



Lessons from Bayard Rustin

Why Economic Justice Is an LGBT Issue

By Aisha C. Moodie-Mills and Preston Mitchum August 23, 2013

Introduction

“One has to fight for justice for all. If I do not fight bigotry wherever it is, bigotry is thereby strengthened. And to the degree that it is strengthened, it will thereby have the power to turn on me.”¹ – Bayard Rustin

Most Americans who have heard of Bayard Rustin know him by the historical taboo of his identity—that he was both black and gay—and as the man who orchestrated the landmark 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, more popularly known as the March on Washington. But the individual behind these labels was so much more complex, and his impact within and beyond the civil rights movement was much more profound than this description suggests.

The radical nature of Rustin cannot be underscored enough. To be a not-so-closeted gay man and thrive in the conservative upper echelons of black society during the 1930s, ‘40s, ‘50s, and ‘60s was indeed remarkable. His lifetime of navigating race and sexuality—his “time on two crosses,” as coined by George Chauncey Jr. in his interview with Rustin just before his death in 1987²—is iconic for LGBT people of color today, who find inspiration in his story as they wrestle with many of the same cultural and political dichotomies that he faced.

Rustin’s identity undoubtedly shaped his worldview, his political and policy positions, and his fundamental belief in the solidarity of struggle for equal civil and human rights for all oppressed people, be they poor, black, Jewish, Hispanic, or gay. But the popular fixation with his identity alone runs the risk of eclipsing the significance of his policy contributions.

First and foremost, Bayard Rustin was one of the most profound thought leaders of his day, shaping movement-building strategies and ideas on nonviolent protest, economic justice, civil rights, gender equity, and LGBT equality that are foundational to today's progressive agenda.³ He not only acted as the strategist who organized the March on Washington, but he also played a key role in developing the policy agenda presented at the march that ultimately transformed the nation's civil rights, labor rights, and education and housing policies—and put in place the equal-opportunity and nondiscrimination laws that we have today.⁴ Most crucially, economic justice was a central theme of the March on Washington, as Rustin and Cleveland Robinson, chairman of the Administrative Committee, understood that there could be no true equality in the face of economic deprivation.

"We march to redress old grievances and to help resolve an American crisis. That crisis is born of the twin evils of racism and economic deprivation. They rob all people, Negro and white, of dignity, self-respect, and freedom."⁵ – Bayard Rustin, Organizing Manual No. 2, March on Washington, 1963

It is this lesson and its impact on LGBT people of color that we explore here. We commemorate the 50th anniversary of the March on Washington by uplifting some of the political ideas and calls to action of the man behind the march that are still instructive today. Specifically, we turn a critical eye on the economic security—or lack thereof—of the black LGBT community to which Rustin belonged, analyze where we are now as a community, and discuss what we must do going forward to continue to realize his dream. While we focus on the black LGBT community, we are mindful that economic justice is also a critical theme for the LGBT movement overall.

LGBT people are economically vulnerable

"The barometer for social change is measured by selecting the group that is most mistreated."⁶ – Bayard Rustin, in a speech delivered to the Philadelphia chapter of Black and White Men Together, March 1986

As an organizer and advocate, Bayard Rustin focused on labor and working conditions, universal human rights, and upward mobility—three principles that became calls to action of the March on Washington. The eradication of economic degradation was a key goal of the march, as Rustin and the other organizers believed that economic freedom was foundational to achieving justice and liberty for all. This remains true today for both the black and LGBT communities.

Contrary to the myth of gay affluence, the LGBT community is economically insecure. After controlling for other factors known to influence the likelihood of being in poverty, same-sex couples and LGBT people are more likely than their non-LGBT counterparts to be poor.⁷ Within the LGBT community, women, couples with children, and black LGBT people have been shown to be particularly vulnerable. Women in same-sex couples, for example, are nearly twice as likely as married different-sex couples to be among the working poor.⁸

Ongoing discrimination against LGBT workers leaves them economically vulnerable and makes it difficult for them to financially provide for their families.⁹ Almost one in four children living with a male same-sex couple and 19.2 percent of children living with a female same-sex couple are in poverty, compared to 12.1 percent of children living with married different-sex couples.¹⁰ Furthermore, 14.1 percent of lesbian couples and 7.7 percent of gay male couples receive assistance from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP, formerly known as food stamps, compared to 6.5 percent of different-sex married couples.¹¹

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. Rustin believed that “the barometer for social change is measured by selecting the group which is most mistreated,” or the most vulnerable among us, which in this case is the black LGBT community.

Let’s examine why this community fairs worse by almost every economic indicator, including actual wages, poverty, and educational outcomes, and consider what needs to be done to create economic stability.

Workplace protections and wage disparities

In the final call to action of the March on Washington, the organizers proposed “a federal Fair Employment Act barring discrimination by federal, state, and municipal governments, and by employers, contractors, employment agencies, and trade unions.”¹² Although equal-opportunity and nondiscrimination laws were established to protect workers from discrimination based on race, religion, gender, and disability, no federal laws currently exist that explicitly protect LGBT workers from similar discrimination based on their sexual orientation or gender identity.

