



IT'S A WAGE SHORTAGE, **NOT A WORKER SHORTAGE**

Why Restaurant Workers, Particularly Mothers, Are Leaving the Industry, and What Would Make Them Stay

MAY 2021

One Fair Wage

UC Berkeley Food Labor Research Center

OVERVIEW

The COVID-19 outbreak has had devastating impacts on the restaurant industry, with 6 million workers losing work temporarily or permanently. Tipped restaurant workers, who are over two-thirds women, reported facing dramatically decreased tips and increased health risks and harassment in restaurants during the pandemic. This report documents the massive exodus of workers from restaurants, their reasons for leaving, and what would make them stay.

The pandemic has had devastating impacts for women and mothers in particular, with many economists dubbing the crisis a “she-cession.”¹ Even prior to the pandemic, working mothers already bore the brunt of domestic duties and were heavily concentrated in low wage jobs.^{2,3} As one of the largest employers of women and one of the largest employers of subminimum wage workers, the restaurant industry plays an outsized role in perpetuating inequality among women, particularly women of color.^{4,5} Not only must these women endure one of the lowest wages in the country, but also experience higher levels of sexual harassment than any other industry in the country.^{6,7} This report documents women and mother’s experiences of the pandemic, and also how it has motivated many of them to leave the restaurant industry altogether.

“As bad as the subminimum wage always was, it’s even harder now. I have a lot of colleagues who are leaving the restaurant industry because it’s not worth it without One Fair Wage.”

–ANNETTE ALCALA
Restaurant Worker
New York, NY

“If a large percentage of our workforce decides to leave the restaurant industry, none of the other relief efforts will have mattered. You can’t run a restaurant without a staff. It’s time we raise wages and ensure that we can attract and retain good talent in our industry.”

–CHEF RON HSU
Owner, Lazy Betty’s
Atlanta, GA

KEY FINDINGS

- ◆ **Over half (53%) of all workers report that they are considering leaving their restaurant job with the pandemic and more than three quarters (76%) say they are leaving due to low wages and tips.** Mothers were more likely to report that they are leaving restaurant jobs than other workers (55% v 52%). ‘Low wages and tips’ was by far the most popular reason for leaving the industry, more than 20 percentage points higher than the second most popular reason – COVID health risks. Mothers were ten percentage points more likely to say they are leaving restaurants due to low wages and tips compared to non-mothers (80% v 71%).
- ◆ **It’s a wage shortage, not a worker shortage.** The vast majority of all respondents (78%) report having a full, stable, livable wage would

make them consider staying at their job. Again, ‘full, stable, livable wages’ was by far the most popular factor that workers reported would make them stay at their job, nearly 30 percentage points higher than the second most popular factor – paid sick leave.

◆ **Workers are leaving the industry not only because tips are down and pay is too low, but also the risks and harassment are far too high.** Reflective of the general demographics of tipped service workers, the majority (74%) of survey respondents were women, indicating that the overall exodus and reasons for leaving of tipped service workers are gendered. However, these factors are even worse for working mothers:

- Mothers report contracting COVID at higher rates than all other workers (26% v 19%)
- Mothers were more likely to report tips decreased with the pandemic (91% v 86%) and that their tips have decreased by half or more (73% v 67%)
- Mothers were more likely to report an increase in sexual harassment with the pandemic (51% v 44%)

This report is based on a national pool of over 2,800 surveys of food service workers conducted online and over the telephone from October 20, 2020 to May 1, 2021. We emailed the surveys to the over 260,000 applicants to the One Fair Wage Emergency Fund starting in October 2020, and collected responses until May 1, 2020, by which time over 4,300 workers had already responded. Of those who responded, 2,838 reported that they were currently employed, and were thus able to answer most of the survey questions about restaurant employment during the pandemic.

