby decides whose suffering counts as a public wrong (Mills 1997). Section 4.2 describes how the concept is operationalized for this analysis.

More than 130 years later, Wells's sentence remains an accurate description of how the United States records the lives and deaths of Black women. High-profile cases, such as the killings of Breonna Taylor in 2020 and Sonya Massey in 2024 by law enforcement officers, and Georgia's dismissal of its maternal mortality review committee after the committee found the deaths of Amber Thurman and Candi Miller preventable, reveal how the state works to erase or justify harm against Black women (these cases are examined in Section 2.3). In each case, the official report either erased the harm, justified it, or was withdrawn when it told the truth.

This article argues that such episodes are not isolated failures of documentation, but expressions of a moral regime that has intensified sharply since January 2025. Across that period, federal and state actors have revoked the executive order that required federal contractors to practice non-discrimination and affirmative action for six decades, directed agencies to abandon disparate-impact enforcement, terminated research on health disparities, suspended the national surveillance system that tracks the experiences of pregnant people, withdrawn from police-reform agreements. In its 29 April 2026 decision in *Louisiana v. Callais*, the Supreme Court made it harder to challenge voting district maps that weaken the voting power of racial minority communities. The ruling raised the standard for proving discrimination under Section 2 of the Voting Rights Act, a law that has helped protect voting districts where racial minority groups make up the majority of voters.

At the same time, Black women experienced some of the steepest labor market losses of any demographic group, while their maternal mortality rate remained more than three times that of White women (Hoyert 2026). These developments are often analyzed separately, as questions of economics, health, law, or history. I analyze them together because Black women live them together.

The objective of this study is to examine how the actions of the American moral state in 2025–2026 have shaped the material and emotional conditions of Black women's lives, and how Black women negotiate and resist those actions. Two questions organize the analysis. First, how does the contemporary American moral state construct and maintain the racialized and gendered norms that render Black women's suffering unremarkable? Second, what are the embodied and emotional consequences of those norms for Black women, and how do Black women negotiate and resist them? To answer the first, I draw on Wells's genealogy of the state's report, on Bailey's (2021) concept of misogynoir, and on womanist ethics (Cannon 1988; Townes 2006). To answer the second, I bring Geronimus's (1992, 2023) weathering hypothesis into conversation with Doka's (1989, 2002) theory of disenfranchised grief, arguing that the cumulative stress Black women carry is inseparable from a grief that the state refuses to recognize. Weathering and disenfranchised grief serve as the article's two explanatory theories; womanist thought supplies the standpoint from which they are read, and misogynoir names the form of harm they help explain (Section 3). The article thereby responds to each of the aims of this Special Issue: it offers a theoretical account of how the moral state constructs racial and gender norms; it examines empirical evidence of moral governance and its consequences; and it traces how Black women interact with, negotiate, and resist state power.

The remainder of this article is outlined as follows: Section 2 reviews the literature on the moral state, on Black feminist thought and misogynoir, and on the state's authorship of the record, from Wells to contemporary cases. Section 3 sets out the theoretical framework and states its linkage hypotheses. Section 4 describes the genealogical method, the operationalization of the moral state, the data sources for each domain, and the analytic procedure. Section 5 reports findings across five domains, separating description from

interpretation. Section 6 discusses those findings through weathering, disenfranchised grief, and womanist resistance. Section 7 offers recommendations for practice, education, research, and policy, and Section 8 concludes.

2. Literature Review

This section reviews three bodies of scholarship on which the analysis builds: work on the moral state and the racial politics of knowledge; Black feminist scholarship on the controlling images and misogynoir through which Black women are governed; and the historical and contemporary record of the state's reports on Black women's deaths, beginning with Wells.

2.1. The Moral State and the Epistemology of Ignorance

This Special Issue defines the moral state as the ways states "establish, justify, and maintain norms, ethical principles, and moral frameworks through institutional structures, policies, governance practices, and cultural discourses," and connects the concept to Butler's (2004) account of moral governance and Mills's (1997) account of the racial contract. Mills argued that the social contract underlying liberal democracy was, in practice, a racial contract among those who counted as full persons, and that its maintenance required an "epistemology of ignorance", a structured refusal to know the realities of racial domination (Mills 1997, 2007). Wells's observation that the perpetrators write the reports is an early description of precisely this epistemology. The report is the instrument through which the moral state manufactures ignorance.

2.2. Black Feminist Thought and Misogynoir

Womanist thought is closely related to Black feminist theory, and I draw on both. Collins (2000) described the "controlling images", the mammy, the matriarch, the welfare recipient, the jezebel, through which the dominant culture has justified Black women's subordination. Crenshaw's (1989, 1991) theory of intersectionality explained why anti-discrimination law, organized around single axes of race or sex, repeatedly failed to recognize harms experienced by Black women as Black women. Harris-Perry (2011) showed how these misrecognitions distort Black women's political citizenship, forcing them to stand upright in a "crooked room" built from stereotype.

Moya Bailey coined the term misogynoir to describe "the anti-Black racist misogyny that Black women experience" (Bailey 2021; see also Bailey and Trudy 2018). The concept names something that neither "racism" nor "sexism" captures on its own: a specific hostility directed at Black women that draws on both but is reducible to neither. Misogynoir appears in the depiction of Black women as angry, unfeminine, hypersexual, or unusually resilient to pain, and it structures how institutions respond to them. Bailey developed the concept through analyses of media and digital culture, but it has proven equally useful for examining medicine, policing, and law. The belief that Black women feel less pain, for instance, is a form of misogynoir with measurable consequences in obstetric care.

In this article, I extend misogynoir from a cultural to a governmental register. If misogynoir describes the images and discourses through which Black women are made legible as undeserving of care, then *governmental misogynoir* describes the institutional processes through which those images are converted into policy, enforcement priorities, and official records. The deputy who writes that a woman holding a pot of water was a threat, the agency that lists a woman shot eight times as uninjured, and the executive order that recasts anti-discrimination programs as themselves discriminatory all participate in governmental misogynoir: each authors a report in which the Black woman is either the danger or the absence.

2.3. The Report and the Record: Misogynoir as Moral Governance

Wells's (1893) address was delivered at a moment when the post-Reconstruction settlement was being consolidated through law and terror. Its central argument was that lynching was not a spontaneous expression of popular outrage, but a system sustained by public institutions. Coroner's juries returned verdicts of death "at the hand of parties unknown to the jury"; the verdict, Wells noted, pronounced over the bodies of more than 1000 Black people, and newspapers supplied the moral justification, most often the "threadbare lie" that Black men were rapists (Wells 1893). Wells understood that the justifying narrative mattered as much as the act. By casting its victims as moral threats, the report converted murder into order.

