



## Open to Good Jobs: Now is the Time to Improve Equity and Job Quality in Restaurant Work

Hosted by the Aspen Institute Economic Opportunities Program

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### Description

Restaurants and their workers have been hit particularly hard by the COVID-19 pandemic. Before the crisis, food and drinking establishments were an important part of the business fabric in communities across the country, and these businesses employed over 12 million people. But as food businesses lost business, millions of restaurant workers lost work. The most recent US Bureau of Labor Statistics report shows employment in restaurants and bars has been cut in half, with industry observers estimating even greater job loss. And among those who continue to work, many still endure limited hours, low wages, and poor benefits that have characterized the industry for far too long.

Food and drinking establishments have been an important source of employment for women and people of color, who are over-represented in the industry's lower paid occupations. As recent events demand attention to systems of racial injustice, we must acknowledge the interconnection of racial justice and economic justice. As we start to emerge from this crisis, can we reimagine restaurants, and restaurant work, so that workers, businesses, and communities all thrive?

In this conversation we talk about ideas for business practices, public policies, and partnerships, including an innovative public/private effort that's addressing the interests that workers, small business owners, and communities all share in a thriving restaurant sector.

Learn more about this event: [as.pn/foodjobs](https://aspeninstitute.org/foodjobs)

### Speakers

#### **Nikki M.G. Cole**

National Policy Campaign Director, One Fair Wage

Nikki M.G. Cole is the national policy campaign director of One Fair Wage. Nikki worked in the hospitality industry from the time she was a child, through high school, college, and post-college. A former tipped worker in the DC Metropolitan area, Nikki personally knows the financial, physical, and emotional challenges that come along with working in sub-minimum wage industries. She began

organizing restaurant workers in 2009 with the Restaurant Opportunities Center of Washington, DC. There she learned the basics of workplace organizing, policy advocacy, and base-building through political education and leadership development. Later she worked in deep coalition as the executive director of DC Jobs with Justice, where along with ROC-DC and many other community, labor, faith, and student organizations, they were able to win historic legislative advances for workers in DC, including paid sick days for all, wage theft protections, and an increased minimum wage. She also has eight years of experience with developing grassroots leaders to run for local office and engaging in progressive grassroots electoral campaigns.

### **Saru Jayaraman**

President, One Fair Wage; Director, Food Labor Research Center, University of California, Berkeley

Saru Jayaraman is an academic at UC Berkeley and president of One Fair Wage, a national service workers' association. She was named one of CNN's "Top 10 Visionary Women," a White House Champion of Change, a James Beard Foundation Leadership Award winner, and the *San Francisco Chronicle* "Visionary of the Year." Saru authored *Behind the Kitchen Door* (Cornell University Press) and *Forked: A New Standard for American Dining* (Oxford University Press) and has appeared on MSNBC, HBO, PBS, CBS, CNN, and at the Golden Globes.

### **Mutale Kanyanta**

Owner, LOCALS Food

Mutale Kanyanta is the owner of a business called LOCALS, located in Fort Greene, Brooklyn, New York. Kanyanta is an immigrant who has lived in that community for 28 years. In that time, it transformed from a food desert to a rapidly gentrifying neighborhood, in which a large number of its Black working-class residents were displaced by an affluent, mostly white-collar demographic. The remaining working-class community has been left in poverty, feeling marginalized, and with limited access to affordable, non-processed foods. Located at the intersection of these two worlds, Kanyanta saw the need to repair the widening schism between the two. His solution was to create LOCALS, a new form of food business, one that centers the need of people and the planet alongside the pursuit of profit. LOCALS functions as a cafe/community kitchen and grocery store during the day. In the evenings, it is a community and event space with the programming around the culinary arts, food justice, and events that highlight conversations around community, equity, and sustainability, using food. In the near future, it will offer culinary arts education to the community as a gateway to sustainable employment.

### **Dan Simons**

Co-Owner, Farmers Restaurant Group

Dan Simons is the co-owner of the innovative Farmers Restaurant Group — majority owned by American family farmers — with a mission to earn farmers a larger share of the food dollar while delivering thoughtfully sourced, scratch-made food and exceptional hospitality. Farmers Restaurant Group operates seven restaurants and one distillery throughout the DC, MD, VA, and PA area and most recently pivoted their business model to include a Founding Farmers Market + Grocery, selling everything from prepared dinners to hand sanitizer made in their DC distillery, Founding Spirits. Passionate about the health of the planet, Simons founded the non-profit Our Last Straw, a business-led coalition working to reduce our reliance on single-use plastics, and is on the Advisory Board of Conscious Capitalism DC.

## Moderator

### Maureen Conway

Vice President, The Aspen Institute; Executive Director, Economic Opportunities Program

Maureen Conway serves as Vice President at the Aspen Institute and as Executive Director of the Institute's [Economic Opportunities Program](#) (EOP). EOP works to expand individuals' opportunities to connect to quality work, start businesses, and build economic stability that provides the freedom to pursue opportunity.