TABLE 1
Summary of Restaurant
Worker Retention Survey

Restaurant workers
considering leaving their
job since COVID-19 outbreak

53% ALL WORKERS

54% ALL WOMEN

50% ALL MEN

55% ALL MOTHERS

52% NON-MOTHERS

WHY WORKERS ARE LEAVING THEIR JOBS

	ALL WORKERS	ALL WOMEN	ALL MEN	ALL MOTHERS	NON-MOTHERS
Due to low wages and tips	76%	78%	69%	80%	71%
Due to concerns about COVID-19 safety	55%	56%	57%	58%	54%
Due to concerns of hostility and harassment from customers	39%	39%	39%	36%	44%
Due to concerns of hostility and harassment from coworkers and/or management	26%	25%	31%	24%	29%
Moving to a different city, state, or country	5%	5%	8%	4%	7%
Moving into a new position within the restaurant industry	4%	3%	7%	2%	6%
Transitioning to a different industry	31%	29%	38%	20%	45%

TABLE 1
Summary of
Restaurant Worker
Retention Survey

Source: One Fair Wage
Worker Public Health Survey
Data collected 10/20-4/21

WHAT WOULD MAKE WORKERS STAY AT THEIR JOB

	ALL WORKERS	ALL WOMEN	ALL MEN	ALL MOTHERS	NON-MOTHERS
Full, stable, livable wage	78%	79%	75%	78%	78%
Increased hours	36%	35%	38%	38%	32%
Paid sick leave	49%	49%	48%	43%	55%
Better COVID-19 safety protocols and enforcement	41%	41%	40%	40%	41%
Health benefits or insurance	44%	44%	46%	37%	53%
An improved working environment with less hostility from customers, coworkers, and/or management	45%	45%	47%	40%	52%

TABLE 2
Summary of
COVID-19 Health
and Customer
Harassment Impacts
on Restaurant
Workers

Source: One Fair Wage Worker
Public Health Survey Data
collected 10/20-4/21

RESTAURANT EMPLOYEE EXPOSURE TO COVID-19

Has personally contracted COVID-19	21%	21%	20%	26%	19%
Knows someone who has contracted COVID-19	95%	96%	92%	93%	96%
Of those who know someone infected, percent who knows someone who has died from COVID-19 or COVID-19 Complications	50%	50%	52%	52%	49%
Employees who report that one or more employees at their restaurant has contracted COVID-19	74%	75%	70%	78%	71%
Employees are within 6 feet of an unmasked person at least once during their shift	53%	54%	52%	50%	63%
Employees are within 6 feet of an unmasked person 30 or more times during their shift	38%	39%	38%	37%	39%

CUSTOMER HOSTILITY, HARASSMENT AND IMPACT ON TIPPING

Report that tips have decreased since COVID-19	87%	88%	84%	91%	86%
Report that tips have decreased since COVID-19 by at least 50% or more	69%	70%	63%	73%	67%
Experienced or witnessed hostile behavior from customers in response to staff enforcing COVID-19 safety protocols	80%	82%	75%	79%	81%
Experienced or witnessed hostile behavior on a weekly basis from customers in response to staff enforcing COVID-19 safety protocols	49%	50%	42%	51%	47%
Felt reluctant to enforce COVID-19 safety protocols upon customers out of concern that customer would tip less	60%	62%	56%	59%	59%
Has experienced or witnessed a noticeable change in overall levels of unwanted sexualized comments from customers	47%	50%	35%	51%	44%

INTRODUCTION: PRE-EXISTING CONDITIONS IN THE RESTAURANT INDUSTRY

THE SUBMINIMUM WAGE, TIPPED WORKERS, AND RACE AND GENDER INEQUALITY



COVID-19's devastating impact on the economy has had far reaching consequences for all workers, especially women and mothers in the service sector. Prior to the pandemic, the restaurant industry was one of the largest and fastest growing sectors in the nation's economy, accounting for over 13 million workers.^{8,9} Despite the size and growth of the restaurant industry in previous years, its workers earned some of the lowest wages in the country.¹⁰ Over 60% of all workers paid below the federal minimum wage are employed in the restaurant industry, and therefore rely heavily on tips for their base wage.¹¹ A legacy of slavery, the federal subminimum wage for tipped workers is still \$2.13 an hour; 43 states persist with a subminimum wage in some form.

