

Nair Views: Gay Immigration (and) Inequality

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by Yasmin Nair

What does immigration mean for queers? A heterosexual U.S. citizen/permanent resident (c/pr) can sponsor a spouse for immigration; a queer U.S. c/pr can't sponsor a partner. The Uniting American Families Act (UAFA) seeks to reverse this by substituting the phrase "permanent partner" wherever the word "spouse" appears in the Immigration and Nationality Act.

UAFA's heavily supported by groups like Immigration Equality (IE) and Out 4 Immigration (O4I) , even though it's not part of a comprehensive immigration reform agenda and is meaningless for undocumented partners.

In February, Queers for Economic Justice (QEJ) released "Queers and Immigration: A Vision Statement." I worked on it with Debanuj DasGupta, QEJ's immigration policy analyst and others, including an IE staff member. Among other things, the statement connects the issues of LGBTQ immigrants, documented and undocumented, to the exploitation of labor that led to the immigration crisis. After a series of intense discussions, language about families and UAFA was included in order to reflect the different groups working on the document. It was sent to a wider group of organizations; over 50 groups signed on but O4I did not. (**Interestingly, the Human Rights Campaign and the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force did not, either.**) To our surprise, IE first signed then took its name off at a very late stage.

Why did two major gay immigration groups not sign on to this document? Why do they support UAFA but not a statement that situates queer immigrant issues in a larger framework of, well, immigration? In trying to answer these questions I interviewed some key people, including Michael Lim at O4I. IE's staff member did not respond to a request for an interview.

UAFA's supporters emphasize "family reunification," long a cornerstone of U.S. immigration law. But recent Republican immigration reform proposals favor a merit-based system and would greatly diminish the extent to which immigrants can sponsor family members. Democrats now accuse their opposition of lacking family values.

But is "family" necessarily part of a progressive reform agenda? DasGupta, explaining why QEJ never originally focused on family or the UAFA, points out that the emphasis on families benefits a neoliberal free-market based economy, where the responsibility for essentials like healthcare is shifted from the state to individuals. Indeed, immigration rights advocates often separate the family from the dynamics of labor.

Media coverage of "the immigrant family" portrays nurturing environments filled with the scent of home-cooked food and the love of extended family. This ignores patterns of domestic violence and incest within families (immigrant or not) and ignores the violence from deportation units.

Ignoring such realities, UAFA's supporters position the interests of bi-national couples in opposition to immigrants, prioritizing the needs of U.S. citizens. O4I quotes an American veteran, Jim Carrozo, who asks emphatically, "Why should I, a gay U.S. citizen with a foreign partner be forced to leave my country ... while immigration reform would allow NON-U.S. citizens to come here?" [O4I Web site emphasis]

Perhaps UAFA's supporters are just focused on a single issue. According to Lim, O4I's board felt that there was too much in the vision statement that did not speak to the interest of queers. But surely it's possible to have a more expansive sense of justice. Marta Donayre, co-founder of Love Sees No Borders and a co-writer on the QEJ statement, criticizes the narrow focus of gay immigrant groups and the fact that "[a] n imigrant is considered ... only when an appendage of [an] American citizen." Donayre is herself in a bi-national relationship, but her kind of critique is rarely heard from groups like IE or O4I.

The gay rights movement ignores the real meaning of inequality. Lim echoed a prevalent statement, "What differentiates LGBT people from non-LGBTs is ... our sexual or gender identity. ... There's plenty of injustice to go around, but that does not go part and parcel with the inequality of LGBT people." Economic inequality is ignored while the "inequality of LGBT people" becomes a way to gain privilege for U.S. citizens. But why should spouses/partners should be given immigration priority in the first place?

Positioning UAFA as the penultimate issue for gay immigrants depoliticizes the most political issue of the day. It's clear that groups like IE and O4I actually see the bill as a vision statement, an affirmation of cozy gay family life. Conversely, they acted as if the QEJ vision statement was a binding piece of legislation.

Ultimately, the issue isn't about which groups have signed on, but about what the dissent over signing on indicates about gay immigration politics. In all the brouhaha over UAFA, one salient fact has been ignored: The two prominent groups advocating for it are not predominantly immigrant groups. Their constituents are American citizens whose interest in immigration lies solely in the fact that their partners happen to be immigrants.

Gay groups shouldn't call themselves pro-immigration groups if they're primarily interested in furthering the interests of American citizens. As one fed-up immigration organizer said to me, "They've got to realize that this is about the needs and issues of all immigrants, not just the immigrants they fuck."

Yasmin Nair is a member of QEJ's Project Advisory Committee on immigration and CLIA (Chicago LGBTQ Immigrant Alliance) , which will hold its second town hall on June 12 at Acme Art Works, 1741 N. Western, at 6-8 p.m. See www.latinospro.org .