The absence of these protections means that it is perfectly legal to fire a worker simply based on an employer's assumptions about the worker's real or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity. Research shows that black LGBT people are at the greatest risk of being the last hired and first fired as a result.¹³ According to the Williams Institute, 42 percent of black LGBT community members reported having experienced discrimination and prejudice during the hiring and firing process.¹⁴ Furthermore, despite similar employment experiences, black LGBT applicants are less likely than white LGBT candidates to be invited to job interviews.¹⁵

The patchwork of nondiscrimination laws that does exist provides protections for LGBT workers in some states while leaving those in other states vulnerable. To make the point, 29 states do not have laws on their books to protect lesbian, gay, and bisexual workers based on sexual orientation, and 33 states lack legal protections for transgender workers.¹⁶

What's more, once employed, black LGBT workers still earn less than their heterosexual and white counterparts. Black same-sex male couples, for example, earn approximately \$20,000 less than white same-sex male couples—\$41,500 annually compared to \$63,500 annually. In addition, black lesbian couples earn \$10,000 less per year than their black heterosexual married counterparts.¹⁷

Job insecurity and wage disparities not only make it difficult for LGBT workers to provide financially stable homes for their families, but they also lead to sporadic health insurance coverage, inadequate housing, and increased economic insecurity.¹⁸

Rustin saw the stability of the American workforce for all workers as critical to achieving equality for the most marginalized groups, and this holds true today. We can begin to address the workplace discrimination and wage disparities facing the LGBT community by taking the following steps:

- Passing the Employment Non-Discrimination Act, or ENDA, a comprehensive federal law that provides employment protections to LGBT workers
- Issuing an executive order prohibiting federal contractors from discrimination against LGBT employees¹⁹
- Enacting laws on the state and municipal level that protect LGBT workers in the absence of these measures at the federal level. States with employment protections for LGBT people have lower rates of poverty for all couples—both same- and different-sex couples—than states without such laws, suggesting a positive association between supporting LGBT workers and greater economic security²⁰
- Advancing policies that address structural issues that perpetuate economic disparities and unemployment within the black community in general

Poverty

Rustin saw poverty as one of the greatest threats to the larger struggle for human rights and individual freedoms.²¹ Despite the enormous progress made over the past 50 years, those in the black community still face severe economic challenges and fewer opportunities in comparison to their white counterparts. This economic vulnerability is exacerbated for LGBT members of the community.²² Still, years after America has begun its rebound from the Great Recession, the black LGBT community is slow to recover and continues to be greatly affected by increasing economic disparities.²³

It's important to note that this population is not insignificant in number. The LGBT community is economically and racially diverse despite media depictions of LGBT families as financially secure and predominately white. In fact, a 2012 Gallup poll revealed that nonwhites were more likely than their white counterparts to identify as LGBT, with African Americans topping the chart as the racial and/or ethnic group most likely to identify as LGBT.²⁴

This security in their identity as LGBT people does not make them immune to the effects of bias and discrimination. Black LGBT people are more likely to be living in poverty than their peers, and black same-sex couples have poverty rates at least twice the rate of black different-sex married couples.²⁵ Black men in same-sex relationships are more than six times as likely to be in poverty than white men in same-sex couples—18.8 percent to 3.1 percent, respectively—and black women in same-sex relationships are three times more likely to be poor than white women in same-sex relationships—17.9 percent to 5.1 percent, respectively.

Recent data also show that black same-sex couples are more likely to have children and be raising those children in poverty.²⁶ According to the U.S. Census Bureau's 2010 American Community Survey, approximately 32.9 percent of black male same-sex couples raise children, compared to just 6.2 percent of white male same-sex couples, and 46.7 percent of black female same-sex couples raise children, compared to 23.1 percent of white female same-sex couples.²⁷

Generally, children in households headed by same-sex couples have higher rates of poverty than those in households headed by different-sex couples. Consider for a moment that 23.4 percent of children living with male same-sex couples and 19.2 percent of children living with female same-sex couples are poor, compared to 12.1 percent of children living with different-sex couples.²⁸

Antiquated family policies that assume families are monolithic nuclear structures headed by two different-sex parents ignore the reality of the diversity of families that exists within both the black and LGBT communities. The black family has historically been nontraditional, with children being cared for by extended families of grandparents, aunts, uncles, and other so-called kin. Rustin, as well as one of the authors of this brief, was raised by his grandparents. Similarly, LGBT families may consist of nonbiological parents, LGBT parents, and those who are married or not.

