Hospitality workers target of sexual harassment

By Bernice Yeung, Reveal

It started out innocently enough when, in the spring of 2014, a Hilton Hotel housekeeper in Southern California was cleaning a set of rooms on the sixth floor. A guest from the next room asked her for extra towels.

She told him to take as many as he needed and he responded by saying, “Would you like to help me with them? I’m going to take a shower.”

The comment made the cleaner feel uncomfortable. A few minutes later, she alleged that he returned to the room, wearing only a towel around his waist. He asked the housekeeper about a late checkout before dropping his towel and moving toward her, she said.

The cleaner – who shared a police report with Reveal from the Center for Investigative Reporting on the condition of anonymity – said she ran out of the room, afraid that she’d be attacked. She tearfully told a coworker what had happened, and the workers called hotel security and management.

She was eventually told to return to the sixth floor to finish her shift. Dissatisfied with how the Long Beach hotel dealt with the situation, the cleaner went to the police a month later. The police weren’t able to locate the suspect because the hotel said it did not have a record of that guest. Hilton did not respond to multiple requests for comment.

Female hotel cleaners from across the country have similar stories of sexual harassment and indecent exposure. In the past decade, 818 incidents of sexual harassment were reported to the federal government by hotel industry workers.

And this month, Unite Here Local 1, a union that represents hotel workers, will issue a report about the state of sexual harassment in the industry. According to its survey of nearly 500 Illinois hospitality industry workers, 58 percent of hotel employees and 77 percent of casino workers said they'd been sexually harassed. Forty-nine percent of housekeepers said that a guest had opened the door naked, exposed themselves or flashed them.

The survey was spurred by a case from an Illinois casino where a guest pulled a 21-year-old waitress into his lap and asked her for a blow job.

"This indecent and gross behavior from guests is almost normalized," says Sarah Lyons, one of the union organizers who conducted the survey. "Women talk among themselves, but it is not being brought into the light of day."

Cleaners can be especially susceptible to sexual abuse on the job. They're often isolated, working in hotel rooms by themselves. And they're often low-wage immigrant workers, worried about the repercussions of speaking up. These are conditions we've previously detailed for female farmworkers and night-shift janitors.

Hospitality workers also said that they did not feel that they could report harassment by guests. According to the Illinois survey, only 33 percent of workers reported the harassment, mostly because they don't think that there is anything that can be done to address indecent guest behavior. Others said that they were embarrassed or that they had normalized the problem and had simply become "immune" to it.

Nereyda Soto, a 23-year-old Long Beach hotel worker who was not part of the survey, said that the hospitality industry's "guest is always right" mentality means that management tolerates behavior that it wouldn't from its own employees. "When you walk into a hotel as a guest, they make you feel

safe – like there's nothing to worry about, and the only thing you have to worry about is relaxing, and they make you feel like everything is clean and safe in your room," she says. "And if you promote this level of security to guests, why are you not promoting it for the workers?"

The American Hotel and Lodging Association says that the industry takes the issue of sexual harassment "very seriously." In an email, a spokeswoman for the American Hotel and Lodging Association, said each hotel has its own protocols and procedures.

"As an industry, we are committed to ensuring hotel employers and operators have tools and resources to educate employees on guidelines and best practices to help avoid unsafe situations, protect themselves from harassment, assaults or injuries, and respond to and report any kind of inappropriate behavior or misconduct," Vanessa Sinders wrote.

Nevertheless, various workers' organizations and local chapters of Unite Here are working together to push for local laws in at least three cities across the country. In Long Beach, Seattle and Chicago, workers are calling, in part, for hotel companies to track complaints against guests and for a ban on those who sexually harass workers.

Advocates for these new local laws also want workers to have access to wearable panic buttons. New York City cleaners began using them after a Sofitel New York Hotel worker claimed in 2011 that the French dignitary Dominique Strauss-Kahn had sexually assaulted her in his room. (The charges against Strauss-Kahn were eventually dropped.)

Juana Melara has been cleaning Southern California hotel rooms for 21 years, and she says she has dealt with sexual harassment nearly every day on the job. Guests have flirted with her, asked her for massages and exposed themselves to her, she says.

Melara currently works at a Westin hotel in Southern California, and she knows that not everyone wants to talk about the harassment because it’s embarrassing and because some workers are afraid that they’ll lose their jobs for being outspoken. But she’s willing to break the silence. “We are women, and we deserve respect, and the hotel industry, especially in housekeeping, is dominated by women,” she says. “If some women aren’t going to speak out, I am going to do it.”

“I’m going to do whatever it takes to make it better for me and my coworkers,” she adds.