The subminimum wage places a disproportionate burden on women, who make up nearly 70% of the workforce. Over a third of these workers are mothers who must rely on tips to support their families.^{12,13} Tipped workers suffer from nearly twice the poverty rate and use food stamps than the rest of the U.S. workforce.¹⁴ These workers face the highest rates of sexual harassment of any industry because they must tolerate inappropriate customer behavior to feed their families in tips.¹⁵ The seven states that require a full minimum wage with tips on top (CA, OR, WA, NV, MN, MT, AK) have one half the rate of sexual harassment as the states that allow employers to pay the federal subminimum wage of \$2.13 an hour, because in those states women are not as dependent on customer tips to feed their families and thus do not have to tolerate as much harassment.¹⁶

Race and gender inequities have been rampant throughout the tipped service sector since Emancipation, particularly in restaurants, which claim the largest share of tipped workers.¹⁷ There is a \$4.79 wage gap between white male tipped front-of-house workers and their Black female counterparts.¹⁸ This inequity is largely due to women and workers of color being concentrated in lower-paying industry segments, such as casual dining establishments like Denny's and Applebee's instead of fine-dining restaurants where tips are higher on average, and because of their concentration in lower-tipping positions, such as busser rather than server and bartender positions, even when they work in fine dining restaurants.¹⁹ Another factor contributing to this inequality is customer bias in tipping. Even before the current crisis, customers of all races tended to give higher tips to white



servers and lower tips to Black servers. Customers' implicit bias results in tips being based on servers' race, gender, and perceived attractiveness of workers.²⁰

THE “SHE-CESION” AND THE RESTAURANT INDUSTRY

Since the 1970s, mothers have increasingly gained a larger share of the total U.S. labor force. In most households with children, a majority of mothers have a job outside of home.²¹ Mothers of color, in particular, are more likely to be the primary breadwinners of their home and bear primary responsibility for childcare and household duties.²² Despite these gains in recent decades, mothers face a persistent bias from employers, which has had far reaching consequences

in regards to hiring, promotions, and perceived levels of productivity or competence.²³ Bias against mothers in the labor force translates to what is commonly referred to as a “motherhood penalty,” which describes how women’s earnings are negatively impacted by raising children.²⁴

These dynamics worsened during the pandemic, which had devastating impacts for women and mothers across all sectors, with many economists dubbing the crisis a “she-cession.”²⁵ Even prior to the pandemic, working mothers already bore the brunt of domestic duties and were heavily concentrated in low wage jobs.^{26,27} As one of the largest employers of women and one of the largest employers of subminimum wage workers, the restaurant industry plays an outsized role in perpetuating inequality among women, particularly women of color.^{28,29} Those in the restaurant industry face an even harsher penalty to their career mobility and overall profitability because the majority of them already lack a livable wage and are largely segregated from the highest paid positions in the industry. A 2014 study by Restaurant Opportunities Centers United (ROC United) found that mothers in the industry often lack the affordable and accessible childcare options necessary to take night and weekend shifts known for garnering more tips.³⁰ Although women make up over half of all restaurant workers, less than a quarter hold head chef or management positions.³¹ Studies show that childcare costs, which were already consumed over a third of the income for low-income families, have only increased in recent years, while wages have remained stagnant.³²

This report documents women and mothers’ experiences of the pandemic, and also how it has motivated many of them to leave the restaurant industry altogether.

WHY RESTAURANT WORKERS ARE LEAVING THE INDUSTRY & WHAT WOULD MAKE THEM STAY

“Restaurants don’t have a labor shortage, they have a wage shortage. We want to work, we just also want to be paid a full, fair wage. And especially as a mother, with a son about to enter this industry, I want to fix this for future generations. I remember in the beginning of all this, people were telling us if we did not like the industry we should just leave. And how they’re looking around and wondering why we are all gone.”

