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Eloise Vitelli, Arrowsic, ME

Senator Carney, Representative Kuhn and honorable members of the Judiciary Committee, my name is Eloise Vitelli and I am a resident of Arrowsic, ME.

I am honored to appear before you today to testify in support of LD 260. This is the 5th time I have testified in support of an Equal Rights Amendment, though the first as a regular voter.

When I arrived in Maine in 1974, the National ERA had just passed in Maine, suggesting that as a nation we were taking one more step toward greater equality. From an economic standpoint, centuries of discrimination had left us with a wage gap for full time working women compared to male counterparts at 59 cents to the dollar. From an equity perspective, we had a way to go.

Today, nearly 50 years later, the wage gap in Maine is 85 cents (78c for PT) At this pace, it will take another 30 years to reach parity.

By 1977, the ERA had gotten 35 of the 38 states necessary for ratification, and even though Congress extended the initial 7- year deadline, the ERA failed to get to 38 until Virginia became the 38 state to ratify in 2020.

What needs to happen now, according to legal scholars, is action from Congress for the amendment to be certified and added to our constitution.

Meanwhile, 28 states have already incorporated equal protections in their constitutions – including: Alaska, Colorado, Hawaii, Maryland, Montana, Nevada, Washington. And Wyoming since 1890. Three other states, in addition to Maine, are in the process of adding an ERA provision.

Over the decades, the ERA has been championed and garnered support from members of both parties, though sadly, in my time in the senate, only once did we achieve the 2/3 in the Senate, though not the House, needed to send the bill on to voters.

Ten years after Maine ratified the national ERA, however, in 1984, the Legislature did garner enough votes in both chambers to send a referendum to voters. That effort, unfortunately, failed.

So, here we are again today to try once more to reach the promise of our founding principles – that all beings are created equal and are entitled to the same rights under the law.

30 years ago, I had the privilege to attend the UN International Conference on Women in Beijing. I was one of nearly 30,000 delegates from over 180 countries attending the NGO Forum. During the week-long gathering, women from the developing world shared stories with those of us from the developed north about their struggles to organize for some of the same rights we enjoyed – the right to an education, to be free from violence, to have a voice in their local community.

I came home inspired by their courage and re-committed to doing what I could to continue improving the lives and opportunities of women and girls in my own home country. As one of the conference coordinators put it, while “The veil of discrimination against women has been lifted” the real battlefield in the fight for women’s equality is still back at home.

As we've all seen, progress does not happen in a straight line and is not guaranteed. The political and cultural forces that shape our society can stall our efforts and even move us backwards. Laws can and do change. In 1995, the US was a beacon for other countries seeking to make their societies more supportive of women's full participation. We are no longer in the top ten list of countries deemed "best" for women. (Iceland is number one)¹

Today, on-going efforts to make our democracy, our communities, more inclusive, diverse and equitable, are being challenged. Women's rights are once again at risk. Indeed, it is not just women's rights.

It was in Beijing that then first lady Hilary Clinton spoke the words "Women's rights are human rights are women's rights."

It is time to lay a strong foundation for our future to **protect the human rights of all of us** who live here, *regardless of actual or perceived race, color, religion, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, age, physical or mental disability, ancestry, or national origin of an individual*. We are all human beings and deserve equal rights under the laws of our land.

I urge you to stand up for equality, for justice, for our democracy and send LD 260 out to referendum. It is past time.

¹ World Economic Forum Global Gender Gap Report 2024