

**PFII May 2014 session**

**U.S. Statement on Report of the International Expert Group Meeting on  
Sexual Health and Reproductive Rights**

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**Tuesday, May 13, afternoon session**

Thank you Madam Chair. Madam Chair, distinguished delegates and Forum participants, the United States appreciates very much the opportunity to address this forum and to highlight the importance of sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights for indigenous individuals. Madam Chair, I would like to express the gratitude of our delegation for the report of the international expert group meeting on the theme “*Sexual health and reproductive rights: articles 21, 22(1), 23, and 24 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.*”

We are pleased that the report clearly acknowledges the importance of investing in sexual and reproductive health programs and promoting and protecting reproductive rights. Strong support of sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights sends a message to the world that we value women’s health and empowerment.

The evidence is overwhelming that gender equality and women’s meaningful empowerment is inextricably tied to promoting women’s rights, including their right to decide freely and responsibly the number, spacing, and timing of their children and their right to have control over and decide freely and responsibly on matters related to their sexuality. The issues of gender equality, universal access to sexual and reproductive health, and meeting the needs of adolescents and young people particularly in indigenous communities are of importance and in need of our continued attention, commitment, and resources.

To address this, my government believes that we must continue to promote universal access to sexual and reproductive health, including a wide variety of modern methods of contraception as life-saving interventions that are essential for promoting health, economic growth, and development across the globe, and

ultimately, for ensuring that all women are able to exercise their reproductive rights.

Millions of women and young people around the world want to control the timing and spacing of their children or avoid pregnancy altogether but lack access to safe and reliable forms of contraception to enable them to do so. Helping women and young people in all communities to have the same access to lifesaving contraceptives must be central to our efforts because for many women, the inability to access modern contraceptives can cost them their lives.

Too many adolescents lack access to comprehensive sexuality education which helps them develop the skills they will need to successfully negotiate relationships, and can help promote gender equality, human rights and lifelong good health. This along with poverty and lack of educational opportunities, make young indigenous girls particularly vulnerable to a range of negative health outcomes, including unintended pregnancies, unsafe abortion, obstetric fistula, cervical cancers, and even death. We should give special attention to the needs and the human rights of the largest-ever generation of adolescents and youth, and take the actions necessary to ensure their participation in discussions and decisions on matters that affect their lives and the future.

The United States reaffirms the universality of all human rights, and stresses that the diversity of backgrounds and cultures should be respected, but can never be an excuse for a country not to fulfill its human rights obligations. However, in the same vein, in promoting respect for cultural and traditional values in the implementation of sexual and reproductive health programs, cultural and traditional values can at times be an obstacle to receiving those life-saving services.

Finally, the importance of information and the method in which the information is delivered is essential to overcoming many of the obstacles we currently face. Effective communication between doctors, nurses, clinicians, and patients is a critical component of providing high quality sexual and reproductive healthcare. Patients are more at ease when they can receive information and express concerns in their native tongue. Providing accurate and reliable information is integral to empowering women and young people to have control over their fertility and sexuality. The results are obvious: Women will be more apt to return to the sexual and reproductive healthcare provider where comfort and communication were highest and thus establishing a long relationship. This translates to healthier

mothers, babies and families and pays off in greater dividends at the community, national and global levels.

Our combined efforts have the potential to transform the lives of women and girls around the world. Moving forward, we should continue to work to removing obstacles and make access to quality care easier.