The lack of legal recognition of these families makes it more difficult for them to safeguard their children and contributes to their economic vulnerability. LGBT families, for example, are more likely to need government assistance than different-sex households, and same-sex couples are more likely to receive government support via SNAP, with 7.7 percent of male same-sex couples and 14.1 percent of female same-sex couples receiving SNAP benefits, compared to 6.5 percent of different-sex couples.²⁹

The following measures would modernize and equalize family policies for all families, especially those headed by LGBT parents:

- Comprehensive parental-recognition laws at the state level that would fully protect children in LGBT families
- State-based, neutral parental-presumption laws with respect to sexual orientation and marital status
- Revised requirements, definitions, and priorities for the Temporary Aid for Needy Families program, or TANF, that reflect today's families

Educational outcomes

Equal education for black students was also a central tenant of the March on Washington.³⁰ Fifty years later, however, opportunity gaps continue to be a critical civil rights issue. Moreover, the research suggests that educational outcomes are further depressed for black LGBT youth largely as a consequence of hostile school climates that allow, among other unequal treatment, bullying and harassment, which push them out of schools and disproportionately pipeline them into the juvenile justice system.³¹

The correlation between harassment and LGBT absenteeism is alarming. According to Mental Health America, an organization dedicated to helping Americans live mentally healthier lives, 28 percent of LGBT students will drop out before finishing high school—more than three times the national average of heterosexual students.³² The Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network, or GLSEN, found a direct correlation between students' concern for safety and school attendance: 33 percent of LGBT students missed classes or entire days of school in the month preceding the survey because they felt unsafe in school.³³

Black LGBT youth also report truancy as a means of escaping unwelcoming school climates. About a quarter of black LGBT youth have missed at least one full day of school in the past month because they felt unsafe or uncomfortable, compared to just 6.3 percent of all black youth and 3.5 percent of all white youth.³⁴

GLSEN also found that black LGBT youth who report harassment in school earn grade-point averages a full half-point lower than students who do not experience harassment, which likely contributes to the much lower rates of college matriculation this group reports.³⁵

Studies further show that LGBT youth are disciplined more harshly than their classmates for similar behavior, and that zero-tolerance policies disproportionately push them out of their classrooms and into the arms of law enforcement for minor offenses and noncriminal behavior.³⁶ Gender-nonconforming youth, as well as black and Latino LGBT youth, are more likely to be caught up in the so-called school-to-prison pipeline, which can derail their ability to secure stable employment later in life.³⁷

Hostile school climates and discipline policies compound the poor outcomes that many black youth already experience.³⁸ The following actions would help enhance the school environment for all youth, and LGBT youth in particular:

- Passage of the Student Non-Discrimination Act, or SNDA, which would prohibit public schools from discriminating against any student on the basis of actual or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity³⁹
- Passage of the Safe Schools Improvement Act, which amends the Elementary and Secondary Education Act to require public schools receiving federal funding to adopt anti-bullying policies that explicitly include LGBT students
- Enaction of school discipline reform that includes a focus on reducing the disparate impact of these policies on LGBT youth

Race-based inequality hurts everyone

“No group is ultimately safe from prejudice, bigotry, and harassment so long as any group is subject to special negative treatment.”⁴⁰ – Bayard Rustin, statement on proposed amendments to the New York City gay rights law, which bans discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, 1987

While both the black and LGBT communities have made substantial civil and equal rights gains over the past 50 years, there are still members of both communities who are black and LGBT who have yet to realize equal access and opportunity under the law.

Surely the LGBT-specific policy priorities outlined above will go a long way toward tackling the disparities this community experiences, but it is institutionalized racism and structural inequalities that stifle educational and economic progress for the black community overall that are most burdensome.

Anti-bullying legislation will not boost educational outcomes if the school-to-prison pipeline persists. Workplace nondiscrimination policies fall flat in the face of alarmingly high rates of black unemployment. And expanded family recognition, marriage equality or otherwise, hardly offers an immediate reprieve from the daily despair of poverty. It is also essential, therefore, that we work beyond the silos of an LGBT agenda to tackle the broader societal issues of racial and economic justice.

“The most important thing I have to say is that they should try to build coalitions of people for the elimination of all injustice. Because if we want to do away with the injustice to gays it will not be done because we get rid of the injustice to gays. It will be done because we are forwarding the effort for the elimination of injustice for all.”⁴¹ – Bayard Rustin, “Brother to Brother,” an interview with Joseph Beam, 1986

This is not to suggest that the economic vulnerabilities that lie at the intersection of identities should be ignored. But real progress can be gained by mobilizing around the lessons learned through the dual experiences of Rustin to spark collaborative action—of blacks and non-blacks, LGBT people and those who are not LGBT, and allies—to enact new laws and policies that are central to an economic-justice agenda.

Deliberative action is needed, not in the name of mere solidarity with one movement or another but with shared purpose and strategic clarity firmly grounded in the truth that injustice anywhere is indeed a threat to justice everywhere. Doing so will put us one step closer to achieving the March on Washington’s objectives of eradicating economic degradation for all.

Conclusion

Economic parity and anti-discrimination are at the heart of all of the priorities of the LGBT equality movement, just as they were foundational to the agenda of the March on Washington 50 years ago. Employment nondiscrimination clauses, anti-bullying measures, health care expansion, marriage equality, and even immigration reform are essential to ensuring that LGBT people have equal opportunity and access to establish healthy, stable, and secure lives.

Simply put, LGBT equality is in fact a measure of economic justice, and economic security is thereby critical to LGBT equality. This is one of the greatest lessons of Rustin's legacy.

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Endnotes

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