Wells also documented violence against Black women, including lynchings of Black women and girls that were barely reported at all. Her attention to the ways Black women were rendered invisible in the record anticipated the work of the #SayHerName campaign, which Crenshaw and Ritchie (2015) launched to counter the erasure of Black women from public narratives of police violence. The problem they identified was not that Black women were never harmed, but that their harms did not fit the dominant frame and therefore went unrecorded, unprotested, and unmourned.

The structure Wells identified persists in contemporary cases. When Louisville police released the incident report for the killing of Breonna Taylor nearly three months after her death, the four-page document listed her injuries as "none," indicated no forced entry although officers had used a battering ram, and offered almost no narrative of what had occurred (ET Online 2020). Taylor, a 26-year-old emergency medical technician, had been shot at least eight times. The report did not merely omit information; it produced an official version of events in which there was no victim. When the Department of Justice in July 2025 recommended that Brett Hankison, the only officer convicted in connection with the raid, serve a sentence of one day, it reasoned that "there is no need for a prison sentence to protect the public" (Spectrum News 1 2025). A federal judge rejected the recommendation and imposed 33 months. Taylor's mother, Tamika Palmer, described her daughter as someone who "did everything right, and she was still treated as disposable" (Spectrum News 1 2025).

The killing of Sonya Massey followed the same pattern. Massey, who had called 911 to report a possible intruder, was shot in her own kitchen by Deputy Sean Grayson on 6 July 2024. Grayson's account stated that he feared bodily harm because Massey was holding a pot of hot water and had said "I rebuke you in the name of Jesus." The partner deputy on the scene testified that he was not worried she would hurt him and that she "never said anything that alarmed" him (NBC News 2025). Grayson was convicted of second-degree murder and sentenced on 29 January 2026, to 20 years, the statutory maximum; at sentencing, the judge told him, "You said you were going to shoot her in the face, and then you did" (NPR Illinois 2026). Without the body-camera footage, the report written by the man who fired the shots would have been the record. Massey's prayer would have become evidence of her dangerousness, an instance of what Townes (2006) calls the cultural production of evil, in which a Black woman's faith is made to read as threat.

The Georgia maternal mortality case shows the same logic operating through health governance. In September 2024, ProPublica reported that the state's maternal mortality review committee had concluded that the deaths of Amber Thurman and Candi Miller, two Black mothers who died after Georgia's six week abortion ban took effect, were preventable, and that Thurman had "a good chance" of surviving had she received a timely dilation and curettage, a procedure that hospital physicians delayed amid the legal uncertainty created by the ban (Surana 2024). On 8 November 2024, the state's public health commissioner dismissed all 32 members of the committee, citing the disclosure of confidential information

(The Current 2024). The committee's findings had not been wrong. They had been public. The state's response was to reconstitute the body that writes the report.

Taken together, these cases illustrate governmental misogynoir as a mode of moral governance. The state does not simply fail to protect Black women; it authors the narratives through which their deaths are made to seem justified, accidental, or nonexistent. Wells's point was that such narratives are not incidental to violence but constitutive of it: they are what allow "lasting blots upon the honor of a nation" to "cause but a faint ripple" (Wells 1893). What has changed since 2025 is that the state's authorship has expanded from individual incident reports to the national infrastructure of data, law, and memory.

3. Theoretical Framework

This article rests on two explanatory theories: Arline T. Geronimus's weathering framework and Kenneth Doka's theory of disenfranchised grief. The first explains how the state's actions become embodied; the second explains why the losses those actions produce are not publicly mourned. Two further bodies of thought play a different role. Womanist theory supplies the standpoint and ethical orientation from which the analysis is conducted, and misogynoir, reviewed in Section 2.2, names the specific form of harm whose consequences the two theories explain. Neither is used here as an independent explanatory theory. Section 3.4 states the hypothesized linkages among these elements.

3.1. Womanist Theory as Standpoint: The Moral Agency of Black Women

Walker (1983) defined a womanist as "a black feminist or feminist of color," one who is "committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female." Walker's definition locates Black women's thought in everyday practices of care, audacity, and communal survival rather than in abstract theory alone. Subsequent scholars developed womanism into a robust ethical and theological tradition. Cannon (1988) argued that Black women have historically been forced to construct a moral life under conditions in which the dominant ethical systems of American society were designed to exclude them; what appears to outsiders as mere endurance or resilience is, in Cannon's account, a sophisticated moral agency she termed "unshouted courage." Williams (1993) read the biblical figure of Hagar as a paradigm for Black women's experience of survival in the wilderness of coerced labor and surrogacy. Townes (2006) analyzed the "cultural production of evil," the process by which the stereotypes and myths a society circulates about Black women become embedded in its institutions and are thereby made to seem natural.

Womanist theory is particularly useful for analyzing the moral state for three reasons. First, it insists that morality is not the exclusive property of the state; Black women have long constituted themselves as moral agents in opposition to the state's norms. That opposition was not always chosen. As Cohen (1997) argued, the state has frequently placed Black women outside its norms involuntarily, marking them as deviant through policies and discourses they did not author. The womanist claim is that Black women have repeatedly converted that imposed position into a deliberate moral stance. Black women have turned lemon into lemonade. When Ida B. Wells was forcibly removed from the ladies' car of a Chesapeake, Ohio and Southwestern Railroad train in 1884, she sued the railroad rather than accept the norm of segregated travel, and her published account of the case launched her career as a journalist (Giddings 2008). Second, womanism attends to the whole person, body, spirit, and community, and therefore resists analyses that treat economic, health, and political harms as separable. Third, womanist ethics is oriented toward survival and flourishing, not merely critique, and so directs attention to the practices through which Black women sustain life under hostile conditions (Phillips 2006). This orientation shapes the article's treatment of resistance in Section 6.3.

Because Black women's moral agency is central to this article, it is important to clearly explain what the term means. In womanist ethics, moral agency is the capacity to discern what is right, to judge one's circumstances by standards of one's own making, and to act on those judgments, even when the dominant moral order denies that one possesses the capacity to do so. Cannon (1988) explained that Black women's moral agency is not simply about having the freedom to make choices, especially when their choices have historically been limited. Instead, it is reflected in the strength, dignity, grace, and quiet courage Black women develop as they navigate difficult circumstances and find ways to survive. Townes (2006) extends the point, arguing that to name the cultural production of evil is itself a moral act, one that refuses the stereotypes through which a society justifies harm. Within this tradition, moral agency is more than resilience or resistance through protest. It is about Black women reclaiming the power to define the meaning of their own lives and losses, rather than accepting the narratives imposed on them by the state. It also involves making choices and taking action alongside others who share and support their experiences. This is the understanding of agency on which the article draws in Section 6.3, where counter-reporting, collective mourning, and restorative rest are read as intentional moral acts rather than as coping strategies.

