

## **Maryland Senate Education, Energy, and Environment Committee**

Senate Bill 588, "Fairness in Girls' Sports Act"

Position: Favorable

March 5, 2025

Dear Member of the Education, Energy, and Environment Committee,

My name is Riley Gaines, and I am an Ambassador for Independent Women. I urge you to pass Senate Bill 588 and include protections for women's college athletics.

Prior to joining Independent Women, I was a student at the University of Kentucky where I was a member of UK's Women's Swim and Dive Team. I proudly finished my career as a 12x NCAA All-American, 5x SEC champion, SEC record holder in the 200 butterfly making me the 10th fastest American of all time in the event, and 2x Olympic trial qualifier.

Many of you know my story. On March 17th, 2022, my teammates and I, as well as female swimmers from universities around the country, were forced to compete against a male named Lia Thomas. Thomas was allowed to compete in the women's division after competing as a member of the University of Pennsylvania Men's Swim Team for three years. We watched on the side of the pool as Thomas swam to a national title in the 500-yard freestyle, beating out the most impressive and accomplished female swimmers in the country, including Olympians and American record holders. (Previously, Thomas had been ranked in the 400ths—at best—in the men's division.)

When I raced Thomas in the 200-yard freestyle, we tied. We ended up with the same time—down to the hundredth of a second. Having only one trophy, the NCAA handed it to Thomas and told me I would go home empty-handed because Thomas needed to hold the trophy for photo purposes. I was shocked. I felt betrayed and belittled, reduced to a photo-op. But my feelings did not matter. What mattered to the NCAA were the feelings of a male.

I can attest to the tears that I witnessed from finishers who missed being named an All-American by one place. I can attest to the extreme discomfort in the locker room from 18-year-old girls exposed to male body parts and having to undress with a male watching in the same room. I can attest to the anger and frustration expressed by girls who had worked so hard and

sacrificed so much to get to this moment, only to have to compete in what felt like a farce. And I can attest to the fact that, around the country, female athletes who protested the inclusion of Lia Thomas in the women's division were threatened, intimidated, and emotionally blackmailed into silence and submission.

By allowing Thomas to join the women's swim team and compete in women's collegiate meets, the University of Pennsylvania, the Ivy League, and the colleges and universities that hosted Thomas at these meets prevented other women from competing at all, subjected female swimmers to a loss of privacy and dignity, inflicted emotional harm on female swimmers, and suppressed the free speech rights of female students to advocate for their rights.

***Unfortunately, my story and the experiences of D1 swimmers are not unique. Across the country, and across various sports, female athletes, particularly at the college and high school level, are losing not only awards but opportunities to compete at all. Over 800 females have been displaced by males competing in women's sporting events.***

By passing Senate Bill 588 you ensure that this same harm does not happen to the females competing in high school varsity and junior varsity girls' sports, and these same protections are needed at the collegiate level as well.

Those who advocate for males in women's sports often speak about "compassion" and "inclusion." In and of themselves, these are important virtues, but let me be clear, it is not "compassionate" to force a young woman to undress in front of a naked man. It's not "inclusive" to ask girls to smile and step aside so that males can take their podium spots.

***Schools must not be allowed to continue discriminating against female athletes. And where they have discriminated, they must be held accountable.***

Allowing males to compete in women's sports is unfair to women, who have fought for their spot on their team and for the opportunity to compete on the junior varsity or varsity level. And it is unfair because of the stark, athletic differences between men and women, where the severity of potential injury at the hands of a male athlete is immense, and where opportunities and resources for women are already extremely scarce.

***Maryland currently has no protections for women's sports. This bill is a step in the right direction for ensuring female opportunities, rights, and***

***safety are a priority. I hope you join the other 26 states that have some protections for women's sports.***

I urge you to pass Senate Bill 588 on behalf of the over 3 million women and girls in Maryland and consider including collegiate sports.

Thank you.