## About

The Economic Opportunities Program's Opportunity in America discussion series is taking a pause as we all do what we can to slow the spread of COVID-19. But the conversations about the changing landscape of economic opportunity in the US and implications for individuals, families, and communities across the country remain vitally important. We hope you will participate as we bring our discussions to you in virtual formats, and we look forward to your feedback. We are grateful to the Ford Foundation, Prudential Financial, Walmart, the Mastercard Center for Inclusive Growth, and the Surdna Foundation for their support of this series. Learn more: [as.pn/opportunityinamerica](https://as.pn/opportunityinamerica)

The Economic Opportunities Program advances strategies, policies, and ideas to help low- and moderate-income people thrive in a changing economy. Follow us on social media and join our mailing list to stay up-to-date on publications, blog posts, events, and other announcements. Learn more: [as.pn/eop](https://as.pn/eop)

## Transcript

### Maureen Conway (00:00:00)

Good afternoon and welcome. I'm Maureen Conway, Vice President at The Aspen Institute and Executive Director of the institute's Economic Opportunities Program. I am delighted to welcome everybody to today's conversation, which we've called "Open to Good Jobs? Now is the Time to Improve Equity and Job Quality in Restaurant Work". This conversation is part of the Economic Opportunities Program, ongoing Opportunity in America discussion series, in which we explore the changing landscape of economic opportunity in the United States and the implications for individuals, families, and communities all across the country.

I want to note our deep appreciation for the support of the Ford Foundation, Prudential Financial, Walmart, The Surdna Foundation, and the Mastercard Center for Inclusive Growth for their support of the Opportunity in America series. Our work at the Economic Opportunities Program focuses on advancing a more just and inclusive economy by expanding individuals' opportunities to connect to quality work, to participate in business ownership, and to build the economic stability that's necessary to be able to pursue opportunity. Our current moment challenges this goal, as we see record shattering levels of unemployment, widespread food insecurity, and the ongoing trauma of our racial divides. The intertwined challenges of racial and economic justice will be part and parcel of our conversation today around restaurant work.

We have a fabulous set of people to talk about restaurant work today, and how we can make it better so that workers, businesses, and communities can all thrive and enjoy good food. Before we start, I want to quickly review our technology. All attendees are muted. Closed caption is available. If you'd like to use that service, just click the button at the bottom of your screen. We welcome your questions. Please do use the Q&A box on the bottom of the Zoom window for questions or comments. We also encourage you to tweet about this conversation if you would like to bring the conversation onto Twitter. Our hashtag is talk opportunity.

If you have any technical issues during this webinar, you can chat with Tony Mastria or email us at [EOP.Program@AspenInstitute.org](mailto:EOP.Program@AspenInstitute.org). This webinar is being recorded and will be shared after the webinar via email and it will be posted on our website. Before I talk to all the panelists, we have a special quick guest. My colleague Corby Kummer, who runs the institute's Food and Society Program, is joining us briefly to share just a few words on his program's work, to assemble a guide, and to really kind of promote practices that are going to help keep workers safe in the age of COVID-19. Corby, thanks for joining us.

**Corby Kummer (00:03:09)**

Thank you.

**Maureen Conway (00:03:10)**

And sharing about what you're up to.

**Corby Kummer (00:03:10)**

Thank you, Maureen. Maureen is our leader at The Aspen Institute, and everything to do with equity and job quality. I was very delighted as the executive director Aspen's Food and Society Program to get to tell you all about our safety first worker safety initiatives. We were lucky enough to get support from The Laurie M. Tisch Illumination Fund, and incredible guidance from the New York City Department of Health, the Center for Disease Control, and many of the organizations. James Beard Foundation, World Central Kitchen, and Off Their Plate to assemble what we hope is an authoritative and really practical and useful guide for back of house workers, to keep themselves safe, to understand how to keep managers and customers safe.

In fact, right now, every week, we are having meetings about server safety and diner safety. We're hoping to formulate a diner code of conduct the World Central Kitchen and James Beard Foundation and our partners will ask all restaurants to get the diners to sign onto when they enter the restaurant and make reservations. We'll have a lot about server safety. We're very far along in that. We'll be releasing those in the next two or three weeks. The work that everyone on this call does, on this webinar does, it's so inspiring to us. We are here to serve all of you. Thank you, Maureen. I look forward to all of your remarks.

Great. Thanks, Corby. We are really excited about that guide. I'll just also say that in addition to being able to find it on the Food and Society website, we've also included it in our Job Quality Tools Library with all our other resources to promote job quality and worker safety, in particularly the age of COVID-19. Wonderful resource. Thank you, Corby. Now, I'm really thrilled to introduce our panelists and start today's conversation. I'm just going to quickly say names and titles. We made their bios available on our website, and I really just want to quickly get into the conversation.

**Maureen Conway (00:05:30)**

Today, we're joined by Nikki M.G. Cole, National Policy Campaign Director at One Fair Wage. Saru Jararaman, President of One Fair Wage and Director of the Food Labor Research Center at the University of California, Berkeley. Mutale Kanyanta, owner of Locals Food in Brooklyn, New York, and Dan Simons, co-owner of Farmers Restaurant Group. Welcome to you all, and Saru, let me just jump in and start with you. You've been working on wages and working conditions for restaurant workers for quite a while. In preparing for this event, I couldn't help but think back to the event we did back in 2013, when we talked about the low tipped minimum wage of \$2.13 an hour, and so many people in our audience were shocked that it was so low, that it hadn't gone up for over 20 years. It's still so low, it still hasn't gone up. But since then, you founded One Fair Wage, and you've just been doing incredible work. Just tell us a little bit about what led you to found One Fair Wage, and what you've been working on.