3.2. Weathering

In 1992, the public health scholar Arline T. Geronimus published "The Weathering Hypothesis and the Health of African American Women and Infants," in which she observed that the risk of poor birth outcomes rose with maternal age for Black women much earlier than it did for White women. She proposed that Black women experience early health deterioration because of the cumulative impact of repeated experience with social, economic, and political exclusion (Geronimus 1992). Subsequent research using biomarkers of allostatic load, an index of physiological wear from chronic stress, found that Black women had the highest probability of high allostatic load scores of any group examined, and that the disparity could not be explained by poverty alone (Geronimus et al. 2006). In her 2023 book, Geronimus synthesized three decades of research to argue that weathering is not a metaphor but a biological process in which the body's stress response, activated repeatedly by the demands of living in an unjust society, erodes the cardiovascular, metabolic, and immune systems and accelerates aging at the cellular level (Geronimus 2023).

Three features of Geronimus's framework are central here. First, weathering is cumulative: it results not from a single traumatic event but from the persistent, high-effort coping required to navigate daily life under structural exclusion. Second, weathering is not confined to the poor; Geronimus found that striving itself, the effort required to succeed in hostile institutions, can intensify physiological wear, a finding consistent with earlier work on "John Henryism." Third, weathering is fundamentally political. Geronimus (2023) insists that its causes lie in social arrangements rather than in individual behavior, and she is critical of interventions that ask Black women to manage their stress more effectively without changing the conditions that produce it. For the purposes of this article, weathering provides the mechanism that links the policy decisions of the moral state to the bodies of Black women.

3.3. Disenfranchised Grief

Doka (1989) introduced the concept of disenfranchised grief to describe "grief that person's experience when they incur a loss that is not or cannot be openly acknowledged, publicly mourned, or socially supported." (p. 4). Doka identified several conditions under which grief is disenfranchised: when the relationship is not recognized, when the loss is not recognized, when the griever is not recognized, when the circumstances of the death

are stigmatized, and when the ways an individual grieves are judged inappropriate (Doka 2002). Each of these conditions applies to Black women's grief in the present moment.

Black women mourn relationships, sons, daughters, partners, and friends, lost to state and interpersonal violence, and the circumstances of those deaths are routinely stigmatized by the official report. Black women also mourn losses that are not deaths at all: the loss of careers, of voting power, of a history that is being removed from public institutions, and of the belief that the nation's moral commitments extended to them. These are what grief scholars call non-death or ambiguous losses, and they are rarely afforded the rituals and social support that accompany bereavement. Finally, Black women themselves are often not recognized as grievers. The controlling image of the "Strong Black Woman," reinforced by what Woods-Giscombé (2010) termed the Superwoman Schema, demands that Black women display strength, suppress emotion, and prioritize the care of others, leaving little room for their own mourning.

Butler's (2004, 2009) account of grievability deepens Doka's framework by locating the disenfranchisement of grief within state power. For Butler, a life is grievable when it is recognized as a life whose loss would matter; the distribution of grievability is a political act, established through the "frames" by which states and media represent populations. The moral state, in this account, is a state that decides which losses warrant public mourning. When Black women's losses are rendered ungrievable by the state, their grief is disenfranchised not only socially but also politically.

3.4. Integrating the Frameworks: The Moral State and Linkage Hypotheses

Synthesizing these traditions, I propose that the American moral state governs Black women through three linked operations. It *authors*, it produces the official record of Black women's lives and deaths, and it controls whether harms are recorded at all. It *erodes*, it withdraws the legal and institutional protections that had constrained discrimination, producing cumulative stress that becomes embodied as weathering. And it *disenfranchises*, it refuses to recognize the losses it produces as losses, thereby denying Black women the public standing to mourn them Womanist resistance involves reclaiming the power of counter-authorship, of survival and repair, and of collective mourning.

These processes lead to four related hypotheses. Given the conceptual design of the study, they are stated as propositions to be examined against the documentary evidence in Section 5 rather than tested statistically.

H1 (moral state—weathering)**.** *When the state withdraws legal and institutional protections across several domains at once, the chronic stress Black women carry will increase, and weathering theory predicts that this stress will be visible in persistent or widening disparities in maternal mortality, longevity, and related outcomes that cannot be explained by individual risk factors.*

H2 (moral state—disenfranchised grief)**.** *When the state frames its own withdrawals as merit, efficiency, or color-blind neutrality, the losses that follow will not be publicly recognized as losses, and Black women's grief for them will be disenfranchised.*

H3 (disenfranchised grief—weathering)**.** *Because grief that cannot be expressed or socially supported remains unresolved, disenfranchised grief will function as an additional chronic stressor, so that the two processes reinforce one another.*

H4 (womanist moral agency as a moderating force)**.** *Practices that liberate grief and reduce the pressure to constantly stay strong and cope, such as counter-reporting, collective mourning, and restorative rest, will weaken the links described in H1 through H3.*

4. Methodology: A Genealogical Reading of the State's Reports

4.1. Design and Genealogical Approach

This is a conceptual and documentary analysis rather than a study of human participants. Its method is genealogical in two senses. In the Foucauldian sense, genealogy refuses the assumption that present institutions developed along a line of steady moral progress; it attends instead to the "accidents," reversals, and relations of force through which present arrangements came to seem natural (Foucault 1977). The idea that civil rights advance in one direction, that the arc of American law bends inexorably toward inclusion, is precisely the kind of teleology genealogy is designed to unsettle. The events of 2025–2026 are legible not as a sudden rupture but as the reassertion of a moral regime whose earlier forms Wells documented.

Genealogy is also, in the more familiar sense, the practice of tracing lineage, and Black women's genealogical work has always been entangled with the archive's silences. Hartman (2008) describes the archive of slavery as a record written by those who held power over the enslaved, one in which Black women appear chiefly as entries in ledgers or as the objects of violence. Sharpe (2016) extended this insight to the present, describing Black life as lived "in the wake," where the afterlives of slavery structure contemporary vulnerability. Both scholars read the official record against itself, and Wells did the same. In *Southern Horrors* (Wells 1892) and in her 1893 address, she drew almost exclusively on White newspapers and official sources, reasoning that evidence from the perpetrators' own record could not be dismissed as partisan. This article adopts Wells's strategy. Wherever possible, it relies on the state's own data, vital statistics from the National Center for Health Statistics, labor data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the Federal Register, and Supreme Court opinions, and reads them for what they reveal and what they conceal.

