

Opinions

Why is forced labor an issue for hoteliers?

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When hotels rely on agencies, or contract out their housekeeping roles or other low-skilled jobs, the risk of forced labor becomes much more real.



By Siobhan O'Neill

In 2014, the International Tourism Partnership (ITP) set about hosting a stakeholder engagement session for our members. We work with the world's leading hotel groups on tools, best practices and solutions that help everyone move faster on sustainability and do better as responsible businesses.

We had recently developed HCMI, the Hotel Carbon Measurement Initiative, which helps hotels around the world measure their carbon footprint in the same standardized manner, allowing benchmarking for the first time. We had an idea what we should work on next but wanted to sense-check with our wider stakeholders to make sure we were still addressing the issues they felt were the most important for the industry to tackle. After an extensive surveying process in which we talked to hundreds of stakeholders, water and human rights came out as the top two issues.

We took those issues into a closed workshop environment, bringing together hotel representatives and the stakeholders working on water and human rights issues to help them collaborate on solutions for the hotel industry to act on. Let's just say it wasn't an easy day. Back then, getting hoteliers to even acknowledge human trafficking risk—let alone work on ways to address it—was a hard sell. No one really wanted to touch this thorny and delicate issue.

Fast forward a few short years and hotels have embraced the issue wholeheartedly. It was really encouraging to see Chip Rogers, president and CEO of AAHOA, [raising the issue of human trafficking on this site just recently](#). Marriott International and global brands are really highlighting the problem and working hard throughout their properties and value chain to address it.

But I think many hoteliers still struggle to understand how it applies to them. Most understand that hotels can be a venue or through-route for traffickers moving people, or exploiting them. Some may realize that their supply chain may be a risk. But fewer will understand that hotels themselves can be employing people who have been trafficked or are victims of forced labor—or modern-day slavery.

The fact is nearly 25 million people worldwide are estimated to be held in forced labor today. Forced labor happens when people are coerced to work through violence or intimidation, or via accumulated debt, retention of identity papers or threats of reporting to immigration authorities.

This can happen when passports are held by recruitment agencies, when workers are made to pay a fee to be placed in employment, or when recruiters hold workers in accommodation where they're made to pay a variety of expenses. Forced labor is an unacceptable human rights violation that can result from unethical employment and recruitment practices throughout the labor supply chain, including for hotels. When hotels rely on agencies, or contract out their housekeeping roles or other low-skilled jobs, the risk that someone there is being coerced becomes much more real.

So it becomes really important that hotels check their agencies, but more than that, that they provide a genuinely open door for all workers in the property to report things they're not happy with. Give employees a route to raise issues—even if they're not directly employed by the hotel. Publicize a hotline for trafficking or forced labor, but make sure all workers understand their rights.

Many people who are held in this way don't even realize their rights are being impinged and that they are victims of forced labor. Roll out department-appropriate training to all employees to make sure they feel confident to report any issues that worry them. Make sure concerns are listened to and escalated. Don't brush reports under the carpet. And ensure that housekeeping employees feel able to alert more senior staff to examples of harassment.

These are all practical and valuable ways that hotels can ensure their staff are safe from exploitation. The issue was highlighted in Singapore on 12 June during the Global Forum for Responsible Recruitment and Employment held at the Marina Bay Sands Hotel, when Marriott CEO Arne Sorenson and IHG Executive Vice President George Turner joined hotel peers to unite in the call to end forced labor. Thirteen of the world's leading hotel groups have agreed to support three key principles which will work to tackle the issue, and all hotels are being urged to join them.

1. Every worker should have freedom of movement.

The ability of workers to move freely should not be restricted by their employer through abuse, threats and practices such as unlawful retention of passport and valuable possessions.

2. No worker should pay for a job.

Fees and costs associated with recruitment and obtaining employment should not be paid by workers.

3. No worker should be indebted or coerced to work.

Workers should work voluntarily, be informed of their employment terms and conditions in advance without misrepresentation, and paid regularly as agreed and in accordance with any applicable laws and regulations.

Forced labor is a real issue for hotels—and all employers. We're all talking about it. It's time to act.

Siobhan O'Neill has been editor of Green Hotelier for the past five years, branching out as communications manager for the International Tourism Partnership. Before joining ITP she worked for ten years as a freelance journalist across a variety of media; specializing in catering and the hospitality sector, with a particular interest in sustainability issues.

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