

**Statement by Elizabeth Dawes Gay, Forward Together  
International Decade for People of African Descent  
Meeting for Europe, Central Asia And North America  
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Thank you to the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and Coordinator of the International Decade for People of African Descent. Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments today.

My name is Elizabeth Dawes Gay and I am here on behalf of Echoing Ida, which is a program of Forward Together that amplifies the voices of Black women on racial, social, and reproductive justice in the United States. Echoing Ida is home to thought leaders, skilled communicators, and truth tellers living the legacy of American activist and journalist Ida B. Wells-Barnett, who notably documented the lynching and lawless killing of Black people in the American South at great risk to her own life.

We at Echoing Ida tell the stories that some would rather see left untold and that often go ignored by popular media – those stories of the real experiences of Black people, our families, and our communities.

As a truth teller and writer, I work to bring attention to the extreme racial disparities in maternal health outcomes in the United States and to inform stakeholders about the reasons why, nationally, Black women are 3 to 4 times more likely to die from pregnancy-related causes. This disparity is greater in some parts of the US. For example, evidence from New York City reveals that Black women are 12 times more likely to die from pregnancy-related causes than their white counterparts. This racial disparity in maternal health outcomes remains even when income and education are accounted for.

Lack of consistent access to high quality, appropriate care certainly contributes to poor maternal health outcomes in the Black community. But when we take a closer look, we find that systemic racism and racial discrimination takes a significant toll on our health in a variety of ways. Racist policies and systems in the US impede our financial and physical access to preventive health care, create pockets of poverty and blight, restrict our community's economic growth, sustain food deserts, and work to put Black youth in prison or in their graves instead of working to keep them in school. Researchers have well documented that the stress and trauma of living while Black in the US disrupts biological processes necessary for healthy pregnancy outcomes. These racist policies and systems set us up to fail, and they are killing Black mothers. But no woman should die while bringing life into the world.

I also serve as chair of the steering committee of the Black Mamas Matter Alliance, a new Black-woman led effort within the US working to achieve our vision of a world where Black mamas have the rights, respect, and resources to thrive before, during, and after pregnancy. We center the voices, experiences, and needs of Black mamas to advance policy, cultivate meaningful research, enhance holistic care, and redirect and reframe the conversation on Black maternal health.

I call on the US government to recognize the role of racism in Black maternal health outcomes and to make a serious effort to address this life or death issue.

I also call on the US government to listen to Black women, to trust Black women, acknowledge our truths, recognize and support our leadership, and act to right those wrongs caused by centuries of racism and racial discrimination. The US can and it must do better.

Thank you.