

Our Rights at Work

¡BASTA!

**THE SEX HARASSMENT CRISIS IN FAST FOOD
& THE PATH TO A SAFER WORKPLACE**



**Legal Aid at Work
California Fast Food Workers Union, SEIU**

September 2026



ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Legal Aid at Work

Legal Aid at Work is a nonprofit legal services organization that has been assisting working families with low incomes for more than 100 years, providing litigation, policy advocacy, direct services, and education to support and promote workers' rights across California. We partner with people to help them understand and assert their workplace rights, and we advocate for employment laws and systems that empower low-wage workers and marginalized communities. As a social justice organization, our work is rooted in the firm belief that all people deserve respect, dignity, and self-determination at work, at school, and in their communities.

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California Fast Food Workers Union, SEIU

The California Fast Food Workers Union unites fast food workers across brands and locations, and it is the first of its kind in the country. This historic union builds on the 10 years of workers organizing in the state, which began with the Fight for \$15 and a Union, and is part of the Service Employees International Union.

Our Union is fighting to achieve racial and economic justice and transform fast food jobs in the Golden State by fighting for fair pay, safe and healthy workplaces and a voice for all workers in the fast food industry. Through our fight for a voice on the job, we're showing low wage workers everywhere that when we organize, strike, and build a movement, we all can win a seat at the table and improve lives and our communities.

californiafastfoodworkersunion.org/

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CONTENT WARNING

This report contains descriptions of sexual harassment and sexual assault, gender-based violence, economic abuse, and workplace discrimination and retaliation. As you read this report, please care for yourself however you may need to.

- If you are experiencing a mental health crisis, including thoughts of harming yourself, call the National Suicide & Crisis Lifeline at 988.
- If you would like to talk to a compassionate peer counselor, call the California Warm Line at (833) 317-4673.

Report available at californiafastfoodworkersunion.org/research-sh/

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

“The store manager hires young women, and he makes advances on them and tries to touch them, and one time I saw him try to drag one of them into the restroom,” describes Silvia, who has been working at a Yum Yum Donuts store in Los Angeles for 10 years. “At least 6 young women he hired over the past few years have quit because of the sex harassment. I saw this happening over and over, and I didn’t know what to do,” continues Silvia.

Like Silvia, many fast food workers experience and witness sex harassment at work, often with grave professional, health and financial consequences. Yet ten years after a landmark survey by Hart Research revealed that sex harassment is commonplace at fast food stores across the USA, fast food corporations have failed to address the sex harassment crisis in their industry in any meaningful way.

A new survey of California fast food workers finds that the sex harassment crisis continues. This new in-depth survey of over 200 California fast food workers – the 2026 California Fast Food Worker Sex Harassment Survey – found that 4 in 10 women surveyed directly experienced sex harassment at work, a figure that remained unchanged since the 2016 HART Research survey. Workers experiencing sex harassment also reported negative health and financial consequences. A shocking 73% of workers surveyed who experienced or witnessed sex harassment said management does not always, or even most of the time, respond appropriately to stop the harassment, and most who reported sex harassment experienced retaliation after reporting to management about it.

Perhaps more shocking than these results is their persistence. The well-publicized 2016 HART Research Survey, protests, strikes, and national attention from the #MeToo movement on sex harassment at McDonald’s – from scandals in the executive suite to lawsuits and investigations around the globe – have done little to prompt fast food brands, known for maintaining “brand standards” across thousands of franchised locations, to take meaningful action to enforce prohibitions on sex harassment in their stores.



SILVIA & COWORKERS LEARN THEIR RIGHTS AND TAKE ACTION TO STOP SEX HARASSMENT

For 10 years, I didn’t know there was anything I could do about the abuses at Yum Yum Donuts, but then organizers from the Fast Food Workers Union came to the store and I learned we aren’t trapped. We have been taking action to stop the sex harassment by the store manager, we filed a sex harassment complaint and we went on strike.

We also filed a violence complaint with CalOSHA after the store manager threw a knife in the direction of my coworker, and we filed wage claims for over \$380,000 in off-the-clock work and other unpaid wages and penalties we are owed.

Although employers have a legal duty to provide workers with training on sex harassment¹, many employees report that they never receive such training, and evaluations of these trainings show that, when they are implemented at all, they are generally limited in scope and lack the qualities that make such training effective.² Workers describe that sex harassment trainings provided by employers are often limited to short videos with content such as admonitions to “say excuse me” if you accidentally bump into someone, and lack information on procedures to respond to sex harassment.³

While fast food companies have policies against sex harassment, and there are laws in place to protect workers from unlawful harassment and discrimination based on sex and gender, the survey results establish that fast food workers remain largely unprotected, and nearly half (45%) of workers surveyed still don't know what to do about sex harassment at work.

Effective Know Your Rights training about sex harassment and discrimination is essential for fast food workers to overcome the gaps in knowledge and know-how that keep workers trapped in unsafe situations at work. This workplace sex harassment training should include:

- What is sex harassment, how to report it, and what to do if management ignores it
- How the law protects all workers regardless of immigration status, how immigration status may affect a worker's situation, and where to get help
- Information about relevant benefits and programs, and how to access them, including: paid leaves and job-protected leaves (sick and safe leaves, State Disability Insurance and Workers Compensation, California Family Rights Act); medical and mental health care; legal assistance; and emergency help with food and housing
- What workers can do if they experience employer retaliation
- How to seek protection in cases of violence, or threats of violence

To be effective, Know Your Rights training for fast food workers should be provided in-person by trusted trainers, in a location away from the workplace where workers feel comfortable asking questions, without fear of retaliation.

This report presents the findings of the 2026 California Fast Food Workers Sex Harassment Survey, as well as an overview of 10 years of efforts by fast food workers, their unions and advocates across the globe to hold fast food corporations accountable for sex harassment, and a discussion of how to put an end to the sex harassment crisis in fast food.

The Fast Food Council and local governments must take action to address the sex harassment crisis in fast food. The Fast Food Council, comprised of fast food workers and their representatives, government and the fast food industry, was established with the passage of AB 1228 in 2023 to improve working conditions in the California fast food industry and investigate the causes and potential solutions to industry-wide problems, and is well-positioned to start addressing the sex harassment crisis. Improvements in economic security are needed to help fast food workers trapped in unsafe situations. Such improvements include increased protections from retaliation, fair work policies to make work schedules



HART RESEARCH FAST FOOD SEX HARASSMENT SURVEY: 10 YEARS LATER

In July 2016, Hart Research conducted a comprehensive, nationwide online survey of 1,217 women fast food workers aged 16 and older in non-managerial positions about sex harassment at work.⁴

The 2016 Hart Research survey found that 40% of women working in fast food restaurants have been subjected to sexual harassment on the job, a result shockingly similar to the 41% found 10 years later in the 2026 California Fast Food Worker Sex Harassment Survey.

The most common types of harassment reported in the Hart Research survey included unwanted sexual teasing, jokes, remarks or questions, (27%), unwanted hugging or touching (26%), and unwanted questions about workers' sexual interests or information about others' sexual interests (20%), with 2% of women even reporting sexual assault or rape on the job.

Like California fast food workers reported in 2026, the Hart Research Survey found in 2016 that many respondents reported serious negative health and professional consequences as a result of the sex harassment they experienced, and that women who speak up about the problem often face negative consequences from their employers, so many women try to resolve it on their own and/or feel that they have to put up with harassment to keep their jobs.

– and incomes – more reliable, and cost of living adjustments to the Fast Food Minimum Wage consistent with minimum wage policies at 40+ California cities and counties.

The report concludes with recommendations on how workers can be supported with Know Your Rights training tailored to characteristics of the California fast food industry, including supporting pilot Know Your Rights training programs at the local level, so that all fast food workers know about their rights and how to enforce them, including the right to work free of sex harassment.

ABOUT THE SURVEY

The 2026 CA Fast Food Sex Harassment Worker Survey asked workers about Sex Harassment at their fast food jobs, including questions about their experiences with a range of sex harassment behaviors at work as well as the impacts these experiences have had on working conditions, physical and mental health, and financial well-being. Workers were also asked about their employers' response to these problems.

The survey was conducted in July 2026 by outreach workers in English and Spanish in July 2026 and included responses from over 200 workers at locations in 38 cities across Northern and Southern California, in major fast food brands including McDonald's, Subway, Jack In The Box, Taco Bell, Carl's Jr., El Pollo Loco, Popeyes, KFC and others.

KEY RESULTS:

2026 CA FAST FOOD SEX HARASSMENT SURVEY

In July 2026, over 200 fast food workers across California were surveyed about their experiences with sex harassment at work. This in-depth survey included questions about specific behaviors such as unwanted physical contact, sexual remarks, and pressure to alter their appearance, perform sexual favors or engage in sexual acts. Workers were also asked about the personal impacts of their experiences, and management's response to the problem of workplace sex harassment.

