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Employee perspectives on sex trafficking in Swedish chain hotels

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates chain hotel employees in Sweden and their ability to work against sex trafficking. Using ten semi-structured interviews, the research asks questions about employee's relationships with external stakeholders (the police, booking channels, non-profit organizations, and competitors) and macroenvironmental factors (political and legal factors, economic, socio-cultural and health). The findings highlight that lack of communication, cooperation and autonomy hinder chain hotel employee's ability to recognize and prevent sex trafficking. The paper concludes by emphasizing the need for better interdisciplinary engagement to help eliminate sex trafficking within the tourism and hospitality industries and reiterates the call for actionable outcomes that empower chain hotel employees to work with external stakeholders to find viable solutions to help stop sex trafficking.

KEYWORDS

Sex trafficking; chain hotels; external stakeholders; macroenvironmental factors, Sweden

Introduction

In the tourism industry, hospitality and transportation are the main sectors that are conscious or unconscious helpers of sex trafficking (Aston et al., 2022; Carolin et al., 2015). Rothberg (2019) goes so far as to state that the profitability of sex trafficking would not be possible without the transportation of victims through the hotel industry. In Europe alone, it is estimated that over 900 000 victims are trafficked for sexual exploitation through the hospitality industry (Sowon, 2020). Similar reports comes from the US where Polaris, the US Human Trafficking Hotline, revealed that hotel and motel-based sex trafficking reported the highest number of cases of sex trafficking based on venue (Rothberg, 2019) and in New York, hotels “host” 45% of commercially exploited victims of sex trafficking (Carolin et al., 2015).

Chain hotels have been recognized as the most susceptible to sex trafficking because of their ability to provide a good price-quality balance (Polaris, 2018). Contrary to common belief, sex trafficking does not necessarily happen in cheap motels. As a survivor of sex trafficking quoted in the Polaris report (2018) states, “we would stay in places where we thought clients were comfortable coming as well . . . just nice enough and affordable so my profits were still ok” (p. 18). Therefore, pricing is recognized as a determinant in the choice of hotel, and many hotel chains can provide good pricing for the quality. Hence, employees at chain hotels are often then most likely to come in contact with sex trafficking within the tourism industry, and are also the ones who hold a level of power when it comes to fighting the issue (Sarkisian, 2015). With this power comes obligations that are governed by the employee's ethical concerns, the hotel chain's codes of conduct and other macro-environmental factors.

Previous research highlights that hotel staff are perceived as guardians for the victims and preventers of criminal acts (Paraskevas & Brookes, 2018) and it is becoming increasingly important to help hotel employees by giving them clear advice and easily accessible support. Hotels need to assess their own risk of hosting sex trafficked victims (Paraskevas & Brookes, 2018) and recognize the role external stakeholders play in reinforcing hotel employee's support systems.

This paper focuses on chain hotel employees in Sweden and their ability to work against sex trafficking. Facing issues of sex trafficking in hotel workplaces affects the psychosocial working environment and employees need support from internal and external stakeholders to be able to keep up the fight against this modern type of slavery. Through examining hotel employee's opinions and experiences, this paper aims to outline some of the necessary requirements for a functional support system for chain hotel employees utilizing external stakeholders.

Swedish context

Sweden, as the first country in the world to establish a Sex Purchase Act (1999), allowing the voluntary selling of sex, but criminalizing its purchase (Holmström & Skilbrei, 2017) provides the setting in which this paper considers hotel employees perspectives of the role of external stakeholders in fighting sex trafficking. As the Swedish Government state, "International trafficking in human beings could not flourish but for the existence of local prostitution markets" (Swedish Ministry of Industry, Employment, and Communications, 2005, p. 2). In 2014, nearly 7000 ads targeting men buying sex from women were found on on-line escort pages, an increase from 304 ads in 2006 (Länsstyrelsen i Stockholm, 2015). Overall, 77% of the online ads related to someone stating that they came from another country; at the same time there was also an increase in the proportion of non-Swedish people among street prostitutes (Länsstyrelsen i Stockholm, 2015). We can make an assumption that the number of people selling sexual services (on-line) in Sweden has continued to increase since 2015. In part, this is evidenced by escalating numbers of trafficked individuals globally (UNODC, 2016), and Sweden is very unlikely to be an exception especially as the European Commission recognized Sweden as a destination for human trafficking, mainly for sexual exploitation (European Commission, 2020).