**Saru Jararaman (00:06:46)**

Thanks, Maureen. Thank you to The Aspen Institute for putting this on, and to Nikki and Dan and Mutale for joining the conversation. I really appreciate the opportunity to lift up these issues. I think given the moment and just the incredible demand that the country is making to reckon with racial equity and its history, its long history of structural racism. I think it's really important to understand the history of this issue as well, that we're going to spend some time talking about. The restaurant industry had been, before the pandemic, one of the nation's largest and fastest growing industries. But unfortunately, was the absolute lowest paying employer in the United States.

There are great employers in this group that weren't part of that group. But on the whole, the restaurant industry has been the lowest paying employer. The data and research has shown that that has been due to the money, power, and influence of a trade lobby called the National Restaurant Association, which has represented the chains. If you look at its history, its history does date back all the way to emancipation. When it first demanded the right to hire newly free slaves, not pay them anything, and have them live entirely on tips.

Tips at the time were new to America. They had just come from Europe. In futility Europe, Feudal Europe, tips really developed as an extra or a bonus that aristocrats gave to serve some bustles, but always on top of a wage. The idea of tipping as wage replacement was mutated in the United States to become a replacement for wages as a result of slavery. After slavery, the restaurant lobby wanted the right to hire black people, mostly black women at the time actually, and not pay them anything, and have them live entirely on tips. Which again, was not the way tips were originally intended.

That became law in 1938 as part of the New Deal, when everybody in the country got the right to a minimum wage for the first time, except for groups of black workers. Farm workers, domestic workers, and tipped restaurant workers, who were mostly black women at the time, were left out. By the way, the other groups left out at the time were incarcerated workers because of an exception to the 13 amendment that allows for slavery in the case of incarceration. They can be paid nothing while they work inside. People with disabilities, youths in many states. You see this large exception to the minimum wage largely based on race, and our history of structural racism in the United States.

Fast forward to today, today prior to the pandemic, you had a workforce of millions of tipped workers across the country, 70% of whom are women. Overwhelmingly working not in fine dining, but in casual restaurants like IHOPs and Denny's and Applebee's, struggling with the highest rates of economic instability of any industry, and literally the highest rate of sexual harassment of any industry in the United States. These were mostly single mothers struggling to feed their families on tips. We used to call it living tip to mouth.

Many of these women who worked in IHOP and Denny's would tell us, "I feed my kids based on the tips that I get in my shift. I eat the family meal. That's how I get my food, I eat the family meal that they provide prior to the shift. I work two or three jobs. I live in my car." That was the struggling. That was the basic level of survival prior to the pandemic. Like you said, we were making actually some progress on this issue. We won the issue in D.C., we won the issue in Maine, we won the issue in Michigan. Voters overwhelmingly agree that people should be paid a full minimum wage. But in every case, the restaurant association reversed these wins.

It wasn't until July of last year that we won the issue in the U.S. House of Representatives that we were starting to see some momentum for change in New York and other states. Then the pandemic hit, 10 million restaurant workers across the country lost their jobs. We've seen an overwhelmingly horrific experience for workers, particularly when it comes to unemployment insurance. Workers across the country are saying, "We can't access unemployment insurance because we're being told our subminimum wage of \$2 or \$3 plus tips is too low to meet the minimum threshold to qualify in our state for unemployment insurance." We've heard that from thousands of workers, particularly workers of color who tend to work in more casual restaurants where their cash tips, their cash tips are not counted. Often, their bosses didn't report those tips.

Thousands and thousands of workers of color are telling us, "I can't access unemployment insurance because I earn cash tips, or because I was off the books. Therefore, I can't get benefits." Or because they're telling me, "My \$3 wage plus tips was too little to qualify." There's enormous frustration about this issue, and I do just want to point out two things. There's some really great signals of hope. One is that there always were seven states that had gotten rid of this system - California, Oregon, Washington, Nevada, Minnesota, Montana, and Alaska. Workers in those states have had a very, very different experience during the pandemic than the workers in the 43 states. They are getting unemployment insurance measured on a \$15 wage in many of those states, plus tips. They are not having as many problems accessing unemployment insurance because they didn't rely entirely on tips for their income.

Those states, I want to point out, had... California has the largest and fastest growing restaurant industry in the country. None of the chains that fought these issues in the past were actually suffering in those states. In fact, they were all growing faster in California than the rest of the country. Small business was growing faster. There is a hopeful kind of pathway forward that we've seen in these other states, and now there's a hopeful pathway forward across the country. Now we've seen with the pandemic just a beautiful willingness, dialogue between employers and workers to really come together and see if we couldn't reinvent the restaurant industry, reimagine the way we do things everywhere, not just in those seven states. Because we've seen that what existed prior to the pandemic was not tenable, and we need to reimagine what we're doing together.

### **Maureen Conway (00:13:20)**

Yeah, great. Thank you, Saru. Dan, let me come to you. You own a restaurant, and you've been living a little closer to a lot of this. You're well known in the district and D.C. area for Founding Farmers, but we have a national audience. Maybe tell a little bit about your restaurant, and just kind of what it's about, and give folks a sense of it a little bit. Then talk a little bit about how you thought about what are sustainability practices, if you will, as you apply them to your workforce. How you think about designing jobs.