–CARRIE SCHWEITZER
Restaurant Worker
Philadelphia

PRE-PANDEMIC TURNOVER IN THE RESTAURANT INDUSTRY

The restaurant industry has always had one of the highest turnover rates in the country and it only increased in recent years.³³ In 2019, the turnover rate for the accommodations and food services industry was 78.6%.³⁴ Multiple studies have found that one of the main reasons restaurant workers decide to leave their job is to pursue a position that pays a higher wage.^{35,36} When restaurant workers are taken care of, they stay longer, are more productive, and provide better quality service.³⁷ However, despite all the evidence that a livable wage would reduce turnover and increase productivity for restaurants, the National Restaurant Association (“the Other NRA”) and its local affiliates, one of most powerful trade lobbies in country, continues to lobby against measures to increase the minimum wage and eliminate the subminimum wage for tipped workers.³⁸

MASS EXODUS DUE TO LOW WAGES AND DECREASED TIPS

The restaurant industry’s pre-existing economic instability, sexual harassment, racial inequities, and consequent high turnover rates in the restaurant industry were all worsened during the pandemic. As described below in Section IV, with COVID-19, the restaurant industry’s low wages were compounded with dramatically reduced tips and increased hostility, harassment, and health risks, resulting in over half (53%) of all restaurant workers surveyed report that they are considering leaving their jobs. When asked to choose all applicable reasons for leaving, over half also indicated that this was due to COVID concerns, but the most popular reason for leaving the industry by far was low wages and tips. Over three-quarters (76%) of all workers and 80% of mothers indicated that low wages and tips are causing them to leave restaurant jobs.

TABLE 3:
Desire to Leave Current Job

Restaurant workers considering leaving their job since COVID-19 outbreak

53% ALL WORKERS

54% ALL WOMEN

50% ALL MEN

55% ALL MOTHERS

52% NON-MOTHERS

TABLE 4
Summary of
Restaurant Worker
Retention Survey

Source: One Fair Wage
Worker Public Health Survey
Data collected 10/20-4/21

WHY WORKERS ARE LEAVING THEIR JOBS

	ALL WORKERS	ALL WOMEN	ALL MEN	ALL MOTHERS	NON-MOTHERS
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Due to concerns of hostility and harassment from coworkers and/or management	26%	25%	31%	24%	29%
Moving to a different city, state, or country	5%	5%	8%	4%	7%
Moving into a new position within the restaurant industry	4%	3%	7%	2%	6%
Transitioning to a different industry	31%	29%	38%	20%	45%

“The Queensboro is a One Fair Wage Restaurant. We pay our staff fairly and have done everything in our power to help them through this difficult year. As a result, we haven’t had any issues staying fully staffed. Perhaps the employers complaining about their staffing problems should re-examine the way they pay and treat their employees.”

–MICHAEL FUQUAY
Owner, The Queensboro
New York, NY

WHAT WOULD MAKE RESTAURANT WORKERS STAY

When asked to choose all applicable factors that would make them stay in restaurants, earning a full, stable, livable wage was by far the most popular factor that restaurant workers indicated would make them stay at their job – again, not surprising, given the dramatic decline in tips. Over three-quarters of all workers, including mothers chose a full, stable, livable wage as a reason to stay, significantly higher than any other factor. If restaurants hope to retain a significant portion of the workforce, the nation must enact livable wage policy that allows workers to remain in restaurants.

TABLE 5
Summary of
Restaurant Worker
Retention Survey

Source: One Fair Wage
Worker Public Health Survey
Data collected 10/20-4/21

WHAT WOULD MAKE WORKERS STAY AT THEIR JOB

	ALL WORKERS	ALL WOMEN	ALL MEN	ALL MOTHERS	NON-MOTHERS
Full, stable, livable wage	78%	79%	75%	78%	78%
Increased hours	36%	35%	38%	38%	32%
Paid sick leave	49%	49%	48%	43%	55%
Better COVID-19 safety protocols and enforcement	41%	41%	40%	40%	41%
Health benefits or insurance	44%	44%	46%	37%	53%
An improved working environment with less hostility from customers, coworkers, and/or management	45%	45%	47%	40%	52%



WHY WORKERS ARE LEAVING: COVID-19 IMPACTS ON TIPPED RESTAURANT WORKERS

“The restaurant industry in New York City is facing a labor crisis that should instead be seen as an opportunity. Well before the pandemic we were having trouble attracting and retaining staff. Now is the time to finally do the right thing by the people on the front lines – allow tip pools to be shared with both dining room and kitchen staff, eliminate the sub-minimum wage for tipped employees, and spread the increased earnings equitably amongst all hourly workers.