4.2. Operationalizing the Moral State

For this analysis, the moral state is examined through three types of government actions that can be observed and measured. These actions reflect how the state shapes narratives, undermines well-being, and denies recognition of certain experiences and losses, as discussed in Section 3.4. Authoring is indicated by decisions about what the state records and publishes: incident reports, mortality review findings, and the creation, suspension, or termination of federal data systems. Erosion is indicated by formal changes in protective law and enforcement: executive orders, final rules published in the Federal Register, changes in agency enforcement priorities, and Supreme Court decisions. Disenfranchisement is indicated by the official language through which those actions are justified, including the text of executive orders and public statements by officials, which is read for how it frames the resulting losses. An action is included in the analysis if it was taken by a federal or state governmental actor between January 2025 and August 2026 and bears directly on one of the five domains examined in Section 5.

4.3. Data Sources

Sources were selected to reflect the most recent data available as of September 2026. Table 1 lists the sources used for each domain, the type of data each provides, and the years the data cover. These include final 2024 maternal mortality data released by the National Center for Health Statistics in March 2026 (Hoyert 2026); the 2024 United States life tables released in August 2026 (Arias et al. 2026); the Violence Policy Center's analysis of 2023 homicide data (Violence Policy Center 2025); BLS-based analyses of Black women's labor force outcomes through mid-2026 (IWPR 2026; Roy 2026); national survey data on women of color collected in 2026 (NAPAWF and Ipsos 2026); federal executive orders and regulations issued between January 2025 and August 2026; and Supreme Court decisions

issued in April and June 2026. News reporting is used to document specific events where no primary government source exists or where, as Wells would anticipate, the government source is itself the object of critique.

Table 1. Data sources by domain, type of data, and years covered.

Domain	Source	Type of Data	Data Years
Body	Hoyert (2026), National Center for Health Statistics	Federal vital statistics (final maternal mortality data)	2024 (compared with 2023)
Body	Arias et al. (2026), U.S. life tables	Federal vital statistics	2024
Body	KFF (2025)	Independent analysis of federal infant mortality and Medicaid birth data	2023
Labor	Executive Orders 14173 and 14281; Department of Labor final rule (Federal Register 2026)	Federal legal documents	2025–2026
Labor	IWPR (2026); Roy (2026); Ms. Magazine (2026)	Independent analyses of Bureau of Labor Statistics data	February 2025–July 2026
Ballot	Louisiana v. Callais (2026); Shelby County v. Holder (2013); Brnovich v. Democratic National Committee (2021); Harvard Kennedy School (2026)	Supreme Court opinions; independent legal analysis	2013–2026
Memory	Executive Orders 14253 and 14416	Federal legal documents	2025–2026
Memory	Liu et al. (2025)	Peer-reviewed analysis of NIH grant terminations	February–April 2025
Memory	Commonwealth Fund (2026)	Independent analysis of the suspension of PRAMS	2025
Memory	TheGrio (2026), reporting a Highland Project survey	Independent survey of Black women voters in Mississippi	2026
Violence	Violence Policy Center (2025)	Independent analysis of FBI Supplementary Homicide Report data	2023
Violence	NPR (2025a); Spectrum News 1 (2025)	News reporting of Department of Justice actions	2025
Emotional climate	NAPAWF and Ipsos (2026); Navigator Research (2026)	Independent national survey; focus groups	2026
Case material (Section 2.3)	ET Online (2020); NBC News (2025); NPR Illinois (2026); Surana (2024); The Current (2024)	News reporting of official records and court proceedings	2020–2026

4.4. Analytic Procedure

The analysis was conducted in three steps. First, evidence was gathered from the sources listed in Table 1 and recorded as reported, without adding interpretation. These findings are presented in Table 2 and in the Findings sections of each subsection in Section 5.

Second, each piece of evidence was placed into one category based on what it directly measures. For example, the suspension of the Pregnancy Risk Assessment Monitoring System was placed in the memory category rather than the body category. This is because the suspension reflects the government's decision to stop collecting important information about maternal and infant health, rather than a documented change in health outcomes.

The potential effects on Black women's health are discussed later in the interpretation. Third, the findings were examined using the hypotheses introduced in Section 3.4. These discussions appear in the Interpretation portion of each subsection in Section 5 and are explored further in Section 6. By separating the evidence from its interpretation, readers can examine the findings for themselves and consider how well they support the article's broader arguments.

Table 2. Selected indicators of cumulative stress for Black women in the United States; most recent available data (as of September 2026).

Domain	Indicator	Most Recent Value	Source
Body	Maternal mortality rate, non-Hispanic Black women (2024)	44.8 per 100,000 live births (212 deaths), vs. 14.2 for non-Hispanic White women; ratio ≈ 3.2	Hoyert (2026)
Body	Life expectancy at birth, females (2024)	Non-Hispanic Black 78.2 years; non-Hispanic White 81.3; Hispanic 84.3; Asian 87.7	Arias et al. (2026)
Body	Infant mortality (2023)	Black 10.9 vs. White 4.5 per 1000 live births	KFF (2025)
Body	Births financed by Medicaid	More than two-thirds of births to Black women vs. roughly half of all births	KFF (2025)
Labor	Black women displaced from the labor market since January 2025	More than 600,000 (through mid-2026)	IWPR (2026)
Labor	Unemployment vs. participation, March–July 2026	Unemployment fell from 7.07% to 5.73% while employment fell by 212,000 and 454,000 more Black women were outside the labor force	Roy (2026)
Labor	Black women's share of the federal workforce	Approximately 12%, about twice their share of the overall labor force	Ms. Magazine (2026)
Ballot	Standard for vote dilution claims under Section 2 of the Voting Rights Act	Raised; remedial majority–minority districts exposed to challenge as racial gerrymanders (6–3, 29 April 2026)	Louisiana v. Callais (2026)
Memory	NIH grant terminations, February–April 2025	694 grants (>$1.8 billion); the National Institute on Minority Health and Health Disparities lost 30% of its funding	Liu et al. (2025)
Memory †	Pregnancy Risk Assessment Monitoring System	Data collection halted in 2025; entire federal team dismissed April 2025	Commonwealth Fund (2026)
Violence	Black women killed by men (2023)	733 victims; rate 3.1 per 100,000, about 2.5 times the rate for White women	Violence Policy Center (2025)
Emotional climate	Women of color survey (2026)	Black women reported the highest frustration (55%) and exhaustion (43%) and the lowest hope (10%)	NAPAWF and Ipsos (2026)

† Each indicator is assigned to the domain that corresponds to what it measures (see Section 4.4). The Pregnancy Risk Assessment Monitoring System appears under memory rather than body because the indicator records the suspension of the state's capacity to document maternal and infant outcomes, not a change in those outcomes; its consequences for maternal and infant health are discussed in Sections 5.1 and 5.4.