It is estimated that, in only the Stockholm area, 200–400 women are trafficked every year (Sweden, 2010). In 2017, the Swedish police identified 82 victims of sex trafficking, but the Migration Agency suspected 444 more cases, an increase of 30% from 2016 (United States Department of State, 2018). It is also evident that the hospitality industry is used as an arena for sex trafficking in Sweden as every fourth sex purchase is estimated to take place at a hotel (Business Against Trafficking, n.d.). As hotels are particularly vulnerable to this type of transaction (Paraskevas & Brookes, 2018) we set out to study chain hotel employee's opinions and experiences in a Swedish setting. We start by presenting the fairly scarce literature on (sex) trafficking within the tourism and hospitality, followed by an outline of our qualitative study design and results. We conclude by giving theoretical and practical implications and suggest future research directions.

Sex trafficking and its relation to the tourism and hospitality industry

In relation to the tourism and hospitality industry, research is generally around sex tourism. Sex tourism is defined as "individuals who plan their travel around the purpose of obtaining sex" (Blackburn et al., 2010, p.22) and, within literature on sex in relation to tourism, this is the most studied area (Carr, 2016). Nordic studies related to sex and tourism tend to examine it as something that happens elsewhere i.e. tourists travelling to other places with the intention to buy sex. These studies often use cases where Nordic men travel to developing countries in South America (Pruthi, 2007) or Asia (Manieri et al., 2013). What is neglected, in Nordic countries and more globally, is the connection between sex through trafficking that takes place within the (Nordic) tourism industry. There is therefore an urgent need to study how systems of sex

trafficking are related to the tourism and hospitality industry from other perspectives, not just from a consumer (sex buyer) perspective.

In the past decade, a small amount of research has emerged that studies the role of the tourism and hospitality industry as a facilitator and venue for sex trafficking (and prostitution). In 2008, Tepelus called for a mobilization of tourism stakeholders, including academia, to explore trafficking and (child) sex tourism (Tepelus, 2008) and urged for these issues to be incorporated more fully into the sustainable tourism agenda. Still not much has been done by tourism academics and Wen's et al. (2020) recent systematic review of the sex trafficking-related literature disappointingly only found a dozen articles in tourism and hospitality journals.

The existing empirical research within tourism and hospitality journals is divided into two thematic areas. The first examines the relationship between sport and business events and the increased supply and demand of prostitution with sex trafficking as a shadow activity (Boecking et al., 2019; Finkel & Finkel, 2015; Matheson & Finkel, 2013; Miller et al., 2016). The second theme, outlined below, relates to hotels as venues for prostitution and sex trafficking.

A small number of studies have been conducted related to hotel's work against trafficking and they have pointed out the need for knowledge about this issue within the tourism industry (Carolin et al., 2015) and the necessity to speak out, admit that this takes place and gain knowledge of how to act (Hughes-Jones & Roberts, 2015). Hotel staff are brought up as guardians for the victims and preventers of the criminal act (Paraskevas & Brookes, 2018) where Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and codes of conduct can help prevent and reduce sex trafficking within the hospitality industry (George & Smith, 2013; Jeng et al., 2022; Kalargyrou & Woods, 2015; Paraskevas, 2020; Sarkisian, 2015).

Paraskevas and Brookes (2018)&b) initiated a qualitative study including stakeholder interviews with 29 respondents in Finland, UK, and Romania of which eight were with hotel staff (on managerial level), followed by focus groups with NGOs and hotel representatives, and a qualitative survey (n = 147) targeting hotel general managers and hotel head of departments (2018a). This study is, to our knowledge, the only one published in a tourism journals targeting hotel staff and we therefore see a further need for knowledge gained from the voices of these "guardians".

Wen's et al. (2020) have highlighted issues related to small sample studies with limited generalizability, few multi-disciplinary studies and measurement concerns related to the event studies (i.e. Matheson & Finkel, 2013). We agree with the necessity of more, and deeper research in this area. However, in this instance we also argue for the use of qualitative case studies with relatively limited samples as a step towards recognition of the issue in a Nordic hospitality context and as a way for academia to take responsibility and build upon the scarce research on relationships between the hospitality industry and sex trafficking.

Methodology

This paper used semi-structured interviews with staff members of chain-affiliated hotels in Sweden. Qualitative research allows for more in-depth analysis of the research problem where the research considers participant's characteristics, points of views and experiences (Bryman, 2012). As this study's research questions revolved around the chain hotel employee perspectives, their individual points of views needed to be taken into account. This study was not aiming to provide a broad overview of the phenomenon, but rather to study and explain a situation relative to the studied group. Therefore, using semi-structured interviews, which allows for detailed discussions of the topics under question and probing of participant responses, was deemed the most suitable method (Bryman, 2012).