41%

SEX HARASSMENT REMAINS PERVASIVE IN FAST FOOD

41% OF WOMEN WORKERS SURVEYED EXPERIENCED SEX HARASSMENT AT WORK

- 37% of all workers reported experiencing sex harassment at work
- 51% experienced or witnessed sex harassment
- 9% of women, and 7% of all workers, experienced 3+ types of sex harassment in the past year

73%

NEGATIVE HEALTH & FINANCIAL CONSEQUENCES

Among fast food workers experiencing 3 or more types of sex harassment in the past year::

73% EXPERIENCED NEGATIVE HEALTH OR FINANCIAL CONSEQUENCES

These include unwanted changes at work such as having their schedules cut or being fired, physical and mental health problems, loss of income and difficulty paying for housing or bills

72%

POOR MANAGEMENT RESPONSE

Among fast food workers who experienced or witnessed sex harassment at work:

72% SAY MANAGEMENT DOES NOT ALWAYS, OR EVEN MOST OF THE TIME, RESPOND APPROPRIATELY TO STOP THE SEX HARASSMENT

65%

MOST DON'T REPORT SEX HARASSMENT THEY WITNESS OR EXPERIENCE

Among fast food workers who experienced or witnessed sex harassment at work:

65% DIDN'T REPORT THE HARASSMENT TO MANAGEMENT

45%

NEARLY HALF DON'T KNOW WHAT TO DO

Among fast food workers surveyed:

45% DON'T KNOW OR ARE UNSURE OF WHAT TO DO ABOUT SEX HARASSMENT

Workers describe not knowing how to address sex harassment, how to handle poor management response, or what to do if they or their coworkers experience retaliation for reporting these problems

59%

MOST WHO REPORTED SEX HARASSMENT EXPERIENCED RETALIATION

Among fast food workers who reported witnessing or experiencing sex harassment at work:

59% EXPERIENCED RETALIATION AFTER REPORTING TO MANAGEMENT ABOUT SEX HARASSMENT

Retaliation included unwanted schedule changes or cuts, being assigned worse duties, warnings or discipline, or getting fired

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS:

2026 CA FAST FOOD SEX HARASSMENT SURVEY

1

KNOW YOUR RIGHTS TRAINING ON SEX HARASSMENT & OTHER VIOLATIONS

Ending the crisis of sex harassment in fast food starts with ensuring all fast food workers have the knowledge and know-how to protect themselves and their coworkers. A full-day format of Know Your Rights training is needed to cover the most common violations fast food workers face, including sex harassment and other forms of harassment and discrimination, health and safety violations, wage theft and other abuses. Training should also provide information on available programs and benefits.

2

EFFECTIVE TRAINING TO EMPOWER FAST FOOD WORKERS

Know Your Rights training for fast food workers must follow best practices that empower workers to report problems, and respond appropriately if management ignores or retaliates against them. Best practices include using trusted trainers – independent from management – who are experienced with diverse communities, including low-income and immigrant workers of all ages, nationalities, gender identities and sexual orientations. Training must take place in a safe environment outside the workplace, in a language workers understand, where workers feel comfortable asking questions and raising concerns about sensitive issues without fear of retaliation.

3

IMPROVE ECONOMIC STABILITY

Improving economic conditions for fast food workers can remove the economic instability that keeps workers silent about sexual harassment and other workplace abuses, and trapped in unsafe work situations. To improve economic stability, fast food workers need strengthened protections against employer retaliation and abusive scheduling, and cost-of-living adjustments to the Fast Food Minimum Wage that keep pace with inflation – in line with minimum wage policies at 40+ California cities and counties. Research shows that financial insecurity is the top obstacle to safety for people experiencing gender-based violence.

4

ACTION NEEDED AT FAST FOOD COUNCIL

Workers look urgently to the Fast Food Council to investigate the causes of – and solutions to – widespread problems including harassment, discrimination, wage theft and unsafe workplaces. The Fast Food Council was established by the State of California to provide workers a seat at the table alongside employers and government to set minimum industry standards to address workers' most pressing problems, but in the two years since the Fast Food Council last met, these abuses have continued, largely unchecked.

5

HOLD FAST FOOD CORPORATIONS ACCOUNTABLE

Fast food corporations must play a central role in implementing industry-wide solutions, and must be held legally responsible for violations and abuses in the restaurants under their brands, including at franchise locations. The fast food industry's franchise business model allows corporate franchisors to evade accountability for systemic abuses, including sex harassment.

ABOUT FAST FOOD WORKERS

Over 700,000 people work in California's fast food restaurants. Statewide, about 80% of California fast food workers are people of color, approximately 60% are Latina or Latino, and over two-thirds are women.⁵ Seven in 10 California fast food workers are under the age of 25, and 90% are under 40.⁶ A quarter of the California fast food workforce is under the age of 18.⁷

The demographic groups that comprise California's fast food workforce have been shown to be particularly vulnerable to sex harassment and its impacts. Women workers face disproportionate rates of workplace sex harassment, with 78% of all sexual harassment charges nationally filed by women.⁸ Women of color, immigrants and younger workers experience disproportionate rates of sex harassment and discrimination, often at the intersection of sex, sexuality, gender, race, ethnicity, national origin and age.⁹ The relative vulnerability of younger workers may stem from their lack of experience with workplace norms, not knowing what is and is not acceptable workplace behavior and that sex harassment is something they can complain about. A 2025 survey of California Fast Food Workers found 82% say workers who are worried about their immigration status are less likely to report or file complaints about workplace problems, including sex harassment.¹⁰

In addition to sex harassment, California fast food workers experience frequent violations of their workplace rights and often face dangerous and hostile working conditions. Since 2020, with the support of the California Fast Food Workers Union, workers have filed more than 600 complaints with state and local agencies documenting wage theft, unaddressed health and safety hazards, discrimination and other abuses in California's fast food workplaces.

Numerous studies confirm that workplace abuses are pervasive in fast food. In California, nearly six in 10 fast food workers surveyed have endured multiple forms of wage theft.¹¹ In a 2025 brief on wage theft in LA fast food restaurants, researchers at Rutgers and Northwestern University reported that just one type of wage theft — paying less than the minimum wage — costs each affected worker nearly \$3,500 a year and total \$44 million in lost wages annually across the region.¹² In a 2025 survey of over 300 California fast food workers about their experiences at work, 58 percent reported working in excessive heat in the past year, and 48 percent reported experiencing symptoms of heat illness.¹³ The same survey found that nearly half (47%) of fast food workers had seen at least one serious food safety problem at their fast food jobs in the past year alone, including problems related to rats, mice, roaches, sewer flooding, expired rotten or moldy food served to customers, lack of access to toilets and handwashing facilities, and unsafe food preparation and storage procedures.¹⁴

Fast food workers won a historic victory in 2023 with the passage of AB 1228, which established the California Fast Food Council, a first-of-its-kind statewide body composed of fast food workers, government appointees, and industry leaders, which has the ability to set standards and improve conditions across the industry.¹⁵ AB 1228 also established a new minimum wage of \$20 per hour in California's fast food industry, effective April 1, 2024.¹⁶ Still, California fast food workers struggle with unpredictable scheduling, insufficient hours, abrupt and unfair firings, and a lack of knowledge about their rights at work and how to uphold them. Sex harassment, along with wage theft and violations of health and safety laws, remain widespread.¹⁷

The prevalence of workplace abuses and employer retaliation against fast food workers, and the culture of fear it creates, are compounded by a national political moment that emboldens abusers and silences those most vulnerable to these harms. The Trump administration's escalating attacks – on immigrants, women, LGBTQIA+ people, and all workers – deepens the crisis of sex harassment and other abuses impacting fast food workers, making state and local policy solutions more urgent.

ABOUT THE FAST FOOD INDUSTRY

California is home to approximately 48,000 fast food locations – about one-seventh of the industry’s 350,000 establishments nationwide.¹⁸ Top fast food chains continue to grow nationally and the top 10 publicly traded fast food companies’ combined operating profits totaled more than \$15 billion in 2025. Industry profits are even higher when privately-held brands are included, such as Chick-Fil-A, which reported revenue upwards of \$10 billion in 2025, but did not disclose profits.¹⁹ In its annual report on brand growth, QSR magazine describes the fast food industry in 2026 as “remarkably resilient”, even amid economic uncertainty and changing consumer habits.²⁰

The fast food industry grew significantly in California in the five years between 2020 and 2025, adding both jobs and restaurants.²¹ In the first year after the California Fast Food Council was established and the statewide \$20 fast food minimum wage went into effect, California added new fast food stores three times faster than the rest of the country, with a third of all new fast food stores in the USA added in California – an increase of 2,480 California locations.²²

In spite of industry claims that the minimum wage increase would cause burger prices to skyrocket, researchers at UC Berkeley found that eight months after the wage increase went into effect, the price increase on a \$4 item attributable to the minimum wage increase was just 8¢, while weekly wages for California fast food workers increased by 10-11%, without a reduction in employment.²³ Since then, workers have continued to call for solutions to the most pressing problems in their industry, and for the Fast Food Council to fulfill its mission to raise standards and investigate the causes of – and solutions to – pervasive abuses such as widespread sex harassment across the industry.

Over the last decade, the industry-wide problem of sex harassment against fast food workers has emerged as a global crisis.²⁴ Across brands and across continents, workers and their advocates have called on global fast food companies to address sex harassment in their restaurants, pointing to the extreme concentration of power and profit that rests in the hands of franchisors as proof of their responsibility.²⁵

As Open Markets Institute Chief Economist Brian Callaci lays bare in his 2026 book *Chains of Command: The Rise and Cruel Reign of the Franchise Economy*, the fast food industry’s franchise business model enables corporations to shield themselves from liability for workplace violations, including sex harassment, even as they exert, in many instances, near total control over the operations of franchised restaurants within their brands.²⁶ Under the franchise model, franchisors may inspect franchisees’ books and records, issue workplace policies, and prescribe detailed hiring and firing requirements, yet they avoid legal liability for labor and employment issues.²⁷ As an attorney representing a 16-year-old Domino’s worker in a sexual harassment case once remarked: “It doesn’t make any sense if you get the benefit of that control without the risk that you could be held responsible for the misconduct of their employees.”²⁸ This “control without responsibility” business model, and franchisors’ dedication to preserving it, have played an important role in the industry’s failure to address the ongoing crisis of sex harassment in fast food over the last decade.

WHY IS SEX HARASSMENT PERVERSIVE IN FAST FOOD?

