Johnson & Wales University

ScholarsArchive@JWU

College of Food Innovation & Technology

2022

Perceived Inequality in The Restaurant Industry for Women

Amanda Wicelinski

Perceived Inequality in The Restaurant Industry for Women

Amanda Wicelinski

Johnson & Wales University

HOSP 6900: Hospitality Capstone

Dr. Paul Howe

May 3, 2022

Abstract

Perceived inequality permeates the hospitality industry at large, and women chefs have to overcome many obstacles, like gender roles, on their path to success in a restaurant. As time settles into the 21st century, the principles of equality and diversity are topics at the forefront of discussions about industries like hospitality. Many aspiring chefs entering the industry can easily name a cisgender, white, and male role model chef that they look up to while struggling to come up with a single name of a female chef as a role model. This apparent homogeneity in leaders reveals greater issues at large. Other demographics and aspects of identity politics are not nearly as represented in the leaders of the restaurant industry. Sifting through surveys and interviews of female chefs from Malaysia, Spain, and the United States helps illuminate where there are issues as well as how women have achieved their success and have become chefs. Men and women are graduating and entering the industry at similar rates, but are not equal in numbers as managers. This paper seeks to explore the barriers preventing women from success in the restaurant industry during the course of their careers and examines the ways women chefs say have supported their success in reaching the top of their field. Common counterpoints to overcoming these barriers included creating opportunities specifically for women, seeking a balance between work and life, and mentorship to help women achieve chef status.

Keywords: Gender roles, restaurant industry, women, chefs, inequality, sexism, career advancement, gender gap, glass ceiling, barriers to success

Table of Contents

Introduction

The perceived inequalities outlined in this paper, such as negative perceptions, gender roles that deter career advancement, and lack of opportunities can all contribute to a not-so-hospitable hospitality industry. These are invisible yet tangible forces that, in the eyes of the female chefs studied, seem to be holding women back from achieving success and attaining the highest career levels in the realm of restaurants. There is also the consideration of other countries across the globe, such as Malaysia or gastronomic centers like Spain, which show similar barriers meet females on their journeys to becoming head chefs despite cultural differences to the United States. The U.S. is not an outlier in its perceived inequality toward women vying to become chefs. With this background and context, there is a chance to look forward to finding where solutions lie for improving the gender gap in the restaurant industry. There are women at the top, and their personal experience is full of guiding factors that created their own success.

In countries like the United States, cooks of any gender seek out formal education to help qualify for the level of a chef to learn technical skills as well as managerial techniques. When looking at the prestigious Culinary Institute of America's fall 2020 enrollment, across the board, 1,564 women were enrolled in classes while 1,667 men were enrolled in classes (IPEDS, 2021). Before the COVID-19 Pandemic, during the 2019-2020 school year, 410 women received degrees from The Culinary Institute of America, while 350 men received degrees (IPEDS, 2021). Graduation rates for men and women from culinary schools are virtually the same, with a slightly higher edge for women. Yet, these numbers shrink over time and do not stay this proportional in the industry as careers progress. There is underrepresentation when looking at the number of men versus women filling higher positions like executive chefs. A lack of promotions and other inequities are blocking these women from succeeding in the restaurant industry.

One indicator of inequality in the industry is the underrepresentation in the number of women filling management positions. "According to data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, in 2013 only 20 percent of chefs and head cooks in the culinary industry were women" (Harris & Giuffre, 2015, p. 3). As for a more current figure, 22.8% of chefs were women in 2021 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022). This number is relatively stagnant, and also is not in line with the proportion of women graduating from culinary school. Throughout a female chef's career versus her male counterparts, perceived inequality is evidenced in components of the restaurant industry such as gender roles, the glass ceiling, wage gaps, and other barriers to equality, which are all conditions that can be removed or improved in order to push equity and representation of women in the professional kitchen.

Literature Review

Within the articles and books studied, containing interviews and surveys of women based in Malaysia, Spain, and the United States, common themes emerged, like the impact of gender roles on women in professional kitchens. As seen in the aforementioned percentages from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the biggest force at play in the underrepresentation of women in the higher rungs of the restaurant industry is the existence of a glass ceiling. Many components construct the glass ceiling that blocks this untapped resource of qualified women from reaching chef status.