Our employees can't survive on what we've been paying them, as indicated by the fact that they are leaving the industry in droves. Without them, all of the relief efforts will have been in vain. It's time we raise wages to ensure that we can attract and retain talent in our industry, which is vital to the soul of New York City.

–BRIAN KEYSER
Owner, Casalula
New York, NY

During the pandemic, nearly 6 million restaurant workers lost their jobs; much more than in previous recessions, these employment losses have fallen mostly on women.^{39,40} Restaurants and other public-facing businesses that were shut down for COVID-19 safety have high concentrations of women. In addition, the closure of schools and daycare facilities, and the implementation of remote learning, have increased childcare needs for women, who continue to bear the brunt of childrearing even when they are the primary breadwinners in the household.⁴¹ This challenge is particularly hard on women in the restaurant industry, who are concentrated in the majority in tipped occupations earning a subminimum wage.

Despite current industry arguments that workers are not returning to work because they are choosing to stay home and collect unemployment insurance, most tipped workers reported that they either could not access these benefits or earned much less than they should have and than they needed due to the subminimum wage for tipped workers and complications with their tips not being recognized as income. By late spring of 2020, a majority of tipped workers experienced difficulty accessing unemployment insurance due to their low wages.⁴² Women tipped workers experienced even greater challenge when applying for unemployment insurance due to their subminimum wage than their male counterparts, and also higher rates of home and food insecurity. Over 60% of women reported they were either unsure or did not qualify for unemployment benefits, compared to 58% of their male counterparts. As a result, the vast majority of all women (92%) reported they were unsure or unable to pay for their rent or mortgage and 80% of women could only afford groceries for 2 weeks or less, compared to 91% and 78% of men, respectively.⁴³

TABLE 6
Impact of COVID-19
on Tipped Service
Workers

Source: One Fair Wage
Tipped Worker Survey Data
collected 10/20-2/21

	APPLICANTS	WOMEN	MEN
Do not qualify or are unsure if they qualify for unemployment insurance	61%	62%	58%
Unable or are unsure whether they can pay their rent or mortgage	92%	92%	91%
Can only afford groceries for 2 weeks or less	79%	80%	78%

LESS TIPS, MORE HOSTILITY AND HARASSMENT

After facing severe challenges in accessing unemployment insurance at relatively higher rates than other workers, many workers felt compelled to return to work in restaurants before they felt safe doing so.⁴⁴ When they returned, they were asked to do more for less. Most workers (87%) of all workers reported that their tips have decreased since the pandemic and nearly 70% of workers report their tips have decreased by half or more.

Women with children, particularly women of color, faced far greater declines in tips and were more likely to report regularly receiving a lower tip from customers due to COVID-19 safety enforcement than all other workers. The vast majority of mothers (91%) reported that their tips declined since COVID-19 and over 70% report that their tips decreased by 50% or more. Because many women in the restaurant industry already have some of the lowest wages in the country and lacked access to not only unemployment insurance, but also supportive work-family policies, the pandemic had amplified the pre-existing inequality in the industry.

TABLE 7
Customer Hostility
and Impact on
Tipping

Source: One Fair Wage Worker
Public Health Survey Data
collected 10/20-4/21

	ALL WORKERS	ALL WOMEN	ALL MEN	ALL MOTHERS	NON-MOTHERS
Report that tips have decreased since COVID-19	87%	88%	84%	91%	86%
Report that tips have decreased since COVID-19 by at least 50% or more	69%	70%	63%	73%	67%
Experienced or witnessed hostile behavior from customers in response to staff enforcing COVID-19 safety protocols	80%	82%	75%	79%	81%
Experienced or witnessed hostile behavior on a weekly basis from customers in response to staff enforcing COVID-19 safety protocols	49%	50%	42%	51%	47%
Felt reluctant to enforce COVID-19 safety protocols upon customers out of concern that customer would tip less	60%	62%	56%	59%	59%
Has experienced or witnessed a noticeable change in overall levels of unwanted sexualized comments from customers	47%	50%	35%	51%	44%

