



Room for Improvement: Trafficking in American Hotels

Patrick Gage

"I've been in a bunch of hotels. Nice, not so nice. I've seen them all. The worst is when my pimp books a room for the day and I gotta work all kinds of men. One after another. Last week on our way, the new girl I work with asked me how old I was. '17,' I said. I lied. I'm really 13. On our way out of the hotel, the guy at the front desk looked at me. We looked at each other. I feel like he knew something was wrong, or off, or whatever, but he looked away. They always look away."¹

Hotels play an essential economic and social role in the 21st century.² Today 165,000 of them operate worldwide, representing 15.5 million rooms, millions of employees (many from low-income families), and more than \$3 trillion in global revenue since 2008.^{3, 4, 5} In 2014, U.S. hotels reported combined earnings of \$176.7 billion, the same year Wyndham announced it had officially opened its 7,600th property and InterContinental added its 700,000th room.⁶ But all is not well. Despite doing an incredible amount of good, hotels have a dark side, one few executives will acknowledge.

Prostitution has existed for thousands of years. A "fully accepted part of [Roman] life," buying sex was permitted, or at the very least tolerated in Europe until the early 16th century, when a growing association between prostitutes and the plague, along with renewed religious opposition, sparked dramatic reform.^{7, 8} Brothels and red-light districts suffered immensely as European governments cracked down on the sex trade.⁹ While prostitution survived as a social reality, it lost its 'institutionalized' status in many countries and retreated to the shadows, where it remained until recovering centuries later. Today selling sex is legal throughout Western Europe, though it is only regulated in a couple of places (Germany, The Netherlands, Switzerland, and Austria).

The United States followed a similar path. Though discouraged and stigmatized, prostitution was not 'banned' until 1910, when a crescendo of moral outrage produced the federal Mann Act barring the interstate transport of women "for the purpose of [selling sex] or debauchery, or for any other immoral purpose."¹⁰

Local 'Red Light Abatement' acts were quick to follow, targeting brothels from coast to coast. By 1920, almost every red-light district in the country had been shut down.¹¹ Facing increased scrutiny, pimps and prostitutes left the streets and moved indoors, relying on telephones to keep business going. 'Call girls' became America's new sexual fad.

The rapid advance of communication technology after WWII pulled prostitutes further from brick- and-mortar brothels. Hotels filled the void, offering buyers safer, more 'enjoyable' experiences. By the late 1900s, almost all U.S. counties had outlawed prostitution, making a return to the days of old impossible. Thus many pimps shifted their attention exclusively to commercial lodging.

Prostitution is not the only issue hotels need to confront. While some people think buying sex is harmless, only a very small percentage of prostitutes, primarily white, privileged women, legitimately choose to sell their bodies. In all other cases, the trade is synonymous with commercial sexual exploitation.¹² Thus as prostitution has made its way into the lodging industry, so too has sex trafficking.

According to U.S. law, sex trafficking occurs when "a commercial sex act is induced by force, fraud, or coercion, or in which the person induced to perform such act has not attained 18 years of age."¹³ The crime's prevalence in America is shocking. Since December 2007, 14,588 potential cases of sex trafficking, representing at least 11,592 victims, have been reported to the National Human Trafficking Resource Center (NHTRC), spanning all 50 states and the District of Columbia.¹⁴ Broken down, these numbers expose hotels' intimate, (often) unwilling connection to modern slavery.

Between December 2007 and February 2015, more than 1,300 cases of sex trafficking in American hotels were reported to the NHTRC involving well over 1,000 potential victims.^{15, 16} When asked, "service providers and law enforcement agencies report that almost every single pimped victim [they come] in contact with has been exploited at one point in hotels."¹⁷ All told, hotels are the second most commonly cited venue for sex trafficking in the United States, trailing only commercial front brothels.¹⁸

Unfortunately this problem affects the entire industry. According to a recent study, many frequent sex buyers earn annual salaries in excess of \$120,000, have graduate degrees, and are married.¹⁹ These men prefer more expensive hotels, implicating some of America's largest brands, while lower-end properties cater to the

less affluent. In total at least seven of the world's ten largest hotel groups have been connected to one or more sex trafficking/prostitution-related arrest since late 2012 (most in the U.S., but some abroad).

Nevertheless American hotels are not awash in illicit sex, nor do they want to be. (The numbers suggest a big, rather than endemic problem.) Prostitution/trafficking cases involving the lodging industry should therefore be met with calls for collaboration instead of shaming. Of course if an owner knows his or her property is being used by pimps and refuses to act, nonviolent coercion is justified.

While some are better than others – in 2013, Carlson received the Presidential Award for Extraordinary Efforts to Combat Trafficking in Persons – U.S. hotel companies have a long way to go, and it is incumbent on activists to work with, not against them. (Naming names is only useful insofar as it brings reluctant stakeholders to the table.) Consumers are similarly responsible for encouraging good behavior by actively supporting ethical brands.

