

*In support of LDs 1435 and 1436.*

My name is Mary Speta. I am a researcher, a survivor of the commercial sex trade, and I serve as the Executive Director of Amirah, Inc. We have been providing exit and aftercare services to women exiting prostitution in New England for 12 years and we have served nearly 450 women, many of whom were exploited through the prostitution system in Maine.

When Maine criminalized prostitution, it did so during the muckraker era – a time filled with strife over immigration, limited perspectives on the societal role of women, and a great fear of the “other.” Prostitution, being shrouded with false narratives, was criminalized in nearly every state. But history has shown that the criminalization of the sale of sex has in fact, never made sense. Since the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century, studies have shown that the primary factors contributing to a person’s participation in selling sex are poverty, lack of affordable housing, lack of adequate medical care, and lack of living wage jobs. Today, those contributing factors still exist, compounded by addiction and the impact of the opioid crisis. We have known, with empirical evidence, for more than a century that most people trading sex in the system of prostitution do so with no legitimate economic alternative for survival. Their bodies are used by others with more power and wealth, and the outcomes for people trading sex are shocking. They are the number one target for serial killers, they are brutally raped, they are often killed in violent sex fantasies by sex buyers, they are exploited by traffickers out of their poverty and in a system of gender-based violence. And they are also arrested far more often than those who buy and abuse them – up to 90% more often according to some studies.

Meanwhile, sex buyers have largely been left alone and treated with impunity. If women don’t perform up to the sex buyer’s standards, it is not uncommon for sex buyers to take it upon themselves to provide a punishment they see fit – like Jenna, who had to have her jaw reconstructed; like April, who had to have an emergency hysterectomy from being raped with knife; and women like me, who have scars in places I won’t speak of today.

As a researcher, I have examined more than 300 studies published on prostitution since the passage of the Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000, and as a service provider I have worked to help hundreds of women exit the system of prostitution. The research, the experience in the field, and my own personal lived experience all lead to one conclusion: the Equality Model is the best path forward in developing a policy addressing the realities of prostitution.

There is an idea that the decriminalization of the sale of sex will somehow provide an open door for traffickers to lure victims into prostitution. The opposite is actually true. The continued criminalization of the sale of sex gives traffickers leverage to control victims by keeping evidence of their supposed crimes. The Equality Model approach has been proven to create better conditions for all in prostitution by providing necessary alternatives, targeting human trafficking, and putting the burden where it should be – on traffickers, sex buyers, and those who believe women’s bodies are objects to be sold. You have more than an opportunity to vote on this bill – you have the opportunity to be the first state in the nation to adopt a model that decades of research support.