### **Dan Simons (00:14:01)**

Sure. Thanks Maureen, and thanks to The Aspen Institute, and thanks for having me. I think conversations like this are so important. I think as Saru said, in this moment, the one thing that is always important in any moment is communication. I think on the topics that we're covering today, folks that traditionally

think that they are opposed to one another, if we can remind people that communication includes listening ideally, twice as much as we talk, that there's a lot of common ground here. I may be a restaurant owner, and someone else may be a worker, advocate. Yet I'm a worker advocate, and yet a worker advocate may also have experienced restaurant work. There's a lot of common ground. For me, I've got seven restaurants. Probably the most notable thing is that the restaurants are majority owned by American family farmers.

We've got our own distillery, we've got our own bakery, we cook from scratch. We run our company, we have a phrase internally, through the eyes of the farmer. We built our company specifically to advocate on behalf of American family farmers. We advocate, we buy their product, we're a market maker for their product. We try to influence our customers on where else they shop, and we try to influence frankly our whole industry on where they buy, the impact of what they buy. For us, that through the eyes of the farmer speaks to how we run the whole company. Another way you could say that is conscious capitalism. Just so there's no doubt about where I stand, the pure, unbridled, unregulated, unrestricted capitalism is a big, serious problem. Anybody who tells you it isn't is both probably really rich and a liar.

I think about conscious capitalism as a remarkably good force for change, and a powerful force for change. We need jobs and we need an economy. We just need it fair, or even how about just a bit more fair? We, by caring about our community and caring about our American family farmers, we care about the planet. We do all sorts of sustainability things. If this was a webinar in green issues, I could go on and on and on. But in our company, I think because of the culture of the company and what's in our DNA, putting mission over profit as a goal to generate longterm profit, it works.

I think we're an example that that recipe can work. You don't always have to try to maximize your profit every quarter at someone else's expense. You can actually do what farmers do, which is play the long game, the multi-generational game. Part of sustainability, I think, is a company that is still here tomorrow. If you want to be here tomorrow and you want to be here next year, you might want to treat your diners and treat your workers and treat your business in an equal way. Those are sort of the three legs of the stool that I see, so I try to guide any of our conversations to that balanced approach. Because if we just take one of those legs of the stool and forget the other two, no, a wobbly stool is pretty useless for anybody who tries to sit in it.

With our company, we have done incredibly well with gender parity, paid parity, people of color in positions of power. The reason I bring that up is not just today's moment, but when you want to end up having fair and equal wages, fair and equal treatment for people, if you can get people up the ladder who represent the people that they manage, you end up with much better dialogue. I happen to be in major cities with my restaurants, and so our tip workers really earn quite a good living, and I think aren't exactly necessarily indicative of some of the problems that we might talk about today. But I think that to find out if your workers are happy, they have to have a voice.

For your workers to have a voice, they really need managers who look like them and who have lived their experience, because that's what empowers their voice. We've done incredibly well in our company with women, women of color. We haven't done as well with men of color in management positions, so we still have ways to go. We have things to work on. I bring that up to say, again, it's communication. It's real looking in the mirror. It's saying where we're doing well or where we can go forward. Thanks for giving me the chance to introduce myself a bit, and I'll turn it back to you.

### **Maureen Conway (00:18:49)**

Yeah, thank you, thank you. I think that was really great. It's interesting you brought up the three legs, the workers, the investors, the customers. You have to make these things work together. I think Mutale, you have a similar, maybe even a broader multi-stakeholder way of thinking about your business and

your goals for your business. Your time to lend different businesses with grocery, café, community space. Can you say just a little bit about why, from a business and a community perspective, you were thinking about this mix of business lines within the space you're picturing?

**Mutale Kanyanta (00:19:32)**

Sure. Thank you very much for having me on the conversation. I'm a third year resident of a community called Fort Greene in Brooklyn. In the time period that I've lived there, it's transitioned to being a very affluent community. It's gone from being a blue collar community to a white collar community. The location that my store is at, I'm actually the property owner as well. The location of the store is actually on the cusp of these two communities, which are drifting further and further apart. My mission in opening the business in terms of being a person who is involved in the community was to try and make fresh food, non-processed food accessible to the predominantly working class community, who are across the street from where the business is.

Up until that point, Fort Greene had been a food desert. Once it started to transition to being a little bit more affluent, grocery stores or the small store restaurants that were being designed were for the more affluent members of our community. I thought that there was a need to rectify that, because that also has an impact on the health outcomes of that community. I also wanted to have a community space that was affordable. As an entrepreneur, my decision for that was the idea that I wasn't going to be able to compete with the fine dining restaurants that were in the neighborhood, because I'm an entrepreneur. I'm not a restaurateur. I see this business as a food business.

I wanted to create a space where overlooked chefs who are diverse, whether it's women, whether it's queer chefs, or whether it's black chefs, would have a space in a community that was known for having really great restaurants. I had to figure out, I owned the building, but I still have to pay a mortgage. I needed to figure out how to create multiple incomes to support the mortgage that would have to be paid out of commercial space. I decided to also bring in the access of CSAs to the members of our community, and I'm still really building that, what that will look like. But the idea for me was, how do we connect our community who don't go to the green markets, to the food, access to fresh food from farmers? That was really the idea for setting up the business, both as an entrepreneur and as a member of the community.

**Maureen Conway (00:22:25)**

Great, thank you. Nikki, I'm going to come to you. You've had a long career in restaurant work, and now you spend your time organizing restaurant workers. We've heard some different perspectives on different kinds of restaurants, so tell... and different kinds of worker experiences. Tell us a little bit about what you see as kind of the upsides and the downsides of working in restaurants, and what you're hearing from workers now.