Sex harassment is a problem across many industries; the sex harassment crisis in fast food must be addressed with industry-specific policies because of the fast food industry's unique characteristics:

Extreme Power Imbalances in the Workplace

- Fast food workers have few job protections, and employers can cut worker schedules or fire them without providing a reason
- Management in fast food often encourages a “customer is always right” attitude, and puts “pretty girls in front”

Vulnerable Workforce

- Most fast food workers are women of color, immigrants and young people – groups that disproportionately experience sex harassment
- Many immigrant workers wrongly believe legal protections don't apply to them, and/or fear the justice system

Fast food workplaces designed to maximize profit, not to protect workers

- Narrow, crowded workspaces prioritize efficiency at the expense of personal space
- Workers are especially vulnerable in isolated spaces such as the manager's office, walk-in freezers, storage areas and parking lots, and spaces without cameras

Fear of Retaliation

- Workers fear retaliation by the harasser if they say no to their advances or make a report
- Workers fear retaliation by their employers for reporting abuses

Franchise Business Model

- Corporate fast food brands are not held legally responsible for sex harassment and other abuses at their franchises, despite their meticulous enforcement of brand standards in other areas

Inadequate Training

- Workers lack access to effective training to empower them with needed knowledge and know-how to respond to the sex harassment they experience or witness at work

FAST FOOD WORKERS SPEAK



5/16/2026: Yolanda and fast food workers from across Los Angeles learn about their rights at a pilot training organized by the SEIU Education Support Fund.

Yolanda, Carl's Jr worker, Los Angeles

The store manager told me that sales were down, so they were moving pretty people to the front of the store, and that management doesn't want older people working in the front.

CASE STUDY:

NOT LOVIN' IT!

McDONALD'S GLOBAL SEX HARASSMENT PROBLEM

For over a decade, in protests, strikes, complaints, and lawsuits, McDonald's workers across the globe have been publicly calling on the McDonald's Corporation and its franchises to effectively address sexual harassment at its stores. With one in eight Americans having worked at McDonald's,²⁹ and with over 2 million workers employed by McDonald's Corporation and its franchisees worldwide,³⁰ the company's actions, and inaction, have national and global impact.

In October 2016, McDonald's workers in over 30 cities across the United States protested sex harassment, drawing attention to 15 different sexual harassment complaints that had been filed against the company and its franchisees over the previous month.³¹ Ten more employee sex harassment complaints were filed in 2018,³² and on September 18, 2018,³³ McDonald's workers walked off the job again, this time in 10 U.S. cities, in hopes of pressuring the company to take stronger steps against sexual harassment. In 2019, Gretchen Carlson, the Fox television anchor who won a \$20 million sex harassment settlement after she went public about sex harassment by Fox News president Roger Ailes, came out with a 2-hour documentary about sex harassment at work, focused mainly on the experiences of McDonald's workers.³⁴

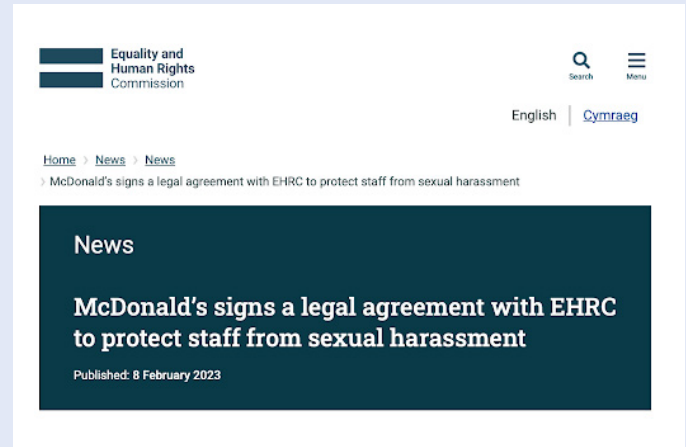


In October 2021, McDonald's workers went on strike once again in cities across the U.S. to protest sex harassment.³⁵ In California, McDonald's workers at stores from Los Angeles and Monterey Park in the south to Milpitas, San Francisco, San Jose, Saratoga, and Vallejo in the north have been learning about their rights and taking action to stop sex harassment at the stores where they work.

United Kingdom's Equality & Human Rights Commission & BBC investigations

In the United Kingdom, the sex harassment crisis at McDonald's first came to light in 2019 when a union representing food industry workers reported that it received 1,000 complaints of sexual harassment at McDonald's stores,³⁶ prompting an investigation by the United Kingdom's Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC), the national equality and human rights watchdog.

While in February 2023, McDonald's signed a legal agreement with the EHRC committing to zero tolerance for sexual harassment,³⁷ a five-month BBC investigation that began after the February 2023 agreement, found an ongoing toxic culture of sexual assault, harassment, racism, and bullying at McDonald's.



Workers, some as young as 17, reported being groped and harassed almost routinely. "There is a saying at McDonald's, 'tits on tills' - boys in the kitchen, girls on the counter. The idea is to put attractive people at the front," described Lucy, a 22-year-old McDonald's worker, in reporting by the BBC.³⁸ Another worker, Shelby, who was just 16 when she started working at a McDonald's, stated that older male coworkers used the cramped layout in the kitchen as an excuse to touch junior female staff inappropriately.



"Multiple workers told us that McDonald's managers at the outlets across the UK were responsible for the harassment and assaults. All too often, senior managers are said to have failed to act on the complaints," described the BBC reporters.³⁹ Some workers told the BBC they felt too scared to report the problems to management, and others reported that they did complain but were ignored by managers or faced retribution.⁴⁰ "In the February [2023] agreement [with the EHRC], McDonald's pledged 'zero tolerance' on sexual harassment and to deliver training for employees. But staff have told

the BBC the training is not being taken seriously by managers. One employee described perching an iPad next to a McFlurry machine and speeding through the harassment training video while he made drinks," described the reporters.⁴¹

In the days after publication of the BBC report in July 2023, over 100 more former and current McDonald's workers came forward describing harassment and bullying at the chain.⁴² Additionally, the EHRC heard 300 new reported incidents of harassment,⁴³ and in November 2025, the EHRC announced a new, strengthened agreement with McDonald's that included new requirements to work with external experts to design and implement a new safeguarding plan to protect vulnerable workers, to be rolled out across McDonald's corporate-owned and franchised restaurants, and to use an external auditor to audit the handling of new sex harassment complaints.⁴⁴ "We originally signed a legal agreement with McDonald's to prevent sexual harassment in 2023. After serious allegations were raised, we decided we needed to update the action plan with stronger actions that were more specific to the way McDonald's operates," stated Baroness Kishwer Falkner, Chairwoman of the Equality and Human Rights Commission. Sex harassment victims have continued to come forward, however, and In April 2026, the law firm Leigh Day reported that it had filed more than 700 sex harassment claims on behalf of McDonald's workers aged 19 and under.⁴⁵

OECD Complaints

In May 2020, an international coalition of trade unions filed a complaint with the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) describing McDonald's failure to observe OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises, including the failures of McDonald's global management to address sexual harassment and gender-based violence at its restaurants in Australia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, France, the United Kingdom, and the United States, among other countries.⁴⁶

The complaint detailed a pattern of sexual harassment and gender-based violence at McDonald's stores and described that the McDonald corporation's response to harassment and gender-based violence—that is, McDonald's denial of responsibility for the abusive behavior in its franchise stores—violates the provisions of the OECD Guidelines that make it clear that corporations cannot hide behind franchise arrangements when it comes to addressing these issues. The McDonald's Corporation refused to participate in mediation to resolve the complaint.⁴⁷ Another complaint was filed in the UK, and the investigation is ongoing.⁴⁸

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UK National Contact Point  Office for Responsible Business Conduct

Decision
Initial assessment: a complaint about McDonald's Restaurants Limited by a group of trade unions and a Civil Society Organisation
Published 7 January 2026

1/7/2026: Investigation of sex harassment at McDonald's is ongoing in the UK.



McDonald's Corporation responded with new Global Brand Standards, but kept them secret

In April 2021, in the wake of widespread reports of sex harassment at its stores and the CEO's #MeToo scandal, McDonald's announced the implementation of Global Brand Standards to take effect in January 2022 with the promise of creating "a culture of physical and

psychological safety for employees and customers through the prevention of violence, harassment and discrimination."⁴⁹ An investigation by The Nation magazine and Type Investigations in May 2025 revealed, however, that McDonald's has refused to disclose the Global Brand Standards, claiming that they are "trade secrets," and that workers and advocates haven't seen a noticeable change.

"The most frustrating thing about McDonald's is that they never change," comments attorney Mary Joyce Carlson, who led efforts to stop sex harassment at McDonald's in the US, Europe and the UK. "They have a tremendous PR ability to come out and say 'we did this' and 'we did that,' but nothing changes. The mayor of London condemned sex harassment at McDonald's, there were hearings in Parliament, and McDonald's didn't change. There was another high-visibility report, and they still didn't change. The new Global Brand Standards came out, and there was no difference for workers. If all the tomatoes have to be recalled because they are making people sick, McDonald's comes down like a ton of bricks on food safety and they make sure things work for the customers. If they can do that for food safety, they can do that in the area of employee safety," states Carlson.⁵⁰



Fairley v. McDonald's Corporation

In April 2020, Jamelia Fairley and Ashley Reddick filed a \$500 million class-action lawsuit on behalf of 5,000 female workers employed by McDonald's corporation at 100 McDonald's stores in Florida since 2016, describing a pattern of unchecked sex harassment, inadequate training, and retaliation against workers who reported sex harassment.⁵¹ The lawsuit was supported by Times Up, a legal defense fund established at the height of the #MeToo movement.

