



## Department of the Secretary of State Maine Permanent Commission on the Status of Women



### JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON JUDICIARY

#### **L.D. 260 "RESOLUTION, Proposing an Amendment to the Constitution of Maine to Establish That All Maine Residents Have Equal Rights Under the Law"**

Testimony of Elinor Higgins  
Executive Director, Maine Permanent Commission on the Status of Women

March 4, 2025

Senator Carney, Representative Kuhn, Members of the Judiciary Committee, my name is Elinor Higgins. I am a resident of Portland, and I am the Executive Director of Maine's Permanent Commission on the Status of Women. The Commission is a government appointed group, created in state statute to improve opportunities for women and girls. The Commission advises the Governor and members of the Legislature about policy and social issues affecting women and girls across Maine. Today, I am speaking on behalf of the Commission in support of L.D. 260 "RESOLUTION, Proposing an Amendment to the Constitution of Maine to Establish That All Maine Residents Have Equal Rights Under the Law."

The Commission is deeply proud of Maine's commitment to equality under the law, particularly the protection offered by the Maine Human Rights Act. We are also grateful to have received funding for my position during the 131<sup>st</sup> Maine Legislature – a sign that Maine is investing in equitable treatment for women and girls. However, the Commission's own research, reporting, and life experiences show there is more to do to ensure that all Maine residents are treated equally and fairly.

In December, the Commission released a report on Maine women's labor and economic security.<sup>1</sup> While we saw exciting successes for women's education outcomes, we found that stubborn, long-time trends continue to undermine women's economic security. Women in Maine experience disproportionate burdens of sexual harassment and violence in the workplace, and the gender wage gap remains present and impactful. Full-time women workers make about 83% of what full-time men make. That wage gap is even wider for BIPOC women, disabled women, and LGBTQ+ folks. On average, Maine mothers make almost \$20,000 less than Maine fathers each year. These wage gaps have concrete, negative impacts on the economic security of women in Maine. Women are more likely than men to experience poverty across all of Maine's counties. 1 in 4 Black or African American women in Maine have incomes below the Federal Poverty Level. 75% of Maine households led by single women are experiencing financial hardship. Maine women over the age of 75 live in poverty at twice the rate of men. These issues impact the Maine economy – and offer an opportunity to make Maine's economy stronger by addressing gender disparities.

Under the Maine Human Rights Act, almost one in three of the employment cases filed with the Maine Human Rights Commission are related to sex discrimination and sexual orientation and gender identity

<sup>1</sup> Maine Permanent Commission on the Status of Women. (2024). "A Report on Maine Women's Labor and Economic Security." Available at: <https://www.maine.gov/sos/womens-comm/documents/MaineStatusOfWomenReport2024.pdf>.

Note: Data cited throughout this testimony is drawn from the report – please see link above for further citations and information.

(or SOGI) discrimination. Sex discrimination charges and SOGI discrimination charges are often accompanied by charges of other types of discrimination. For example, 15% of sex discrimination cases also included age discrimination charges and 35% of SOGI discrimination cases also included disability discrimination charges. These are real issues facing Maine women every day, and L.D. 260 embeds in our Constitution legal protections and avenues for re-dress when the rights of Maine citizens are violated.

Maine is a national leader on equality. However, members of the Commission have talked to me about their intense frustration with the lack of progress on addressing these gender disparities. Some do not see themselves and their communities reflected in our data sources. Others feel like we have been rattling off the same disturbing statistics for decades with limited change to show for it. While L.D. 260 will not provide an immediate fix for these obstacles, it provides a firm bedrock for legal equality in Maine. It will offer an additional, foundational tool for us to utilize as we aim to eliminate discrimination and increase opportunity for Maine women and all Maine residents. L.D. 260 is a sensible step to take to signal to Mainers and the rest of the country Maine's continued support for equality.

The members of the Commission stand in unanimous support of L.D. 260. Several members have been working in support of a federal Equal Rights Amendment for decades and urged me to convey the strength and urgency of their support to all of you. We appreciate the opportunity to provide testimony today on this important bill, which will reinforce Maine's commitment to equality and fairness for everybody – regardless of who we are, our abilities, and what we look like. I urge you to vote "Ought to Pass" on L.D. 260. Thank you again for your time and attention.