5. Findings: The Arithmetic of Erosion, 2025–2026

This section documents the converging losses experienced by Black women across five domains. Table 2 summarizes the most recent indicators available as of September 2026. I present these losses together deliberately. Weathering theory holds that stress is cumulative, and Black women do not experience a maternal health crisis, a labor market crisis, a voting rights crisis, and a crisis of historical memory in sequence; they experience them simultaneously, often in the same household and the same body. As outlined in Section 4.4, each subsection begins by presenting the findings for that category, followed by an interpretation of what those findings mean.

5.1. The Body: Maternal Mortality, Longevity, and the Withdrawal of Surveillance

Findings. The final 2024 data released by the National Center for Health Statistics in March 2026 recorded a national maternal mortality rate of 17.9 deaths per 100,000 live births. For non-Hispanic Black women, the rate was 44.8, 212 deaths, compared with 14.2 for non-Hispanic White women, 12.1 for Hispanic women, and 18.1 for non-Hispanic Asian women (Hoyert 2026). Black women were therefore approximately 3.2 times as likely as White women to die of maternal causes. Changes from 2023 were not statistically significant for any group, meaning that the modest national improvement did not translate into a meaningful narrowing of the racial gap. Life tables for 2024 released in August 2026 show that non-Hispanic Black women had a life expectancy at birth of 78.2 years, compared with 81.3 years for non-Hispanic White women, 84.3 for Hispanic women, and 87.7 for Asian women (Arias et al. 2026). Black infants died at more than twice the rate of White infants in 2023 (KFF 2025).

The same period saw significant changes to Medicaid, which finances more than two-thirds of births to Black women, compared with roughly half of births nationally (KFF 2025). The suspension of the federal surveillance system that tracked the experiences of pregnant people, an indicator this analysis classifies under memory, is reported in Section 5.4.

Interpretation. These disparities are the established evidence for weathering. Geronimus (1992) first proposed the hypothesis precisely because maternal and infant outcomes for Black women deteriorated with age in ways that could not be explained by individual risk factors. The persistence of a threefold maternal mortality gap across income and education levels is consistent with her argument that the stress of navigating structural exclusion, rather than individual behavior, drives these outcomes (Geronimus 2023).

Medicaid plays a critical role in Black maternal health, covering 62.4% of births among Black women in 2024 (Osterman et al. 2026). Changes to Medicaid enacted in 2025, including stricter eligibility rules and additional administrative requirements, threaten to create further barriers to healthcare access for Black women and families (Hinton et al. 2025). Although pregnant and postpartum women are exempt from the new Medicaid work requirements, other coverage restrictions and administrative barriers may still affect their access to care. These policy changes reflect a central concern of the moral state framework: the government publicly acknowledges the crisis of Black maternal mortality while advancing policies that may weaken the systems intended to protect Black mothers and address maternal health disparities (Section 5.4).

5.2. Labor: Displacement and the Revocation of Equal Opportunity

Findings. On 21 January 2025, the president issued Executive Order 14173 2025 (2025), "Ending Illegal Discrimination and Restoring Merit-Based Opportunity," which revoked Executive Order 11246. Signed by President Lyndon B. Johnson in 1965, Executive Order 11246 had required federal contractors, employers of roughly one-fifth of the American workforce, to refrain from discrimination and to take affirmative steps to ensure equal opportunity. In August 2026, the Department of Labor finalized a rule rescinding the regulations that had implemented the order, eliminating requirements that federal contractors maintain affirmative action programs and analyze their workforces for disparities (Federal Register 2026). A companion order issued in April 2025, "Restoring Equality of Opportunity and Meritocracy," directed federal agencies to deprioritize enforcement based on disparate impact, the legal theory that allows discrimination to be proved through its effects rather than through evidence of intent (Executive Order 14281 2025). Because much of the discrimination Black women experience is structural rather than explicit, disparate-impact doctrine had been among the most important tools for addressing it.

The labor market data are stark. Black women represent roughly 12% of the federal workforce, about twice their share of the overall labor force, making them disproportionately exposed to the federal workforce reductions of 2025 (Ms. Magazine 2026). Between February and July 2025, according to BLS data, Black women lost 319,000 jobs, while White women, Latinas, and White men each gained employment (Ms. Magazine 2026). An August 2026 report by the Institute for Women's Policy Research estimated that more than 600,000 Black women had been pushed out of the labor market since January 2025, attributing the losses to anti-DEI policy, federal job cuts, algorithmic bias in hiring, and tariffs (IWPR 2026). The report also found that Black women spent twice as long unemployed as White women.

Headline unemployment figures obscure the depth of this displacement. Between March and July 2026, Black women's unemployment rate fell from 7.07% to 5.73%. Over the same months, however, employment among Black women declined by 212,000, and an additional 454,000 Black women left the labor force altogether (Roy 2026). The unemployment rate improved because Black women stopped being counted.

The firing of Carla Hayden, the first woman and first African American to serve as Librarian of Congress, in May 2025, was accompanied by White House statements criticizing her "pursuit of DEI" (NPR 2025b). The attempted removal of Federal Reserve Governor Lisa Cook, the first Black woman to serve on the Board of Governors, rested on allegations regarding a mortgage she obtained before taking office. In June 2026, a divided Supreme Court ruled that Cook could remain in office while her challenge proceeded, finding that she had not been afforded the procedural protections the statute required (Trump v. Cook 2026).

Interpretation. The rhetoric of these orders is itself an instrument of moral governance. By recasting anti-discrimination programs as "illegal discrimination" and positioning "merit" as their opposite, the orders reproduce a controlling image with a long history: the Black woman who has received what she did not earn. Collins (2000) traced this image to the "welfare queen" of the 1980s; its current iteration is the "DEI hire," an epithet widely directed at Black women in positions of visibility. The Hayden and Cook cases are highly visible, but they condense a message that Black women across the labor market have received: that their presence in positions of authority is presumptively illegitimate. The unemployment figures reported above offer a quantitative version of the phenomenon Wells described: the official statistic reports recovery while the lived reality is exclusion.

