



Posted on Mon, Apr. 25, 2011

## Women driving opposition to immigration bill

By NOELLE PHILLIPS

[nophillips@thestate.com](mailto:nophillips@thestate.com)

As dusk settled across the State House grounds on a recent Wednesday night, scores of people opposed to South Carolina's latest immigration bill gathered for a candlelight prayer vigil.

The crowd of more than 280 people was filled with women and children. A female Methodist minister led the vigil. And of the 11 people who read Bible verses in English and Spanish, seven were female.

As the S.C. General Assembly has considered the bill during the past year, the opposition to it has been steady and strong.

And it has been driven by women.

The arguments against the bill have focused on religious values, human rights concerns and civil rights issues — all issues that women are more likely to be involved in, experts say.

"I suspect it's because women are more compassionate, more women than men are involved in social services and therefore see the needs of the Latino community, and women tend to be more active in church work, and churches are among the groups opposing the bill," said Elaine Lacy, a professor at USC-Aiken who has done extensive research on Latinos in South Carolina.

The bill, which is under consideration by a House judiciary subcommittee, would create an Illegal Immigration Enforcement Unit that would operate statewide under the supervision of the S.C. Department of Public Safety. The House is expected to take up the issue this week.

The Senate already has set aside \$1.3 million in its proposed budget to start up the 12-member unit and outfit it with cars and other equipment. The bill also would require all police officers to check the residency status of anyone they suspect is an illegal immigrant.

The bill specifically outlaws racial profiling as a reason to check documents. But the bill's opponents have argued that it nonetheless will encourage it and further alienate Hispanics in South Carolina.

Anna Walton, a USC graduate student, is one of those who got involved through her social services work.

Walton came face to face with immigrants while working with a campus Latino health coalition. She learned more about their cultures and why they immigrated to the United States.



Zoe Reyes, 13, rests her head on her mother, Felicitas Reyes, during a prayer vigil Wednesday at the State House. The bill has passed the Senate and is being considered by the South Carolina House. It would allow law enforcement officials to check the legal status of anyone they stop.

- Tracy Glantz /The State

She also realized how offended they were by an anti-immigrant movement in South Carolina that seemed to focus on Hispanics.

The defining moment of her experience came when she was helping with a grant application and received a scolding when she used the term “illegal immigrants” on the form.

“Someone said, ‘You shouldn’t say ‘illegal immigrant,’ because that terminology is fraught with hatred and discrimination,” she said. “It was a path of self-discovery for me.”

Walton began understanding the immigration issue from another perspective. Since then, she has founded a campus organization, Students Allied for Better Immigration Opportunities, to educate other students about the issue.

She has testified three times before legislative panels to urge lawmakers to abandon the bill.

“It’s amazing how much inaccurate information is out there,” Walton said. “I saw how close-minded people were and how ignorant of the facts they were. We’re in the next stage of the Civil Rights movement, and I wanted to be a part of it.”

It’s not that men are not involved. A few have spoken against the issue, and they belong to groups such as the S.C. Coalition for Immigrants Rights, said Tammy Besherse, a lawyer with the S.C. Appleseed Legal Justice Center, which also works with the coalition.

Often, the legislative hearings are during the day, when the group’s male members have to work, Besherse said.

“Sometimes, they take weird lunch breaks and come out to speak, but even then they may not get called before they have to back to work,” she said.

Besherse also had an example of more women speaking out for immigrants’ rights during off hours.

Her coalition is building a website and has sought volunteers to record video testimonials as to why they oppose the immigration bill. So far, they’ve filmed eight videos, and five were women, she said.

“We were watching them, and someone said, ‘Why are they all women?’” Besherse said. “We’re going to reach out to some other men.”

Myriam Torres, director of USC’s Consortium for Latino Immigration Studies, said the latest S.C. bill is a threat to families, because its aim is to deport undocumented immigrants. That will result in split families, especially since many Latino families are a mix of people with and without legal status.

“It is an issue for women,” Torres said.

Amanda Jackson, Columbia field director for Church World Service, a nonprofit that works with immigrants, said she knew several women who came to the prayer vigil because their husbands have been deported.

“Women are left to be the two-headed leader of their homes,” Jackson said.

The people speaking out — ministers, social workers, retired teachers — have worked with immigrants.

“Those people who are talking have seen the face of immigrants, and it’s not in the abstract,” Torres said.

Torres said she hopes the male-dominated legislature is listening and considering the merits of a faith-based, human rights opposition to the bill.

Jackson noted that the bill originated in the Senate, which does not have any female members.

“People always say make it an economic issue, because that’s what the legislators care about,” Torres said. “I don’t believe that they don’t care about the human consequences of this.”

*Reach Phillips at (803) 771-8307.*

© 2011 TheState.com and wire service sources. All Rights Reserved. <http://www.thestate.com>