YOUNG WORKER Storytelling Project

CHANGING THE NARRATIVE OF YOUNG WORKERS IN TODAY'S ECONOMY
ABOUT THE YOUNG WORKER STORYTELLING PROJECT

The Young Worker Storytelling Project started in late 2016, when a small group of diverse workers (ages 16 - 28) came together and shared stories of their experiences. The workers had experienced working in fast food establishments, warehouses, retail shops, and grocery stores. They were mainly women, immigrants, with a combination of full, part-time and student workers. Most shared a hopeful and inspired work introduction that came with their first job, a sense of independence, and increased economic security. But many of these stories had an unspoken side.

As one person commented, "I was just trying to make a living, get an education, give back to my family when I had extra, and all while keeping the dreams and hopes for myself and future alive. That wasn't easy when I would go to work." Nobody's dreams should cost them their dignity.

The Young Worker Storytelling Project’s mission is to create more visibility of the experiences of diverse young workers, and for young people in today’s growing economy to change the workplace.

HOW TO USE THIS RESOURCE:

This booklet is a snapshot of the full Young Worker Storytelling Project, and is meant to be a resource to be shared. Invite others in your community to join the discussion, or use these stories as a platform to start your own conversations about the experiences today's workers face. Check out the online toolkit for more stories and ways to take action at www.21progress.org.

THE FUTURE OF THIS PROJECT:

The Young Worker Storytelling Project will continue collecting stories from young people, particularly those of historically marginalized identities. In 2018, the project will listen to 100 worker stories through group conversations that empower and bring together young workers for fair treatment. The Young Worker Storytelling Project will release a follow up in January 2019.

TAKE ACTION:

Today’s young workers ages 16 - 28 are far from the millennial stereotype. They are persistent in the face of adversity, desire respectful relationships with their employers, coworkers and/or customers, and they are committed to performing well for their organizations.

What young workers want is pretty simple: to be treated with respect, paid fairly for their work, and given real opportunities to better their lives and pursue their dreams. Here's what you can do to get involved:

1. Attend A Young Worker Rise Up Event: Interested in having conversations with friends, family, coworkers, and/or other young workers about your experiences at work? Attend an upcoming workshop to meet others, learn about your rights, and gain skills to make things better.

2. Share Your Worker Story: Each story changes the way we interact with one another, creating greater awareness, safer workplaces, and increased power to workers. Change the work culture and contribute to 2019's Young Worker Storytelling Project.

NOTE: The stories featured in this booklet have been edited from their original version.

Learn more by visiting www.21progress.org.
Upon review of the 100 stories contributed by workers, 5 main themes were identified. The following are the descriptions, and frequency of each theme represented in this project. Frequency is represented as percents, calculated from 100 worker stories. Each story has been categorized and assigned an icon to represent the theme(s) it falls under. For more information about the themes, visit www.21progress.org.

**WAGE THEFT**

13% of stories documented stealing of pay and compensation.

**INSECURE SCHEDULING**

38% of stories documented unfair work expectations and scheduling requirements.
HOSTILE WORK ENVIRONMENT

71% of stories documented subtle but offensive comments or actions that reinforce stereotypes.

SAFETY & HARASSMENT

26% of stories documented conduct that creates a hostile and unsafe work environment.

COERCION & RETALIATION

18% of stories documented assertion of power that force employees to comply to with workplace rules and regulations.

For information about the labor violations and your rights at work visit:

City of Seattle
Office of Labor Standards
Phone: 206-256-5297
www.seattle.gov/laborstandards

Washington State Labor & Industries
http://www.lni.wa.gov/

U.S. Department of Labor, Wage and Hour Division
https://www.dol.gov/whd/

Washington Department of Labor and Industries Division of Occupational Safety
http://www.lni.wa.gov/Safety/default.asp
RIKKI EVANS • age 25

I had a manager, who googled a racist term to call me. He googled jiggaboo and would call me that, or jigga for short. I was the only Black employee so everything was chicken, watermelon and grape drink jokes. He encouraged my co-workers to also participate in this behavior. I was homeless at the time and needed the money, so I dealt with it, but I got anxiety every time I went to work. I would leave work, drive to where I parked my car for the night and cry. I was angry and wanted to quit, but then again, I needed the money to be able to get into a place.