This paper is part of a broader research project funded by BFUF (the R&D Fund of the Swedish Tourism & Hospitality Industry) that focuses on hospitality employee's views on prostitution and sex trafficking. This paper focuses specifically on chain hotel employee opinions and views on engagement with external stakeholders and macroenvironmental circumstances. The data for this

Table 1. Participants’ profile.

Referral code	Gender	Job role	Type of hotel chain	Location
P1	Male	Front desk agent	International	Small city
P2	Male	Front desk manager	National	Big city
P3	Female	Hotel manager	Scandinavian	Stockholm
P4	Male	Front desk agent	International	Stockholm
P5*	Male	Hotel manager	International	Big city
P6	Female	Housekeeping manager	International	Nature
P7*	Female	Quality manager	International	Stockholm
P8	Female	Hotel manager	International	Big city
P9	Male	Hotel manager	International	Small city
P10	Female	Front desk agent	International	Big city

*Follow-up interviews conducted.

study was gathered through 10 semi-structured interviews, and two follow-up interviews (see Table 1).

Table 1 shows information about the participants including their job role, the type of hotel chain and where the hotel was located. Each participant was assigned a referral code to help ensure anonymity and to aid the reader in understanding the results.

The study consisted of two phases conducted in spring 2020. In the first phase 62 hotels were approached to participate in the study. Thirty-two asked for an email to be sent to a manager from which five hotels refused to be interviewed and 27 did not reply. Of the remaining 30 hotels, 14 declined to be involved, nine did not answer and seven agreed to take part in the research. The second stage of the research involved contacting an extra 90 hotels. The response rate here was even lower with only three hotels agreeing to take part in the research. The initial seven hotels were also contacted again to ask if they would be willing to answer some follow-up questions and two hotels were willing to answer follow-up questions. In the hotels who agreed to take part in the research, each hotel chose an individual within the workplace who had the most knowledge and experience to be interviewed on the topic. The interviewees selected were split between front-line employees, including front-desk managers and front-desk employees, and hotel managers with one housekeeping manager. This tends to follow previous studies pointing out that front line employees are most likely to come into contact with sex trafficking and prostitution in hotels (Aston et al., 2022; Sarkisian, 2015).

Considering a total of 151 hotels were contacted, the data gathering was characterized by a very low response rate. We believe this was caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Several hotels commented on their shortage of staff due to the pandemic and therefore they could not take on extra activities such as being involved in the research project. Other hotels were unreachable or had closed due to low numbers of guests (Okamoto, 2020). Despite the low participation, the research was able to reach data saturation (Guest et al., 2006). The ability to ensure data saturation was enhanced by structuring the interview guide with questions that multiple participants could answer, in order to gather each participant’s point of view on the same issue (Guest et al., 2006).

Individual semi-structured interviews were undertaken because, as Miles and Gilbert (2005) state, they allow a deeper understanding and are more appropriate when discussing sensitive topics. All interviews were conducted in English. The interviews were conducted in spring 2020 during the COVID-19 outbreak. Social distancing guidelines and consideration for the health and safety of the researchers and the respondents meant that all interviews were carried out either by phone or through the online platform Zoom. Although face-to-face interviews are often considered methodologically stronger, telephone or video chat interviews have “convenience factors” (Cachia & Millward, 2011, p. 270), meaning that they have other kinds of benefits, such as access to interviewees who would otherwise not be contactable (Cachia & Millward, 2011).

All interviews, including the two follow-up interviews, lasted approximately half an hour and an interview guide was used as a support guide to allow for follow-up questions based on the

participant's responses (Kallio et al., 2016). The interviews were recorded with the participant's consent and transcribed in full. The data was analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Initially, the analysis produced 26 codes, which were then revised and grouped into 13 themes. The grouping process allowed the integration of smaller codes into bigger themes. For instance, one of the codes discussed the gendered demand of sex trafficking. Such codes were produced based on the discussion of sex trafficking with the participants, and although the questions were specifically asked in a gender-neutral way, the discussions were all based on women being the victims, and men being the oppressors. Upon review, it was noticed how the most relevant quotes from the participants which discussed gendered demand, were also discussing the impact of festivals and events on sex trafficking. Therefore, these two themes were grouped and discussed under the theme "socio-cultural factors". Upon further review, the themes were divided into the three global themes of macro, meso and micro environmental factors related to hotel employee engagements with internal and external stakeholders (after Ivanova, 2011; Paraskevas & Brookes, 2018&b). This paper focuses on the global theme of macro-environmental factors (see Figure 1 below).

