



## Woodhull Freedom Foundation

### Memo of Support for House Resolution 5250

The Woodhull Freedom Foundation strongly supports House Resolution 5250, which would create a special legislative commission to ensure racial equity and the optimization of health and safety laws impacting marginalized individuals. I am Ricci Levy and I am one of the founders of and the President and CEO of this organization. The Woodhull Freedom Foundation is a 501(c)3 organization whose mission is to affirm sexual freedom as a fundamental human right. Among those human rights are:

1. The right to life;
2. The right to liberty and security of the person;
3. The right to equality and the right to be free from all forms of discrimination;
4. The right to privacy;
5. The right to healthcare and health protection; and
6. The right to the benefits of scientific progress.

I offer this list, which is by no means complete, as an introduction to the United States commitment to protect sex workers from violence and discrimination. In 2010, United Nations member states reviewed the United States as part of the Universal Periodic Review. This marked the first time the country's human rights record was submitted to public examination. In this process, the US government supported several recommendations made to protect people's human rights. The supported recommendations, available [here](#), focus on a range of issues including criminal justice, immigration, racial discrimination, and labor and trafficking.

During the 2010 UPR, Woodhull Freedom Foundation, represented by then Human Rights Program Director RJ Thompson, joined its allies in successfully lobbying to place sex worker rights on the human rights agenda. Recommendations 86 and 112 are part of the outcome of these efforts.

*Recommendations 86 and 112: (86) Undertake awareness-raising campaigns for combating stereotypes and violence against gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transsexuals, and ensure access to public services paying attention to the special vulnerability of sexual workers to violence and human rights abuses; (112) Take measures to comprehensively address discrimination against individuals on the basis of their sexual orientation or gender identity.*

During this historic review, the US agreed with and supported recommendations 86 and 112.

***U.S. Response to Recommendations position: We agree that no one should face violence or discrimination in access to public services based on sexual orientation or their status as a person in prostitution, as these recommendations suggest. We have recently taken concrete steps to address discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity, and are engaged in further efforts.***

In the response, the US committed to protecting sex workers from violence and human rights abuses. The responsibility to fulfill this recommendation is ongoing as sex workers and people profiled as sex workers continue to be the targets of violence and oppressive laws that interfere with their enjoyment of their human rights. This violence and systemic abuse are disproportionately inflicted upon sex workers and people profiled as sex workers who come from already marginalized communities, including Black and transgender, nonbinary, or gender nonconforming individuals.

To be clear, sex work is the consensual exchange of sex between adults. In stark contrast, human trafficking and sexual exploitation of children are serious human rights abuses which must be addressed through well-resourced rights-based prevention and protection programs.

There has been significant research on the safety and health impact of laws governing commercial sex, specifically related to violence, stigma, exploitation, and sexual health. Research continues to point to a correlation between repressive policing policies, diminished health outcomes and coercive work environments. A meta-analysis conducted by professors at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health and other institutions reviewing over 130 studies conducted over nearly 30 years made the following critical findings: repressive policing practices of sex workers were associated with increased risks of sexual/physical sexual violence from clients or other partners and led to increased risk of infection with HIV/STIs.<sup>1</sup>

A study conducted by researchers at Baylor University and the University of California Los Angeles found that during 2003 through 2009, while indoor prostitution was decriminalized in Rhode Island, the number of rapes diminished by 31 percent and the statewide incidence of gonorrhea among women diminished by 39 percent.<sup>2</sup> There has also been a documented increase in exploitation and violence against people in the sex industry in Rhode Island since the passage of federal legislation FOSTA in April of 2018, which has limited the availability to online websites for

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<sup>1</sup> Lucy Platt, Pippa Grenfell, Rebecca Meiksin, Jocelyn Elmes, Susan G. Sherman, Teela Sanders, Peninah Mwangi & Anna-Louise Crago, Associations Between sex Work Laws and Sex Workers' Health: A systematic review and meta-analysis of quantitative and qualitative studies 45, 46 (PLOS Med. ed., Dec. 11, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> CUNNINGHAM, SCOTT & SHAH, MANISHA, DECRIMINALIZING INDOOR PROSTITUTION: IMPLICATIONS FOR SEXUAL VIOLENCE AND PUBLIC HEALTH (July 17, 2014). Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2467633> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2467633>

workers.<sup>3</sup> Woodhull is the lead plaintiff on the federal challenge to the unconstitutional SESTA/FOSTA law, [Woodhull Freedom Foundation et al vs. the United States of America.](#)

Overall, there is clear correlation between the inability to assert one's rights and obtain support and the likelihood and severity of exploitation and harms health and safety. Further analysis needs to be undertaken in Rhode Island to assess laws' impact on the most marginalized communities. There is a saying in various movements for freedom, "Nothing about us without us." Members of the impacted communities must be a part of the crafting of the solutions!

We all want full realization of rights for all persons, especially the right to freedom from violence and exploitation.

I urge you to support this crucial legislation which would lead to best practices and implementation thereof in Rhode Island. Thank you for your time and consideration on this matter.

Sincerely,

Ricci Joy Levy  
President and CEO  
Woodhull Freedom Foundation

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<sup>3</sup> COYOTE RI, SESTA/FOSTA (July 28, 2018), AVAILABLE AT: <https://coyoteri.org/wp/sesta-fosta-death-aids2018/>