Perceptions of Female Chefs

Gender roles have been a pervasive force in many women's lives and are a factor that has little to no control over them. In Spain, many female chefs interviewed reiterated that they felt

the gender roles of a domestic kitchen were simply duplicated within a professional restaurant setting with negative results, and it manifests in ways like women being expected "to make more sacrifices at [their] workplace than men" over the same tasks (Haddaji, Albors-Garrigós, & García-Segovia, 2017, p. 52). Toxic masculinity, and the idea of a kitchen being a *boys' club*, is cited as a factor that still allows for prejudice toward women inching up the ladder in a restaurant: "the kitchen work environment has been described as hard physically and emotionally. It was considered as 'macho', masculine and a difficult one for women. It is also highly stressful with long working hours" (Haddaji et al., 2017, p. 51). Women have to prove that they can take the heat of a professional kitchen, just like the boys do.

Gender perceptions set the stage for expectations of a certain gender. "[R]esearch in Spain has found that at the implicit level, men's (vs. women's) faces prime the activation of competence-related traits, whereas women's faces trigger the activation of warmth traits" (de Lemus, Moya, Lupiáñez, & Bukowski, 2013, p. 2). Women have to fit the expectations laid out in front of them in a male-dominated industry like the restaurant industry. Further studies out of Spain discovered that in a pre-cursor survey question for one gender roles study, female participants believe only 39% of high-status positions like chefs are actually female-occupied in contrast to their male counterparts (de Lemus, Moya, et al., 2013), a perception that is higher than the reality such as in the United States.

This same study examines gender roles and typical pairings, and it is where researchers determined that perception about pairings of men in kitchens versus women in kitchens have the chance to "be interpreted differently in terms of status (e.g., the man could be seen as a chef— high status, whereas the woman is seen as a housewife—low status)" (de Lemus, Moya, et al., 2013, pp. 10-11). There is not always an automatic assumption that a woman could be seen as a

competent professional chef, but rather, it is assumed she is simply a homemaker cooking for the

family. Further research on the way presenting these pairings would prime certain responses led

to another study out of Spain, where female students were again the main participants. The

participants were exposed and primed with stereotypical gender roles such as women in the

home kitchen to see their influence on organizational tasks:

> The stereotypical association of men with competence/agency and women with
>
> warmth/communion is challenged when traditional roles are emphasized. This is
>
> particularly the case for those women who endorse progressive beliefs (i.e., support for
>
> affirmative action), suggesting that such beliefs do indeed motivate them to contrast the
>
> stereotype. The stereotype reversal finding supports our hypothesized motivated
>
> resistance effect of women to pervasive or stable traditional roles, at the implicit level.
>
> (de Lemus, Spears, Bukowski, Moya, & Lupiáñez, 2013, p. 114)

Nevertheless, because of negative, outmoded perceptions, some female chefs build

distance between their successful careers and their gender. A renowned American pastry chef,

Christina Tosi, "does not consider her gender as a defining factor in her success, but rather points

out that she worked hard and learned how to excel, irrespective of gender bias" (Koper, 2017, pp.

5-6). As Koper (2017) further points out, this is not a slight to other women, but rather it is the

way women have forged forward to reach their success. In the masculine environment of a

kitchen, being a woman is not a welcomed concept. What is welcomed is someone's skills. Once

these women reach the top of their field, they use this leverage to help other disadvantaged

women succeed. These female chefs "fight for equality once they achieve success and have their

own kitchen. These are strong, tenacious, and powerful women who do not want to… constantly

refer to their gender in their stories of accomplishment" (Koper, 2017, p. 6). It is a view that

women in the restaurant industry want to succeed not because of their gender, but notwithstanding of their gender.

With this being said, feminine characteristics that tend to be ostracized in male-dominated kitchens can instead be repositioned as strengths in these restaurants. "Through accepting differences between men and women leaders and drawing from feminine strengths, our participants believed that they could alter professional kitchens (including those in restaurants and culinary schools) to be more democratic, humanistic settings" (Harris & Giuffre, 2015, p. 161). Leaning into the feminine qualities that are not typically seen in traditional professional kitchens can overhaul negative elements of this environment and make it more inclusive. It does not have to be isolating to lead using traditionally feminine management techniques, and women can be the change they wish to see once they rise to these chef roles and are the managers of the kitchen. Men chefs should also take on certain feminine traits without being regarded as *effeminate* to promote more warmth and the reduction of hostility in the restaurant workplace.