“He googled jiggaboo and would call me that, or jigga for short. I was the only black employee so everything was chicken, watermelon and grape drink jokes.”
MARIA MARTINEZ

One summer when my mom and I were looking for field work, a man offered us a job in his apple orchard. My mom and I agreed. That day, we worked over 16 hours in the hot summer picking apples. Later, the owner of the orchard told us that we had not done our jobs right, and he was not going to pay us anything for any of the bins we picked. He yelled at us to get out of his orchard, don’t ever come back, and to learn how to pick apples. At that moment I felt sad and disappointed by how that man treated us.

“The owner of the orchard told us that we were not doing our jobs right, and he was not going to pay us.”
I started working at a broker firm as an insurance agent. I was the only person of color, and my manager made me feel unwelcomed from the start. She always made comments about how strong my accent was and how difficult it was for people to understand me. She told me that I needed to stop speaking Spanish and work on my English. I knew that I was more than capable of doing the job and becoming a great agent but her attitude and treatment made me feel stupid.

I ended up leaving the company even though I performed well. The situation impacted me, I’ve always believed in myself and am a strong young woman, but when working there I started doubting my ability. I felt small, incompetent, and ashamed for having an accent, I questioned myself when I spoke in English, and dreaded going to work. I was not going to let one person define who I am.

“She always made comments about how strong my accent was and how difficult it was for people to understand me. She told me that I needed to stop speaking Spanish and work on my English.”
I was working at a French restaurant and my boss would constantly belittle me. He called me stupid in front of staff, mocked the way I cut the bread, and conversed in French with coworkers about how dumb I was, all while I stood there.

The worst was when he decided to let me go by no longer scheduling me. He didn’t tell me that he was firing me, it was clear. I let it go and didn’t say anything. They never called me back and a few weeks later I was driving past the restaurant and noticed they had hired someone to take my place. I felt so awful working there. I was happy about being let go, but at the same time it made me sad.

“He outright called me stupid in front of staff, mocked the way I cut the bread, and conversed in French with coworkers about how dumb I was, all while I stood there.”
LEO CARMONA • age 23

“My company, a manufacturing warehouse, had fired all undocumented immigrant workers, approximately 45 people, which was 90% of their team.”

One morning I arrive to work to learn that my company, a manufacturing warehouse, had fired all undocumented immigrant workers, approximately 45 people, which was 90% of their team. At that point, I had received DACA, a special permit that allowed me to work while undocumented, so I was not scared of being fired. However, it was frustrating that my peers who worked in this company for 10+ years were no longer there. They knew the work, they were the experts.

My supervisor told me to fire up the manufacturing machines. I had been working there for 5 months as a general laborer. I had not been trained to operate the machines. However, I learned fast and figured things out. I took responsibility for operating the machines like my supervisor wanted.
The company started hiring people from a temporary hiring agency – all white workers. My supervisor told me I needed to train the new workers so they can become machine operators. I started training and doing the general labor.

Two months later, I had trained all the machine operators, was performing my normal duties but still getting paid only $12.50 per hour. The new workers I trained were making $15.00 per hour.

I was tired. I was drained. I was emotionally exhausted, and unsure how my work was being valued. I decide to ask my supervisor why I was not a machine operator or getting compensated at the same level as trainers. He told me that management didn’t think I was ready. I couldn’t understand so I asked, “What do you mean? Are you telling me that I am training people for a role I am not prepare to take?” He then answered, “To be quite honest, management thinks you don’t have papers and that you may be fired any time, just like the rest”. I was livid.

As a 19 year old who had just finished my first year in college, I didn’t know what this meant or how I could fix it. I told management that I am perfectly capable of doing the work and made it clear that I do have papers to work legally. They decide to “promote” me.

One year later, after many physical injuries on the job and countless tears from the injustice, I decide to walk away to continue my journey in college. Until this day, I regret staying at that place as long as I did. I feel ashamed that I had to tell them I had papers in order be valuable. The guilt always comes back to me because of how I managed it. I was 19, I didn’t know any better. I always have to remind myself that all that mess was not my fault.

