

On August 23, 2017, women in our General Meeting discussed how we all eat out but we may not be aware of the life-work of our wait staff. As a UMW we are called to educate ourselves on situations that are unfair, unequal or unjust in our world. This book and other resources listed below will open our eyes some more. Here's an enlightening book summary plus information we learned that night.

Behind the Kitchen Door: Restaurant Workers Organizing for Dignity and Justice

<http://www.unitedmethodistwomen.org/behind-the-kitchen-door>

There are 20 million workers throughout the U.S. food system who harvest, process, ship, sell, cook and serve the food we eat. More than half of them work in restaurants in the lowest-paying jobs in the United States. They include immigrants, women and mothers raising children in poverty. They receive little pay or sick days, often working in dangerous conditions. Come read from nationally renowned advocate Saru Jayaraman, of *Behind the Kitchen Door*, which shares the stories of women restaurant workers, their organizing efforts for decent wages and dignity, and how consumers can support restaurants that do the right thing for their workers. **YEAH-there are restaurants that DO THE RIGHT THING!!**

What Is the Issue?

With 10 million workers, the restaurant industry is one of the nation's largest private-sector employers and one of the fastest growing segments of the economy in most regions nationwide, even during the recent economic recession. Unfortunately, the restaurant industry is also the lowest paying industry. Restaurant occupations employ the highest proportion of workers earning at or below the federal minimum wage. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, 7 of the 10 lowest paid occupations, including the two absolute lowest-paying occupations, are jobs in the restaurant industry. For all the talk about sustainability, conversations about true sustainability must not only be about organic, locally sourced goods, but include the workers who touch, prepare and serve our food.

The fact that one of the largest and fastest-growing sectors of the U.S. economy is proliferating the lowest-paying jobs in the nation is due to the political power of the industry trade group, the National Restaurant Association (NRA). The NRA has been listed by *Fortune* magazine as the tenth most powerful lobbying group in Congress, and it funds local Restaurant Associations in every state. In 1996, under the leadership of later-presidential candidate Herman Cain, the NRA struck a deal with Congress agreeing to a modest increase in the regular minimum wage as long as the minimum wage for tipped employees remained frozen indefinitely. Thus, the federal tipped minimum wage has been stuck at the 1991 rate of \$2.13 for more than two decades, and the NRA dedicates significant resources to keep it that way.

Two-thirds of tipped workers are women, the majority of who work at casual restaurants like IHOP and Denny's, where tips are meager. In fact, the median wage for tipped workers hovers around \$8 an hour *including tips*. Restaurant servers, the largest group of tipped workers, are three times as likely to live in poverty, and they use food stamps at double the rate of the rest of the U.S. workforce. Ironically, the women who put food on the tables of millions of diners are struggling to put food on their own families' tables. Women restaurant workers are often unable to provide basic economic security for themselves and their families, meaning they must routinely choose which necessities their families must forego as they struggle to make ends meet.

Earning between \$2 and \$5 per hour in 43 out of 50 states in the United States, tipped workers' wages are so low those wages go wholly to paying taxes, forcing millions of women to live entirely off their

tips. Living off tips is not only economically unstable, since tips fluctuate daily, but also puts these women in compromising positions. Since they are forced to rely on customers for their income rather than their employer, women in the restaurant industry must often tolerate inappropriate behavior from customers, co-workers and management, making the restaurant industry the single largest source of sexual harassment claims in the U.S. Seven percent of American women work in the restaurant industry, but 37 percent of all sexual harassment claims to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) come from the restaurant industry.

A permissive culture in which women can be talked to and treated inappropriately and illegally can sometimes lead to sexual assault. These issues are particularly troubling given that the size of the industry means that most young women in America are introduced to the world of work in a restaurant. Since the restaurant industry is one of the largest and fastest-growing industries, it is often the first job a young woman obtains — whether she stays in the industry her whole life, or moves on to become a corporate executive. Numerous women have told us that they accepted gender pay inequity and sexual harassment in later jobs because it was “never as bad as it had been when I worked in a restaurant.” In addition, because many women’s first introduction to the workplace is a restaurant job, this is where they learn their worth as workers.

The U.S. restaurant industry is the only industry on earth that has succeeded in convincing lawmakers that customers pay a majority of its employees’ wages. However, not all U.S. states have followed this model. Seven states provide the same wage for tipped and non-tipped workers. *In fact, five of the seven states in which women are not asked to live off tips for any portion of their income have faster restaurant industry growth rates than the restaurant industry nationwide.*

Resources:

- *Behind the Kitchen Door*, by Saru Jayaraman. Cornell, 2013
- Living Off Tips website www.livingofftips.com
- Restaurant Opportunities Centers United www.rocunited.org
- Get the National Diner’s Guide www.rocunited.org/diners-guide

United Methodist Women Connection

- Visit the Economic Justice web page www.unitedmethodistwomen.org/economic-justice
- “Action Alert: Combating Income Inequality: Raising the National Minimum Wage” www.unitedmethodistwomen.org/news/income-inequality

Suggestions for Action

- Join The Welcome Table www.thewelcometable.net
- Observe and speak up. As consumers, you have the power to make demands. Communicate to restaurants/managers, in whatever way you feel comfortable (talking directly, tweeting, writing a letter, etc.), what you would like to see change.
- Sign and spread the petition: www.stoptheothernra.org
- If you've ever been a restaurant worker living off tips, tell your story at www.livingofftips.com. The corporate restaurant lobby has been speaking on behalf of all restaurant workers for too long.