



**Vermont Senate Committee on Judiciary**  
**Written Testimony of**  
**Yasmin Vafa, Executive Director, Rights4Girls**  
**March 18, 2026**

Dear Chairman Hashim, Vice Chair Norris, and Members of the Senate Committee on Judiciary, thank you for taking the time to consider testimony on this important issue. My name is Yasmin Vafa and I am the co-founder and Executive Director of [Rights4Girls](#), a national human rights organization dedicated to defending the rights of young women and girls in the U.S.

At Rights4Girls, we work to end gender-based violence against marginalized young women and girls throughout the United States, including right here in Vermont. Specifically, we work to change the policies that allow women and girls to be criminalized when they experience sexual violence and promote policies that provide survivors with access to safety, justice, and support. We do so through state and federal advocacy, research, and training and technical assistance.

We have also co-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 legal 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 the criminalization of survivors, thus we've worked shoulder to shoulder with sex trade survivors in many states 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.



Where we differ from those testifying before you today, is that we do not believe these protections should be extended to exploiters—mainly sex buyers, third-party profiteers, and other facilitators who profit or benefit from the exploitation of others. Survivors have told us repeatedly that extending such legal protection to these actors would undermine any upper hand they would gain and thus put them further at the mercy of the industry and those with the real power and money.

First, it's critical to note that research consistently shows that the majority of individuals in the sex trade are girls and [women of color while the men who purchase them](#) are overwhelmingly white men of economic means. These acute inequalities are a legacy of our nation's longstanding history of racialized and gender-based violence that stems from colonization and the slave trade, which continues to shape the dynamics of the sex trade today as well as who bears the brunt of our criminal justice response to it. To that end, our organization published a report, [Buyers Unmasked: Exposing the Men Who Buy Sex & Solutions to End Exploitation](#) that analyzed hundreds of posts and conversations from sex buyers taken from online hobby boards—essentially Yelp pages for prostitution—and revealed a culture of dehumanization, indifference, and entitlement that traffickers rely on. The report makes clear that sex buyers are wholly aware and indifferent to overt signs of coercion and desperation in the people they purchase for sexual gratification, as several posts made references to women having “handlers” or “pimps” on the premises or nearby, several not being able to speak English, multiple women being passed out due to addiction, and many living in poverty. At no point do any of the men make attempts to ask if these women need help nor do they seem to care—all just provide info and tips to other sex buyers as if rating a meal at a restaurant.

As one buyer in our report candidly [shared](#), the goal is: “**Find them, f\*\*\* them, forget them.** This is the gold standard for men's spiritual health. **When you see a pig, let it in your car and shoot in it.** It's that simple. It's not rocket science.”

Another buyer from Vermont [stated](#), “**With Monkeypox going on was hesitant about rainbow so tried calling some white girls... she is fat**, not in a well put together way, fat in like a crackhead eating mickey ds and chugging twisted teas 7 days a week kind of thing. **Fat in all the wrong places. Oh and no grabbing, which kind of defeats the purpose of a fat girl.**”

This combination of male entitlement and dehumanization is the invisible engine that drives the sex trafficking market.

One of the key problems with **full decriminalization** (better known as “[decriminalizing sex work](#)”) efforts like those touted by the witnesses testifying today is that it fails to account for the fact that the demand for commercial sex [already outpaces the supply](#). Meaning that there are



already so many (predominantly men) willing to break the law to buy sex today that traffickers already have to resort to coercing and manipulating people to meet the current demand. Imagine what would happen if we were to decriminalize sex-buying? More men would enter the market as new clients— not just from the surrounding area and cities, but via sex tourism, like we observe in Amsterdam and Nevada. How will the commercial sex industry accommodate this sudden and certain surge in demand for paid sex following decriminalization? Through sex trafficking. In fact, Vermont would be creating a new profit motive for traffickers by creating this sharp new spike in demand for commercial sex.