5.3. The Ballot: Section 2 Vote-Dilution Challenges and the Narrowing of the Voting Rights Act

Findings. On 29 April 2026, in *Louisiana v. Callais*, the Supreme Court ruled 6–3 that Louisiana's 2024 congressional map, which had created a second majority Black district to remedy vote dilution under Section 2 of the Voting Rights Act, was an unconstitutional racial gerrymander (Louisiana v. Callais 2026). The majority opinion, written by Justice Samuel Alito, substantially narrowed the standard under which plaintiffs can prove vote dilution under Section 2, requiring them in effect to show that racially polarized voting cannot be explained by partisanship, a burden that voting rights scholars have described as nearly impossible to meet (Harvard Kennedy School 2026). In practice, the decision makes it harder to prove that voting laws or district maps weaken the voting power of minority communities under Section 2 of the Voting Rights Act. At the same time, by treating districts created to address this discrimination as racial gerrymandering, the decision makes it easier to challenge and eliminate those districts. Analysts have projected that the decision will substantially reduce the number of Black members of Congress over the coming decade, particularly in the South (Harvard Kennedy School 2026).

Callais followed Shelby County v. Holder (2013), which disabled the preclearance regime of Section 5, and Brnovich v. Democratic National Committee (2021), which narrowed Section 2 as applied to voting restrictions.

Interpretation. Black women have been the most consistent and cohesive voting bloc in American politics, and they have been central to the defense of voting rights since Fannie Lou Hamer testified before the Credentials Committee of the 1964 Democratic National Convention. Read against that history, together, these decisions have hollowed out the statute that Black activists, many of them women, bled to secure. The loss is not merely instrumental. For many Black women, the Voting Rights Act represents a scared social contract: a formal acknowledgment by the nation that their citizenship would be protected. Its erosion is experienced as a betrayal of that contract, and as such it is a loss that must be grieved.

5.4. Memory: The Archive, the Museum, and the Research Record

Findings. The period since 2025 has seen coordinated executive action directed at the historical and scientific record. Executive Order 14253, "Restoring Truth and Sanity to American History," issued on 27 March 2025, asserted that the Smithsonian Institution had "come under the influence of a divisive, race-centered ideology" and directed a review of its exhibits and programs (Executive Order 14253 2025). A second order, issued in July 2026, directed federal agencies to act on a Domestic Policy Council report on the Smithsonian and to post signage warning visitors to the National Museum of American History of its alleged "ideological capture," asserting that the institution "cannot be trusted to tell America's story with honesty and gratitude" (Executive Order 14416 2026).

In early 2025, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention halted data collection for the Pregnancy Risk Assessment Monitoring System (PRAMS), a survey that for more than three decades had gathered information on the experiences of people before, during, and after pregnancy across 46 states and several other jurisdictions. In April 2025, most of the staff of the CDC's Division of Reproductive Health were fired, including the entire PRAMS team (Commonwealth Fund 2026). PRAMS data had been used to design interventions specifically aimed at Black maternal and infant mortality; New Jersey, for example, used them to invest $4.7 million in community-based case management (Commonwealth Fund 2026).

The scientific record has been similarly narrowed. Between late February and early April 2025, the National Institutes of Health terminated 694 grants totaling more than $1.8 billion; the National Institute on Minority Health and Health Disparities was disproportionately affected, losing roughly 30% of its funding (Liu et al. 2025). Research on the health of Black women, including research on weathering itself, depends on this funding.

In a 2026 survey of Black women voters in Mississippi sponsored by the Highland Project and partners, 71% named the erasure of Black history as a top concern, more named than any other issue, including the cost of healthcare (TheGrio 2026).

Interpretation. Wells understood that controlling the record meant controlling the future. The July 2026 order's language of gratitude is revealing it asks the descendants of the enslaved to narrate the nation's history as a gift. The suspension of PRAMS follows the same logic in the domain of health: the moral state's response to the data on Black maternal death has been to reduce its capacity to collect them. In Wells's terms, the state did not change the outcomes. It stopped writing the reports, it stopped authoring. When combined with the suspension of PRAMS, the NIH grant terminations mean that the nation will know less about why Black women are dying at the precise moment the conditions producing their deaths are intensifying.

The Mississippi survey findings should not surprise scholars of genealogy. For communities whose lineages were deliberately obscured by slavery, the archive is not an abstraction. Its erasure is a threat to identity, continuity, and the capacity to mourn.

5.5. Violence: Intimate, Interpersonal, and State

Findings. According to the Violence Policy Center's analysis of 2023 data, 733 Black women were killed by men in single victim, single offender incidents, a rate of 3.1 per 100,000, about two and a half times the rate for White women (Violence Policy Center 2025). Nationally, nearly nine in ten women murdered by men were killed by someone they knew, and nearly two thirds were killed with guns.

In May 2025, the Department of Justice moved to dismiss the police-reform consent decrees it had negotiated with Louisville and Minneapolis following the killings of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd, and it closed pattern or practice investigations of several other police departments (NPR 2025a). Two months later, it recommended a one-day sentence for the officer convicted in the Taylor raid (see Section 2.3).

Interpretation. These figures reflect violence committed by individuals rather than the government, but the two are closely connected. When Black women seek protection from violence, they may face suspicion instead of receiving the help they need. The killing of Sonya Massey, who called the police for assistance and was fatally shot by an officer, illustrates this concern. Both the government's failure to protect Black women from violence and the violence committed against them by government authorities reflect a broader pattern in which Black women's lives, safety, and well-being are not equally valued or protected. The Department of Justice's actions communicate a clear moral judgment about the relative weight of Black women's lives and the institutional prerogatives of police.

6. Discussion

This section examines the findings presented in Section 5 using the hypotheses introduced in Section 3.4. Section 6.1 explores how government actions contribute to weathering, or the physical and psychological effects of long-term stress (H1). Section 6.2 examines how these actions contribute to disenfranchised grief and how grief and weathering reinforce one another (H2 and H3). Finally, Section 6.3 explores the womanist practices Black women use to resist, heal, and disrupt these harmful experiences (H4).

6.1. Weathering the Moral State: Cumulative Stress as Embodied Governance

The losses documented in Section 5 are not experienced as discrete events. They arrive as a continuous stream of news, policy, and personal consequence, a layoff notice, a change in a relative's Medicaid coverage, a court decision, a museum closure, a viral video of a woman killed in her kitchen. Weathering theory explains how such a stream becomes embodied. The human stress response evolved to manage acute threats; when it is activated repeatedly and without resolution, the hormones that mobilize the body for action begin to damage the systems they are meant to protect (Geronimus 2023). Chronic activation elevates blood pressure, disrupts glucose metabolism, promotes inflammation, and, over time, shortens the protective telomeres at the ends of chromosomes. The consequence is not a single disease but a generalized acceleration of biological aging.