Louise F. Fitzgerald, Ph.D., Professor Emeritus of Psychology and Gender and Women's Studies at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and a leader in the field of sex harassment research, submitted to the court a 171-page review of sex harassment policies at McDonald's from 2016 to 2020 and McDonald's response to reports of sex harassment in Florida during the period. The review quoted testimony by dozens of workers describing a relentless series of threats, harassment and assaults met with management indifference and retaliation.

Of the 42 named plaintiffs and putative class members who submitted declarations in this case, 30 stated that they had complained to a manager but nothing was ever done.⁵² One worker, for example, described management's response to two incidents:

"After Zay said that he would choke me, I told a manager, Ms. Thu, about his comment. She said something like, 'I don't think he would actually do that, but I'll go talk to him.' I don't know if Ms. Thu actually said anything to Zay or told anyone else about my complaint, but after I told Ms. Thu, Zay actually tried to choke me in the break room. I immediately reported what Zay had done to Ms. Thu and she said she would handle it later. It seemed like she didn't really care about my complaint or what Zay had done. I don't know if Ms. Thu said anything to Zay. No one ever followed up with me about my complaint."

"I also told manager Tangie that the guys were making comments about my body. Tangie treated my concerns like a joke, saying, 'Well, look at what you wear.' ... I was wearing my McDonald's uniform and I had been wearing it when the guys touched me and commented on my body. Tangie acted like the harassment was my fault."⁵³

Findings of the expert witness report included that McDonald's sex harassment policies were written at a college graduate level or at a level considered "difficult to read."⁵⁴ Employee training on these sex harassment policies, when it was received at all, was found to be ineffective, for example, the trainings were one-time-only, not reinforced, and were largely passive experiences, with little or no opportunity for interaction with the material.⁵⁵ When sex harassment was reported to frontline managers, the cases were frequently not escalated to HR.⁵⁶ When cases were investigated, the investigators typically did not take notes during interviews, and McDonald's did not maintain a tracking system for reports of sex harassment, evidence or the outcomes of investigations.⁵⁷

On December 31, 2025, the court denied class certification of the case, and the two named plaintiffs subsequently settled their cases as individuals in July 2026. "The massive amounts of evidence we put in of all the hundreds of complaints of sexual harassment, and Dr. Fitzgerald's report, showed the enormity of the problem and McDonald's complicity in it. Sex harassment at McDonald's is a systemic problem because McDonald's has refused to put in place, and enforce, appropriate policies and procedures to prevent sex harassment, along with necessary training for workers and managers" stated Eve Cervantez, lead attorney on the case. "This loss shows that litigation alone will not bring an end to the sex harassment crisis in fast food. Workers need training that empowers them to understand their rights at work and know what to do when they are violated – at scale – in order to start shifting the balance of power in fast food workplaces."⁵⁸

More cases moving through the US Courts

In 2023, the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) settled a lawsuit with a McDonald's franchise with 18 restaurants in California, Arizona, and Nevada, for \$1.9 million and requirements that the franchise hire an outside third-party monitor to conduct internal audits.⁵⁹ According to the lawsuit, since at least 2017, the franchise, AMTCR, knew about sexual harassment and allowed it to continue unabated by supervisors, managers, and coworkers at several of its McDonald's restaurants. The harassing conduct, which was mainly directed at young, teenage employees, included frequent unwanted touching, offensive comments, unwelcome sexual advances, and intimidation. As AMTCR failed to adequately address the complaints of sexual harassment, many workers found the working conditions so intolerable that they had no choice but to quit.

On January 28, 2026, an Oklahoma McDonald's franchise paid \$80,000 to settle a federal lawsuit filed by the EEOC that alleged that a teenage worker was sexually harassed by a male supervisor for a month.⁶⁰ According to the lawsuit, when the franchise learned of the supervisor's sexual harassment of the teen worker, it failed to properly investigate the allegations and allowed the supervisor to continue supervising the teenage victim and other young workers, and as a result, the teenage victim had to quit.



In April 2026, McDonald's workers in Milpitas, California learned about their rights from the California Fast Food Workers Union and went on strike over sex harassment, wage theft, and retaliation. The workers demanded that managers be trained on how to handle sex harassment complaints and that employees who have engaged in sexual harassment be removed, along with demands to pay workers what they are owed and restore their regular schedules. The workers called on members of the Santa Clara County Board of Supervisors to support the establishment of independently administered Know Your Rights training for fast food workers in the County, so that all fast food workers know about their rights and what to do about violations, hazards, and abuses at work.⁶¹

April 2026: McDonald's workers in Milpitas, CA demand McDonald's to stop sex harassment at their store, and call on Santa Clara County Supervisors to support Know Your Rights training programs for fast food workers.

Press Release
01-06-2023

McDonald's Franchise to Pay Nearly \$2 Million to Settle EEOC Sexual Harassment Lawsuit

Fast-Food Franchise Resolves Sex Harassment Case Involving Young Employees Spanning Three States

LAS VEGAS – AMTCR, Inc., AMTCR Nevada, Inc., and AMTCR California, LLC (AMTCR), a Kingman, Arizona headquartered franchise owner operating approximately 18 McDonald's restaurants in Nevada, Arizona and California, will pay \$1,997,500 to resolve a sexual harassment lawsuit filed by the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity

**Recent Press
Releases from the
Las Vegas Local
Office**

McDonald's workers continue to report abuses and demand change

McDonald's is an icon of brand consistency, so it is not surprising that McDonald's workers from around the world have similar experiences of sex harassment, and point to similar factors that put them at risk and give them little recourse. For many workers, the lack of fixed schedules leaves them vulnerable, at the mercy of their managers. Narrow workspaces give workers little room to avoid unwanted touch. Lack of effective training means many workers don't know how to report sex harassment, or what to do if their reports are ignored, or if management retaliates against them—leaving many workers feeling they have little recourse but to put up with harassment and abuse, or quit.

After over a decade of sex harassment investigations, lawsuits, protests, and strikes across California and around the globe, McDonald's workers and their advocates continue to demand effective action to prevent and respond to sex harassment. Meanwhile, existing sex harassment cases continue to work their way through government agencies and courts, and workers continue to file new ones.

McDonald's spends \$27 million to stop California fast food workers from knowing about their rights and improving industry standards

McDonald's, its affiliated companies and its California franchise operators have spent more than \$27 million fighting pro-worker policies in California since 2022 alone. This includes over \$15.5 million as the leading contributor to Save Local Restaurants,⁶² a fast food industry-led PAC that has raised over \$71 million from fast food companies and industry groups.⁶³ Save Local Restaurants was established in 2022 to oppose landmark legislation giving fast food workers a seat at the table to improve standards and conditions in their industry through the California Fast Food Council, and establishing the \$20 fast food minimum wage.⁶⁴ Since 2024, Save Local Restaurants and McDonald's continue to spend millions to oppose legislation aimed at expanding workplace protections and access to Know Your Rights training for fast food workers, including proposed policies in the City of Los Angeles and Santa Clara County.⁶⁵

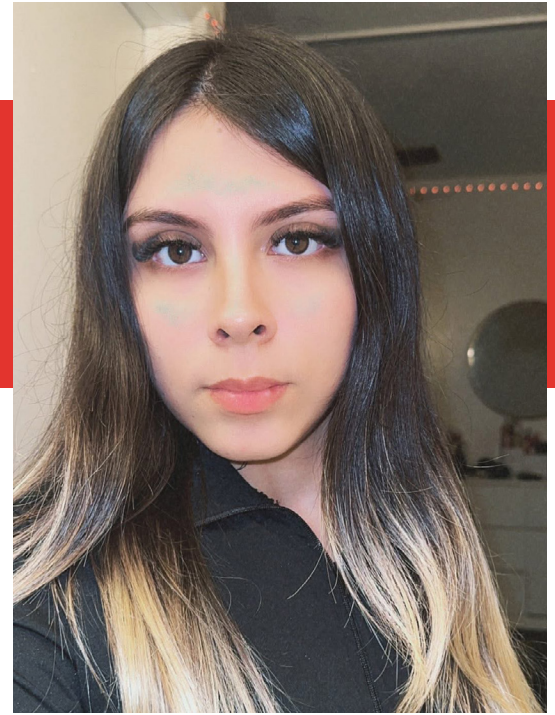
FAST FOOD WORKERS SPEAK

Andrea, McDonald's worker Milpitas (Santa Clara County)

In February 2026, a coworker at McDonald's started touching my wrist and my waist every time I would pass by him on the job. The first time he touched my body, I said "don't touch me – don't do that again," but he just smiled and laughed. He started touching me more and more, and he started asking me to kiss him and to go out on dates with him, and he started calling me late at night. I kept telling him to stop. This went on for months. When I reported the problem to my supervisor, she didn't do anything to stop him. This went on for months.

I started calling off work sick because I was afraid to come in to work and get harassed again. Management gave me a warning for missing work, even though I told them I missed work because I was scared to work with the harasser.

