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AS WRITTEN

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Presentation to ICPD Plenary

Thank you for the opportunity to address this most important gathering.

Many people have spoken to you on behalf of the planet and its health.

As a family planning provider, I am here to advocate for the millions of
 women who do not have access to contraception or safe abortion services.

Because while you as policy makers weigh the Earth's ability to provide
 for coming generations, individual women in every corner of the globe
 are weighing, right at this moment, whether or not they can provide
 adequately for a new child.

Most of us in this room—members of the world press, the diplomatic corps and educated representatives of NGOs—we and our families have access to safe, effective birth control methods in our cities or towns, or can afford to travel to another society where birth control is available. But millions of women, by virtue of their economic circumstances or political decisions of their leaders, are denied the ability to safely control whether and when they will bear a child.

Grand political concepts, like cultural imperialism, are hurled about while each year 60,000 women die from unsafe abortions and countless more are forced to bear children they do not have the resources to adequately nurture.

To me, it is the height of imperialistic thinking, to support policies that force women to bear children against their will. Birth control and abortion are not questions of faith. In my country, where Catholic women have the legal right to make their own choice, they have abortions at the same rate as non-Catholics. So the Vatican representatives cannot claim to speak for millions of Catholic women.

Nonetheless, the Vatican, because it opposes birth control and abortion, is seeking to remove the concept of reproductive health from the agreement we all hope will emerge from this conference. I give the Vatican credit for acknowledging an important truth: that we cannot support the reproductive health of women without providing access to birth control and abortion.

This conference must have the courage to face that same truth. Before you is this question: Who is more qualified to make decisions about

birth control and abortion— political authorities in each nation, or each individual woman whose health, and thus perhaps the survival of her other children may be at stake?

We all know what we need to do to secure women's health. And we also know the reason this is so contentious: because, as Marguerite Holloway wrote this summer in the US magazine *Scientific American*, "securing women's health means social transformation." Controlling one's own fertility is crucial to controlling one's destiny. Access to family planning is inextricably intertwined with women's ability in any society to advance in economic, political and social terms.

That is why what most of us see as modest, sensible health proposals inspire such a hostile response from societies and institutions that, as a matter of policy, do not allow women in leadership.

At Planned Parenthood, we have always made an important distinction between providing information and services on one hand, and on the other, manipulating women's choices. We are not interested in making decisions for anyone—only providing real options. Women bring life into the world. We support policies that give each woman, regardless of economic circumstance or geography, the power to determine her own reproductive destiny, and to do so safely.

Those of us who trust women with this moral decision-making power, also trust women to bear those children they and their families can sustain, and that the earth can sustain. And our trust in the wisdom of human nature has been supported by the history of this century. Where women are given the choice, some have large families, most have smaller families, neither choice need be a public issue, and their societies have prospered.

Denying women power over their own bodies has cost countless lives and fueled an ecological crisis. It is time to acknowledge every woman's right to make the decisions that most impact her life. Only by taking this crucial step will we allow women to exercise their rightful and indispensable share of stewardship of our endangered planet.

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