**Nikki Cole (00:22:55)**

Hi, everyone. Thank you for having me join you today. It's a pleasure to be a part of this important and innovative thought circle here. Again, my name is Nikki. I've worked in hospitality for almost 20 years. My heart is racing a little bit every time I have to talk about my experience in the hospitality industry, because it's more than half of my life. It's the majority of my life, and then I've spent the last 10 to 12 years advocating for changes in the hospitality industry. A little bit about the upside. In my personal experience in the hospitality industry, you don't work in hospitality for 20 years if you don't love it. It runs in my family, so it's a tradition.

My grandmother was a hostess and a server, and then worked in hotels and ran restaurants inside of her hotels. She had a bed and breakfast. Just growing up, I was inoculated in being in beautiful places, taking care of people, having fun events, creating ambience. That's what I love. I love being in beautiful spaces and serving, and talking about delicious, incredible food. Working in the hospitality industry is one of, as Dan was talking about, one of the coolest places where you're on the forefront and the cutting edge of what's happening. Mutale too, about what's happening in food.

You get to see firsthand working in the hospitality industry how incredible dishes are made. I know how to make incredible food because of my experience in the hospitality industry. Being able to cook that gourmet stuff at home, that most people don't have unless they take a class or what have you. Also, the experience of community, from when you have regular guests all the time. People that you get to take care of, that you see in your neighborhood walking around. Restaurants, working in hospitality, it's just such a big and important part of American culture, the melting pot that is American culture, and getting to live that and practice it.

Those are some of the upsides, the best upsides of working in the hospitality industry. Also, it's an industry where everybody works, everybody works. Whether you have a high school degree or you don't have one. You could have a PhD or not have anything. It's a place and a melting pot really of opportunity for everyone. That's what's really beautiful about it. Challenges though, the downsides, why have I spent 10 years organizing? I experienced so much sexual harassment and assault in the restaurant industry, just on a regular basis. Working in restaurants was the first thing that I did as a 15-year-old girl -young lady.

You grow up in that environment of it being normal for men that you work with, customers, to touch your arm, smack you on the butt, call you sweetie. Tip you more if you're more flirtatious. Get better shifts or better sections if you are silent and cooperative with management, and not raise things. You learn that, and then for me, it led me to be in dangerous situations where I thought that was normal. Over my lifetime, after being assaulted, I think about it all the time? Why, why, why, why, why, why, and how? I just keep over and over coming back to oppression, and the oppression of myself, my people, yeah, of myself and my people.

I've always come back to the culture that exists when you work on a subminimum wage. In Washington, D.C., it's like \$3.33. I think it went up to \$4.44, I think recently. It's going to go up to \$5. But basically, when you work on that in a city where rent is, for a studio apartment, \$1300 to \$1500 or higher. Not to mention transportation costs, the cost to eat if you have a child. Utilities and bills on top of that. Savings if you ever want to have fun. It puts you in a situation where you literally just have to work all the time. Even when you work all the time, somehow for me, I was always in a position of still juggling my bills.

I could never feel security that I was able to pay things. I was always juggling, and some things I had to let go. I let go of repaying college loans. Now I have bad credit. Let go paying other credit card bills. Things started impacting me financially, so I felt like I'm never going to get ahead. No matter how hard I work, I'm not going to get ahead, or I keep trying. If I just keep working as hard as possible, maybe it'll happen one day. But years and years have passed, and I'm literally in the same situation, never getting ahead, never having any savings.

That level of oppression and self-doubt is a part, for me, that was really challenging of working in the industry. Men have the same thing working in the industry if you are a tipped person. In this society, if you are a man, you're supposed to be a provider. You're supposed to be powerful, but you are stuck in this situation oftentimes where you cannot get ahead. Where your race or your accent or the way that you look determines whether you're going to get a promotion, or move from being a bar back or a busser into a bartender, or something into management.

There's a lot of stereotypes that seep into our minds and our narrative that impact who we think we are, and also who employers think we are, and make their hiring and promotion decisions accordingly. That

level of oppression shaping how somebody feels about themselves. When you work in a situation like that and you oftentimes don't have regular political education about the system or how you can be an active democratic person and effectuate your situation. Or if you don't come from a public or a private school that teaches you that you are worth something, and you have power, and you can advocate and organize and vote in order to make a difference or negotiate.

Then you have the mentality of, I take what I'm given, and I'm going to give that back out. I'm going to give that pain back out to other people, because I'm angry and I don't know how to channel it. It manifests in all different types of ways. Verbal abuse in the restaurant industry, again, sexual harassment and assault in the industry. Lack of paid sick days or basic dignified benefits that a lot of other industries have for people. The cumulative effect of the lack of basic human benefits, plus the culture that comes from the imbalance of culture with low wages is the most challenging.

Now that the COVID pandemic is happening, I'm hearing that more and more from workers. Their stories of what they're fed up with. They're hearing the same things. They're frustrated that they're not able to get unemployment insurance because they're making a subminimum wage. They're frustrated that they're not able to take advantage of paid family leave or paid sick days because they didn't have those benefits. Their employers are not paying them out. People are scared and frustrated and angry right now.

Workers are being called back to work in some places where there are no safety protocols, or training about what's going to be different. Workers are walking out on the job because of this. They're coming to legal clinics, they're trying to learn their rights and figure out what to do in these situations, and reimagine. They're going out to protest on the streets right now because they're angry about what's happening structurally, racially, economically, health wise in this country right now.