Although most abolitionists acknowledge the lodging industry's connection to sex trafficking, they often overlook its links to forced labor. Like any other business, hotels buy products, and lots of them. Bed-sheets, towels, and shampoo fill ledgers, but where do they come from? Are they ethically sourced, does the company pay a fair price? At best the answers to these questions are mixed, and at worst, well, you get the picture.

The lack of charred pillowcases in Bangladesh does not exonerate hotels. On the contrary, large brands purchase millions of dollars worth of high-risk goods every year. (Those uniforms have to come from somewhere.) In doing so they perpetuate an increasingly complicated system of exploitation built to benefit Western corporations at the expense of foreign labor. Yet for all the criticism H&M, Zara, Forever 21, and Wal-Mart have justifiably received since Rana Plaza's deadly 2013 collapse, no one has ever scrutinized hotels. And the problem does not stop at America's shores: from December 2007 to February 2015, 294 potential cases of labor trafficking in the U.S. lodging industry were reported to the NHTRC, of which 32% involved contract fraud.²⁰

All of this has to change.

First, hotel staff must be trained to recognize human trafficking (companies like Carlson and Wyndham are ahead of the curve). For example, while a guest who pays in cash may seem, and likely is completely innocent, his choice warrants scrutiny. (Pimps avoid paper trails like the plague, relying on hard currency and prepaid cards to cover their tracks). And what happens when someone frequently requests new linens or books a long stay with no luggage? Of course not every customer who spurns credit or travels light is a criminal, far from it. But knowing what indicates a potential case of forced prostitution makes identifying a real one that much easier.

Second, American hotels need to advertise the NHTRC's hotline number. Self-reporting is a critical tool in the fight against sexual exploitation and forced labor, but since 2007 just 22% of the national center's lodging-related trafficking calls have come from victims, who know far more about their situations than outsiders.²¹ Thus it is imperative the number appears in as many hotels as possible. Options include putting it on hygiene products (bars of soap, bottles of shampoo), which many guests take with them, or displaying it at the front desk.

Finally, only the most naïve observer would suggest American hotels do not benefit from forced labor. Brands that care about ending slavery should therefore undergo continuous, comprehensive supply chain audits, working with nonprofits like Made in a Free World (FRDM Tool) and Walk Free Foundation (Global Business Authentication) to ensure their vendors pay a living wage and give workers the rights they deserve.

While these policies are not solutions in themselves, they are a start, the first step down a long road – and a good one at that.

Today U.S. hotels have a choice: ignore those in need or help them. While most brands want to do more, talk is cheap. The downtrodden have waited long enough.

It is time to act.

1 "The Code of Conduct: Does Your Hotel Know?", ECPAT-USA, accessed September 24, 2015.

2 In this paper, the term 'hotel' refers to all reasonably sized commercial lodging establishments, including motels.

3 "Wyndham Worldwide Corporation 2014 Annual Report", Wyndham Worldwide Corporation, accessed September 24, 2015.

4 "Global hotel industry revenue from 2008 to 2016 (in billion U.S. dollars)", *Statista*, accessed September 24, 2015.

- 5 Of these properties, 53% are members of a local, regional, national, or international brand (i.e. Holiday Inn).
- 6 “Revenue of the United States hotel industry from 2001 to 2014 (in billion U.S. dollars”, *Statista*, accessed September 24, 2015.
- 7 Leah Lydia Otis, *Prostitution in Medieval Society: The History of an Urban Institution in Languedoc* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 8.
- 8 Ibid., 41-43.21 Ibid.
- 9 Ibid., 40-45.
- 10 Eric Weiner, “The Long, Colorful History of the Mann Act”, NPR.
- 11 Paul R. Abramson, Steven D. Pinkerton, and Mark Huppert, *Sexual Rights in America: The Ninth Amendment and the Pursuit of Happiness* (New York: New York University, 2003), 124.
- 12 Not to be confused with sex trafficking, one type of commercial sexual exploitation. Whereas someone who ‘freely’ enters prostitution for economic reasons may not be considered a victim of human trafficking, for example, he or she is nevertheless exploited by pimps and sex buyers, who prey on his or her vulnerability for personal gain.
- 13 Trafficking Victims Protection Act, U.S. Code 22 (2000), § 7102.
- 14 “Sex Trafficking”, National Human Trafficking Resource Center, accessed September 24, 2015.
- 15 “Human Trafficking and the Hotel Industry”, Polaris, accessed September 24, 2015.
- 16 94% of the 1,434 total human trafficking cases in hotels reported to the NHTRC between December 2007 and February 2015 involved sex trafficking, thus the “over 1,300” estimate.
- 17 “The Code of Conduct: Does Your Hotel Know?”, ECPAT-USA, accessed September 24, 2015.
- 18 “2014 Statistics”, Polaris, accessed September 24, 2015.
- 19 Rachel Moran, “Buying Sex Should Not Be Legal”, The New York Times, August 28, 2015, accessed September 24, 2015.
- 20 “Human Trafficking and the Hotel Industry”, Polaris.