Gender Stereotypes and Family Care

There is also this expectation that stems from traditional gender roles for women to rear and be the predominant ones to raise a family, which, to many women, such as those located in Malaysia, seems to be impossible to balance with having such a demanding career (Md Mubin et al., 2021). Combining restaurant work with being a mother is described by many U.S. chefs as an unharmonious union since these are hugely time-consuming responsibilities that are competing for priority (Harris & Giuffre, 2015). "Understanding this phenomenon may help us understand why, even though women are graduating from culinary schools in similar numbers to men, this does not translate into equal numbers in fine dining restaurants" (Harris & Giuffre, 2015, p. 164).

In Haddaji et al.'s research out of Spain, a few of the women interviewed stated how they cherry-picked their own niches in the food industry "because it presented less barriers and allowed them better advancement or time flexibility" (Haddaji et al., 2017, p. 52) over a standard chef role in a restaurant kitchen; this even means some women went as far as owning their own restaurant to control their work-life balance as well as achieving success. These female chefs sought out a more traditional schedule structure for work/life balance. "All the chefs also agreed that there are gender differences when it comes to household responsibilities and that women have to dedicate more time and are more preoccupied by their family issues" (Haddaji et al., 2017, p. 52). Since falls squarely on the shoulders of women, there is a lack of compatibility with family caretaking and a demanding restaurant job as a chef.

One large solution from this study in Spain was women becoming chef-owners of their own businesses. There were three main reasons why owning a restaurant felt like the best move to achieve their successes: it solved the problem of a work/life balance, they were able to become the boss and dictate the kind of environment they work in, and being a leader gave them autonomy as well as "creativity that they could not attain as employees in other restaurants" (Haddaji et al., 2017, p. 53).

When listening to successful women chefs who made it big domestically in the U.S., they also reiterated what was said in the interviews of Spanish chefs. These women who want to have families have to follow rigid paths to ensure they are both successful in their careers as well as dedicate enough time to their families at home. Some policies are rare but if implemented on larger scales, would greatly benefit many employees in the restaurant industry. Benefits like "paid leave, onsite daycare, and flextime" (Harris & Giuffre, 2015, p. 168) could help curb the burden of being overworked, working while sick, and other issues that fester.

Many of the chefs interviewed in the U.S. spoke about waiting to have kids (Harris & Giuffre, 2015). Out of thirty-three women, "seven of our participants cited forgoing or delaying childbearing as the reason they could remain working in the gastronomic field" (Harris & Giuffre, 2015, p. 177). Delaying the start of a family meant that a woman could get farther on her career path, and would also be able to have more control over her scheduling needs once she has children. There are also views that women cannot be mothers and be dedicated wholly to their job. Two women interviewed spoke dejectedly about how their status as mothers was explicitly the reason they were denied the promotions to being chefs: "Because women are more likely to be tasked with caregiving responsibilities, the reliance on the ideal worker trope disadvantages women in the workplace" (Harris & Giuffre, 2015, p. 169). It is a level of discrimination that still permeates the industry.

What Supports Success as a Female Chef

Many of the women who were studied had achieved the peak of success in their careers, and during their interviews, they highlighted some of the ways that they were able to break down barriers and become female chefs.

Opportunities

Many of the chefs across the studies agreed that having space created and held for them was a huge factor in their success. Effectively, having an open seat at the table is what will bring women into these leadership roles in kitchens. When looking at the industry in Malaysia, not only would it bolster a woman's confidence to grow and counteract any imposter syndrome, but it can also demonstrate that "promotion vacancies [are] assigned based on performance merit and

not on gender" (Md Mubin et al., 2021, p. 106). It improves many facets that block women from climbing the ladder in the restaurant industry and becoming a chef in a sea of male chefs.

Women also feel that their capacity to be in charge is diminished based on the idea that competency is a skill more so linked to the male gender — women in restaurants are patronized and it is assumed they are unable to do a *man's job* like running a kitchen. As reported in the interviews from Spain, many chefs established that "women are given fewer opportunities to make decisions… [which] restrain women's professional evolution. In 'Haute Cuisine', women chefs are expected to be less competent. Consequently, they had always to work more and to prove their ability" (Haddaji et al., 2017, p. 52).

Certain positions are simply not offered to women in the hospitality industry as well. In a study based in Malaysia, the researchers concluded that a focus on creating "equal opportunities on promotion would significantly influence female chefs' career commitment" (Md Mubin et al., 2021, p. 106), and would reinforce their prospects down the road.