### **Maureen Conway (00:32:58)**

Right. Nikki, thank you so much for sharing all that. That was really amazing. I will just say personally, I worked in the restaurant industry, but it was 30 years ago. At this point, I can remember it with the little rose colored glass on it. But you just reminded me of all the things that were also really hard about it, and the way it... I just really appreciate you sharing all of that, and unpacking that full experience. It's just still shocking that how much hasn't changed. It's really, really shocking. Dan, I'm coming to you next. I realize, I'm looking at the clock and I can see there's lots of questions, that's what I'm looking at over here, that are already coming in.

I wanted to ask you though a little bit about safety, how you're keeping your workers safe. Obviously this is very top of mind for us now with the COVID-19 epidemic and how we keep workers safe. But I also want to ask you what your practices are for keeping workers safe in terms of harassment and all those issues that Nikki brought up. I remember when I was a server, I was really, really lucky a couple of times that I had a manager that rescued me basically. I'm just curious how you're dealing with that issue in your staff practices as well.

### **Dan Simons (00:34:40)**

First, I want to say, Nikki, I hear you. I hear your words. I feel what you're saying, and nobody should go through that. I wish it really meant something for me to say, "I'm sorry you went through that." But what really would mean something is if I said, "Not only am I sorry that you went through that, I'm sorry lots of people go through it. We all need to work together to change it." It's not going to fix it overnight. There's nothing we're going to fix overnight, but we can sure as hell make things better tomorrow than today, and the next day, and the next day.

So much of this conversation is about wage and wage structure. Let me just say, I think that's important and we should address it. But it doesn't matter how much money you pay someone per hour. If their boss doesn't look like them, doesn't think that they are fundamentally equal, doesn't listen to them, and is the kind of person who assaults and offends and ignores, then just adjusting wages doesn't solve that. I do think that solutions are about recipes and creating confidence in someone's wage, in their income, so they're not vulnerable or victim related, or so vulnerable with just wages, is one step towards more empowerment. But I hear that story, those life stories from Nikki. I think to myself, if her boss was a woman, would it have gone down like that?

If her boss was a woman of color, would it have gone down like that? I'm not letting all women off the hook, and I'm not letting all people of color off the hook. But if we just go with the data and the statistics, the stories that we hear would happen a lot less. What can we do? I know what am I doing in my restaurants, your question Maureen, of what am I doing to keep my workers safe? I'm ensuring that the people who are in power are connected to the workers. I don't know of a better way to do it. I see questions in this chat stream, what can we do to help workers? What can restaurateurs do in their company? Promote people who look like your workers into management and leadership positions.

When you do that, I'll tell you what happens. Sexual harassment claims go down. Claims of discrimination go down. More talent rises to the top. All of a sudden, you think it's hard to find restaurant managers, but what you'll realize is you're only looking at one section of the population because you didn't know how to look at someone earning X dollars, or with X background, or with X income. You didn't know how to see them as a leader because people hire in their own image. You need a mentor that doesn't look like you, and you need to have the courage to promote people who don't look like you, so they can hire and promote people who look like them.

I can give you a whole list of what I'm doing. We actually released out to the public our 50 page manual of pandemic related safety, and how we're using electrostatic sprayers, and how the training that we're doing for our staff, and how we're balancing calling people back when they get paid more on unemployment. And they want to know the environment is safe, and how much are they going to earn at work when the restaurants are barely doing any sales?

I could go on and on about what we're doing, but I think I've put that information out there. I'm happy to share that link to that document, and it can help other restaurants do things in a safe way. But I think mental safety, mental health and the safety of a culturally safe work environment. Essentially, work on that. That solves the physical safety in so many ways. I know time is limited, but that's what was going through my mind when I heard Nikki.

### **Maureen Conway (00:38:39)**

Yeah, and I can see Saru wants to get in here, so I will go to you next. But I also want to say a word or two about High Road Kitchens as well.

### **Saru Jararaman (00:38:47)**

Sure. Dan, you're being humble and you're not lifting up another great thing that you're doing right now, which is changing your wage structure. I do want to uplift Dan, because Dan was somebody who we weren't always on the same side of this issue. We really talked over the last year. As he said, it's about communication. We got to know each other, we learned from one another. Dan, on top of all the safety and promoting people of color and women, which is so critical. On top of that, he is also moving to pay people a full minimum wage with tips on top.

I do want to say, it is absolutely essential to promote more people of color and women. But on the issue of sexual harassment, our years and years and years of research have shown that the number one thing that actually does reduce sexual harassment is making sure to pay everybody full minimum wage, so that a mostly female workforce of tipped workers is not reliant on tips as a portion of their base wage. In fact, the data is so strong on that, the seven states, I'll say them again because people asked, were saying in the chat it went so fast. California, Oregon, Washington, Nevada, Minnesota, Montana, and Alaska had required a full minimum wage with tips on top, have one half the rate of sexual harassment in the industry as the 43 states with a subminimum wage for tipped workers.

The reason for that is that in most of the country, when you have a subminimum wage, 70% of tip workers are women. As I said, they're mostly women working in casual restaurants. They're single moms feeding their kids on tips. They are told in large part by managers, and unfortunately we've heard this from both male and female managers. I'm sure Nikki can speak to this too, that say, "Dress more sexy. Show more cleavage. Wear tighter clothing so that you can make more money in tips. Because as long as tips is your primary source of income, you are going to have to kind of sell yourself." There's just reams and reams and reams, years of data now that shows that unfortunately, tipping and service is not correlated. That unfortunately, tipping is correlated with the gender and race of the server.

