

## *Why Are Women Not so Successful as Men in the Professional Kitchen?*

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### Introduction

In any industry where men seem to dominate management positions and have better opportunities, women face discrimination and inequality problems. In the restaurant industry, rooting out the causes of this phenomenon unearths a paradox. Historically, women have always been the gender that “owns” the act of cooking, coming up with new recipes and cooking techniques in the process of nourishing their families (Cooper, 1998). However, from a professional perspective, it is a different story. Men dominate the restaurant industry in terms of holding a “chef” or a managerial position, often leaving women to do jobs that demand fewer responsibilities. Some of the inequality problems that women face in the hospitality industry are related to motherhood, gender differences (Haddaji et al., 2017), wage gap (Santero-Sánchez et al., 2015), and sexual harassment (Brownell, 1994).

This case scenario introduces Gabrielle, a 32-year-old Colombian woman who has studied and worked many years intending to become a successful chef. She has a strong foundation in culinary arts, restaurant and hospitality management, food science, and general creativity. She has worked in her home country and worldwide, holding cook positions in restaurants and hotels as far away as Spain and Australia. With her background and work experience, she fits the qualification profile for a supervisory position as chef or sous-chef. However, when applying to these jobs, she usually does not hear back from potential employers. In some instances, she was told that as a woman, she would not be able to handle the stress of a kitchen during a busy service and that she would be better off seeking a more entry-level position. Then upon applying for those positions, she would get passed over because of her overqualified background.

In this scenario, the case study aims to identify possible explanations for the underrepresentation of women in chef positions in the restaurant industry. This case will discuss the background of women’s historical roles in kitchens and cooking, women’s actual situation in the restaurant industry, and the benefits of applying diversity management in the workplace for a culinary context. Even though women represent a majority among employees in the hospitality industry (BLS, 2019), men dominate managerial positions, leaving women be-

hind in less demanding positions. The importance of this research is to understand that there should be equality and equity in the restaurant industry between men and women. Success for women in the kitchen must be more accessible and less discriminating, especially with women who have family and motherhood responsibilities. This is especially relevant as women have historically been associated with cooking in the home, and many recipes and techniques used in a professional context were developed by home cooks. However, these women receive no credit for their legacy.

### Literature Review

#### *History of Women in the Kitchen*

Harkening back to the age of hunter-gatherer societies, women’s role as providers of food for daily subsistence needs earned them recognition and importance within their groups (Swinbank, 2002). As Ann Cooper notes in her book titled “A Woman’s Place is in the Kitchen: The Evolution of Women Chefs” (1998), women would gather and cultivate food, as well as create recipes and develop different cooking techniques. Men would hunt and invent tools, notably among them, the knife. A man could use his knife as a tool to cut and prepare proteins or as a weapon with which to obtain them, thus associating him with power and conquest. By comparison, a woman relegated to cooking in the kitchen was deprived of the same power.

The term “chef” started to gain importance around the 17th century (Trubek, 2000). Initially, it was men who were employed in this capacity. As many of them had a military background, a military-style chain of command was a meaningful way to organize kitchen staff (Trubek, 2000; Farrell, 2016). However, it was apparent even then that these men had learned from their mothers and grandmothers, who were themselves domestic cooks or even cooks at small restaurants. By taking these family recipes as their own, men could achieve success and wealth as chefs in the restaurant industry (Swinbank, 2002).

In the 19th century, in the United States, it was commonplace to have black slave women working in kitchens (Whitaker, 2015). The more visible front-of-house and management positions were reserved for men (Whitaker, 2015). Overall, women’s fundamental responsibilities were to cook and provide food to their communities. As if life was

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not difficult enough, early and dangerous versions of the stove, invented in 1800, became one of the leading causes of accidental death for women (together with childbirth) (Cooper, 1998). According to Swinbank (2002), women's perception of the gender associated with the kitchen varies between cultures, but it is still seen nearly universally as a female activity. In some African cultures, tasking a man with cooking would threaten his masculinity. In Eurasian cultures, while domestic cooking was considered a female activity, professional cooking associated with the glory of haute cuisine was very much considered a man's occupation. (Swinbank, 2002).