I didn't know what to do. I took a video of him approaching me in the break room and asking me to kiss him, and sent the video to McDonald's management. After that, management talked to him and the harassment stopped, and management promised to change my schedule so I wouldn't have to work with him, but they didn't follow through on the promise. **McDonald's management continued to schedule me to work on Sundays with the man who was harassing me, and when I refused to work on Sundays, management retaliated against me, and cut my daily hours and 2 days a week from my schedule, while giving him more hours and more responsibility.**



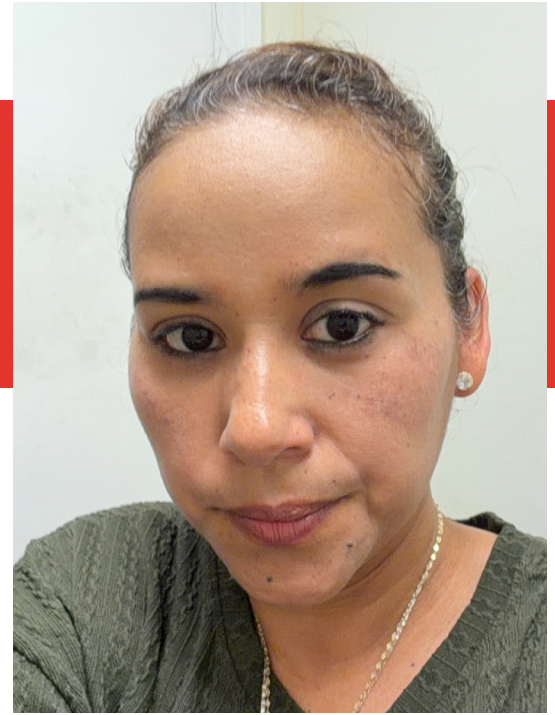
FAST FOOD WORKERS SPEAK

Maria, Yum Yum Donuts worker Los Angeles

In 2023, the store manager at the Yum Yum Donuts where I worked tried to drag me into the restroom. I thought he was going to rape me. He grabbed my left wrist and said, “Let’s go into the restroom, let’s go inside”. I said, “Let go, don’t be dirty.” I pulled as hard as I could to pull myself free. I felt scared, angry and shaky.

After this incident, the store manager blew kisses at me, and whispered to me several times while I was taking orders, saying “Divorce your husband.” I didn’t know what to do, so I quit my job.

Three years later, my former coworkers talked with the Union and told me about our rights. We learned that workers can file complaints with the State of California to stop sex harassment at work. I wish I had known there was something I could have done – other than quit my job – when the store manager at Yum Yum was harassing me and assaulting me. My coworkers and I know of at least 6 women who have been sexually harassed by the same store manager – if we had known about our rights earlier, maybe we could have put a stop to the harassment years ago.



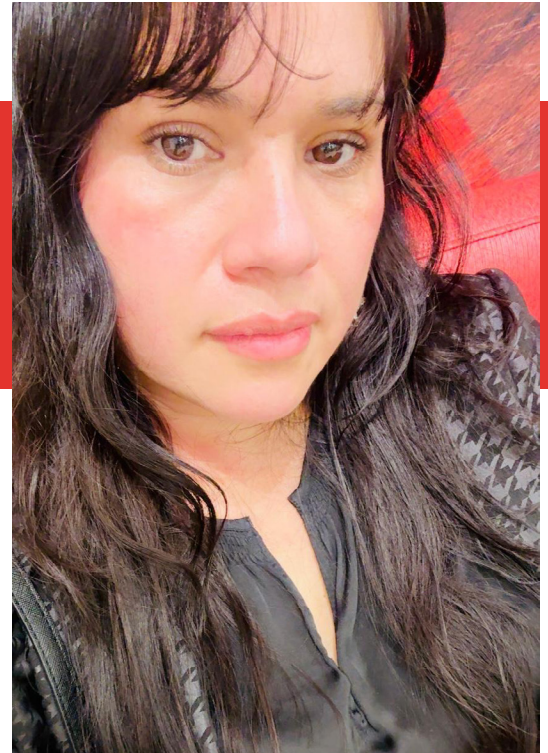
FAST FOOD WORKERS SPEAK

Araceli, former El Pollo Loco worker Huntington Park (Los Angeles County)

In early September 2023, a co-Shift Leader at El Pollo Loco started saying sexual things about me and asking me sexual questions over our crew headsets, for all the coworkers to hear. He asked me how I like men, for example, whether I like them “big, brown hair, young.” Everyone heard it. He kept asking me when I was going to give him a ring, and I kept asking him to stop. One day when we were both working in the front of the restaurant, he groped my breasts as he passed me.

I think management at El Pollo Loco knew he had a history of sexual harassment before he harassed me. A year before this happened to me, HR asked me if I had ever seen or heard him making comments about young girls, and three months before, a manager asked me if I had observed him repeatedly spending time in the walk-in refrigerator with a female crewmember.

I called HR in mid-October and reported that I was suffering at work from sex harassment, and 2 days later I was fired.



FAST FOOD WORKERS SPEAK

Gabriela, Carl's Jr. worker San Fernando (City of Los Angeles)

When I was 16 years old, the manager at Carl's Jr., who is in his 50s, started asking me many questions about my personal life, and a few months later, he started telling me about his sex life, and that he had gotten another girl at work pregnant. He would tell me about how attractive he thought my coworkers were, and which ones he wanted to have sex with. He asked me why I didn't wear skinny jeans or something tighter.

He started bringing his friends to the store, who were also in their 50s, suggesting I have sex with them for money or gifts. When I got a scratch behind my ear, he talked to me about it for 2 hours, saying it was a hickey and saying I was sexually active, which I was not.

Then he started having other staff stay home so it would be just me and him closing the restaurant. I felt suffocated. I never received sex harassment training, and I didn't know what to do. I told him I wasn't interested in his friends, and that I was just there to do work, but he didn't take me seriously, and he just laughed. I was in a constant state of fear, stress and anxiety for more than a year because of the ongoing harassment. He marked down my 18th birthday on his calendar, and kept talking to me about it.

I couldn't focus on work, and I was terrified that he would fire me or cut my hours if I spoke up. But I did speak up, and management of this Carl's Jr. franchise suspended him for a few days, but then he came back and retaliated against me, cutting my work schedule by 20 hours per week. He told me he cut my hours because I complained about his sexual harassment, and he offered to restore my hours if I decided to be "friends" with him again. This job provided my only source of income, so I was really stressed. This went on for 4 months, until management transferred him to another store. I am worried that he might be harassing other teenage workers at other stores.

I learned about my rights from the Union, and I filed a sex harassment complaint with the state, but I can't file a lawsuit because the owner of this franchise filed for bankruptcy – the location is still operating, and my coworkers and I are still working here, but it seems as if no one will be held accountable for what happened to me, or what happened to my coworkers, who filed complaints and claims for wage theft and retaliation they experienced.

Franchise owners come and go, but the big fast food corporations have the power to change what happens in their stores. We need policies to hold the fast food corporations accountable for violations and abuses by their franchisees, to make sure workers can pursue justice when employers violate our rights, even if there is an ownership change, and we need stronger protections against retaliation when we report abuses.



FAST FOOD WORKERS SPEAK

Stella, Jack in the Box worker Roseville (Sacramento area)

My supervisor at Jack in the Box made inappropriate comments about my appearance, repeatedly asked me to go out with him, and left unwanted gifts on my car. I rejected his advances and asked him to stop again and again, but his behavior got worse.

I reported this sex harassment to the store manager, and she gave him a verbal warning, but I was still required to work alone with him for 4 days a week. He kept talking to me about his sexual experiences and described having sex at work. I tried ignoring his behavior, but he became more vulgar. He started intimidating me, screaming at me, taunting me and walking quickly toward me but stopping just short of physical contact. He sabotaged my work by giving me the wrong food orders to prepare. When I told the new store manager about it, he told me to call 911 “if things get really bad,” and took no action.

After a year-and-a-half of this, I saw him inappropriately touching a female employee and I intervened to protect her, and he threw a basket containing hot oil in my direction. When I reported this incident and the prior harassment to another new store manager, she stated that it was a personal problem between me and the other worker who was harassing me, and we had to resolve it ourselves.

I submitted a medical note to the store manager requesting an accommodation to be able to work daytime shifts for my medical condition. Jack in the Box management responded by cutting my schedule from full time (around 37 hours per week) down to only 4-8 hours per week. The store manager claimed there were no daytime hours available, but a week after I submitted my request to work on the day shift, she hired a new employee with daytime shifts averaging around 30 hours per week.

I know my supervisor also harassed other female employees, and that management was made aware of this. Despite their knowledge, I believe no investigation was conducted, and no corrective action was taken.



FAST FOOD WORKERS SPEAK

Andre, former Taco Bell worker Carmichael (Sacramento area)



Before I started working at Taco Bell, I worked as a management trainer for ATT, traveling the country to provide training on sales, and also on management topics including sexual harassment. I left my job at ATT to stay closer to home to help care for my nephew, who has special needs. I know how to use the proper channels to report problems at work, and I did everything I could to report problems through the proper channels at Taco Bell.

I saw there was a guy who used to hang out in the Taco Bell lobby and harass the teenage customers. Several of these customers came up to me and my coworkers and reported the harassment, and we let the general manager know about it. **The guy started harassing one of my coworkers, and I told him, “Dude, she’s a minor,” but he kept doing it.**

Then the general manager hired the same guy, and he started harassing my coworker Mahek. He started saying that Mahek was his girlfriend, which wasn’t true, and I had to accompany her to her car after work because she was scared he would approach her while she was alone in the parking lot.

I encouraged my coworker Mahek to tell management she was being harassed, and she texted the store manager that she was uncomfortable working with this guy, and the store manager responded, “Hey, we don’t put things in texts, tell me in person or call me.” That was his whole response.

I told the general manager that if they weren’t going to fire the guy, at least they shouldn’t schedule him to work with Mahek. I helped her report the sex harassment to HR, and I emailed HR a statement about the sex harassment I had witnessed. Soon after, the guy got fired, but not for sex harassment – he got fired for punching the general manager. I saw the video of it.

I also reported to HR that hours were being skimmed from my paycheck, and that I had evidence that the general manager was altering my timekeeping records, including a video that showed that my timekeeping record was “edited” 16 times during the one-month period from January 14-February 15, 2026.

I learned about the Union because I saw on Facebook that 2 workers at the Taco Bell in El Dorado Hills had learned about their rights from the Union and filed complaints with the Health Dept about unsafe food being served there, and with CalOSHA about a general manager who had punched the wall next to a worker’s head, and they filed harassment and discrimination complaints with the CA Civil Rights Dept. I didn’t even know the Civil Rights Department existed until I learned about it from the Union.

