



**Rhode Island House Judiciary Committee  
Testimony of Rights4Girls  
In Opposition to  
HB 8057  
April 9, 2026**

Thank you, Chair McEntee and Members of the Committee, for the opportunity to provide written testimony today on HB 8057. Rights4Girls is a human rights organization dedicated to defending the rights of vulnerable young women and girls throughout the United States, including here in Rhode Island. We work to change the policies that punish young women and girls when they suffer 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 **voice our strong opposition to HB 8057**— legislation that would fully decriminalize all aspects of prostitution in Rhode Island, including acts of pimping, sex-buying, and brothel-keeping.

**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 a lack of choice. This includes women, children, and members of the LGBTQIA+ community. Over 90% of those in prostitution have experienced violence, including physical and psychological trauma at the hands of both sex buyers and exploiters.<sup>1</sup> Many more have been trafficked or sexually exploited; they are frequently survivors of the foster care system or runaway and homeless youth services,<sup>2</sup> are disproportionately women and girls of color,<sup>3</sup> and often struggle with substance use disorder.<sup>4</sup>

Historically, people in prostitution have been seen as criminals and arrested at disproportionately high rates compared to buyers, pimps, and traffickers.<sup>5</sup> 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 provides legal protection solely 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, ending the crime of engaging in prostitution solely for those selling sex acts and sealing their past prostitution convictions.<sup>6</sup> This recognition that no one should be punished for their own exploitation is paving the way

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<sup>1</sup> 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>.

<sup>2</sup> Rights4Girls (2020), <https://rights4girls.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/CW-Fact-Sheet-UPDATED-OCT-2020-FINAL.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Rights4Girls (2024), [https://rights4girls.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Racial-Disparties-Fact-Sheet\\_Jan-2024-updated.pdf](https://rights4girls.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Racial-Disparties-Fact-Sheet_Jan-2024-updated.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Yasmin Vafa & Nora Hennick, Buyers Unmasked: Exposing the Men Who Buy Sex & Solutions to End Exploitation, Rights4Girls, (2025) <https://rights4girls.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/Buyers-Unmasked-02122025.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Rights4Girls (2024), [https://rights4girls.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Racial-Disparties-Fact-Sheet\\_Jan-2024-updated.pdf](https://rights4girls.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Racial-Disparties-Fact-Sheet_Jan-2024-updated.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> 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.



for other states to follow suit, as both Illinois<sup>7</sup> and New York<sup>8</sup> have had Survivor Model bills introduced in recent legislative sessions.

At Rights4Girls, we've authored numerous reports exposing the widespread criminalization of survivors of sexual violence and exploitation—especially for girls and young women of color—through reports like [The Sexual Abuse to Prison Pipeline the Girls' Story](#), and [Criminalized Survivors: Today's Abuse to Prison Pipeline](#) with Georgetown Law. These reports highlight how survivors are too often punished and pushed into the justice system because of the violence and exploitation they endure. These reports have helped shape the way our nation understands and responds to incarcerated women and girls while helping to ignite a movement to decriminalize survivors.

Our work has largely focused on advancing policies that seek to end this abuse-to-prison pipeline. We've worked shoulder to shoulder with sex trade survivors in many states—including Rhode Island—to promote legislative efforts that offer legal protection to those in the sex trade, while also offering them services and support. We believe this is an important and necessary change since these individuals are among some of the most marginalized people in our community, given that many i) first entered the industry as children and suffered childhood sexual abuse, ii) sell sex as a means of survival or coercion, and iii) experience extreme violence at the hands of both sex buyers and exploiters. Criminalizing these individuals merely keeps them trapped in the industry and hinders their ability to access essential needs like housing, safe employment, and other support for them and their families. However, decriminalizing the whole industry as this bill seeks to do is a dangerous and misguided policy that threatens to put Rhode Islanders and all New Englanders in harm's way.

### **Why We Oppose HB 8057- Full Decriminalization Bill**

As mentioned, we believe that it is necessary and long overdue to decriminalize and offer legal protection to those engaged in directly selling sex—often women who represent some of the most vulnerable members of our society. But decriminalizing and empowering the individuals who exploit them is an ill-advised and dangerous policy that threatens to harm the very communities this bill aims to protect. Although framed as an effort to better protect people in prostitution, this legislation takes a number of steps that further marginalize people in the sex trade.