If you're a woman, you make more money in tips if you touch the person or allow yourself to be touched. If you're a man, you make less money if you allow... if you touch. But you always make more money as a man, especially a white man, as a server. Even if you're working alongside an equally competent, equally good server who is a woman of color, she will always make less money in tips. Generally, just having the portion of the base wage be reliant on tips is subjecting people like Nikki to the biases of customers and to harassment. We know that moving to a full minimum wage cuts that in half, in fat.

When you couple that with the things that Dan is talking about, promoting people of color, that's the ideal situation. I want to respond to one of the comments, the questions that came up. I see there's a restaurant owner with us who said, "I can't raise wages for the front. That would create disparity with the back." I want to share one of the biggest reasons why employers and workers are coming together and aligning, like Dan and us and many others actually. There are many other restaurant owners around the country that we weren't in conversation with prior to the pandemic, that we're suddenly in conversation with. It's because as we're reinventing what restaurants look like, there's a desire not only to get rid of these biases of tipping that we just talked about. There's also a desire to create more equity between front and back.

We got a law passed in congress in 2018 that says if you pay everybody the full minimum wage, tips can be shared with all non-management employees in the restaurant. Just for those that are not steeped in the industry, in states that have a subminimum wage, tips cannot be shared with kitchen staff. But we passed a law in congress that said if you do pay everybody a full minimum wage, including servers, tips can be shared with the kitchen staff. There can be more equity between front and back. The beautiful vision ideal world that we're now working on with many restaurants including Dan is this world in which the front and the back are equally diverse. Because until now, the front in many fine dining places had been mostly white. Back had been mostly people of color. But if you both diversify and create one wage and tip sharing, you allow for cross training between front and back.

You allow for a more unified team between front and back. You actually can afford it as a restaurant owner because you are bringing up the front, but then equalizing the incomes by sharing the tips. For those that don't understand what I'm talking about, I'm really happy to share even financial data and tools that we've created, that show how this is possible and profitable. But the most important thing I wanted to lift up that Maureen mentioned is that we've not only created the tools to help employers figure this path out, we've now created grants and cash programs. We worked with Governor Newsom in California to launch what's called High Road Kitchens, where we're providing anywhere from \$15,000 to \$25,000 cash grants to restaurants that commit to going to higher wages, greater equity.

They rehire workers and repurpose themselves as community kitchens feeding thousands. Now, we're about to launch this in New York and Detroit and Boston, where we... and actually providing it to restaurants in other parts of the country, where we're able to provide up to \$30,000, \$35,000 to restaurants, cash grants, not loans, to restaurants that want to work with us to move to a one wage tip sharing, more equitable system. Now is the moment, as people are kind of reinventing from scratch to think about an entirely new compensation model.

**Maureen Conway (00:44:42)**

Great. Mutale, I want to come to you and just ask you a quick question. Then we're going to do our lightning round. We're sort of working questions in as we go along here, but I saw some questions about restaurant associations and what's wrong with them. You became involved with RAISE, and I was just wondering if you wanted to... Restaurants Advancing Industry Standards and Employment. I was wondering if you just wanted to talk about what you were looking for in a restaurant association, and what's the conversation among restaurant owners who are in RAISE? If you could just talk about that.

**Mutale Kanyanta (00:45:18)**

As I mentioned before, when I initially set up my business or was thinking about setting up my business, I didn't really... I knew that I wanted to pay people a livable wage, but I didn't know what that looked like. That's how I was introduced to RAISE, through somebody who works there. Basically, for myself, it gives you the tools as a restaurant owner to model your business and see what you would need to tweak in order to be able to achieve that. They also give you tools to basically reduce racial inequity within your business, as well as to reduce sexual harassment. The other thing that's also important was when I talked to my business savvy friends about opening a restaurant, they all told me why it wouldn't work with me trying to pay people a livable wage.

In becoming a member of RAISE, I basically found peers who are working at the same problem. There's a community to dig into and ask questions, as well as a community where we've decided that there needs to be a new day. One of the things that comes to my head whenever I think about our current political social climate, in the 1800s, we used to think it was okay for children to work in factories. We've built a food system in this country that has basically baked in an underclass and trapped an underclass within that system. These are predominantly mothers. It shows a lack of investment in our future.

In good conscience, I don't think you could have a business in which you need to oppress your workers in order for you to make a living. It just doesn't make sense to me. RAISE was that rainbow that I saw in terms of, we're very committed in creating this as a reality. We work on local levels with politicians, state level as well as federal level. I feel really connected to something which five years ago, when I first decided this was what I wanted to do for the rest of my life, seemed very, very abstract. I think it's a really exciting time to reinvent our industry.

We can definitively say what is wrong with it, and there are solutions out there to create an equitable community, and also to make the restaurant industry a profession. One out of two Americans have worked in the restaurant industry. Why do we not give restaurant workers that respect? Why is this not a profession that you could be in all your life, and be able to feed your kids, send your kids to college? Why is that not a reality? Part of my being involved with RAISE was to answer those questions for myself, and find a pathway into creating a viable business that can have that baked into its DNA.

Yeah, I really appreciate that. I just appreciated how you weren't willing to accept the trade off that we hear so often of, well, to have a viable business, I can't afford to pay people a living wage. You said, "Well, if you can't pay people a living wage, you shouldn't be in business." I really appreciated that.