I helped Mahek get in touch with the Union about the sex harassment, and Legal Aid at Work helped her file a sex harassment complaint. We also filed a health complaint when the kitchen flooded with sewer water for several days, but management kept the store open and serving customers.

After my coworkers and I filed complaints about the sex harassment, violence, sewage flooding and wage theft at the store, management retaliated against me, cutting my hours, scheduling me to work at a time they knew I was not available because they knew that every Saturday morning I take my nephew to speech therapy, and then firing me.

I applied to work at 3 other Taco Bell franchises, and I was denied work at all 3. I talked to the Area Coach from one of the stores, and he told me that management from the franchise that fired me had called him and told him not to hire me.

FAST FOOD WORKERS SPEAK

Mahek, Taco Bell worker Carmichael (Sacramento area)



As soon as I started working at Taco Bell in October 2025, another worker started harassing me, and my coworker Andre told me that management knew since May that this man had been harassing customers and coworkers at the store – mainly underage girls – but they didn’t do anything to stop him. The man followed me around the store, told people I was his girlfriend, got into fights with people who told him I wasn’t his girlfriend, and he said explicit things about my clothes, my hair and how I looked. Andre encouraged me to report the harassment to management, which I did multiple times.

The harassment kept getting worse, and in November I asked to give a report about it to HR, but I was told to report the problem to the general manager again. The GM suspended the man for a week while an investigation occurred, and while he was suspended, he came into the store and verbally harassed my coworkers and the customers, loudly objecting to his suspension.

After a week, management welcomed him back to work, and immediately placed him on the same shifts as me. The store manager forced us to work closely together for two weeks under his observation, and after failing to observe any harassment, concluded that we could continue working together without his observation. I told the GM verbally and in writing that I felt uncomfortable about being forced to work with the man who was harassing me, and that the harassment was continuing. The GM called me right away and told me not to put anything in writing. Then he held a staff meeting to warn against bullying or harassing, while making it clear that this meeting was for my benefit. Being singled out like that made me feel more vulnerable.

I sent an email to HR giving a written statement, and my coworker Andre also emailed a written statement about what he witnessed. HR gave me a call a few days later and told me they had lost our written statements about the harassment, despite clear evidence that our emails had been received. Then they fired the man who was harassing me, but only because he punched the GM and they saw it on video. Then HR told me they were closing the investigation about the sex harassment because of lack of evidence.

When the man who was harassing me got fired for punching the manager, I hoped this would be the end of the harassment at this Taco Bell, but then another coworker started harassing me. He made fun of how I talk and my home country, because I am from Canada. He rushed up to me in the middle of work and began snapping in my face, demanding me to work and get him things, saying, “woman, get me a cup,” like he expected obedience from me. **I reported the harassment to the shift leader and to the GM, but no investigation took place as far as I know.**

The man started talking about my appearance as a woman with other coworkers, stating that I looked like a man and that I was built like a man, and going so far as to call me a slur. I immediately reported this and the other harassment to HR in February 2026, and in March 2026, I was brought into the office with HR and the Vice President of the company, where they told me they found no incidents of harassment had occurred, and that they mainly wanted to address my insubordination. I didn’t know what they were talking about, especially since I had never had a write-up or been told there was any issue with me.

I still don’t know what Taco Bell management was talking about when they said I was insubordinate, or if they were just trying to intimidate me, and stop me and my coworkers from reporting sex harassment and other hazards and abuses at the store.

FAST FOOD WORKERS SPEAK

Veronica, Burger King worker San Jose



I have worked for Burger King stores for over 30 years. At one point I had to use the rest room a lot until I found out I had diabetes. **The manager was very rude to me about my needing to use the rest room, saying “educate your animal,” (“eduque su animal”) which I took to mean my vagina was an animal that needed training.** He said this many times, and then other people started saying it. I was afraid to say anything about it, but eventually I just couldn’t stand it anymore, so I told the manager to stop.

When I was recovering from a hysterectomy and told the manager I couldn’t do heavy lifting, he told me to carry heavy boxes of meat and potatoes, saying, “How come you are able to have sex with a woman but you are not able to carry a box?” – which to me implied that because I am a lesbian, I am like a man and should be able to lift heavy boxes like a man.

When a young coworker was being sexually harassed by one of the shift leaders, I believed that management knew about it and wasn’t taking action to protect him, so I knew I had to do something. I talked to the Union, and I went on strike to call attention to the problem and support my coworker.

After management saw me supporting my coworker about the sex harassment, the retaliation got really bad – they started cutting my schedule and making up negative things about me and my work. When a box fell on my finger and broke it, I reported it to the manager but he didn’t do anything, and I didn’t want any more problems, so I didn’t ask for help. But management kept retaliating against me anyway. The owner told me they cut my schedule because I had supported the Fast Food Minimum Wage of \$20 per hour, and then eventually they fired me. **I talked to a lawyer and filed a complaint about the retaliation, but justice is slow, and the rent doesn’t wait – these kinds of indignities need to be prevented in the first place.**

Sex harassment is pervasive in fast food

41%

OF WOMEN WORKERS SURVEYED EXPERIENCED SEX HARASSMENT AT WORK.

- 37% of all workers reported experiencing sex harassment at work.
- 51% experienced or witnessed sex harassment.
- 9% of women, and 7% of all workers, experienced 3+ types of sex harassment in the past year.
- Commonly reported forms of sex harassment include: sexual teasing, jokes, remarks or questions (22% of women and 20% of all workers surveyed); being told by management that they want young, pretty, or handsome people in job positions that interact with customers (14% of women, 12% of all workers surveyed); and unwanted physical contact (12% of women, 10% of all workers surveyed).

Results of the 2026 CA Fast Food Sex Harassment Worker Survey show little change from the findings of the 2016 national survey conducted by Hart Research, in which 40% of women fast food workers reported experiencing sexual harassment on the job.⁶⁶

Over the last decade, researchers have identified systemic conditions in fast food work as major contributing factors to persistently high rates of workplace abuses in this industry, including sex harassment.⁶⁷ These factors include low wages and the economic pressures low-wage workers face to remain in unsafe work environments;⁶⁸ low worker empowerment;⁶⁹ widespread retaliation that deters victims from reporting abuse,⁷⁰ and the fast food industry's franchise business model, which shields parent companies like McDonald's and Burger King and Burger King from legal liability for violations, leaving individual franchise operators responsible for solving industry-wide patterns of abuse.⁷¹ These industry-wide problems remain largely unaddressed today.

In addition to the harms of directly experiencing sex harassment, workers report – and research confirms – that witnessing or hearing about sex harassment at work is akin to “second-hand smoke”. Some witnesses experience stress from seeing their coworker in distress and/or from experiencing fear that they too may become targets of harassment, and witnessing or hearing about poor management response to reports of sex harassment can also cause stress and feelings of powerlessness.⁷² Like people who directly experience sex harassment at work, witnesses can experience negative impacts on their work performance, as well as negative health and psychological outcomes.

FAST FOOD WORKER SURVEY RESULTS

Specific unwanted behaviors experienced by fast food workers surveyed		
Unwanted Behavior	Percent (all respondents)	Percent (female respondents)
Experienced any type of SH at work	37%	41%
Experienced sexual teasing, jokes, remarks or questions	20.5%	22.2%
Heard people gossiping about their personal relationships or sex life	17.5%	21.4%
Were told by a manager that they want to put workers who are young and/or pretty/handsome in job positions that interact with customers?	12.0%	14.3%
Were looked at in an unwanted sexually suggestive way	11.4%	12.8%
Experienced unwanted physical contact, including someone rubbed their genitals against them	10.4%	12.2%
Were asked questions or told unwanted information about sexual interests	9.0%	9%
Were told unwanted comments about their gender or gender expression	6.1%	5.9%
A person got too close to them or blocked their movement	6.0%	8.0%
Have been shown or received sexual images, texts, etc.	5.0%	6.4%
Experienced pressure to go out with someone	4.5%	4.4%
Were told unwanted comments about their sexual orientation	4.0%	4.5%
Were called inappropriate sexual or intimate names	4.0%	4.5%
Someone rubbed their genitals against them	3.5%	4.5%
Were told to alter their appearance beyond dress code to appear sexy	3.0%	3.2%
Experienced requests for sex or sexual favors	2.5%	3.2%
Were told to flirt with customers	2.5%	2.6%
A person exposed parts of their body to them	2.5%	3.2%
Were told to alter their appearance beyond dress code to change their gender expression	2.0%	2.6%
Have been offered more hours, a promotion, or other benefits in exchange for sexual favors	1.5%	1.3%
Have been asked to pose for or send nude images	1.0%	1.3%
Have been sexually assaulted or raped	0.5%	0.6%
Were told to expose parts of their body to someone else	0.5%	0.6%

Sex harassment causes negative health & financial consequences

**Among fast food workers
experiencing 3 or more types of
sex harassment in the past year:**

73%

**EXPERIENCED NEGATIVE
HEALTH OR FINANCIAL
CONSEQUENCES**

*These include unwanted changes
at work such as having their
schedules cut or being fired,
physical and mental health
problems, loss of income and
difficulty paying for housing or bills*

Victims of workplace sex harassment suffer a range of both mental and physical impacts, in addition to problems such as loss of income.⁷³ The experience of sex harassment can cause mental health impacts including negative mood and depression, disordered eating, reduced self-esteem, PTSD and substance use disorders.⁷⁴ Research also shows the experience of sexual harassment is connected to a range of physical health problems including headaches, exhaustion, sleep problems, gastric problems, nausea, weight loss or gain, and respiratory, musculoskeletal, and cardiovascular issues.⁷⁵