When interviewing participants about taboo topics, such as sex trafficking, answers can generate inaccurate results, which are distorted by social desirability bias (Krumpal, 2013) where respondents may underreport socially undesirable behaviour and overreport socially desirable behaviour (Krumpal, 2013). Such responses can impact data quality, and thus need to be addressed and somehow limited (Krumpal, 2013). In this study, the participants were given an information sheet and were verbally informed that all the information they would provide would remain anonymous and confidential. Furthermore, participants were allowed to not answer any question, and were reminded of this right any time a sensitive question was being asked. The interview questions were designed to allow for in-depth discussions yet at a broader level, asking about the factors that impacted on the participants ability to recognize and deal with issues of sex trafficking in their hotel. In trying to gain in-depth details but remain relatively broad in the outlook, the interview questions were designed to try and ensure that participants felt comfortable expressing their views and reflections on the topics. As Krumpal (2013) pointed out, making the participant comfortable in their answers can highly diminish social desirability bias and allow for more reliable responses.

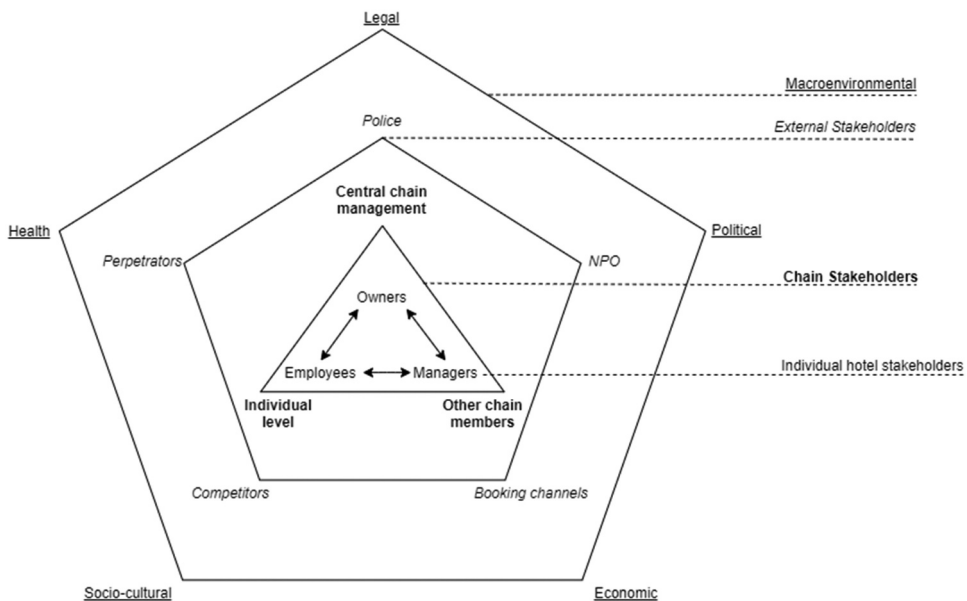


Figure 1. The stakeholder's model of sex trafficking and prostitution in hotel chains. (Adapted from Ivanova, 2011, p. 2).

Below, [Figure 1](#), adapted from Ivanova (2011) stakeholder model of hotel chains, will be used to shape the findings and discussions in this paper, and showcases the themes. Ivanova's model has been used in this paper as it helps to illustrate the links between previous research on sex- trafficking in hotels (Paraskevas & Brookes, 2018&b) and the relationships between a hotel and its main stakeholders. Based on Ivanova (2011) model, the internal level, the triangle, represents the *points of view* from which the other levels may be examined: owners, managers, and employees. This paper is based on the employee perspective, which is represented by this level. On the second level, the smaller pentagon represents the external stakeholders which may impact sex trafficking in the hotel industry: the police, non-profit organizations, booking channels, competitors, and perpetrators. Their role and impact will be further examined in the results section. In essence, this level includes any party which, from an external point of view, impacts sex trafficking in the hotel industry. Finally, the most external level, the bigger pentagon, showcases the macroenvironmental factors: political and legal, economic, socio-cultural and health. Along the lines of the external stakeholders, the macroenvironmental factors represent those forces which impact sex trafficking in the hotel industry. The discussion on such impacts will also be further explained in the results section.

External stakeholders

The police

The role of the police was considered vital among the interviewees for two main reasons: the employee's certainty of a crime being committed, and the importance of education and communication. In relation to crimes being committed, P5 stated:

We can't call the police and tell them "I have a confirmed issue with trafficking", I can only tell them "I believe there is", which means they will probably not prioritize the issue (P5).

Similarly, P3 reported:

It would help a lot if we could be a little bit more transparent, and maybe send in more tips . . . because right now they [the police] don't do anything if it is just a tip, . . . it needs to be super clear (P3).

