



**Testimony of Yasmin Vafa, Executive Director, Rights4Girls
Maine Joint Standing Committee on Judiciary
April 11, 2023**

Thank you, Senator Carney, Representative Moonen, and Honorable Members of the Judiciary Committee for taking the time to hear testimony on this important bill. My name is Yasmin Vafa and I am a human rights attorney and Executive Director of Rights4Girls—a national human rights organization based in Washington, DC. I am testifying today in support of ***LD 1435, An Act to Reduce Commercial Sexual Exploitation***.

At Rights4Girls, we work to end gender-based violence against marginalized young women and girls throughout the United States, including right here in Maine. Specifically, we work to change the policies that allow women and girls to be criminalized when they experience sexual violence, and promote policies that provide survivors with access to safety, justice, and support. We do so through advocacy, research, and training and technical assistance. In addition, I am pleased to serve as a member of the U.S. Advisory Committee on the Sex Trafficking of Children and Youth under the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services where we provide national guidance, as well as expertise to the U.S. Attorney General and the Secretary of Health of Human Services on the nation's response to human trafficking. Furthermore, over the last decade, I have served as a judicial educator for the National Judicial Institute on Domestic Child Sex Trafficking—a program I co-designed and created where we have trained more than 1,000 judges throughout the country on how to promote alternatives to detention for survivors of commercial sexual exploitation that appear in their courtrooms.

This week, our organization released a new report called [*Criminalized Survivors: Today's Abuse to Prison Pipeline for Girls*](#). Our report highlights how survivors are often punished and pushed into the criminal justice system because of the violence and exploitation they endure. The [*Washington Post featured the report*](#) and noted how survivors of sexual exploitation and trafficking were particularly vulnerable to this disturbing abuse to prison pipeline.

This legislation works to end this disturbing cycle by repealing the crime of engaging in prostitution. This is an important and necessary change for individuals in the sex trade—



who are some of the most marginalized women in our community given that the majority i) have suffered childhood sexual abuse, ii) first entered the sex trade as minors, iii) sell

sex as a means of survival or coercion, and iv) experience extreme violence at the hands of both sex buyers and exploiters/pimps. Criminalizing these women merely keeps them trapped in the industry and hinders their ability to exit. It also impedes their ability to access other essential needs like housing, safe jobs, and other support for them and their families. LD 1435 recognizes the injustice of punishing sex trade survivors for their own exploitation and ends this punishment, allowing survivors the chance to exit the industry and start a new path.

Importantly, LD 1435 *solely* repeals the crime of engaging in prostitution for survivors—NOT their exploiters. This is a key aspect of the legislation that must be highlighted. This thoughtful and nuanced *partial* decriminalization approach ensures that only those who are unjustly criminalized for their own exploitation are being protected. LD 1435 is careful to maintain the prohibitions against all other aspects of the commercial sex industry, ensuring that the sex trade remains as small as possible and that exploiters' actions remain strongly deterred.

There are other important provisions in the legislation as well, such as provisions recognizing the added vulnerabilities of children in the sex trade and those with disabilities and providing greater information about community resources and support services to assist survivors.

We know that in order to effectively exit the industry and stay out, we must adopt policies that i) repeal the crime of engaging in prostitution for survivors, ii) provide survivors criminal record relief, and iii) provide essential services and exit support to individuals in the sex trade.

For these reasons, I ask you to **please vote “ought to pass” on LD 1435 and its complimentary bill, LD 1436, *An Act to Provide Remedies for Survivors of Commercial Sexual Exploitation***, scheduled to be heard later today which promotes the other two factors I mentioned above with respect to criminal record relief and the promotion of services.

Please help end the abuse to prison pipeline for sex trade survivors in Maine.

Thank you.