“I feel ashamed that I had to tell them I had papers in order to be valued.”
I was 19 working at an airport and I experienced many forms of disrespect and violations to my rights. The station lead I was regularly paired up with was known for being racist to immigrants with accents. I felt unsafe working with her. Some of the older staff would disrespectfully tell us what to do and treat us like children. The people traveling in the airport were extremely disrespectful, openly denying help from someone who was Black or Muslim. One traveler intentionally ran her cart over my foot. Management didn’t do anything about the harassment I and others experienced. I had to walk for the entire 8 hour shift without taking breaks to sit down, except for lunch.

“The station lead I was regularly paired up with was known for being racist immigrants with accents.”
While working at the airport, I experienced harassment from my former assistant manager: He would always tell me that he is attracted to Filipina women, and he would drop hints about asking me out. He would purposely extend my time, so that I would miss the last light rail back to UW, and he could give me a ride home. Those experiences were hard at the time, but I needed the money for college, rent, and to support myself.

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"I work at a large company that has warehouses all across the country. They have the resources to legally defend themselves, while I don’t."

I do heavy lifting at my place of work, so I wear a back brace for support. One day, my supervisor saw the back brace and told me I couldn’t wear it unless I have a doctor’s note. I took off the brace, and that day I threw my back out and hurt myself. Because of the injury, I’ve been on pain medication and had to take time off. My employer is trying to convince me to not take legal action. They have asked me to lie to my doctors and on formal documents to cover up what happened. They have accused me of lying about the incident, and now I’m in a he-said she-said situation where it is going to be my word against theirs.

I work at a large company that has warehouses all across the country. They have the resources to legally defend themselves, while I don’t.
I was hired as a caregiver by the daughter of a man with Parkinson's, a degenerative disease that significantly affects motor functions and quality of life. While taking care of this man, I knew I was contributing emotional and physical labor that was making a difference in his life and life of his daughter's. I knew my work was valuable. I saw the man's need for care, and the impact I was bringing to their lives.

At the time, I was making just above minimum wage, $10.50 an hour, and it was a challenge to pay for my basic needs like food, housing, and utilities. I wasn’t certified but knew that my emotional and physical labor was hard and strenuous, and the value I created was meaningful. I believed I deserved to make a living wage. Multiple times I asked the daughter about getting a raise. She eventually told me that I wasn’t a certified CNA, should consider myself lucky, and threatened to fire me if I kept asking. I felt like my work was not valuable and my effort wasn’t enough. It’s hard for me to understand why there isn’t enough to go around.

“I felt like my work was not valuable and my effort wasn’t enough. It’s hard for me to understand why there isn’t enough to go around.”
I was called a terrorist twice, and was screamed at multiple times by customers while working at a major retail shop. I felt unsafe in my work space, which forced me to leave.

“I was called a terrorist twice.”
FATIMA SHEIKN

At a networking event, I asked an outreach coordinator, “What would I need to have or learn in order to work for your company?” The outreach coordinator, though very polite, and after a little stumbling said, “You seem to be good to go, but honestly, I’m not sure how we could take you with... how you dress.” Sadness mixed with disappointment enveloped my heart, but I cheerily replied, “I understand” and walked away.

As a Muslim woman I choose to wear a Hijab (headscarf) and a Niqab (face veil) voluntarily. After studying how important having modesty, sincerity, and what it means to be an empowered woman, I decided to take a big step and wear them to represent my strength and identity. My interaction with the outreach coordinator is one of many experiences where I felt dejected. I’ve learned that even though a person is qualified and has the acquired skills in their field of work, many times they are still seen as not good enough. I deserve to be a whole person at my workplace. Wearing a Hijab and Niqab is an expression of my identity, my beliefs, and my values.

“You seem to be good to go, but honestly, I’m not sure how we could take you with... how you dress.”
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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21 Progress is a nonprofit organization based in Seattle, Washington. 21 Progress provides high quality leadership development training/education programs that unite, develop, and empower emerging leaders – including young adults, immigrants, refugees, and people of color – to build thriving communities. We are committed to supporting next generation of leaders and delivering services that address communities most impacted by inequality.

To learn more about this project please visit our website:

21progress.org