Geronimus emphasized that weathering is driven less by extraordinary trauma than by what she calls "the extraordinary stress of ordinary life" in an unjust society (Geronimus 2023). The events of 2025–2026 have made ordinary life more stressful for Black women in specific and identifiable ways. Anticipatory vigilance, the constant scanning of the environment for threat, is a well-documented component of the stress Black women experience, and each new rollback extends the domains in which vigilance is required. A Black woman

federal employee in 2025 was required to anticipate not only racism from colleagues but the possibility that her position, her agency, or her professional field might be eliminated by executive order. A Black mother in a state with an abortion ban must now anticipate that a miscarriage might be treated as a legal as well as a medical event. A Black voter in Louisiana must anticipate that her district may be redrawn to dilute her vote.

The NAPAWF–Ipsos survey fielded in early 2026, offers a snapshot of the emotional climate in which this vigilance operates. Among women of color surveyed nationally, Black women reported the highest levels of frustration (55%) and exhaustion (43%) and the lowest levels of hope (10%) (NAPAWF and Ipsos 2026). Sixty-eight percent of women of color reported declining confidence in federal institutions. Focus group research conducted by Navigator Research in May 2026 found Black women voters expressing a profound political fatigue; as one summary puts it, participants felt that "the country they keep rescuing is no longer interested in rescuing them" (Navigator Research 2026). Exhaustion and hopelessness are not merely moods. They are the affective signatures of chronic stress, and weathering research suggests they will eventually be legible in the body.

The labor market data are especially significant from a weathering perspective. Geronimus (2023) observed that the effort required to succeed in hostile institutions can itself be a source of physiological wear, and that the Black women most exposed to that effort are often those who have achieved professional success. The federal workforce was for decades a pathway into the Black middle class, and Black women were overrepresented in it precisely because federal employment offered protections against the discrimination prevalent in the private sector. The dismantling of those protections imposes a double burden: the loss of employment itself and the destabilization of the strategies through which Black women had sought to secure themselves against weathering. The displacement of hundreds of thousands of Black women from the labor market is thus both an economic event and a public health event.

Finally, weathering is intergenerational. The stress experienced by Black women during pregnancy affects fetal development and infant health, which is why Geronimus's original hypothesis concerned birth outcomes. When the moral state intensifies stress for Black women of reproductive age while simultaneously dismantling the surveillance systems that would document its effects, it sets in motion harms that will extend into the next generation; harms that, due to the absent PRAMS and the terminated NIH studies, may not be fully recorded. When considered alongside the findings in Section 5, these patterns support the first hypothesis (H1): when the government removes protections across multiple areas of Black women's lives, it increases chronic stress, which weathering theory suggests can accumulate over time and negatively affect the physical and mental health.

6.2. Disenfranchised Grief: Mourning What the State Will Not Name

If weathering describes the physiological cost of the moral state's erosions, disenfranchised grief describes their emotional and spiritual cost. Black women in the United States are grieving. They are grieving people: Breonna Taylor, Sonya Massey, Amber Thurman, Candi Miller, and the thousands of women whose names never reached the news. Research by Umberson et al. (2017) has shown that Black Americans are significantly more likely than White Americans to experience the death of a mother, father, sibling, child, or spouse from childhood through mid-life, and that these exposures accumulate across the life course. Black women carry a disproportionate burden of bereavement before any policy change is considered.

But Black women are also grieving losses that are not deaths. They are grieving careers, pensions, and professional identities lost to federal cuts. They are grieving the Voting

Rights Act, which for many represented the fulfillment of their grandmothers' struggle. They are grieving public histories that are being revised, research programs that have been terminated, and institutions, museums, libraries, universities, that had begun, however imperfectly, to recognize them. And they are grieving a set of expectations about the nation's moral trajectory: the belief, cultivated over the six decades since the Civil Rights Act of 1964, that the gains of the civil rights movement were permanent. These are what Boss (1999) has called ambiguous losses, losses without closure, whose status remains unresolved, and what grief scholars more broadly term non-death losses. The second hypothesis (H2) addresses how the government presents these losses as progress rather than acknowledging the harm they cause. This reflects Doka's framework of disenfranchised grief, in which certain losses are not publicly recognized or supported.

Doka's framework identifies why this grief is disenfranchised. First, the losses themselves are not recognized. The state frames the revocation of Executive Order 11246 as the restoration of merit, the dismantling of PRAMS as efficiency, and *Callais* as the vindication of color-blind constitutionalism. Within these frames, there is nothing to mourn; the state presents these changes as moral progress. To grieve them is to be positioned as mourning the loss of an unfair advantage. This is governmental misogynoir operating at the level of affect: the state not only inflicts the loss but defines the grief as illegitimate.

Second, the circumstances of many deaths are stigmatized by the official report. When the report lists a victim's injuries as "none," describes her as a threat, or is suppressed when it finds her death preventable, her survivors are denied the public recognition that ordinarily accompanies bereavement. Their grief must first become an argument. Tamika Palmer spent years contesting the official account of her daughter's death before she could mourn it publicly, and, in 2025, she was forced to contest it again (see Section 2.3). Mourning under these conditions is inseparable from advocacy, and the labor of advocacy compounds the stress that weathering theory describes.

Third, Black women are frequently not recognized as grievers. The Strong Black Woman ideal, which Woods-Giscombé (2010) found to be associated with emotional suppression and delayed self care, expects Black women to absorb loss on behalf of their families and communities. The ideal is double edged: it is a source of pride and resilience, but it also functions as a controlling image that denies Black women vulnerability. Institutions reinforce it. Black women professionals, including those in higher education and human services, are routinely expected to support colleagues and students through collective trauma while their own grief goes unacknowledged. When grief cannot be expressed, it does not disappear; it is carried in the body.

Here, the two frameworks converge, as predicted by the third hypothesis (H3). Disenfranchised grief is itself a source of chronic stress. Grief that cannot be expressed, ritualized, or socially supported remains unresolved, and unresolved grief sustains the physiological activation that weathering describes. The moral state thus produces a feedback loop: it inflicts losses; it refuses to recognize those losses as losses; the resulting disenfranchised grief intensifies cumulative stress; and cumulative stress erodes the health of the women who carry it, producing further losses. Butler's (2009) question, "when is life grievable?" is not only philosophical. For Black women in the United States in 2026, it is a question with measurable consequences for longevity.

6.3. Womanist Resistance: Counter-Reports, Collective Mourning, and Restorative Rest

To describe the harms of the moral state is not to describe Black women as passive. Womanist theory insists on Black women's moral agency, and the history of Black women's resistance to the American moral state is as long as the history of that state. This section identifies three womanist practices through which Black women interact

with, negotiate, and resist state power. In line with the fourth hypothesis (H4), each of these actions represents a form of moral resistance that helps Black women challenge government-imposed harms, make space for their grief, and reduce the long-term effects of chronic stress.