Mentorship

Mentorship, with influences from both male and female perspectives, is seen as a top contender for reducing the impacts of the aforementioned barriers to equality (Haddaji et al., 2017). This is a critical tool to help women overcome obstacles and become prepared to be a chef. Those interviewed in Spain stated that "a mentor is someone who gets to know well his mentee, who helps him believing in himself and in his capabilities, and who pushes his career forward" (Haddaji et al., 2017, p. 53). There are plenty of hard and soft skills that a proper mentor will drill into their mentee. Mentorships benefit all young cooks and can help shape them into well-rounded chefs through examples and practice. However, in such a fiercely competitive

industry such as the restaurant industry, many people are vying for a top mentor, so this is a resource that is not always readily available for women to access especially if a male's competitive personality takes this opportunity away from an unconfident woman.

When looking stateside, there was a noted preference to have female mentors. In fact, "[i]t was common for women chefs to mentor each other…and provide warnings about what working in a kitchen was really like, especially in terms of the different expectations of men and women" (Harris & Giuffre, 2015, p. 103). These women have lived experiences that they can pass on to the newer generation of female chefs and can help them learn how to navigate barriers that were oppressive as these mentors made the climb to develop into a chef.

Methodology

The methodology for this working paper is to collect data through secondary research and make qualitative conclusions from analysis and interpretation. This is a mixed-methods research method with primarily qualitative data supporting the conclusions. Sampling data from studies and interviews conducted in Malaysia, Spain, and the United States allows for comparisons and contrasts of female chefs in different worldwide cultures to be made. Sifting through these sources also helps illuminate where there is room for additional studies to research further into the perceived inequalities for women in the restaurant industry.

To gain evidence for the topic at hand, there needed to be an investigation into the research problem of what is blocking women from becoming executive chefs. The studies reviewed were amassed from the Johnson and Wales University Library as well as Google Scholar databases; these databases are an indelible resource because they harbor a variety of peer-reviewed sources from trade and academic journals as well as books. Studies about the

relationship between the restaurant industry and female chefs were sought out through keyword searches. A collection of statistics and quantitative data was also found for some foundational background on graduation rates versus employment rates in management roles.

Secondary research was appropriate for the topic because of the short time constraint of this working paper, and primary research on this topic would need much more time dedicated to finding participants and collecting data. Furthermore, qualitative data was preferred in this working paper because this type of data allows for researchers to collect in-depth, open-ended responses from participants and allows for all kinds of details to be recorded. Qualitative data documents the lived experiences of these women who pursued becoming chefs during their careers.

Findings

Gender roles play a huge part in inequality in the kitchen when it comes to female chefs. Women are presumed to be incompetent in the professional kitchen, and they can only last in a domestic kitchen where their perceived warmth thrives as a homemaker and not a chef. Due to these preconceived notions, women chefs will try to distance their work from their gender as a means of proving their accolades came from their hard work and not from their sex. With a large pressure of family care placed solely on women, it can be nearly impossible to balance time taking care of a family with the incredibly demanding job of a chef overseeing a restaurant. Women have made this work and have found ways to include balance in their work and personal lives, such as by pursuing ownership to reduce negative masculine elements of a kitchen and being in charge of their own schedules.

In addition to finding attainment through becoming chef-owners, a larger number of opportunities must be made for women. In the vein of affirmative action, more opportunities must be made so that there is space for women to occupy as chefs. Breaking into the boys' club of a kitchen requires making seats for female chefs to sit in. Furthermore, mentors are the most indispensable tool to help women navigate the restaurant industry and overcome any barriers or obstacles in their way on the path to becoming a chef.

Limitations and Implications

Even in countries as vastly different as the U.S., Spain, and Malaysia, there are still similar struggles and solutions regarding women in the restaurant industry. Gender roles, and in turn, gender discrimination, permeate many aspects of the restaurant industry, even with conscious efforts like affirmative action. Men and women are still treated differently in a restaurant, and this snowballs into a lack of women running the industry and being underrepresented as chefs.

For the sake of brevity in this paper, the wage gap in the restaurant industry should be further scrutinized in other bodies of research. Pay disparity plays another role as something that can also block success in the restaurant industry. For the Malaysian restaurant industry, the researchers state an explanation that "perceptions of fairness (equality) in personal outcomes and in procedures of decision-making pertaining to rewards allocation (i.e., promotion or salary) positively contributed to female chefs' feeling of commitment in career and career growth in the organization" (Md Mubin et al., 2021, pp. 106-107). Equity in pay led to higher retention and more satisfaction, as well as a drive to continue in the restaurant seeking out promotions into leadership roles. Creating opportunities for women to become chefs, training them for the role

through mentorships and education, and attaining work/life balance is not enough; women

should be fairly compensated for their work as chefs to make a living.

