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Windy City Times

Forum focuses on LGBTs and immigration

Extended for the Online Edition

by Amy Wooten

2008-05-07

During the week of the large immigration march downtown, members of the community gathered at the Center on Halsted, 3656 N. Halsted, to discuss the many ways LGBT and immigration issues intersect.

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Pictured: Bill Greaves and Kim Edwards listen to youth at the April 29 gathering. Photo by Yasmin Nair

At the April 30 Immigration at the Margins conference, members of various aspects of the LGBT community touched on just a small number of ways immigration issues impact the LGBT community, from corner day workers and sex workers to domestic violence.

"A lot of us are part of many worlds—queer, immigrants and more," said community activist and Windy City Times writer Yasmin Nair. "A lot of us have to deal with immigration."

During a two-hour discussion, conference participants tried to shed light on issues complicated by immigration issues.

Jessica Acee, a coordinator of the Latino Union's Albany Park Workers' Center, spoke about the issues Chicago immigrant day laborers face each day, such as health and safety abuses; wage theft; and police abuse. Given a "20-year onslaught of the far right," Acee said, it's important to also talk about issues like racism, sexism and heterosexism in order to better and fully understand the framework.

Sex work and immigration was another topic widely discussed during the afternoon plenary session. Young Women's Empowerment Project co-director Shira Hassan discussed the issues Chicago girls and women in the sex trade face each day.

"It's always intersecting," Hassan said of both sex trade and immigration issues. "But it's only in the past year people have been frothing at the mouth about the sex trade and immigration," she added.

YWEP has seen both documented and undocumented women in the



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sex trade suffer a variety of problems, such as being threatened with arrest and deportation from law enforcement. Other issues include the problems gender non-conforming sex workers face because their documents may not match how they appear. Hassan also discussed how broad and ever-changing trafficking laws have caused massive problems for immigrants involved in the sex trade.

Chicago Metropolitan Battered Women's Network policy advocate Angelica Jimenez shed light on domestic violence issues immigrants face. Many laws, she said, don't focus on what the needs really are, and fail to truly help many people, including LGBT folks.

One of the most important highlights of the session was the demand that the immigrant and LGBT communities learn more about each other's experiences and find ways in which these experiences intersect and connect.

"These two communities need to know about each others experience," said Radio Arte's Tania Unzueta. After all, they have much more in common than they might think. For example, while sharing her own personal experience with being a part of two highly marginalized communities, Unzueta said that she "came out" as an immigrant before she came out of the closet.

But in order to share these similar experiences, a space is needed where people feel comfortable, Unzueta suggested.

"It's often very hard to find a place where you feel comfortable when you are part of various stigmatized communities," Unzueta said. Stigmatized communities often make their own priorities, and "those who identify as both are often left out," she added.

Many present agreed that not only should more discussion be had, but also various stigmatized communities need to work together and tackle ways in which everyone is oppressed.

Another solution brought up several times during the conversation was the need for alternatives other than the law while the law fails to assist immigrants.

"It's almost impossible to access the law," Hassan said of immigrant sex workers. Meanwhile, many sex workers fare better by finding community alternatives to ease their needs, such as healthcare and housing.

Jimenez agreed, pointing out that the Violence Against Women Act only protects those who are married to their abuser, leaving out protections for same-sex couples.

"This might be an issue of taking a step outside of that framework and finding sources and solutions outside of the law," Jimenez said.

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