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IPPF/WHR Activists Defend Reproductive Rights at UN

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Summary: *Nearly 6,000 representatives of non-governmental organizations and activists came together this spring as the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women met in New York to review the progress in the 10 years since the Beijing World Conference on Women in 1995. IPPF/WHR representatives from 12 countries played an important role in reaffirming the Beijing Conference's declaration and action plan, despite efforts by the Bush Administration to insert its conservative position on sexual and reproductive rights.*

This March, the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) met in New York to review progress toward the advancement of the status and welfare of the world's women in the decade since the historic Beijing Women's Conference in 1995. The event drew nearly 6,000 representatives from non-governmental organizations around the world to advocate for a declaration that unequivocally reaffirmed the Beijing Conference's declaration and action plan, which revolutionized definitions of women's rights as human rights and placed gender equality on the UN agenda for world health and development.

As a leading international advocate for sexual and reproductive rights, IPPF/WHR played a key role in those advocacy efforts, bringing together a delegation drawn from our member associations in twelve countries, comprising executive directors, board members, and youth representatives. They ranged in experience from veterans of numerous international conferences to young people venturing into this arena for the first time.

Their presence proved important, as what had been expected to be a relatively uncontroversial event turned highly contentious. The contention was generated once again by efforts of the Bush Administration to inject its very conservative and largely internationally rejected position on sexual and reproductive rights into the session's final declaration. The U.S. delegation sought to add to the reaffirmation of the Beijing Declaration, a qualification

that it did "not create any new international human rights and [did] not include the right to abortion." If adopted, the amendment would create the impression that the international community had yielded to U.S. pressure, undermining a woman's right to choose, and retreating from a landmark commitment to women's equality.

Faced with this challenge, IPPF/WHR "ambassadors" fanned out through the corridors of the UN. They conferred with members of numerous Latin American and Caribbean government delegations, some of which were the prime targets of U.S. pressure, urging them to stand firm in their commitments to women's rights. In the end, finding itself almost completely isolated, the United States withdrew its amendment and the CSW reaffirmed the Beijing consensus without reservation.

The CSW experience served as an important building block for advocates of sexual and reproductive rights at the national level in the Latin American and Caribbean region. It was especially significant for the youthful (under the age of 25) members of the IPPF/WHR delegation, articulate young activists from Costa Rica, Mexico, Panama, and Venezuela.

Youth participation has been defined as a key element of IPPF/WHR's strategy to create programs that are truly based on young people's needs. Youth volunteers at IPPF/WHR's associations offer valuable contributions and leadership, many of them participating as members of the organization's Board of Directors. By participating in the reaffirmation of the Beijing Declaration these young leaders' vision was extended to an international agenda, allowing them the opportunity to experience decision-making processes at the UN level.

Adriana Maroto, a youth volunteer at IPPF/WHR's association in Costa Rica says of youth involvement in the CSW, "Young people working for reproductive rights have an agenda, and define their own strategies to propose, negotiate, and fight. We have solid arguments and the skills to engage in debate. Youth participation is fundamental to establishing our rights and not simply be considered a 'future generation,' but individuals existing now."