First, it is important to realize that despite laws prohibiting sex-buying, there are currently thousands of men who are willing to break the law to purchase sex from vulnerable people—so much so, that the demand for commercial sex already outpaces the supply.<sup>9</sup> Decriminalizing the purchase of sex would invite *even more* men to the market as new clients, because not only would we be signaling to society that this is socially acceptable behavior, but men who were deterred by the illegality of prostitution elsewhere will flock to Rhode Island as sex tourists as they do to Amsterdam and Nevada.<sup>10</sup> How will the commercial sex industry accommodate this sudden and certain surge in demand for paid sex following decriminalization? Through sex trafficking.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> HB 3626, Illinois General Assembly (2025), available at <https://www.ilga.gov/legislation/104/HB/PDF/10400HB3626lv.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> S 2005, New York State Senate (2025), available at <https://legislation.nysenate.gov/pdf/bills/2025/S2005>

<sup>9</sup> Demand Abolition, *Who Buys Sex? Understanding and Disrupting Illicit Market Demand*, 4 (2018), <https://www.demandabolition.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Demand-Buyer-Report-July-2019.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> Id.

<sup>11</sup> Cho, Seo-Young and Dreher, Axel and Neumayer, Eric, *Does Legalized Prostitution Increase Human Trafficking?* (January 16, 2012).



The reality of the sex trade is that you will never have as many willing participants as an unchecked demand requires. Traffickers will seek to capitalize on this increased demand by targeting the most vulnerable people in our communities. As an academic study of 150 countries led by the London School of Economics demonstrated, wherever prostitution is legalized or decriminalized, it subsequently leads to an increase in sex trafficking.<sup>12</sup> Further, sex buyers won't be able to tell if the person they're buying is consenting or coerced. And as one child survivor noted, *"They don't care. Buyers don't check IDs."*<sup>13</sup> Therefore, decriminalizing sex-buying would be an incredibly dangerous policy move that puts marginalized people—especially vulnerable women and youth— at risk for trafficking because it would create a large uptick in demand for paid sex that could only be met through sex trafficking.

Our organization recently published a report, [\*Buyers Unmasked: Exposing the Men Who Buy Sex & Solutions to End Exploitation\*](#), which features quotes from sex buyers all across the country—including Rhode Island— taken from “hobby boards” or websites where sex buyers rate and review the individuals they purchase for sex (essentially *Yelp*, but for prostitution). By analyzing sex buyer quotes and conversations, we were able to conclude that on the whole, these men are aware and indifferent to overt signs of coercion, desperation, and substance abuse in the people they purchase for sex.<sup>14</sup> These are the men that this law would be protecting and normalizing.

### **Failure of Full Decriminalization in Rhode Island—Why Go Backwards?**

Perhaps most importantly, Rhode Island is the only U.S. state to have experimented with full decriminalization of indoor prostitution and later sharply reversed course based on the disastrous outcomes. During the 29-year period of full decriminalization between 1980 and 2009, the lack of laws attracted not only traffickers and organized crime, but also predators, like the Craigslist Killer.<sup>15</sup>

Not only did Providence become known as “the most densely concentrated red-light district in New England,” attracting “thousands of out-of-town spenders” from all over the region,<sup>16</sup> but armed exploiters were known to openly run prostitution businesses out of hotel rooms, and teens were found exploited in the local sex industry.<sup>17</sup> Prosecutors also noted challenges with holding traffickers accountable, and child protection organizations voiced frustration to the Governor with not being able to investigate child exploitation and recover trafficked children as they could in other states because of the law.<sup>18</sup> Even former Providence Mayor David Cicilline called the combination of exploitation, violence, and chaos throughout the state a true “wild west.”<sup>17</sup> These daily realities are what prompted the Rhode Island legislature to sharply change course back in 2009.

**We have to ask, if full decriminalization was such a success, why would Rhode Island legislators have made a point of changing the state laws back?**

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World Development, 41 (1), 2013, pp. 67-82, Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=1986065>

<sup>12</sup> Id.

<sup>13</sup> Child sex trafficking survivor age 16, Washington, DC. (2019).