This is also expressed by P1 where she "can't do anything personally, but I can call the police and they can help. But you can't go with what you think every time". She explained that the police have too much to do and that she can call but she does not expect them to come right away, which means that the "crime" might be over and so be considered prostitution "only". The main issue is that, while the police require hotel employees to be certain, sex trafficking is considered a "discrete crime", in the sense that it is very hard to see and spot (Datko, 2020). In other words, as P10 states, sex trafficking is "hard to recognize because you have to be alerted how the guests are acting and such things, and if I have a busy day, I could easily miss things."

The first step for collaboration between hotel staff and police is the education process. The participants outlined different ways through which they have been educated on the issue of sex trafficking in the hotels. Most of them reported being informed by the police. The general feeling was that, through proper education and collaboration with the police, the issue can be either prevented, limited, or even stopped. As P8 mentioned:

We have had several meetings with the police, so our staff is well informed [...] because we had several cases a few years ago, [...] we have been cooperating with the police with surveillance cameras and so on, so we have actually helped the police (P8).

Similarly, P5 mentioned how after six years of working in the hotel industry, the police educated him on sex trafficking, and since then he has been able to spot signs:

. . . when the trafficking police came out and educated us, that made me reflect and see the signs. Then you start to see the work. Before, I had too little knowledge, I didn't understand enough [...], but nowadays I see them all the time (P5).

As Accor's ' Global Study on Sexual Exploitation of Children in Travel and Tourism (Accor Hotels, 2016) proves, regular collaboration between hotel employees and the police is essential in fighting sexual abuse in the tourism industry. Therefore, in the fight against sex trafficking and prostitution in the hotel industry, support from the police is vital.

Non-profit organisations and governmental agencies

Non-profit organizations (NPOs) are third parties that work with hotel staff to support them combat sex trafficking and prostitution. For example, P7's hotel has been working with Talita,¹ an organization that works to help women out of prostitution, pornography and sex trafficking (2020). P3 explained the work they do, stating:

Right when you enter the hotel room, on the bed, there is a sign about what we are doing with Talita and sex trafficking, and that they can skip cleaning and we will add 40SEK [to donate to Talita]. So, for us it is a big statement that if . . . you are buying sex, you will have to move that sign (P3).

What is more worrying to note are the organizations not mentioned by the participants. In particular, two other Swedish organizations were not mentioned: 1) RealStars² with their work on Hotels against Trafficking and 2) the operational network National Methods Support Team³ (NMT) – led by the Swedish Gender Equality Authority and who work against prostitution and all types of human trafficking. NMT actively work with the police, Swedish Migration Agency and the Swedish Prosecution Agency as well as County Administrative Boards and municipalities. Neither of these organizations, nor their collaborative partners (except for the Police) were mentioned by the respondents. This highlights the necessity for continued work to ensure efficient external support systems around communication and education about sex trafficking and prostitution in the tourism and hospitality industry. As stated earlier, Tepelus (2008) have called for a mobilization of tourism stakeholders, including academics, to explore these issues more fully and urged the incorporation of issues of trafficking and (child) sex tourism into the sustainable tourism agenda. What is obvious from conversations with these hotel workers is that this mobilization is still needed and is far from incorporated into the tourism system.

Booking channels

External booking channels have been recognized by sex trafficking survivors as mediums for trafficking operations (Polaris, 2018). P9 confirmed the phenomena by stating:

They only book through the third-party channels, they book through them and try to prepay [. . .] nowadays we normally don't have contact with the guests before they arrive, they only book through websites or our home page, so without having so much information we can't do much (P9)

Based on this statement, sex traffickers seem to exploit the lack of personal engagement that booking channels allow, in order to make the crime discrete and easy to perform. Moreover, P2 raised another issue with the booking channels:

The booking channels: Booking.com, Expedia, Hotels.com. For instance, if I see a booking, and I recognize the name, and I know it is a prostitute, if I call Booking.com and say "look, I want to cancel this booking because it is a prostitute and we don't like that", they don't accept that, and say "look, you will have to charge your room" (P2).

This quote hides a sense of dissatisfaction and frustration, linked to a lack of power of employees in the industry. The same feelings are shared by P5:

The point with Hotels and Expedia is: you can make a prepayment through the site and they will send a virtual card, like a credit card that only exists online, to the hotel, and we can only see the credit card detail of the guest, which normally . . . we could say: "ok we just need to double check that it is your credit card that was

paying and used for this reservation”, but since it is a virtual card [...] we can’t really control it that way. As long as they have a correct ID as the name on the reservation, we have to let them up (P5).