Another concept beyond the scope of this paper would be how women are patronized

versus men in food media. Referring to two equally skilled people who have achieved chef

status, one food writer was quick to label a man, Jaime Lauren, as a chef, but withheld the title

from Amanda Freitag, saying her work simply shows that she is "a talented cook" (Harris &

Giuffre, 2015, p. 66). The semantics and patronizing language describing a woman's cooking

against a man's cooking is something that can be further researched and dissected.

There are several other topics that the women of the restaurant industry are negatively

obstructed by. Future discussions should spend time on intersectionality to see how components

such as race, sexual orientation, and disability divisions further illuminate inequality in the

industry at large and create roadblocks for women trying to become chefs. Sexual harassment in

the restaurant industry is rampant and is another lengthy barrier that would require research

beyond the scope of this paper.

Many of the studies looked at in this paper focused on the perceptions of women and

their personal experiences and observations, and such a focused lens did not include many male

perceptions. More balance would be brought to the conversation with men, especially male

mentors who have championed for and trained women in the restaurant industry to lessen the

gender barriers.

The main studies that were looked at in this paper were also concentrated in three

countries: the United States, Spain, and Malaysia. This population sample does not represent the

world because it is limited to these three countries and their respective cultures, and further

research can and should be done to compare and contrast the experiences of women across the global restaurant industry.

Conclusion

Women do not proportionally fill out chef roles as compared to their male peers within the three countries under study. Even with equivalent graduation rates from prestigious culinary programs, there are many barriers along the course of a woman's career that prevents some women from finding success and becoming a chef in the restaurant industry. If women are graduating and enrolling in numbers on par with men, then these same numbers should be evidenced in the gender divide of chefs — but it is not. Old-fashioned thinking that pins women as unable to withstand the heat of a professional kitchen still saturates the public's perception of female chefs, causing female chefs to distance themselves from the heavy, negative perceptions of their gender. Female chefs still need to advocate for their female peers, and they should "be open and willing to help foster that change by giving some voice to the important role they play as renowned women chefs" (Koper, 2017, p. 6). There is also a lack of opportunities, so women choose to create these opportunities by becoming their own bosses and promoting themselves.

Countless policies can be implemented to make the industry more hospitable for women; for example, restaurants codifying benefits with mothers in mind would give equity across the sexes as well. Work-family balance policies would positively impact the lives of parents and those without children, and these benefits are even seen "as necessary strategies to recruit and retain talented individuals" (Harris & Giuffre, 2015, p. 201). It would be reducing a struggle that primarily impacts mothers in the restaurant industry and prohibits their upward mobility within the business, but improving work and life balance would also benefit all employees. Chefs from

across the three countries studied in this paper agreed about the significant impact of mentors,

especially female ones, had to break down barriers and break the glass ceiling for women to

reach the top of the industry and become a chef.

References

de Lemus, S., Moya, M., Lupiáñez, J., & Bukowski, M. (2013). Men in the office, women in the

kitchen? Contextual dependency of gender stereotype activation in Spanish women. *Sex*

Roles, *70*(11–12), 468–478. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-013-0328-6

de Lemus, S., Spears, R., Bukowski, M., Moya, M., & Lupiáñez, J. (2013). Reversing implicit

gender stereotype activation as a function of exposure to traditional gender roles. *Social*

Psychology, *44*(2), 109–116. https://doi.org/10.1027/1864-9335/a000140

Haddaji, M., Albors-Garrigós, J., & García-Segovia, P. (2017). Women chefs' experience:

Kitchen barriers and success factors. *International Journal of Gastronomy and Food*

Science, *9*, 49–54. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijgfs.2017.06.004

Harris, D. A., & Giuffre, P. (2015). *Taking the heat: Women chefs and gender inequality in the*

professional kitchen. Rutgers University Press.

IPEDS Data Center. (2021). Nces.ed.gov. Retrieved April 28, 2022, from

https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/datacenter/institutionprofile.aspx?unitId=190503

Koper, H. (2017). Head chefs versus CEOs: An analysis of the women in charge. *Graduate*

Journal of Food Studies, *04*(02). https://doi.org/10.21428/92775833.a752c0a3

Md Mubin, S. I. I., Hemdi, M. A., & Isjkarim, S. (2021). Factors affecting career advancement of

female chefs. *Journal of Tourism, Hospitality & Culinary Arts*, *13*(3), 99-109.

U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2022, January 20). *Labor force statistics from the current*

population survey. https://www.bls.gov/cps/cpsaat11.htm