The invention of the kitchen brigade by Auguste Escoffier, the "father" of French cuisine, provided yet another systematic obstacle for women's success in professional kitchens. His system of hierarchy and autocratic structure in the kitchen was inspired by the military model and is said to have perpetuated a patriarchal disenfranchisement of women, who often could not own property or manage household finances. (Cooper, 1998). In the early 20th century, as Whitaker (2015) reveals, women started to gain more influence and began owning, operating, and managing restaurants like tea rooms and cafeterias. These were predominantly native-born white American women from traditional middle-class families, some with a college education. Though open to everybody, these establishments were typically perceived as too "feminine" and thus were avoided mainly by men (Whitaker, 2015).

The generational passing-down of recipes is considered a matriarchal tradition (Farrell, 2016): grandmothers, mothers, and aunts to daughters, cousins, and nieces. In America, many of the first cookbooks were written by women and for women. These books were not limited to recipes and addressed women's other roles and duties, including tips to optimize other housework (Cooper, 1998). However, in Europe, the writing and authoring of cookbooks were entirely controlled by men, as was culinary education. Women were seen merely as students, unable to advance, and excluded from growing professionally in the restaurant industry (Farrell, 2016).

### ***Diversity Management***

In many countries, women are considered a minority group, facing discrimination and underemployment (Kalargyrou, 2016). According to Nentwich and Kelan (2013), wage gap inequality, where women earn less money than men for performing the same work, is one of the most pervasive issues women face today. Because of a misconception that women are unable to balance work and family, paired with the everlasting perception that women alone are responsible for family matters, it is a common experience for women to be "underdeveloped" professionally and hold positions that seem lower in caliber (Nentwich & Kelan, 2013).

It is important to understand diversity management as a human resources practice to achieve an organization's goals in terms of productivity, outcomes, and profits (Manoharan & Singal, 2017). In their

Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, UNESCO states, "As a source of exchange, innovation, and creativity, cultural diversity is as necessary for humankind as biodiversity is for nature" (UNESCO, 2001). The restaurant industry is already a perfect example of an environment that is enriched by diversity. A sizable proportion of restaurant workers includes immigrants who can introduce their culinary traditions and contribute to menus. With this in mind, one can argue that women, who to this day remain involved in the near-universal tradition of passing down recipes and cooking techniques, are an untapped resource in terms of kitchen creativity and, thus, for a food service organization, business innovation (Bishop, 2019).

### ***Gender Differences in the Restaurant Industry***

Harris and Giuffre (2015) explain that gender inequality issues were exacerbated by the perception of men's cooking as superior and different from women's cooking. This distinction between the genders ended up cementing men as professional chefs and women as amateur cooks. This was based not just on skill but also on the intended consumer. A man cooks to express creativity, and a woman cooks to demonstrate caring for her family. A man cooks at a restaurant, and a woman cooks at home—that one of these tasks is typically remunerated and emphasizes the stark difference in value. In their book *Taking the Heat*, Harris and Giuffre (2015) elaborate on the differences between a dish made by a woman and a man through the venues of consumption. Since the dining room in the home is right next to the kitchen, there is no mystery as to what will be served. A dish created by a woman lacks magical appeal. However, there is panache and professional quality inherent to a chef creating a dish in a restaurant. The food seemingly comes out of nowhere because the dining room is completely separated and away from the kitchen, hiding the magic and mystery being conducted inside (2015).

Dashper (2019) attributes men's and women's unequal success in the industry to maternal walls. This concept describes women's unfavorable situation. More specifically, mothers in the workplace have reduced availability and flexibility to work because of childcare responsibilities. This leads to the assumption that women cannot be fully committed to a job and can't be available to respond to the company's needs. The constant availability to work is often seen as a masculine norm in the hospitality industry (Dashper, 2019). As a result of these maternal walls for women, as Nentwich and Kelan (2013) explain, committed and confident women may lose confidence and motivation in their careers after giving birth, sensing they no longer belong to the organization. After it has been ingrained in women that they would not be able to concentrate on family matters and work matters in a balanced way and succeed at either, sacrificing one of the two might be a self-fulfilling prophecy (Nentwich & Kelan, 2013).

Platzer (2011) explains that the dream of becoming a professional chef is more loaded with sacrifice for women than for men. These

sacrifices include putting aside the idea of having a family and being a mother, a situation that men typically would not have to consider. So sometimes, women do postpone the idea of having a family to be successful and stable first. Positions like pastry chefs, personal chefs, and food writers are positions that are more flexible for women that would allow them to keep the balance between work and family and still succeed in their aspirations in life (Platzer, 2011).

