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The Appalling Prevalence of Waitress Harassment

Most careers have their issues. Janitors clean dirty toilets, UPS drivers deliver packages in the rain and snow, and professors have to deal with students who pay more attention to their laptops than to the lectures. However, the struggles waitresses face are far worse. Plaguing the restaurant industry are numerous accounts of sexual harassment and work cultures that enable improper behavior to go on. Trapped in a cycle of fear and oppression, waitresses often find themselves in positions where speaking out could mean more than just losing their tips, but also their jobs. Changes must take place to better waitresses working conditions, but first it's important to understand how restaurants have allowed for this inappropriate behavior to thrive and what the effects on waitresses are.

Sexually objectifying environments (SOEs) such as Hooters and Tilted Kilt Pub & Eatery are at the forefront of restaurants that have established and normalized sexual objectification of women and waitresses. Sexual objectification is the act of viewing people merely as objects of sexual desire. Requiring or mandating that waitresses dress in revealing clothing is a tactical move used by businesses to draw men's attention; however, restaurants that choose to partake in these strategies establish environments which give men the "[right] to evaluate a woman's appearance and sexual desirability without her consent," (Szymanski). By actively encouraging customers to view waitresses in a sexual manner, restaurants are normalizing inappropriate

behavior and allowing for the sexual objectification of women to occur without a second thought.

While many waitresses understand that the skimpy clothing required by these SOEs is a necessary part of the job, they don't sign up for the ramifications that come from the looks they receive. The male gaze, often elicited by the uniforms waitresses are required to wear, is merely the first domino to fall. Research conducted by Dr. Dawn Syzmanski, a professor of psychology at the University of Tennessee-Knoxville, was published in the *Psychology of Woman Quarterly* and found that the male gaze had, "a positive direct link to self-objectification, self-objectification had a positive link to body shame, body shame had a positive link to depression, and depression had a negative direct link to job satisfaction," (Syzmanski). Accepting a waitressing job to make ends meet is totally understandable, but working conditions which actively lead to states of depression and low job satisfaction are absolutely not. Unfortunately, restaurants continue to require certain dress codes for women, eliciting sexual objectification from customers and exposing waitresses to a host of detrimental issues.

It could be argued that the best choice for women looking to waitress or work in the restaurant industry is to seek positions at restaurants that aren't classified as SOEs, since so many negative consequences exist in those environments. However, other problems, such as sexual harassment, remain prevalent in regular restaurant jobs. Alexis Steakhouse & Tavern in Clifton, New Jersey, a popular spot where customers go for a steak and a beer, doesn't require waitresses or female employees to wear form-fitting clothing or low cut uniforms. Yet the restaurant was recently fined \$80,000 for having failed to address instances in which a male manager, "slapped a female employee on the buttocks as she leaned over a table... [and] pulled

the elastic waistband of a female worker's pants, exposing her buttocks," (Attrino). If managers at restaurants are displaying this type of unacceptable, crude behavior, they are setting a poor example for their co-workers who very well may follow suit and perpetuate these types of actions. When behaviors get out of line, restaurant owners and upper level management are failing to provide their female workers with a safe work environment and allowing the harassment of waitresses to persist.

Making their working conditions worse is the fact that waitresses believe sexual harassment is an inevitable part of their daily routine. This idea became clear after Dr. Lisa Huebner, a professor of Women's and Gender Studies at West Chester University, conducted extensive interviews with multiple waitresses surrounding their interactions with customers in typical restaurant settings. Her findings were published in the academic journal *Sociological Viewpoints*, where Dr. Huebner noted that most waitresses identified "sexual situations as something to simply accept, that ... normally occurred in the work environment," (Huebner). This may be due in part to the nature of their job, since waitresses are tasked with understanding and responding to the various needs of the people they interact with. Unfortunately, this has gone beyond just taking orders, as recognized by Mike Rose, an author for *The American Scholar* whose mother was a lifelong waitress. Rose witnessed that waitresses, including his mother, had to deal with customer needs that went beyond "physiological ones, including the emotions that accompany hunger, to a sometimes complicated desire for human contact," (Rose). Regardless of the expectations placed on waitresses or the needs customers have, the fact that women have to deal with and ultimately

come to expect sexually exploitative behavior as a normal occurrence in the workplace is simply awful and unacceptable.

With the prevalence of sexual harassment and other issues in the restaurant industry, it would seem likely that waitresses would be speaking out, standing up for themselves, or bringing attention to their working conditions, but sadly they aren't. The hard truth is that even though they acknowledge the existence of problems, including "sexual harassment, waitresses may be less likely than those in more secure employment to confront [these] behaviors because they are more afraid of losing their jobs," (Huebner). Some argue that this stems from the lack of required education and experience needed to obtain a waitressing job. Minimal requirements make people in these jobs feel easily replaceable, creating a sense of powerlessness among waitresses, especially those who depend on the income they are making and afraid of losing. Yet what this fear really highlights is a lack of trust in the restaurants they work for. When waitresses believe that managers and business owners would rather fire or get rid of an employee who has spoken up rather than deal with the problems, the hardships that waitresses face only get worse. This type of work environment is extremely oppressive and can lead to women suffering through sexually harassing behaviors instead of trying to confront them because that is the only option they believe is available to them. When speaking out means the possibility of losing their job, many waitresses opt to remain quiet, creating an environment where the harassment they face is likely to sadly continue.

It's evident that a wave of change needs to take place in the restaurant industry, especially when it comes to the treatment of waitresses. Sexual harassment and inappropriate behaviors have been allowed to run rampant, fueled by restaurant work cultures that have

historically enabled this type of conduct to thrive. In order to take steps towards fixing the problems at hand, restaurants must first recognize their wrongdoing and how they have enabled these conditions to exist. The next step is to require all businesses to maintain a full time human resources representative. Designating someone that employees know they can go to and confide in can help in fostering trust and lines of communication between employees and the restaurants they work for. An HR representative also has the ability to implement training and establish policies that directly relate to understanding what sexual harassment is, how it impacts waitresses and others in the workplace, and how it can be discouraged and eliminated. An incredibly important thing for restaurant owners and upper level management to realize is that they must also play an active role, whether through check-ins or conversations, to ensure a safe and tolerant work environment. In doing so, they can help to develop stronger relationships between themselves and waitresses, while showing their employees that they are valued and thought of. Letting waitresses know that they are cared for and that their voices are important can help make them feel more comfortable and confident in speaking out when difficult circumstances arise.

Changing the way customers treat waitresses is something that restaurants have less direct control over. Restaurants can, however, encourage managers to actively keep an eye out for signs of sexual harassment and to speak with waitresses during their shifts to make sure everything is alright. Additionally, signs or posters indicating that a restaurant will not tolerate sexual harassment or inappropriate behavior of any kind can be utilized. Whether they are posted on the front door, the walls throughout the restaurant, or even in the bathroom, these

signs can actively remind customers that certain behaviors will not be allowed under any circumstances and can reassure waitresses that restaurants are on their side.

Changes in restaurant work culture won't take place overnight, but steps need to be taken to fix the problems plaguing the industry. Waitresses have long been the victims of sexual harassment and unjustifiable work environments. It is going to take an active effort from waitresses, customers, business owners, and managers of restaurants to work on these issues together. No one deserves to live or work in fear and no one should have to deal with harassment of any kind. Restaurants need to right their wrongs and provide their waitresses, and all of their employees for that matter, with the proper treatment and work environments they deserve.

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