“The shortage in restaurant staff in these parts is currently extreme. It was prior to the pandemic and the situation has returned. Many have left the industry because of the health concerns and all the precautions caused by Covid-19. But our industry has always suffered from low pay. Raising wages in our industry would lift up the entire industry and “professionalize” it. Make it more legit. Most important is the elimination of the subminimum wage as this policy truly undermines the respect and dignity of our workers. With recent legislation when tipped workers earn full minimum wage employers can distribute tips across the chain of service. This means kitchen staff share in tips too. This one change would be monumental for the industry. Making the way all staff are compensated similar while eliminating any chance of poverty level wages would change our industry dramatically for the better. What’s more it would make restaurant work more dignified, professional and desirable. We all need restaurants. It is time to change the laws to support them and the people who work in them becoming healthy, motivated and stable.”

—MICHAEL LANGARTEN
Owner, Lil’s Cafe
Kittery, ME

Restaurant workers have become de facto public health marshals, enforcing critical masks and social distancing protocols in one of the pandemic’s most dangerous environments, according to the Centers for Disease Control.⁴⁵ A major source of restaurant workers’ inability to protect themselves and enforce critical health and safety protocols with customers, and in 43 states, is the subminimum wage for tipped workers, because it requires workers to derive a substantial portion of their income from customer tips. During the pandemic, these workers’ reliance on tips from customers has made it difficult to nearly impossible to enforce critical social distancing and mask rules on these same customers.

The majority of the workers surveyed (80%) reported that they have experienced customers becoming hostile to staff for following public health guidelines, such as insisting upon wearing a mask. Women and mothers were more likely than men to witness or experience such hostile behavior from customers on a weekly basis in response to enforcing these public health protocols. Unsurprisingly, 60% of workers report feeling reluctant to enforce COVID-19 protocols out of concern that customers would reciprocate with aggression, hostility, and lesser tips. This feeling is based on real experience; over 60% of workers (62%) report having received a lesser tip than normal after enforcing COVID-19 protocols on customers. Of those workers, 47% report that receiving a lesser tip for enforcing these protocols is a weekly experience. Simultaneously, restaurant workers are presented with the impossible task, and losing battle, of policing the customers who directly subsidize their wages. The outcomes are even more significant for workers of color, with Black tipped workers reporting far greater decline in tips and more punishment for trying to enforce social distancing and mask rules in the form of lesser tips than their white counterparts.⁴⁶ The subminimum wage for tipped workers thus created an impossible situation in which workers were forced to enforce public health rules on the same customers from whom they had to get tips to survive.

With the pandemic, fewer customers and lessened tips has increased the power dynamic between male customers and women servers, forcing many women, particularly those with children, to tolerate even higher levels of sexual harassment than before. More than half of all mothers (51%) reported an increase in sexual harassment during the pandemic, compared to 47% of all workers. Hundreds of women have reported that they are repeatedly asked to remove their masks so male customers can judge their looks and their tips on that basis.⁴⁷



INCREASED HEALTH RISKS

It should come as no surprise, given the high-risk environment and workers’ inability to enforce social distancing and mask rules given their dependence on customer tips, that restaurant workers report extremely high levels of exposure to COVID-19 and infection and death of co-workers due to this exposure. Nearly one in five workers reported having contracted COVID-19 themselves (21%) and 95% knew someone who had contracted the virus; nearly three-quarters (74%) reported that someone in their restaurant contracted the virus. More than half (53%) of all employees report that they are in contact with maskless individuals at least once during their restaurant shifts.

These alarming statistics were worse for women and mothers – not surprising given the data above indicating that women and mothers were more often punished in the form of lower tips for enforcing COVID-19 safety measures to protect their health and others. Mothers surveyed were significantly more likely to report that they had contracted the virus; a rate 24% higher than all other workers on average. Women overall were more likely to report they were within six feet of maskless individuals.

