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Hotel workers demand bosses protect against assault from guests

ANNA MEHLER PAPERNY

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Recent high-profile abuse cases, including Dominique Strauss-Khan, give housekeepers the courage to insist harassment stop

Cicely Phillips was cornered while making a bed - pinned to the wall and then groped, the man's face so close she could smell the alcohol coming off his breath.

Tap water running, bathroom mirror foggy with steam as she worked, Andria Babbington wasn't aware of the man's presence until she felt his hands grabbing her from behind.

Ms. Phillips and Ms. Babbington were sharing their experiences as hotel workers, who may be employed at some of Canada's swankiest addresses, but are vulnerable nonetheless as easy targets of harassment and sexual assault.

The spotlight on their predicament stems from the high-profile cases of Dominique Strauss-Kahn, the former head of the International Monetary Fund who faces charges of

attempted rape and sexual assault, and Mahmoud Abdel Salam Omar, the prominent Egyptian businessman charged with the sexual abuse of a hotel maid.

On Thursday, Ms. Babbington and Ms. Phillips were among hotel housekeeping staff who held public demonstrations in cities across the continent to demand more be done to stop assaults.

"[Hotels should] use this opportunity to say to guests, 'Look ... not in my hotel.' And really mean it," Ms. Babbington said.

"I had coworkers that because of their cultural background were too ashamed to even mention it. ... It was like a soap opera, us telling our stories at break."

Housekeepers in Canadian hotels are at a disadvantage on multiple fronts, says **York University professor Steven Tufts**, because they're overwhelmingly female immigrants. For some, English is a second - or third, or fourth - language. The work itself is menial and often solo, cleaning the most intimate possessions of a total stranger who takes brief possession of a room before moving on.

For many, this is their first job since coming to Canada - badly needed paid employment they'd be loathe to jeopardize.

So the odds are stacked against rocking the boat, especially when they know from humiliating experience that it will do little good. Ms. Babbington said she has reported dozens of incidents of harassment over her 17-year stint as a housekeeper in a luxury Toronto hotel, but was often greeted with laughter.

"As often as it happened, I would report it. And they would find it funny. ... I think that's what made it worse," she said.

Sid Ryan, president of the Ontario Federation of Labour, is hoping that will change starting now.

"Now they're getting a sort of energy here where they can feel protected," he said. "The stories will be tumbling out of the woodwork. Everywhere. At every hotel."

Mr. Ryan and Unite Here, a union representing hotel workers, hope the attention surrounding the two New York cases - those involving Dominique Strauss-Khan and Mahmoud Abdel Salam Omar - will spur concrete changes to the way hotels protect their employees, and better teeth for legislation meant to ensure employers provide safe workplaces.

It's already prompted the two upscale hotels at the centre of the New York cases, the Pierre and the Sofitel, to pledge to provide their workers with "panic buttons" meant to summon help. But security consultant Anthony Roman notes these are far from a silver bullet: "Most sexual assaults are initiated and completed in under a minute," he said. "The panic button's not going to do very much good in rescuing them."

As far as Hotel Association of Canada President Tony Pollard is concerned, the media frenzy is unwarranted: This is "not an issue," he said.

"Staff are trained since day one. They have safety and security rules and regulations in every hotel. They are trained on how to deal with situations, who to report to, all of these things."

Mr. Roman said, however, that these incidents are grossly underreported. His company, Roman & Associates, gets about a dozen reports of assault and harassment of housekeepers each year from the six New York-area hotels for whom his company designs security systems.

"They're primarily designed for anti-terror," he said of the systems. "But they absolutely apply to this circumstance. This is a terroristic incident."