<sup>14</sup> Yasmin Vafa & Nora Hennick, *Buyers Unmasked: Exposing the Men Who Buy Sex & Solutions to End Exploitation*, Rights4Girls, (2025) <https://rights4girls.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/Buyers-Unmasked-02122025.pdf>

<sup>15</sup> Boston 'Craigslist' Killing May Be Linked to Attempted Robbery in Rhode Island, Fox News, April 17, 2009, <https://www.foxnews.com/story/boston-craigslist-killing-may-be-linked-to-attempted-robbery-in-rhode-island>

<sup>16</sup> Malinowski, Zachary, Sex industry expands at startling pace, The Providence Journal, April 23, 2002.

<sup>17</sup> Shapiro, M., & Hughes, D. M. (2017). Decriminalized Prostitution: Impunity for Violence and Exploitation. Wake Forest L. Rev.

<sup>18</sup> Id.



And further, **why would they have felt the need to pass *additional* laws to end child sex trafficking and prevent exploitation?**<sup>19</sup>

The unfortunate truth is that the sex trade cannot be fixed no matter what “protections” are put in place, because it is impossible to regulate away the long-term physical and psychological harms that come with repeated, unwanted sex with strangers.

For example, in a sample of 100 women on the streets of D.C., 42% had PTSD, 61% reported physical assault, nearly 80% reported being threatened with a weapon, and 44% had been raped in prostitution, with 60% of these rapes committed by sex buyers.<sup>20</sup> But this is not just true in D.C.; no matter where you look, the sex trade is inherently violent. In fact, 92% of women in the sex trade report being subjected to physical violence, such as being raped, shot, strangled, burned, beaten, stabbed, or punched.<sup>21</sup> Full decriminalization does nothing to improve these conditions. In fact, it merely provides legal protection to those who enact this violence against prostituted women.

In New Zealand, which is cited by the bill as an example to emulate, women in the sex trade report that they do not feel safer after full decriminalization and that they continue to face stigma and harassment.<sup>22</sup> The sex trade also swelled soon after the law went into effect: just six months after the full decriminalization legislation went into effect in New Zealand, the state marked a 39% increase in street prostitution.<sup>23</sup> Additionally, over the last several years, the U.S. State Department has downgraded New Zealand in its annual and influential Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Report, noting severe deficiencies in its response to human trafficking as a result of its laws; notably, the government’s failure to have ever identified “a child victim of sex trafficking or victims from New Zealand” despite ample data from local experts that sex trafficking of Maori women and girls is rampant throughout the country.<sup>24</sup> New Zealand also has the highest rate of intimate partner violence in the developed world, a national crisis that requires a response every four minutes from law enforcement.<sup>25</sup>

To be clear, we can and must immediately decriminalize and support those engaged in prostitution, clear their criminal records, and offer them services and support. **But this bill offers none of that.** It simply repeals several sections of the law that hold exploiters accountable, offering a gift to sex industry profiteers and organized crime.

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<sup>19</sup> Yasmin Vafa & Nora Hennick, *Buyers Unmasked: Exposing the Men Who Buy Sex & Solutions to End Exploitation*, Rights4Girls, (2025) <https://rights4girls.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/Buyers-Unmasked-02122025.pdf>

<sup>20</sup> 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>.

<sup>21</sup> Id.

<sup>22</sup> New Zealand Ministry of Justice, *Report of the Prostitution Law Committee on the Operation of the Prostitution Reform Act 2003*, 124.

<sup>23</sup> Yasmin Vafa & Nora Hennick, *Buyers Unmasked: Exposing the Men Who Buy Sex & Solutions to End Exploitation*, Rights4Girls, (2025) <https://rights4girls.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/Buyers-Unmasked-02122025.pdf>

<sup>24</sup> Id.

<sup>25</sup> Id.



The true progressive solution is to work toward eliminating this harm and reducing the number of people involved in the sex trade by offering survivors exit services, affordable housing, criminal record relief, and other vital support. Full decriminalization, by contrast, expands the commercial sex market by attracting more buyers and thus drawing more vulnerable people in as the “supply.”

**At a moment of national reckoning over sexual exploitation and abuses of power, brought into sharp focus by cases such as Jeffrey Epstein’s, and amid growing public demand for accountability, we urge you to please vote NO on HB 8057.**

We thank you for the opportunity to weigh in on this important bill. Should 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](mailto:peter@capcomgrp.com)) or Joe Baxter ([jbaxter@capcomgrp.com](mailto:jbaxter@capcomgrp.com)).

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Respectfully,

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