We have evidence of the failures of full decriminalization particularly with respect to how it impacts sex trafficking. New Zealand, a country that is widely regarded as a beacon of full decriminalization by its supporters has been sharply criticized in this regard. First, New Zealand noted a [39% increase](#) in prostitution in just the six months following the passage of its full decriminalization law. In addition, the United States Department of State in its annual ranking of nations and their responses to human trafficking downgraded New Zealand from Tier 1 to Tier 2 status, citing its [failure to meet](#) the minimum standards for eliminating trafficking in several recent annual Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Reports. Specifically, the 2024 TIP Report highlighted 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. Finally, like many other jurisdictions that have normalized prostitution—New Zealand 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.

But we do not have to look abroad for evidence of full decriminalization’s failures—we can look right next door for this data. The only state to have experimented with full decriminalization later [sharply reversed](#) course due to the increases in violence, child sex trafficking, and collateral crime. Rhode Island decriminalized indoor prostitution between 1980-2009. As a result, the state became a regional sex tourism hub with [high rates](#) of sex trafficking, gender violence, and organized crime, prompting the state to revert back and adopt strict laws against the sex trade in 2009. In fact, we in Washington, D.C. have worked with survivors who were trafficked to and from Rhode Island in that period.

During Rhode Island’s 29-year experiment with full decriminalization, the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) [wrote](#) the Governor of Rhode Island to make clear that they were the only state that could not effectively participate in their Innocence Lost Initiative—a multi-state child exploitation recovery operation because their local laws prevented law enforcement from being able to meaningfully participate in the operation:



*"Under current Rhode Island law, commercial sex between adults inside a building is considered a private activity and is thus protected. This deprives Rhode Island law enforcement of the ability to detect whether children are being victimized in this commercial sex trade, to rescue these child victims, and to provide them with the services they so desperately need. Your state's efforts in the fight against child prostitution [sic] would be greatly enhanced if law enforcement were empowered to fully investigate the commercial sex trade."*

Furthermore, investigative reporter Zachary Malinowski documented the impact of Rhode Island's full decriminalization experiment in several articles during this period. He wrote one particularly lengthy article for The Providence Journal about the increase in the number of sex tourists, sex clubs, massage parlors, and bathhouses entitled, "*Sex industry expands at startling pace*" in April 23, 2002 where he described:

*"In recent years, the sex industry has exploded in the city, and a dreary industrial strip along Allens Avenue has become the most densely concentrated red-light district in New England that attracts thousands of out-of-town spenders...Chartered buses pull up to the curb outside the gaudy pink building on Allens Avenue with the flashing police light on the roof. Hundreds of cars pack the lots and side streets. Next door, dozens of pedestrians, almost all men, venture into a windowless warehouse. The visitors, many from Massachusetts and Connecticut, are in pursuit of a common goal: sex."*

Ultimately, we know from listening to survivors and observing the impact of laws in other jurisdictions that in order to effectively respond to the sex trade, we must adopt policies that i) stop punishing victims, ii) clear survivors' records, iii) provide people services and opportunities to exit if they so choose, and iv) shrink the industry by reducing the number of people involved in the sex trade to begin with. [The Survivor Model](#), which solely decriminalizes those who sell sex accomplishes all of these goals and more. By contrast, we know that full decriminalization policies do the opposite. They greatly *expand* the sex industry, invite more men in as new clients spiking the demand for paid sex, and grow sex trafficking, putting more marginalized people, including youth, in harm's way.

At a moment when the country is engaged in a broader reckoning around sexual exploitation and abuse of power, highlighted by cases such as Jeffrey Epstein's, there have been growing calls for accountability for powerful or privileged men who exploit vulnerable young women. We hope that in the future the committee will feature voices that understand the importance of holding accountable those actors instead of solely featuring those advocating for the removal of criminal accountability for sex buyers and those who profit from the trade, given how these dynamics can facilitate trafficking.



We thank you for taking the time to examine this important issue and allow our written testimony. We are happy to answer any questions you may have at [yasmin@rights4girls.org](mailto:yasmin@rights4girls.org) or 202-670-0695.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "YV", is positioned above the typed name.

Yasmin Vafa, Esq.  
Executive Director, Rights4Girls