The quotes from P5, P9 and P2 express a sense of frustration that links to a lack of autonomy that employees suffer when their hotel is advertised, and rooms are booked through external booking channels. The “easy” response would be for external booking channels to put into place a support system to increase hotel employees’ autonomy and power in the fight sex trafficking and prostitution. Active communication and education between hotels and external booking channels is necessary to stop the issue. As it works now, booking channels can state their responsibility to prevent crime through their willingness to help the law enforcement. Police have to contact them with a formal request (which usually requires an active police case) after which the booking channels may give access to details about the guests. A single hotel or hotel employee is left without any “power” to prevent bookings that may involve sex trafficking from coming into their hotel.

Competitors

As Winters (2017) states, one of the biggest strengths of the hotel industry to fight sex trafficking and prostitution is the ability to undertake a cooperative and collaborative approach. Participants were asked if they had any kind of communication with other hotels in the area. P5 and P7 discussed two government-based apps and websites which hotels can use to report any kind of crimes to other hotels in the area:

There is actually this site for hotels [...] where you can report things and other hotels in the area will get an email that says that we had a problem with this guest, be careful, don’t accept them at your hotel, or cases like this: “we had an issue of prostitution, be aware”. We couldn’t write the full name but “it’s a person with brown hair”, or whatever (P7).

It worked better like two years ago. They had this app on the phone. [...] where we could tell like “ok, now there is a prostitute out who we just sent out away from the hotel”, we won’t say the names because we can’t [...] but we can give significant information (P5).

On the other hand, P8 reported a less formal form of communication:

We have a group so we have contact with all the front desks in the city [...] if we suspect anything, we will let every hotel know (P8).

All three participants reported how active communication between competitors has helped. However, the inconsistency between the answers, even by participants from the same city, is proof that an active and collaborative system is not yet in place. Considering the efficiency reported both by the literature (Winters, 2017) and the participants, a support system based on active communication between hotels in the same area is an efficient tactic to fight sex trafficking and prostitution. As P10 says,

I think the hotels in the town could stand together and help each other much more than they actually do [...] because when I have had these trafficking moments in my work I would like to send an email to other hotels, but I don’t have the time to search for these email addresses to all the hotels, it takes a lot of time, time that I have to spend on something else (P10).

This highlights the desire from hotel employees to have a system that creates open conversation between hotels. As P10 pointed out, “I am not the police, I am just doing my job”, expressing how a network of connections should not be the single employee’s responsibility, but that of a larger system, put into place so that all hotels within a destination can more easily fight the issue together.

Macroenvironmental factors

Political and legal

The political and legal factors relate to how governmental actions impact sex trafficking and prostitution in hotels. During the interviews, the conversations revolved around two main political and legal concepts: the Sex Purchase Act, and the allowance of privacy.

As previously mentioned, the Sex Purchase Act was enacted in Sweden in 1999 and allows the voluntary selling of sex, but criminalizes its purchase (Holmström & Skilbrei, 2017). Some participants expressed how, in their opinion, the law is ineffective:

What I would really like to do is to make prostitution illegal as well, and I am talking as a worker in a hotel. Then our problems would be more or less solved. [...] because it is so much easier not to accept a booking [...]. I think it would be a little bit safer for everyone (P2).

Similarly, P4 stated:

For my point of view, I would take it a different way: either you completely stop it (no buy, no sell), or you leave it open (P4).

One difficulty pointed out by the participants is the apparent similarity between prostitutes and victims of sex trafficking. For instance, P2 was questioned as to how he knows for certain that the women he is coming in contact with, who he thinks are prostitutes, are not actually victims of sex trafficking, to which he replied:

It is everything: dressing appearance, talk, looks ... it tells you pretty good what is going on (P2).

The statement is based on the common misunderstanding that victims are most often badly dressed or visibly bruised. However, as Helga Flamtermesky (2013), who wrote a guidebook of advice from women who survived sex trafficking, pointed out, that is not actually the case. Prostitutes and victims of sex trafficking are, in appearance, very similar. Therefore, any education of staff or support system needs to recognize the similarities and aim to stop sex trafficking and prostitution by analysing other characteristics. For instance, when asked what personal tactics and preventive mechanisms participants have developed to spot prostitution and sex trafficking, P5 mentioned how “they try to make a reservation where they can make a cash payment of course, so my first reaction was ‘ok, no more cash payments’ [at my hotel]” (P5).

On the other hand, P7 suggests focusing on the men. When questioned on how she recognized instances of sex trafficking or prostitution in her hotel, she answered: “the fact that there was a man that came in and visited a paid-for hotel room, maybe in the age difference between the two [the woman and the man]” (P7).

