



# FEMINIST MAJORITY

Working for Women's Equality from the Streets to the Legislature

Testimony on LD 2136: Support with Strong Accountability and Survivor Protections

Submitted by: Leyla Damirchiyeva

On behalf of: GLI Chapter, Thornton Academy

Dear Senator, Representative, and Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services,

My name is Leyla Damirchiyeva, and I am submitting this testimony on behalf of our GLI chapter, a program of the Feminist Majority Foundation dedicated to gender equality.

We support the intent of LD 2136 to provide emergency funding for anti-trafficking services in Maine, particularly given the urgent need created by delayed federal funding. Survivors of human trafficking, domestic violence, and other forms of exploitation require uninterrupted access to critical services, and this funding has the potential to help meet those needs.

However, we urge the Committee to ensure that funding is accompanied by strong accountability measures. Public funds must be paired with transparency, independent oversight, and survivor-centered practices to guarantee that the organizations receiving funds operate ethically and effectively.

According to the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2022, for child victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation, the median age is 16 and the average age is 15. Adult victims in sexual exploitation have a median age of 18 and an average age of 22 (United Nations publication, 2023). Women aged 16 to 19 are four times more likely to be sexually assaulted than women in all other age groups, emphasizing the extreme vulnerability of adolescents who have recently escaped human trafficking (Prim Care, 2020 Feb 27; Banvard-Fox et al., PMC7702185). Globally, children make up almost a third of all human trafficking victims, and women and girls comprise 71% of victims (UNODC, 2016).

Women and girls with psychiatric or intellectual disabilities face even greater risks. According to a 2014 study, women with mental illness or intellectual disabilities are four to five times more likely than other women to be sexually assaulted (Violent Victimization of Women with Disabilities, 2014). Research further demonstrates that survivors with mental illness are often disbelieved, infantilized, or confused by cross-examination in investigations, making it difficult for them to obtain justice (Wieberneit et al., 2023, Silenced Survivors: A Systematic Review of the Barriers to Reporting, Investigating, Prosecuting, and Sentencing of Adult Female Rape and Sexual Assault, PMID: 39077946).

This underscores the critical need for service providers to take all complaints seriously, validate survivor experiences, and operate under strict trauma-informed and ethical standards. Emergency funding should not put survivors at risk of further harm by supporting programs that fail to honor or protect their voices.

Maine's shelters are vital but insufficient. In fiscal year 2024, shelters housed only 14% of those eligible and seeking a bed (Maine Coalition to End Domestic Violence, 2024). Shelter stay lengths have increased dramatically, often lasting six months to a year, due to Maine's housing shortage and rising rents (Maine Monitor, 2025). Limited access to Section 8 vouchers and federal rental assistance compounds these challenges, leaving survivors at risk of returning to unsafe environments (MaineHousing, 2025).

Research shows homeless women with mental health symptoms face elevated risk of sexual exploitation. A study from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (Ivanich et al, 2017, Int. J. Environ. Res. Public Health, 14(9), 1031) found that impulsivity, history of trauma, and mental health challenges significantly predict engagement in survival sex.

These vulnerabilities are reinforced by structural barriers, long waitlists, inadequate shelter capacity, and lack of mental health resources, creating a Cycle of Perpetual Vulnerability that keeps women trapped in unsafe situations (Li & Urada, 2020).

Given these documented risks, LD 2136 must include robust accountability and survivor protections:

- Mandatory public reporting on fund usage and outcomes for survivors.
- Independent oversight or third-party evaluation to ensure ethical, trauma-informed practices.
- Accessible grievance procedures so all complaints, especially from individuals with mental illness or disabilities, are taken seriously and investigated thoroughly.

Supporting anti-trafficking services without these measures risks further harm to already vulnerable populations, including adolescents, survivors of domestic violence, and women with disabilities. Emergency funding must be accompanied by enforceable standards that validate survivor voices and ensure safety, dignity, and accountability.

We urge the Committee to pass LD 2136 with amendments requiring strong oversight, transparency, and protections for the most vulnerable survivors.

Thank you for your consideration.

Respectfully,

Leyla Damirchiyeva

GLI Chapter, Thornton Academy