Thank you.

**Maureen Conway (00:49:11)**

Okay, so we have a great audience here with us of people who care about workers, and issues of job quality and equity and opportunity. We are at our lightning round, so I'm going to go quick. Mutale, Nikki, Dan, Saru, what is one thing that you want this audience to keep in mind if they want to be part of making a better future for restaurant workers? Mutale, you first. One thing quick.

**Mutale Kanyanta (00:49:37)**

We live in a consumer society. You need to go and spend in places and with organizations and business that have the same values that you do. Wherever you're spending your money, you need to ask them about how they treat their workers, if they have respect for their environment. Every day you go out and you make that decision, and you support the businesses that are or aren't. That's my only thing.

**Maureen Conway (00:50:09)**

Great, okay. Vote with your dollars. Nikki?

**Nikki Cole (00:50:14)**

I'm just copying and pasting in the chat here the video for... I'm sorry, the movie that we made, Waging Change, by Abby Ginzberg, a woman award winning filmmaker. I encourage everyone to watch the film. It's an hour. This will really illuminate more deeply for you the story of our fight, the history of this, and what's going on right now. I encourage you to not only watch it, but share it with other people. Have a watch party on Zoom or at your house, and engage dialogue about it. Then vote, and call your representatives and tell them that you support this in your state.

**Maureen Conway (00:51:06)**

Great, awesome. I believe we have a link to that on our website. Also, I think she's having a showing tonight. Right at 7:00, there's one everybody can participate in. I think there's links on our website if you want to do that. That's great, Dan?

**Dan Simons (00:51:23)**

I would say remember to take into consideration that it's easy to champion and shout about an ideological vision, or about a solution, or the way things should be. But if it doesn't connect back to a business model that works, it's a waste of time. The issues are always more complicated than just do this. Try to encourage an actual conversation. Not so much what do we want, but what do we want and how does it get paid for? Without just ideological assumptions of, well, just raise prices. Or an assumption that business owners just always raise money. Restaurants have never had less money than today. The question still always needs to be, where does the money come from and how is it sustainable? What is a fair way for a business to use that money, to line up with the principles I think of the consumer? Then spend your money with the businesses whose principles line up with yours.

**Maureen Conway (00:52:32)**

Great, and Saru?

**Saru Jararaman (00:52:34)**

Great. Exactly to Dan's point, we actually have, as I mentioned, reams and reams and reams of business modeling to help businesses figure this out. I think there's a different answer depending on who you are. If you're an employer listening to this, please be in touch. We've got a whole training and technical assistance program with, as I said, financial tools. We've actually got this great spreadsheet where you can input how many workers, your menu prices, and figure out how you might be able to move to a full minimum wage with tip sharing profitably. Then we've put together this roadmap to reimagine restaurants. I put it in the chat. It actually features case studies of how many restaurants right now are moving to this new model during the pandemic. If you're a restaurant, please talk to us.

If you're a consumer, I think absolutely what everybody said. Encourage your favorite restaurant to not just do the right thing, but talk to us. Because once they talk to us, we can actually help them not only figure it out with the tools, but we might even be able to provide them with cash grants to make the changes, to help them make the changes. But as the consumer, you are also a resident of this country. I'm not even going to say citizen, because everybody who lives here does have the opportunity to speak up. You go to [OneFairWage.com](https://www.onefairwage.com) and sign that petition so that we can push for a level playing field for great employers like Dan and Mutale.

They shouldn't have to do it on their own. It should be just the law, as it is in California, Oregon, Washington, Minnesota, Montana, and Alaska. Everybody should be required to pay a full minimum wage. I'm just going to close by saying, after all, what was the point of having a minimum wage in this country in 1938, if not the idea that nobody should be paid less than that? Let's go back to the idea of a minimum wage. Pay it, let tips be shared. Let's create more equality. Responding to the call of the country, let's address structural racism and gender inequity at every level. From getting rid of a history of slavery, a legacy of slavery, to addressing as Dan said, racial and gender inequalities in who is managing and who is in the front of the house. To just all of us as consumers and as people demanding this kind of equity in every aspect of our lives, including when we eat out.

**Maureen Conway (00:54:57)**

Wonderful, that was fabulous. Thank you all. You got a ton of information across in a record amount of time. I really appreciate everybody being with us today. Many thanks to my Aspen Institute colleagues, who sent me many questions in our chat that I know we don't have the time to dig into now, but I think we've touched on a lot of them. I think that there's a lot of additional resources. Be in touch with One Fair Wage, RAISE, with other kinds of organizations. We'll put some more links on our website if you're looking for more information.

As I mentioned, we'll be sending out the recording of this webinar as well. Thank you everybody for joining the conversation, for your active participation, and for your concern about these issues. I hope I will see some of you in the chatroom tonight watching Waging Change, and please do take a moment to respond to our quick feedback survey at the close of this webinar, or send us an email at [EOP.Program@AspenInstitute.org](mailto:EOP.Program@AspenInstitute.org). Let us know what you think. We'd love to hear from you, and we hope you'll join us again for another Opportunity in America series. Thank you, everybody.

**Mutale Kanyanta (00:56:14)**

Thank you, Maureen.

**Saru Jararaman (00:56:15)**

Thank you.

**Nikki Cole (00:56:15)**

Thank you.

**Dan Simons (00:56:15)**

Bye.

**Maureen Conway (00:56:15)**

Bye.