As mentioned earlier, employees also need more autonomy to strategically work against these crimes. In particular, the participants discussed issues of privacy that current legislative systems allow. As P7 states, in Sweden it is not compulsory for hotels to request a valid ID to the guests:

It is very hard for the hotel sometimes to know what is going on. I mean ... because in Sweden we don't have to take ID or, you know, passport from all the guests for example. So I guess it's really hard to know for us who it is [...]. If the guest is giving a false name or an email address that they created just for this occasion, if we don't check their ID, we can't really know if it's that person or not.

Similarly, P4 stated that, in order to stop sex trafficking, “you need to have information about the guests that are checking in” (P4). In other words, what is currently lacking is a system that allows employees to have “a little bit more transparency” (P3), so that the privacy of the guest can be somehow limited, and spotting sex trafficking would be easier. In fact, as previously mentioned, the privacy inherent in chain hotels is one of the characteristics of these businesses that is exploited by sex traffickers (Banks, 2020; Sowon, 2020). As P1 says:

These people that are in the sex trafficking business, they kind of use the hotel as a platform because they can kind of remain anonymous . . . You know, by having the hotel as kind of a safe heaven, because within the hotel there is a lot of privacy, because we can't really go into the rooms and just see what people are doing.

Economic

Sex trafficking is globally recognized as a billion-dollar business. According to the ILO, in 2014 sex trafficking earned profits of roughly US\$99 billion (ILO, (International labour Organisation), 2014), and is the most lucrative of all forms of human trafficking. Furthermore, Europe and developed economies generate the highest annual profits (ILO, 2014). Sex trafficking is therefore an organized crime with different levels in terms of income, exploitation and organization (O'Connor & Grainne, 2006). The participants of the study also recognized the different levels by stating:

The more spontaneous [as in less planned and smaller scale] sex trafficking stuff, it is easy for us to avoid. But the ones that are doing it constantly and have a plan, it is really hard for us (P3).

Similarly, P6, when referring to acts of sex trafficking in hotels, stated: "I think we only see the small ones".

These respondents recognized the fact that sex trafficking is an organized crime with different facets, different levels, and that employees might be able to only see "the more spontaneous" cases, as P3 stated, or "the small ones" (P6). P5 had a similar point of view. He stated:

. . . not only the individuals, but the whole network needs to be torn apart. Bigger efforts into the bigger picture because I believe that is what the problem is. Some heartless assholes making too much money on selling people, it is a horrible business, they are the ones who should be punished the hardest (P5).

By looking at patterns of bookings and characteristics on guests, hotels could collaborate as there are time dimensions to the act of trafficking. As P6 states:

Sometimes the trafficking is going in periods: it's a lot of girls sometimes and then it can go a couple of months and we have nothing [...] if we don't have the trafficking, and you talk to other hotels, they have the trafficking. I think they move around (P6).

In other words, from an economic point of view, hotel employees could play a vital role in recognizing patterns to prostitution or sex trafficking by collaborating with other hotels and external stakeholders. This again highlights the necessity for external stakeholders to collaborate to fight against these crimes.

Socio-cultural and health

Socio-cultural factors relate to any large-scale force within cultures that affects sex trafficking in hotels. For instance: festivals and big-scale events have been recognized as having a direct link with the amount of sex trafficking and prostitution in a destination (i.e. Boecking et al., 2019; Carolin et al., 2015). When questioned on their personal experience with this phenomenon, some participants denied any knowledge. On the other hand, P3 and P7 noted examples of this. For example, P3 stated:

What I have experienced is most of all during big weekends when there are concerts and, maybe, football games or something, when there are a lot of men around town.

Similarly, P7 stated:

In my old workplace there were guests that were coming quite openly to the reception to ask if we could give them the phone number of a prostitute, and I think that was during a medical conference or something like that, and it was foreign guests. So I guess they came from a country maybe where that is more accepted.

When asked if those guests were mostly men, P7 answered: “I would say only men”, which reiterates the concept of gendered demand, firmly dominated by men (Olsson, 2019). Therefore, considering these socio-cultural factors, the support system for employees should take into account the presence of large-scale events or gatherings where men are the prevalent gender, and reiterate that attacking the demand is the most effective way to stop prostitution (Olsson, 2019).

