



Rhode Island House Judiciary Committee
Testimony of
Yasmin Z. Vafa, Executive Director, Rights4Girls
HB5357 & HB5358
February 25, 2025

Thank you, Chairman Craven and Members of the Committee, for the opportunity to provide written testimony today on HB5357 & HB5358. Rights4Girls is a human rights organization dedicated to defending the rights of vulnerable young women and girls throughout the United States, including in Rhode Island. We work to change the policies that punish young women and girls when they experience violence and promote approaches that provide survivors with opportunities for safety, healing, and support. As human rights attorneys and advocates dedicated to defending survivors' rights, we submit this testimony to i) **voice our support for HB5357**, legislation that would eliminate fees, and ii) **voice our support for and offer recommendations to strengthen HB5358**, legislation that protects individuals from being charged under the prostitution statute if they are the victim or witness of a crime.

Background

People in prostitution are among the most vulnerable Rhode Islanders. The majority of those in prostitution are not there by choice but due to lack of choice. This includes women, children, and members of the LGBTQIA+ community. The vast majority of those in prostitution have experienced violence, including physical and psychological trauma at the hands of both sex buyers and exploiters.¹ Many others have been trafficked, sexually exploited, are members of the runaway and homeless youth and/or foster care communities, are disproportionately women and girls of color², and/or struggle with substance use disorder.

Historically, people in prostitution have been seen as criminals and arrested at disproportionately high rates as compared to buyers, pimps, and traffickers.³ Today, jurisdictions around the country and the world have begun to recognize that most prostituted people are people in need of services and exit strategies rather than arrest and prosecution. As a result, many jurisdictions around the globe have adopted the Survivor Model—a survivor-centered policy approach, which

¹ Get the Facts: What we know about sex trafficking, sexual exploitation and prostitution in the United States, World Without Exploitation (January 2020), <https://www.equalitymodelus.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Get-the-Facts-January-2020.pdf>.

² Rights4Girls (2024), https://rights4girls.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Racial-Disparities-Fact-Sheet_Jan-2024-updated.pdf

³ Id.



provides legal protection to prostituted people from arrest and prosecution while continuing to hold accountable their exploiters—the pimps, sex buyers and brothel owners. In fact, in 2023 Maine became the first U.S. state to adopt the Survivor Model, recognizing that no one should be punished for their own exploitation and paving the way for other states to follow suit.⁴

Our position on HB5357

Concerning HB5357, we offer the following opinions:

- We strongly support the elimination of prostitution-related fines for prostituted people, some of the most vulnerable people in our communities. Such fines constitute an undue burden on women in the sex trade and often serve to keep them further ensnared in the industry and/or under the control of their exploiters.
- Eliminating such fines would help assist prostituted people in having one less burden for them to submit to.
- We also support the community offenders' program for women. Given that our research at Rights4Girls shows many low-level women offenders have suffered violence and trauma before entering the system via an "abuse-to-prison pipeline"⁵; we support community-based alternatives instead of incarceration that exacerbates women's trauma and disconnects them from their family and their community—fueling a vicious cycle of harm and further incarceration.

Our position HB5358

Concerning HB5358, we offer the following opinions:

- We support offering prostituted people immunity for reporting crimes they have experienced or witnessed. These situations often apply in scenarios where a prostituted woman is raped, beaten, and/or robbed by their sex buyer or other exploiter but is too afraid to report the incident to police for fear of being charged with prostitution.

⁴ Heal, Alexandra, Maine becomes first state to decriminalize selling sex, The Washington Post, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2023/06/30/maine-sex-work-decriminalization/>, June 30, 2023.

⁵ Saada Saar et. al., Rights4Girls, Georgetown Law Center on Poverty and Inequality & Ms. Foundation for Women, *The Sexual Abuse to Prison Pipeline: The Girls' Story*, <https://rights4girls.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/SexualAbuseToPrisonPipeline-Report.pdf> (2015)



- In fact, numerous studies have shown that survivors consistently experience physical and sexual violence at the hands of sex buyers and pimps.⁶ Therefore we are very glad to see this immunity protection limited solely to prostituted people and not their pimps or sex buyers who, in many instances, are the very people inflicting acts of violence and theft against prostituted people.
- We do, however, recommend one further language clarification to ensure that exploiters cannot receive any unintended protections under this bill.
- **We urge the committee to slightly amend the bill's language to clarify the definition of "victim."**
- Without such a definition, we are gravely concerned that pimps and sex buyers could claim to be victims under the bill and avail themselves of the protections of the law.
- Therefore, we strongly recommend that the language be clarified to include a simple definition of victim, such as the following:
 - (d) For the purposes of this section, a "victim" means an individual who has suffered direct physical, emotional, and/or monetary harm as a result of a crime.

We thank you for the opportunity to comment on these important bills. If you have any additional questions, we welcome the opportunity to speak with you at your convenience. Inquiries can be directed to Peter Baptista (peter@capcomgrp.com) or Nick Hemond (nhemond@capcomgrp.com).

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Respectfully,

Yasmin Z. Vafa, Esq.

Executive Director, Rights4Girls

⁶ Yasmin Vafa & Nora Hennick, Rights4Girls, *Buyers Unmasked: Exposing the Men Who Buy Sex & Solutions to End Exploitation*, rights4girls.org/Buyers-Unmasked (2025)