In fast food, the harms victims of sex harassment face are often compounded by intersecting problems of economic insecurity, job instability, and barriers to accessing workplace rights and protections.⁷⁶ A 2023 study found that the vast majority of California fast food workers surveyed lacked information about their rights to programs such as paid leave or workers compensation.⁷⁷ In cases of workplace violence, CalOSHA guidelines call for “emergency medical care and debriefing employees” and state that employers should provide trauma counseling to workers who desire such intervention after workplace assaults, to address the short and long term physical and emotional effects of these incidents. But fast food workers report that employers fail to take these steps in many cases.⁷⁸

Poor management response to sex harassment

Among fast food workers who experienced or witnessed sex harassment at work:

72%

SAY MANAGEMENT DOES NOT ALWAYS, OR EVEN MOST OF THE TIME, RESPOND APPROPRIATELY TO STOP THE SEX HARASSMENT

Though California law requires all employers to take reasonable steps to prevent and correct harassment,⁷⁹ fast food workers overwhelmingly report that their employers often fail to take adequate action to stop sex harassment in the workplace or to support impacted workers.⁸⁰ On a range of workplace violations and hazards – from sex harassment to health and safety issues such as excessive heat, workplace violence and food safety hazards – fast food workers report that management fails to correct problems that workers report, or ignores problems altogether.⁸¹ Workers also report that employers provide incorrect and/or inadequate information on workplace rights and protections.⁸²

In addition to strengthening enforcement to increase employer accountability and compliance with these laws, workers need comprehensive workplace rights training that includes information on rights and protections related to workplace harassment, employers' responsibility under the law, and what to do when employers fail to address the problem.

Most don't report sex harassment they witness or experience

**Among fast food workers
who experienced
or witnessed sex
harassment at work:**

65%

**DIDN'T REPORT THE
HARASSMENT TO
MANAGEMENT**

Across industries, workplace sex harassment often goes unreported.⁸³ Fear of retaliation is a primary reason that many workers who experience or witness sex harassment do not report it to management or file formal complaints.⁸⁴ Many workers also lack confidence that their employers will take sex harassment claims seriously, or respond appropriately to address the problem.⁸⁵

Findings of the 2026 CA Fast Food Sex Harassment Worker Survey are consistent with prior studies, which show that California fast food workers have low confidence in their employers' responses to workplace violations and abuses, and that they frequently experience retaliation when they report these problems.⁸⁶ Additionally, most fast food workers lack information about their workplace rights and how to uphold them, and may not recognize sex harassment when it takes place or may not know how to report it.⁸⁷

Formal complaints and legal actions represent only a tiny fraction of actual occurrences of workplace sex harassment.⁸⁸ One study found that 90% of workers who experience harassment never take formal action.⁸⁹ Fast food workers have few job protections, and many immigrant workers wrongly believe legal protections don't apply to them, and/or fear the justice system.⁹⁰ Effective workplace rights training can provide fast food workers with the resources they need to address sex harassment at work and pursue complaints when they experience these and other abuses.

Nearly half don't know what to do about sex harassment

Among fast food workers surveyed:

45%

DON'T KNOW OR ARE
UNSURE OF WHAT TO DO
ABOUT SEX HARASSMENT

Studies show that sex harassment is more likely to occur in workplaces that do not offer adequate resources or education for workers.⁹¹ A 2023 survey of California fast food workers found that nearly 9 in 10 workers surveyed did not know about their rights on the job and broadly lacked information about essential benefits and programs.⁹²

Workers describe not knowing how to address sex harassment, how to handle poor management response, or what to do if they or their coworkers experience retaliation for reporting these problems.

Most who reported sex harassment experienced retaliation

Among fast food workers who reported witnessing or experiencing sex harassment at work:

59%

EXPERIENCED RETALIATION AFTER REPORTING TO MANAGEMENT ABOUT SEX HARASSMENT.

Retaliation reported included unwanted schedule changes or cuts, being assigned worse duties, warnings or discipline, or getting fired.

Retaliation can have devastating consequences for fast food workers, who are economically vulnerable and lack job stability.⁹³ Cuts to hours, unwanted schedule changes, or unexpected job loss can mean significant loss of income, often resulting in missed rent or bills, and even eviction.⁹⁴ In addition to punishing the workers who do report problems at work, retaliation acts as a deterrent for other workers, discouraging them from speaking up about the abuses they experience and witness.⁹⁵

Workers who have immigration concerns are especially vulnerable to both harassment and employer retaliation,⁹⁶ as are workers who face language barriers in the workplace, and younger workers who are likely to have limited familiarity with workplace policies, rights and protections.⁹⁷ These demographic groups make up significant shares of California's fast food workforce, underscoring the need for comprehensive workplace rights training provided by culturally competent trainers, in a language and manner workers can understand.⁹⁸ To be effective, training must include curricula on protections against retaliation and rights and resources for all workers regardless of immigration status.⁹⁹

LEGAL OVERVIEW: SEX HARASSMENT RIGHTS AT WORK

Sex Harassment in the Law

When a worker is experiencing unwanted behavior at work, and this behavior is related to the worker's gender or sex, this behavior is likely sex harassment. Sex harassment is a form of sex discrimination that violates the California Fair Employment and Housing Act (FEHA) and Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. These workplace rights apply to workers regardless of their immigration or citizenship status.

In California, sex harassment in the workplace is unlawful, and employers have the legal responsibility to prevent harassment and create a harassment-free workplace for their workers.

Under the law, a harasser can be of any sex or gender. A harasser does not need to be the worker's boss—they can be an employer, supervisor, mayordomo, co-worker, customer, client, patron, salesperson, delivery person, or anyone else associated with the business, even if they are not the worker's direct supervisor, manager, or co-worker.

Sex harassment may take many forms: it does not have to be physical or motivated by sexual desire. Some ways that sexual harassment may occur are unwanted sexual attention or pressure, gender-based harassment, witnessing harassment towards someone else, a hostile work environment, or other hostile, offensive, humiliating, or intimidating behavior.

WHAT IS SEX HARASSMENT?

If a worker is the target of unwanted sexual attention at work, they are likely experiencing sexual harassment. Examples of this sexual type of harassment include:

- Asking for sex or sexual activities
- Pressuring to endure sexual harassment or engage in sexual conduct to
 - Get or keep a job
 - Get or keep a benefit at work, like a promotion, more hours, overtime hours, or some other benefit
 - Avoid getting in trouble (whether this is stated clearly or implied)
- Pressuring for a date, or asking repeatedly after being told “no”
- Making sexually suggestive jokes, comments, or innuendos
- Making comments about a worker's body
- Making comments about a worker's sexual activity
- Sharing, showing, or openly viewing material (videos, photos, audio, text) that is sexually explicit (like porn) or degrading
- Staring at a worker
- Making lewd gestures or gestures that make a worker feel uncomfortable
- Touching, grabbing, rubbing up against or making other unwanted contact
- Unwanted sexual touch of any kind, including touching intimate body parts

Sex- or gender-based harassment can also involve non-sexual conduct. This non-sexual type of harassment occurs when a worker is targeted based on their sex or gender. This can include:

- Harassing a worker for “not being masculine” or “not being enough of a man,” or harassing a worker for not behaving in a “feminine manner” or “like a lady”
- Harassment (including repeated misgendering) towards transgender, nonbinary, or gender-expansive workers
- Harassment based on pregnancy, childbirth, or related medical conditions
- Harassment based on lactation (breastfeeding, chestfeeding, and/or pumping)
- Harassment based on reproductive decisions, including decisions about abortion or contraceptives

A worker may have a claim for sex harassment even if they are not the target of the behavior, if they were present while the harassment happened, and if the harassment is affecting the workplace enough to create a “hostile working environment.” Some examples of this are:

- Witnessing harassment behavior directed at another worker
- Favoritism where a supervisor treats the worker(s) they are having sex with better than other coworkers
- Comments made about others but not necessarily directed at the worker receiving them

ELIA’S STORY - WHEN THINGS GO RIGHT

Since Elia first started her fast food job in Los Angeles, she has attended a Know Your Rights training with other fast food workers every year, where she learned about laws in place to protect her at work and what to do if she experiences violations. Her employer let her know about these laws and posted information about them in the employee break room. There is also information on what to do if a worker feels like they are being harassed. Because several of the workers at the restaurant speak Spanish, this information is available in Spanish and English.

Twice a week, a worker named Saul makes deliveries to the restaurant where Elia works. As the opener, it is Elia’s responsibility to receive the deliveries and place them in the store room. At first Saul was friendly and professional, but then he made lewd comments to Elia, which made her feel uncomfortable.

Elia thought about the Know Your Rights training she had received, and reviewed the poster in the breakroom on sexual harassment. She noted that the process for filing a complaint was to first speak to her supervisor. Elia also noted that if her employer does not address the harassment, she has the right to file a complaint with the California Civil Rights Department.

Elia asked for a meeting with her supervisor Carlos, and told him about the comments Saul made. Elia took notes during this meeting, and texted her notes to Carlos after and saved a screenshot, to ensure that everything that was said was documented. Carlos affirmed to Elia that Saul’s behavior was inappropriate and confirmed to her that he, along with the restaurant management, would ensure a harassment-free workplace for Elia.

Carlos contacted the vendor making deliveries and reported Saul’s behavior, and asked them to assign a different delivery driver to the restaurant. Starting with the next delivery, Elia did not have to interact with Saul again.