TABLE 8
Restaurant Employee
Exposure to
COVID-19

Source: One Fair Wage Worker
 Public Health Survey Data
 collected 10/20-4/21

	ALL WORKERS	ALL WOMEN	ALL MEN	ALL MOTHERS	NON-MOTHERS
Has personally contracted COVID-19	21%	21%	20%	26%	19%
Knows someone who has contracted COVID-19	95%	96%	92%	93%	96%
Of those who know someone infected, percent who knows someone who has died from COVID-19 or COVID-19 Complications	50%	50%	52%	52%	49%
Employees who report that one or more employees at their restaurant has contracted COVID-19	74%	75%	70%	78%	71%
Employees are within 6 feet of an unmasked person at least once during their shift	53%	54%	52%	50%	63%
Employees are within 6 feet of an unmasked person 30 or more times during their shift	38%	39%	38%	37%	39%

CONCLUSION: ALL WORKERS, ESPECIALLY MOTHERS, NEED ONE FAIR WAGE NOW

At the end of our survey, more than two thirds (66%) answered ‘yes’ to signing on to the following statement:

“I do not want to return to work in a restaurant until we have One Fair Wage – a full minimum wage with tips on top – and the necessary safety protocols to keep us safe! If I do return to work before One Fair Wage becomes law, I cannot guarantee that I will enforce social distancing and mask rules with customers because I need to be able to get tips from those same customers. I call on my congressional representatives to take action!”

Every restaurant I know is struggling with hiring right now. I see places closing or operating at a limited capacity due to not having enough staff. After all the relief efforts, pivoting, and resilience, this is what it is coming down to. Unlike what some would like to have you believe, people who work in the restaurant industry are skilled professionals, and we ought to start treating them like they are. It is time to raise wages.

–JI HYE KIM

Owner, Miss Kim
Ann Arbor, MI

Restaurants received significant relief in the COVID-19 package passed by Congress in March 2021. However, in order to reopen and recover, restaurants will need to be able to find enough willing employees to reopen at full capacity. With more than half of all workers reporting that they are considering leaving their restaurant jobs and more than three quarters indicating that the primary reason is low wages and decreased tips, it is clear that we must raise workers’ wages nationwide in order for consumers to enjoy the vibrant restaurant industry they experienced pre-pandemic.

The mass exodus of workers from the restaurant industry is clearly greatest among women, who are the extreme example of what a ‘she-recession’ means. Since the pandemic, women – disproportionately women of color – have suffered the most in job losses economy-wide and have borne the added responsibilities of child care while many schools remain closed.⁴⁸ A recent poll by Marketplace found that 63% of women are the primary person in their household responsible for supervising their children’s remote school during the pandemic compared to only 29% of men.⁴⁹ Women who work in the restaurant industry in particular already typically lack accessible and affordable childcare options to take on more desirable shifts, have among the lowest wages in the country, and with the recent outbreak have had the compounded role of enforcing safety

protocols needed to protect the public while facing economic retaliation and sexual harassment from the very people they are trying to protect.⁵⁰ This report's findings highlight that this vulnerability is not new and that it is exacerbated in every way by their dependence on tips to make up a majority of their wage.

Forced to find ways to entice workers to stay in the industry and buoyed by the recent momentum generated by federal momentum to raise the minimum wage, many independent restaurant employers are proactively raising their wages. However, they cannot raise wages alone; employers need the level playing field that federal policy change would create. The Raise the Wage Act, which would finally eliminate slavery's legacy of the subminimum wage for tipped workers and increase the minimum wage to \$15 for all workers, is now a COVID emergency, not only for service workers themselves but also for the long-term economic stability of their families, the communities that rely on them, and restaurant industry itself.

As the research shows, mothers in the restaurant industry are especially in need of a livable wage to better cover their childcare expenses and provide for their families.

These women have bared the brunt of the crisis, and those who are tipped workers have experienced a significant decline in their tips while taking on the compounded role of public health enforcement. If the nation wants to ensure both economic recovery and public health, these workers must be paid the full minimum wage with tips on top, enabling them to enforce safety protocols and reject dangerous and demeaning sexual harassment from customers. One Fair Wage – an equal and just wage with tips on top – must be enacted as permanent law now.



ENDNOTES

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- 3 Kim, M. (September 2000). Women paid low wages: who they are and where they work. U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. *Monthly Labor Review*. <https://www.bls.gov/opub/mlr/2000/09/art3full.pdf>.
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