6.3.1. Counter-Reporting

Wells's response to a system in which perpetrators wrote the reports was to write her own. She compiled statistics, interviewed witnesses, published pamphlets, and carried her findings to audiences in the North and in Britain. Her method, using the state's own record to indict it, is the foundation of a womanist tradition of counter-reporting that continues today. The #SayHerName campaign compiled the names and stories of Black women killed by police precisely because official narratives had omitted them (Crenshaw and Ritchie 2015). Black women journalists, researchers, and community organizations have documented the effects of the 2025–2026 rollbacks on Black women when federal agencies would not; the Institute for Women's Policy Research analysis cited in this article is one example. The body-camera footage that contradicted Sean Grayson's account of Sonya Massey's death functioned as a counter-report as well, and it existed because earlier waves of activism, many led by Black women, had demanded it.

Counter-reporting also operates through law. Lisa Cook's decision to contest her removal in court rather than resign, and the voting rights organizations that litigated *Callais*, used legal institutions to force the moral state to justify itself on the record. Even when they lose, such efforts create a documentary trail that future movements can use, just as Wells's pamphlets became the evidence base for the anti-lynching movement. For scholars, counter-reporting implies a methodological commitment: when the state ceases to collect data on Black women, the obligation to collect it passes to those who are accountable to Black women.

6.3.2. Collective Mourning

If the moral state disenfranchises Black women's grief, one form of resistance is to re-enfranchise it: to create spaces where losses can be named, witnessed, and ritualized. Black women have long done this work. The Black church, which Cannon (1988) and Williams (1993) identified as a primary site of womanist moral formation, has historically provided rituals for mourning losses the wider society ignored. Mothers of those killed by police have formed networks that transform private grief into public testimony. The annual vigils held in Georgia for Amber Thurman and Candi Miller on the anniversaries of their deaths are a contemporary example of communal mourning that refuses the state's decision to silence the committee that found their deaths preventable (The Atlanta Voice 2025).

Collective mourning is political because it contests the frame through which the state distributes grievability (Butler 2009). When Black women gather to name those the reports omitted, they assert that these lives were grievable and that their loss is a public matter. Collective mourning is also restorative. Grief that is witnessed and shared is less likely to become the unresolved, chronic grief that sustains physiological stress. In this sense, communal mourning is a public health intervention as well as a political act.

6.3.3. Restorative Rest and the Refusal of Endurance

The third practice is the refusal of the demand for endless performative resilience and endurance. Hersey's (2022) articulation of rest as resistance frames rest not as self-indulgence but as a reclamation of the body from systems that have treated Black bodies as sources of labor. The idea resonates with Geronimus's (2023) critique of interventions that asked Black women to cope more effectively: if weathering results from sustained

high-effort coping, then rest, understood as a collective and political practice, directly interrupts the mechanism of harm. The 2026 Mississippi survey found that Black women prioritized joy, family, faith, rest, and freedom over conventional measures of success, and that three-quarters nonetheless remained motivated to participate in the 2026 elections (TheGrio 2026). This is womanist survival in Walker's (1983) sense: a commitment to wholeness that sustains engagement rather than abandoning it.

Restorative rest must not be confused with withdrawal, and it cannot substitute for structural change. Geronimus (2023) was explicit that the remedy for weathering is to change the conditions that produce it. But a womanist ethic of survival recognizes that Black women must live and flourish in the meantime, and that refusing the Superwoman Schema is itself a form of resistance to the controlling images on which governmental misogynoir depends.

7. Recommendations for Practice, Education, Research, and Policy

Based on these findings, the article offers recommendations in four areas. For human services and social work, it suggests that practitioners serving Black women should assess for cumulative and disenfranchised grief, including grief associated with non-death losses such as job loss, displacement, and the erosion of rights. Grief-informed practice should validate these losses as losses, resisting the frames that render them illegitimate, and should attend to the physiological effects of chronic stress. Practitioners should also recognize the Superwoman Schema as a potential barrier to help seeking and create conditions in which Black women clients can express vulnerability without penalty. Social work's professional commitment to social justice obliges practitioners to name the policy sources of their clients' distress rather than locating it solely in individual coping.

For higher education, the analysis suggests that Black women faculty, staff, and students are carrying disproportionate burdens of both cumulative stress and unacknowledged grief in the current climate, often while being asked to support others. Institutions committed to their Black women members should recognize this labor, provide spaces for collective mourning, and protect the curricula, programs, and research that the moral state is targeting. Faculty in fields such as human services, public health, and history can incorporate Wells's method of counter-reporting into their pedagogy, teaching students to read official data critically and to generate community-accountable evidence where official data are absent.

For researchers, the suspension of PRAMS and the termination of health disparities research create an urgent need for independent data infrastructure. University community partnerships, community-based participatory research, and archives maintained by Black women's organizations can partially fill these gaps. Researchers should also develop measures of non-death and collective grief suitable for use with Black women and should examine the relationship between such grief and biomarkers of weathering.

For policy, the analysis supports restoring the data systems that document Black women's health, including PRAMS and independent maternal mortality review committees protected from political interference; restoring disparate-impact enforcement and affirmative obligations for federal contractors; legislative restoration of the Voting Rights Act; and funding for community-based grief and mental health services designed by and for Black women. Most fundamentally, the analysis suggests that policies should be evaluated not only for their immediate effects but for their cumulative contribution to the stress burden carried by Black women.

8. Conclusions

Ida B. Wells did not accept that the perpetrators' report would be the final word. She wrote her own, and in doing so she created a genealogy of resistance that runs through every

subsequent effort by Black women to make their suffering legible to a nation determined to ignore it. This article has argued that the American moral state of 2025–2026 has expanded its authorship of the record from the incident report to the national infrastructure of data, law, and memory; that the cumulative erosions it has imposed become embodied in Black women as weathering; and that the grief Black women carry for these losses is systematically disenfranchised by the same state that produces it.

The consequences are measurable, in a maternal mortality rate more than three times that of White women, in a life expectancy year shorter, in hundreds of thousands of livelihoods lost, and in the exhaustion and diminished hope Black women report. But the numbers are also, in Wells's sense, a report written in part by those responsible for the harms, and they must be read against the grain. Behind them are women who are grieving, organizing, resting, voting, and writing their own accounts. A womanist reading of the moral state insists on holding both truths: that the state's harms are real and embodied, and that Black women remain moral agents who have never ceded to the state the authority to define the meaning of their lives or the worth of their losses. The task for scholars, practitioners, and policymakers is to ensure that, this time, the report is not written by those who commit the harm.

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