Carlos had a follow-up meeting with Elia where he told her the steps that he took to support her and asked if there was anything else she needed. He made it clear to Elia that she did the right thing by reporting the harassment, and assured her that their whole workplace was safer because of her actions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Ensure Access to Know Your Rights Training that Empowers Fast Food Workers

To address the crisis of sex harassment in California's fast food industry it is critical to ensure that all fast food workers have the knowledge and know-how to protect themselves and their coworkers from harassment and other abuses. Fast food industry-specific workers' rights training programs are currently being piloted in Santa Clara County and in the City of Los Angeles, where lawmakers are considering legislation that would ensure fast food workers citywide receive comprehensive Know Your Rights training.¹⁰⁰ The proposed training includes curriculum on how to identify, address, and report sex harassment at work, and what to do when employers respond inadequately or retaliate against workers for speaking up about sex harassment and other violations.¹⁰¹

Extensive research supports a full-day, in-person training program that covers the core areas of rights and protections available to California fast food workers, with industry-specific curriculum focused on the violations, hazards and abuses that fast food workers commonly face.¹⁰² Such training is most effective when it is interactive, learner-centered, and provided by independent, culturally competent trainers who are experienced in supporting diverse workforces, including low-income and immigrant workers and workers across all age groups, gender identities and sexual orientations.¹⁰³

Similarly, studies on the effectiveness of sexual harassment trainings find that trainings that make meaningful change share certain qualities.¹⁰⁴ Specifically, these trainings are delivered by human (not only electronic) instructors; include active modes of learning such as interactive exercises, rather than solely relying on lectures or videos; and are tailored to particular audiences.¹⁰⁵

In addition to facilitating interactive learning, in-person training can help break through the fear that traps many workers in abusive work situations.¹⁰⁶ This can be especially important for workers who are targets of abuses like harassment, workplace violence, and immigration-related threats by employers.¹⁰⁷ Training in a safe environment outside of the workplace, where workers feel comfortable asking questions and raising concerns about sensitive issues without fear of retaliation, can help them to pursue justice when their rights are violated, and connect them with vital resources such as counseling and other healthcare services, housing and food assistance, and legal support.¹⁰⁸

Take Steps to Address Economic Insecurity and the Precarity of Fast Food Work

Workers in low-wage industries are especially vulnerable to sexual harassment.¹⁰⁹ California's fast food workers face the intersecting challenges of low pay, unpredictable schedules, job instability and barriers to exercising rights and accessing essential benefits and programs put in place to support workers and their families (such as workers' compensation and paid leave programs).¹¹⁰ These industry-wide challenges are exacerbated by widespread workplace violations, including wage theft that costs each affected worker thousands of dollars per year, and the persistent threat of employer retaliation for speaking up about problems at work.¹¹¹

All of these challenges contribute to the economic insecurity and precarity that characterize fast food work¹¹²—realities which are especially pronounced amid California's high and rising cost of living.¹¹³ Such economic challenges are a key barrier that prevents workers from reporting workplace sex harassment and keeps them trapped in unsafe work situations.¹¹⁴ Policies aimed at improving economic conditions and addressing the precarity of low-wage work can remove the barriers that keep workers silent about sexual harassment and other workplace abuses, and trap them in unsafe work situations.¹¹⁵

To improve economic stability, fast food workers need cost-of-living adjustments to the Fast Food Minimum Wage that keep pace with inflation – in line with minimum wage policies at 40+ California cities and counties.¹¹⁶ A 2025 survey of over 300 California fast food workers, found that despite the fast food minimum wage increase to \$20 per hour, the vast majority of respondents reported persistent struggles making it through the month. 86% of workers surveyed said they worried about being able to pay next month's rent, and 76% said that during the past year they had to choose between paying rent or paying for basic needs such as food, medicine and bills.¹¹⁷

Workers also need protections against abusive scheduling, which can be achieved through policies such as the proposed Fast Food Fair Work ordinance, currently under consideration in the City of Los Angeles.¹¹⁸ In the 2025 worker survey referenced above, an overwhelming majority of California fast food workers surveyed reported experiencing unstable schedules and insufficient work hours, and worrying about schedule changes, cuts to their work hours, and the possibility of losing their jobs without warning or for no good reason.¹¹⁹

Additionally, “Just Cause” policies that safeguard workers from arbitrary punishment and retaliatory firings for speaking up about workplace problems like sex harassment also promote stability for workers and their families.¹²⁰ Strengthening state and local-level enforcement mechanisms that protect workers against retaliation would also make a meaningful difference in addressing economic instability and precarity in fast food work.

Action Needed at Fast Food Council

The Fast Food Council was established by the State of California to provide workers a seat at the table alongside employers and government to set minimum industry standards to address workers’ most pressing problems, but in the two years since the Fast Food Council last met, these abuses have continued, largely unchecked.¹²¹ Workers look urgently to the Fast Food Council to investigate the causes of – and solutions to – widespread problems including harassment, discrimination, wage theft and unsafe workplaces.

Hold Fast Food Corporations Accountable

Fast food corporations must play a central role in implementing industry-wide solutions, and must be held legally responsible for violations and abuses in their restaurants, including at franchise locations. The fast food industry’s franchise business model allows corporate franchisors to evade accountability for systemic abuses, including sex harassment.

Sex harassment in the fast food industry is a global crisis and, for years, workers across the globe have called on the corporations that control the industry to take responsibility for this crisis and use their vast resources to drive solutions on an international scale.¹²²

In California, workers, community advocates and elected leaders are working together to develop, test, and implement practical solutions to address sex harassment and other pervasive abuses in fast food, which can serve as powerful examples to inform policies and improve industry conditions worldwide. For this progress to take hold, corporations must cooperate alongside state and local officials, workers, and communities to establish and implement commonsense measures that address industry-specific problems directly: fair workweek policies that protect workers against abusive schedules; stronger protections against retaliation; and robust training programs that empower workers to exercise their workplace rights, protect themselves and their coworkers from harassment and other abuses, and use their collective voice to improve standards and conditions across their industry.

Lorena, former Wingstop worker Santa Clarita (City of Los Angeles)



I'm in my 60s. In the fall of 2022, a worker started saying mean things to me, that women are "good for nothing" and "should be at home," and he made offensive, homophobic comments about my son, who is gay. **I reported this verbal harassment to my direct supervisor, and 2 other supervisors, but management didn't help me, and the physical sexual assault began soon after.**

The man forcefully grabbed my waist and repeatedly touched my butt cheeks with his hand while I worked, especially on busy shifts, and when I told him to stop, he laughed at me. It got worse. One shift he physically sexually assaulted me 8 different times. I told management about it right away, but Wingstop took no action.

The sexual assaults continued from February 2023 to January 2024. I kept reporting them to management. They eventually changed my schedule, but in a way that reduced my hours and cut my income – but our schedules often still overlapped. The man who was assaulting me then began arriving at the store early, while I was working, before his scheduled shift. He followed me around the store, and one time he followed me to the bathroom, which was very frightening.

I didn't know what to do. Even though the State of California requires training on sex harassment, management didn't give me that training.

I learned from the Union that if management doesn't protect me, I can start the Complaint process with the CA Civil Rights Department, and the Union connected me with attorneys who helped me start an investigation. I talked with and corresponded with the Wingstop franchise owner, and he told me that he didn't believe me, and that the man who was sexually assaulting me had a good reputation. Wingstop retaliated against me for filing my Complaint with the CA Civil Rights Department, assigning me to do heavy lifting, carrying around heavy boxes of potatoes – work that I had never done before -- and telling the younger workers who wanted to help me that they weren't allowed to help me, while giving them light cleaning work. I filed a lawsuit.

My hair started falling out. I suffered from anxiety and depression. I felt forced to quit my job in June 2024, and when I applied for new jobs, management from my old employer called the places where I was applying and told them I had filed a lawsuit against my former employer and not to hire me.

Individual workers like me cannot end the sex harassment crisis in fast food one store at a time. The whole industry needs to change. The first step is for all fast food workers to know our rights and how to enforce them.

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RESOURCES

CALLING FOR HELP

If you are experiencing harassment, discrimination, or violence because of your sex, sexuality, or gender – there are resources you can call for help:

- **Legal Aid at Work** – For free and confidential legal advice and information about workplace problems, including sex harassment and discrimination: **call 415-864-8848**
- **CHIRLA** – If you are experiencing workplace problems, including sex harassment and discrimination, and you are concerned how your immigration status may affect your situation: **call 213 201-8773**
- **Santa Clara County Office of Labor Standards Enforcement Advice Line:** (866) 870-7725
- **National Domestic Violence Hotline (24/7 and Confidential):** 1 (800) 799-7233, or text **START** to 88788
- **LA County Domestic Violence Hotline (24/7 and Confidential):** (800) 978-3600
- **National Suicide & Crisis Lifeline** – If you are experiencing a mental health crisis, including thoughts of harming yourself (24/7 and Confidential): call 988
- **California Warm Line** – If you would like to talk to a confidential and compassionate peer counselor, **call: (833) 317-4673**
- **211** – For free and confidential resources and information on housing, food, health care and crisis services: **call 211**

GUIDES & FACT SHEETS

- **Workplace Sexual Harassment Prevention Toolkit by Legal Aid at Work**
legalaidthatwork.org/guides/workplace-sexual-harassment-prevention-toolkit/
- **Legal Aid at Work Self Help Library**
legalaidthatwork.org/self-help-library/
- **FreeFrom:** For more information, resources and data on workplace rights for survivors of violence, visit www.freefrom.org/survivors-at-work

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Liz Hernández (Mexico City, 1993) works across painting, sculpture, and textiles, taking writing as its point of departure: each series begins with a short story that guides the creation of handmade images and objects. Through this process, she uses fiction and symbol to explore affective memory, feminine inheritance, and identity as unstable territory, speaking of what language alone cannot hold. Her work is held in the permanent collections of SFMOMA, the De Young Museum, and KADIST, and has been presented in Mexico City, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and New York.

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