In the hospitality industry, Santero-Sánchez et al. (2015) confirm how the gender wage gap reveals a significant index of inequity when hiring women in industrialized countries. Women represent a higher proportion of low-skilled workers in hospitality (Morgan & Pritchard, 2019) and are getting paid less for doing the same work as men in the same roles. Also, when they do ascend to higher positions, women usually tend to hold jobs in organizing, accounting, human resources, which perpetuates the association of women with a wife role. In restaurants, women are over-represented in positions as servers rather than production roles such as cooks or chefs. (Santero-Sánchez et al., 2015). In contrast, the hotel industry presents this phenomenon in reverse: 56% of its total employees are women, holding high-stress jobs related to cleaning and customer service, where jobs with administrative responsibilities are dominated by men (Santero-Sánchez et al., 2015).

Gvion and Leedon (2019) conducted a study in Israel that concluded that men and women have different management styles. Women's leadership styles include traits of compassion, cooperation, and empathy, which create a healthier and more enjoyable workplace. A menu designed by women prioritized simplicity and local ingredients while creating an experience that resembled "home" for the customers. However, when it comes to the abilities to manage a restaurant, women, at some point, have to be trained to be able to further develop specific leadership and managerial skills (Gvion & Leedon, 2019).

As previously mentioned, one of the reasons why men dominate the kitchen is Escoffier's invention of the kitchen brigade. The military model is based on rigor, discipline, precision, order, clear communication, and hierarchy, which Escoffier took and implemented to run kitchens more smoothly and efficiently. Whenever the chef says something, all his cooks and employees will answer "yes, chef," mirroring the military where "yes, sir" is the prescribed response to captain's orders (Jensen, 2017). This association with the military, another male-dominated institution, further perpetuates the idea that women are unable to hold leadership positions in the culinary world. Working as a line cook is a very physically and psychologically demanding job, made more difficult in an environment where one feels as though they don't belong (Agg, 2015). The prevalence of sexual and verbal harassment in restaurant kitchens is widely viewed as the norm rather than the exception (Weber et al., 2002). The restaurant industry has the highest rates of sexual harassment (Thornell, 2018).

## ***The Actual Situation of Women in the Restaurant Industry***

The chef profession is getting more exciting and attractive to people entering the workforce in the 21st century, particularly women. To illustrate this, 51.6% of the students at the prestigious Culinary Institute of America are women (Schwedel, 2017). This suggests that regardless of the well-documented struggle they are bound to experience in a male-dominated industry, women still want to succeed, become chefs, open restaurants, change the paradigm and innovate the industry. It is worth noting that while 39% of cooks in the restaurant industry are women, only 23.9% of all the head cooks and chefs are women (Sutton, 2014). Women also represent fewer than 7% of chefs/owners of restaurants in the United States (Thornell, 2018). However, the foodservice industry certainly doesn't lack a female presence, as women represent 70% of restaurant servers in the United States (BLS, 2019).

Haddaji et al. (2017) case study concluded that the industry's culture of masculinity was not the most significant barrier faced by Michelin-starred women chefs. Most of the women chefs who have achieved this honor have done so while working in their restaurants or restaurants that are part of a family business, so they were more involved in the formation of their own kitchen culture. In addition to being able to create in a workplace absent of harassment, these chefs presumably have access to fair family leave practices enabling them to have a work-family balance (Hartke, 2018) that suits their needs. Additionally, some of these women don't have an extensive professional background or formal training. Their success has been attributed to hard work, talent, and passing on family traditions (Haddaji et al., 2017).

## **Analysis of the Dilemma**

Gabrielle, a 32-year-old woman, has aspired to be a successful chef since she was very young. The tradition of cooking in her family is well-observed and respected, having been a central part of every celebration or gathering, particularly while her grandmother was still alive. With a large extended family, these multi-generational gatherings provided Gabrielle with enough gustatory inspiration and determination to know that this was what she wanted to do for the rest of her life. Gabrielle was driven by these memories of cooking with love and the intense satisfaction of seeing her loved ones' joy while enjoying every dish. Tradition, seasoning, and her origins were written very deeply into these professional aspirations.

After Gabrielle graduated high school, she went to the university in her home country, Colombia, and received a bachelor's degree in Gastronomy. To Gabrielle, her calling as a chef didn't just mean knowing how to cook. It meant studying management, science, history, nutrition, biotechnology, human resources, marketing, and much more. In her quest to learn as much as she could, she proceeded to take international food tradition courses in Italy and enrolled in a

Master of Science in Hospitality Management program in the United States. Gabrielle's middle-class upbringing had instilled in her the value of hard work and a cognizance of the fact that without connections or wealth, her effort and experience would be her ticket to the career of her dreams.

