

Opinion

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FORUM

Examining women's health equity

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This year, YWCA Greenwich's Center for Equity & Justice is proud to focus our Coretta Scott King and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Annual Conversation on Women's Health Equity. The event, "A Vital Conversation: Women's Health Equity Forum," will take place Thursday, Jan. 23, and will examine a range of issues that create chronic health disparities for women.

Women's health research continues to face significant underfunding and disparities in representation, despite the critical importance of addressing gender-specific health issues. For example, cardiovascular disease, the leading cause of death among women, received less than 6% of the U.S. National Institutes of Health budget in 2022, with a small fraction of that amount allocated specifically to women's heart health, according to a McKinsey study. Similarly, women remain underrepresented in clinical trials, according to a 2022 study at Harvard Medical School showing that only 40% of trial participants were female for three of the diseases most impacting women, limiting the applicability of findings to women's unique health needs. Even funding for gynecologic cancers, such as ovarian and cervical cancers, remains disproportionately low com-

pared to their lethality, highlighting inequities in research allocation, according to a Bell & Seidhoff study.

The widespread underfunding and lack of research directed toward health issues that impact women may lead to higher mortality rates for women, when treatable and preventable illnesses may compound due to misdiagnoses or delayed diagnoses. The physicians joining our panel discussion are subject matter experts in their fields: Dr. Mia Kazanjian of Stamford Health, Dr. Romelle Maloney of Greenwich Hospital, and Dr. Juliet Mushi of Harlem Hospital. These experts will expand on the inequities and biases in funding and research, as well as provide on-the-ground accounts of how these disparities directly impact their patients.

The adverse impact of marginalizing the needs of women can also be seen in insurance coverage rates in the United States, particularly for women of color. According to the 2022 U.S. Census Bureau data, the rate of insurance for men and women are rather similar. The disparity in insurance coverage becomes more pronounced when comparing by race and ethnicity. Among women, White women had relatively high coverage rates, with 72% privately insured and 37% publicly insured. In contrast, women of color had

significantly lower rates: 57% of Black women were privately insured, and 43% relied on public insurance, while Hispanic women had the lowest coverage, with 49% privately insured and 37% publicly insured. Our panelists will dig deeper into why these disparities exist, particularly as it pertains to social determinants of health like socioeconomic status and the economic conditions that make private health care less accessible to women of color. Our fourth panelist, Fatmata Williams, director of Medical Administration for Connecticut's Division of Health Services, will highlight ways in which policymakers and health care providers can take active steps to bridge the divide and mitigate the impact of systemic inequities in access to our health care system.

The tragedy of women's health care being marginalized is no more apparent than when it comes to the maternal mortality rate in the United States and even in the state of Connecticut, particularly for Black women. It is widely known that the rate of maternal mortality in the United States is among the highest in developed countries worldwide, despite substantial funding for health care. In 2024, according to the Connecticut Health Foundation, Black women are almost three times more likely than their white counterparts to die within six

weeks of childbirth. This rate of mortality is also in line with the national rate. In hosting physicians who are OB/GYNs, we hope to discuss the reasons for this startling epidemic.

As part of our event on Jan. 23, we will conduct a real time focus group to gather information about how the inequity women face in health care impacts the community at large. The focus group will be facilitated by our research partner, Two Gems Consulting. Together we seek to understand and address the unique challenges faced by women all across the socioeconomic spectrum. Our approach will focus on key demographic details such as age, race/ethnicity, income, sexual orientation/gender identity, and location to assess the quality of health care available to women. Given the lack of funding and data devoted to women-specific health initiatives and research, we aspire to provide access to information on this mission-critical topic.

Please visit ywagreenwich.org for more information and to register for this free, community-wide celebration of Coretta Scott King and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s legacy and vision of a just society.

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