



May 21, 2021

Dear Senator Hickman, Representative Sylvester, and Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Labor and Housing,

I join you today on behalf of the Maine Women's Lobby. For over forty years, the Maine Women's Lobby has advocated for public policy which increases the health, wellness, safety, and economic security of Maine women and girls, with a focus on the most marginalized populations and communities.

We write today **in support of LD 1711, "An Act To Enhance Enforcement of Employment Laws."** We thank President Jackson for sponsoring this bill.

Discrimination in the workplace – especially gender-based discrimination – is still pervasive in Maine, despite the increase in awareness in recent years. In 2019, a full quarter of complaints filed with the Maine Human Rights Commission were based on sex or gender identity.¹ Half of Mainers experience sexual harassment in the workplace – women at three times the rate of men.² Women are significantly more likely to experience wage theft or wage violations – and those violations make up a greater share of women's earnings.³

This discrimination is even more devastating when the women belong to an additional marginalized group. Women with disabilities, women of color, and trans women all experience greater economic injustices because of discrimination. For instance, while white women make 83 cents for every dollar white men make, Black women make just .66 cents on the dollar.⁴ This means that she has to work until she's 81 years old to be paid what a white man earns by the time he is 60 years old.⁵

Maine has recently made changes that ensure equal pay - **but without enforcement and accountability, the protections of the law aren't accessible to many Mainers.** In addition to being more likely to experience workplace harassment or inequity, women in Maine are also more likely to experience barriers to seeking redress. According to a recent study, two-thirds of female employees believe that reporting workplace violations can harm a career – as compared with only one third of male employees.⁶

¹ Retrieved from: https://www.maine.gov/mhrc/sites/maine.gov/mhrc/files/inline-files/MHRC%202019%20ANNUAL%20REPORT_0.pdf

² Retrieved from: <https://www.mecando.org/research.html>

³ Economic Policy Institute. (2017). Employers steal billions from workers' paychecks each year. Retrieved from <https://www.epi.org/publication/employers-steal-billions-from-workers-paychecks-each-year/>

⁴ Lifetime Wage Gap Losses for Black Women Overall State Rankings: 2019. (2020, March). Retrieved August 3, 2020, from <https://nwlc-ciw49tixgw5lbab.stackpathdns.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Black-Women-Overall-Lifetime-Losses-2020.pdf>

⁵ Lifetime Wage Gap Losses for Black Women Overall State Rankings: 2019. (2020, March). Retrieved August 3, 2020, from <https://nwlc-ciw49tixgw5lbab.stackpathdns.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Black-Women-Overall-Lifetime-Losses-2020.pdf>

⁶ Ibid.



Maine Women's Lobby

THE VOICE OF MAINE WOMEN

This is why fair and equal access to workplace remedies is so essential to women's economic justice. Only when Mainers can engage in impartial, unbiased, and open civil processes can they move their claims forward with confidence. Remedies such as the Maine Human Rights Commission are critically important, but under resourced. Without that access, individuals are forced to engage in confidential, closed-door negotiations, and employers escape the public scrutiny that would come from a more open process.

LD 1711 specifically seeks to build that access for enforcement for Maine. It creates a process to ensure that all workers, especially those least likely to be supported under the status quo, have a pathway to justice for workplace harassment and discrimination. I worked in the field of sexual violence and sexual harassment for many years, and one thing we know is that survivors need many pathways and options for addressing the harm that they experience. LD 1711 creates more options – ultimately creating more protections for Mainers, and a safer, more equitable Maine.

Please join me in supporting this important step forward to protect women's and workers' rights.

We hope you will vote 'ought to pass' on LD 1711.

Sincerely,

Destie Hohman Sprague, Executive Director
Maine Women's Lobby / mainewomen.org