The job market, however, presented Gabrielle with a different reality. On the one hand, Gabrielle's exceptional attention to detail, the high level of responsibility with which she conducts her life and her profession, and her desire to always keep learning and performing at a high level at work has allowed her to stand out among her co-workers at several establishments. She has worked in numerous kitchen positions, outperforming other employees with her own mental and physical fortitude. She is living proof that one's success in a restaurant kitchen has nothing to do with one's gender, as she was always the only woman on the line. However, despite excelling in her job and being seen as a leader and a good team player, time and time again, she has been denied a raise or a promotion and thus a chance to advance professionally. On top of this, the discrimination and verbal abuse she endured sometimes led her to question her aspirations. Would a man in her position be subject to the same treatment?

In the pursuit of advancing her career by seeking out more advanced job positions, Gabrielle's biggest challenge has been finding restaurants or hotels that would hire her in a role where she could apply some of her higher education. Despite her many qualifications, she has had no luck applying to higher positions such as chef de partie, a sous chef, or a banquet and catering sous chef. In some instances, Gabrielle was offered more junior positions, such as that of prep cook, with a lower starting wage, despite her experience, formal education, and language proficiency. In the restaurant industry, some employers prefer to hire an inexperienced person who can be trained and is "teachable" because an extensive professional background isn't necessary to execute many of the basic cooking functions. Cooking is a skill that, with enough time and training, can be acquired by anyone. As a result, people with formal education and professional experience are often seen as overqualified and underappreciated in the industry.

The feedback Gabrielle has received in her interviews has been discouraging. One employer advised her that since she would eventually have a family to take care of at home, she would never be able to maintain a successful work-life balance. She was told that the reason she wouldn't be hired was that she was a woman, as the advanced positions were reserved for men because they were physically and emotionally capable enough to endure the constant stress that comes with working in a kitchen. Gabrielle's accomplishments prove that women are just as capable physically and mentally as men to take on the responsibilities of a chef. With a proper understanding of women's historical contribution to culinary traditions, their presence in the restaurant industry should be better appreciated and respected. Diversity

initiatives in restaurants that include addressing the gender gap would do well to achieve this vision. Working in a professional kitchen requires a certain passion, not a certain gender, and all cooks should be appreciated for their value to the restaurant industry.

## Conclusions

This case study analyzes the disparity between women and men in reaching advanced management positions in restaurant kitchens, particularly within the context that women have historically been associated with the task of feeding their families and the fact that most cultures have a rich tradition of culinary rituals which are passed down with a matriarchal trajectory. Gabrielle's experience proves that there is a glass ceiling phenomenon in the restaurant industry. The brigade staffing model of restaurant kitchens implicitly excludes women and perpetuates the notion that women lack the physical, mental, or emotional strength to succeed in a restaurant kitchen. At the same time, the traditional "caretaker" role of women also works against them because some employers believe that the responsibilities of family life will result in female employees being less committed and available to their work obligations. This results in yet another hurdle to women's professional advancement in the restaurant industry, which is based on the outdated notion that only women can be at home taking care of the family. Only men can work outside the home and provide for the family.

Many successful chefs worldwide admit to finding their passion for cooking from watching their mothers and their grandmothers. While some of their best-known recipes and cooking methods were likely adapted from this influence, women's contributions to the culinary world are routinely minimized. It will take years to change the stereotype-filled mindset of the restaurant industry and society in general, and it will take cases like Gabrielle's to help facilitate this shift. Women deserve the same opportunities as men to become recognized as great chefs and be invited to be part of teams rather than forced to go it alone in solo ventures to be seen and heard as credible leaders in the culinary field.

## Discussion Questions

1. Understanding Gabrielle's situation, and given the circumstance that she hasn't been able to find a job pathway compatible with her passion, what would be an option for her to advance her career and keep doing something fulfilling?
2. What would be the best way to change the military-based "brigade" staffing model of the restaurant industry? What cultural mindset changes would be necessary to convince the industry that this could be both feasible and beneficial?
3. Would there be any value for culinary students to study and analyze women's work as traditional cooks in addition to the work of renowned professional chefs around the world? How could this be done without implying that one is better than the other?
4. Women, by nature, are resilient and known for cooking "from the heart." How could the potential of women's creativity be communicated to restaurateurs in a way that demonstrates the benefits to their organization?