



# Whose Families Do We Truly Value?

## Why Protecting LGBT Workers is a Family Value

By Danielle Moodie-Mills    February 4, 2014

Conservatives have long lauded marriage as the silver bullet for any economic disadvantage an individual or family may face.<sup>1</sup> Living at the poverty level? Get hitched. Need health insurance? Get hitched. We know that marriage alone will not cure the economic insecurity that only sound policy solutions can address.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, such rhetoric suggests that family values are one-dimensional and reserved for households comprised of one mother and one father. While in reality we know that modern families are diverse with single parents, grandparents, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender, or LGBT, parents raising children. Yet our nation's current family and employment policies don't recognize all American families, which gives rise to the question: Whose families do we really value?

The late Bayard Rustin, the March on Washington strategist, once said, "The barometer for social change is measured by selecting the group that is most mistreated."<sup>3</sup> The implication is that public policy should lift all boats, especially for those who are the most economically insecure.

By these metrics, African American lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender individuals and their families—who bear the brunt of both systemic racism and homophobia and are the most economically vulnerable among us—are in most urgent need of smart policy solutions to strengthen their families.

A recent Williams Institute study, "LGBT African Americans and African American Same-Sex Couples,"<sup>4</sup> highlights a number of startling key findings from the 2010 Census:

- African American LGBT individuals, as well as those in couples, have higher rates of unemployment than those in different-sex couple households—15 percent unemployment versus 12 percent for individuals, and 9 percent unemployment versus 7 percent for couples.
- Thirty-four percent of African American same-sex couples are raising children, a parenting rate more than double that of white same-sex couples.

- African American same-sex couples have poverty rates twice the rate of different-sex married African Americans.
- African American female same-sex couples report having household median incomes that are \$20,000 less than African American male same-sex households.
- African American same-sex couples raising children report household median incomes that are \$15,000 lower than comparable African American different-sex couples—\$47,300 versus \$63,020.
- African American same-sex couples are less likely to have health insurance coverage for both partners than different-sex couples.

The above set of data illuminates the immediate need for workplace protections that would strengthen the lives of LGBT African Americans, moving them and their families from poverty to prosperity.

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### Workplace discrimination is worse for black LGBT people

Contrary to the pervasive myth of gay affluence, the African American contingent of the LGBT community is living in or on the brink of poverty. Current unemployment numbers for the nation as a whole are now hovering below 8 percent unemployment, but African American unemployment rates stubbornly remain at 12 percent.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, bias and discrimination coupled with the lack of federal protections for LGBT workers makes this harsh reality even starker for African American LGBT workers, who face unemployment rates of 15 percent.<sup>6</sup>

A recently released Center for American Progress issue brief, “Lessons from Bayard Rustin: Why Economic Justice is an LGBT Issue,”<sup>7</sup> argues:

*Ongoing discrimination against LGBT workers leaves them economically vulnerable and makes it difficult for them to financially provide for their families ... Black LGBT people in particular lag behind in multiple areas of economic security due to the heightened vulnerability that stems from race-based and anti-LGBT discrimination and stigma.*

The Senate made history this past November, voting overwhelmingly (64–32) to pass the Employment Non-Discrimination Act, or ENDA, which would extend workplace protections to LGBT Americans.<sup>8</sup> But Speaker of the House John Boehner (R-OH) has made it very clear that protecting the ability of LGBT people to work without the fear of being fired is not a part of his or the Republican-led House’s agenda. When speaking about ENDA, Boehner said:

*I am opposed to discrimination of any kind in the workplace or anyplace else, but I think this legislation ... is unnecessary and would provide a basis for frivolous lawsuits, people are already protected in the workplace.<sup>9</sup>*

This could not be any further from the truth. LGBT people are not protected in the workplace, and without these protections, it is perfectly legal for a worker to be discriminated against and fired based on her or his perceived or actual sexual orientation or gender identity. It is a totally unacceptable situation that not only leaves these individuals vulnerable but their families as well.

Without a federal law, protection diverges significantly between states, as stated in “Lessons from Bayard Rustin”: “The patchwork of nondiscrimination laws that does exist provides protections for LGBT workers in some states while leaving those in other states vulnerable.”<sup>10</sup>

What makes this observation even more onerous for African American LGBT people is that most of them also live in southern states, where there are no LGBT-worker protection laws.<sup>11</sup> In order to protect African American LGBT families, the House should pass ENDA and make discrimination in the workplace illegal for this most vulnerable population.

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## Lesbian, bisexual, and transgender women living on the brink

One of the first acts President Barack Obama signed into law was the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act, which allows a woman to sue for pay equity regardless of the lapse in time of her employment. While this was a huge step for gender equality, women who identify as lesbian, bisexual, and transgender, or LBT, are far from equal to their heterosexual female peers.

According to “A Broken Bargain,”<sup>12</sup> a joint report by CAP, the Movement Advancement Project, and the Human Rights Campaign:

*Two women—even if they individually earn more than comparable heterosexual women—may still have a combined household income that is lower than that of a married different-sex couple because both earners’ wages are affected by the gender wage gap. This “double-gap” multiplier means less money for the entire family every year and fewer resources to save for retirement.*

One’s gender and sexual orientation or gender identity should not constitute an individual’s ability to thrive economically and support one’s family. The ability to thrive financially and adequately provide for one’s family is compromised even more for African American LBT women. The Center for American Progress’s “Jumping Beyond the Broom”<sup>13</sup> report revealed that black lesbian couples were five times as likely to be liv-

ing in poverty than white lesbian couples. What's more, transgender women of all races face double the rate of unemployment as the general population and higher rates of job discrimination. Additionally, they are living in extreme poverty, as they are four times more likely to have a household income of less than \$10,000 per year.<sup>14</sup>

In his recent State of the Union address last Tuesday, President Obama proclaimed that no one should work 40 hours a week and still remain in poverty. The president declared “it’s time to give America a raise.”<sup>15</sup> In light of the stark economic realities facing African American LGBT people—individuals who are working hard to make ends meet for themselves and their families—how can anyone disagree? How can anyone say that it’s acceptable for someone to live well below the poverty line simply because of whom they love or because of their perceived or actual gender identity?

Not only do African American LGBT people need a raise, they also need the security of knowing that their hard work won’t be rewarded with a pink slip because of our government’s refusal to protect all workers from discrimination. When we protect each and every worker, we boost the security of all families—and that is key to the true promotion of family values. It is time to move beyond rhetoric and toward responsible family policies for all Americans.

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## Endnotes

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