Health factors are the subject of this study for two reasons. One is because the research was carried out during the COVID-19 pandemic. Reports show that, since the outbreak, prostitution has decreased, probably caused by a lower demand due to reduced business travel alongside national and company guidelines and a general perception of risk around potential infection (Willets, 2020). Although most participants aligned with this point of view, P5 pointed out another side to this:

Since Corona came, our hotel changed from being a 24-hour business to actually have the night-time closed nowadays, and without surveillance in the night-time, that increases it [the sex trafficking] . . . so, we lock the main entrance but give the guests codes for the main entrance so they can access it anyhow. We can't really control it other than camera surveillance (P5).

P5's statement relates to the fact that, since the outbreak, hotels have been suffering from a reduction of staff (Okamoto, 2020). Sex trafficking happens mainly during night-time (Thrupkaew, 2009), so a reduction in numerous and/or obvious night-time staff, can lead to an increase in unnoticed sex trafficking and prostitution at hotels.

The second health factor relates to the employee's view of these women (both prostitutes and sex trafficked women) as victims and therefore vulnerable and at risk. P5 states: “You shouldn't punish the victim, which in this case is the prostitute” and P6 says “I know that the women are not doing some kind of crime” both showing that employees often care about the women and think of their well-being and health. P7 gives an example of how employees can use their time of interaction at the check-in to show their understanding and that they are there for the victims:

They don't have it so good . . . I want the best for them. I always tell them “take care”, . . . I can't say that you're not allowed to check in if I don't know directly what they are doing, but when I think I know what they are doing I always tell them to take care and we are here if they need help.

Potentially this knowledge could assist prostitutes or trafficked women if they were able to, or trying to, seek help. At the same time, without concrete and clear internal and external support structures, how would hotel employees know how to help any women who approached them for help?

Conclusion and implications

Theoretically, what this research helps to highlight is the severe lack of engagement between tourism and hospitality research and trafficking, specifically the known and exploited links between sex trafficking within the hospitality industry. As a small study, this paper does not intend to “fill” a gap or hope to “solve” such a global issue. Rather, it is intended as one (more) point of departure on which to build. In taking Paraskevas and Brookes (2018) themes and in utilizing Ivanova's (2011) model of relationships between a hotel and its external stakeholders, so this paper highlights the necessity of interrogating the interconnectedness between external stakeholders, macro-environmental factors, chain hotels, their employees and sex trafficking. Yet these interconnections are just some of those that need to be understood. From a theoretical perspective, interdisciplinary engagement is needed to better understand how trafficking within the tourism and hospitality industry can be eliminated in ways that does not simply move the problem “on” to somewhere else, such as the sharing economy where issues of sex trafficking and slavery are already being highlighted (O'Regan, 2019).

From a practical perspective, more engagement between external stakeholders and the tourism industry is needed. What is clear is that employees feel powerless in relation to external stakeholders and macro-environmental factors. From the findings in this paper, it is evident that there is a lack of

communication, or miscommunication, between employees in chain hotels and the non-profit and government organizations that specifically tackle issues of sex trafficking and it is doubtful that this is only a problem in Sweden. We can suggest improved and increased education and training to ensure that every employee working in front-line, management and housekeeping at hotels would know what to look for and how to react to sex trafficking. Yet, we also know it is not as easy or straightforward as this: an email reply received from a hotel asked to take part in the research helps to emphasize this:

Thank you for your email. Your study is an important one . . . But fortunately, we, as far as we know, do not have an issue with that problem at the moment so I don't know how I can contribute to the study.

This reply came from a hotel in a mid-sized town where other hotels had experienced issues of sex trafficking and where the town hosts large events and multinational businesses, known drivers of sex trafficking and prostitution. This response helps underscore the depth of the perceptions that need to be overcome with more knowledge and better communication. It highlights the lack of awareness of these issues at the very least or the naivety, ignorance, or lack of knowledge at the other extreme.

In 2016, Carr commented that within the sex tourism industry, deviant behaviours “not only hide in the dark, but in the dark corners of the darkened room” (p. 190). What this paper highlights is that those dark corners and darkened rooms are in hotels. Yet, tourism and hospitality researchers still often seem to focus on the sex tourism happening “out there”. We therefore strongly reiterate Tepelus’s (2008) call for mobilization on the issues of prostitution and sex trafficking the tourism industry. More research is needed, but what is really needed is actionable outcomes that will have positive effects on the many people entangled in sex trafficking. A single employee in a chain hotel can only be empowered to do so much. The tourism academy and the tourism industry have a responsibility to ensure that each employee, business, destination and industry organization is involved in the cessation of the illegal sexual activities that tourism consciously or unconsciously currently “helps”.

Notes

1. See <https://www.talita.se/>.
2. See <https://realstars.eu/csr/hotels/>.
3. See <https://www.nmtsverige.se/>.

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