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<https://www.wsj.com/articles/lawsuits-accuse-big-hotel-chains-of-allowing-sex-trafficking-11583317800>

U.S.

Lawsuits Accuse Big Hotel Chains of Allowing Sex Trafficking

Dozens of women say Hilton, Marriott, Wyndham and others turned a blind eye to organized prostitution at their establishments



S.Y., whose lawsuit accuses major hotel chains of allowing sex trafficking, poses for a photograph.

PHOTO: MARIA ALEJANDRA CARDONA FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

By Corinne Ramey

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During the three months that S.Y. was forced into prostitution, she said blood and used condoms littered the hotel rooms where she had sex in Naples, Fla. Skinny, underdressed women loitered in hotel lobbies while men wearing gold chains waited their turns, she said.

Once, a woman was left unconscious in a hotel bathtub, causing a minor flood. S.Y. said she called the front-desk manager.

“He didn’t come to help the girl in the bathtub,” said S.Y., who spoke on condition that

she be identified only by her initials, as she is in her lawsuit. “He came to clean up the water.”

S.Y.’s lawsuit, in state court in Florida, is one of dozens filed across the country, largely in the past year and still in early legal stages, accusing some of the country’s best-known hotel brands of ignoring sex trafficking at their properties. Hilton Worldwide Holdings Inc., Marriott International Inc. and Wyndham Hotels & Resorts Inc. are among the defendants.

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The suits represent a rare use of a federal sex-trafficking statute against large corporate entities, legal experts say. In addition to monetary damages, the plaintiffs are seeking agreements that force hotel parent companies to implement broad measures to prevent trafficking, including at their franchises.

The suits say that the hotel companies and franchisees profited from sex-trafficking operations being run out of their establishments and that they either were aware of it, or should have been.

More than 40 of the suits were filed in federal courts. Others are in state courts, like S.Y.’s, who is suing the hotels where she says she was trafficked and their parent companies, including Hilton and Wyndham. Plaintiffs’ lawyers said they expect to file at least dozens of similar suits in the next year.

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The hotel companies have broadly argued in court documents that they have no control

over what happens at franchised hotels and that they have implemented policies to prevent trafficking since many of the allegations occurred. The hotels have generally asked judges to toss the suits, but there have been few rulings on those motions so far.

A spokesman for Hilton said it was committed to protecting people from exploitation. “We require all our hotels, including franchises, to conduct training on identifying the signs of human trafficking and on how to report them,” the spokesman said.

A Wyndham spokesman declined to comment on the lawsuits but said the company condemns human trafficking. “We also make training opportunities available for our franchised hotels, which are independently owned and operated,” the spokesman said.

Marriott said it has trained more than 700,000 hotel workers to spot signs of human trafficking.

Hilton and Wyndham declined to comment on S.Y.’s allegations.

The first federal suit was filed in Ohio in March of last year. A loosely organized group of plaintiffs’ lawyers soon began searching for victims through advocacy-group referrals and online advertising, leading to a steady stream of lawsuits.

The federal lawsuits rely on the Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act. The statute was amended in 2008 to allow for civil lawsuits against anyone who “knew or should have known” that sex trafficking occurred and financially benefited.

“If you can control the thread count of the bed sheets or the furniture in the lobby, you can control what mandates you are giving for anti-trafficking policies and efforts,” said Kim Adams, a Florida-based lawyer whose firm represents women in Ohio, California and other states.

The lawsuits describe common patterns. In most, either the women or their traffickers paid for rooms in cash, sometimes for weeks at a time. Many women were minors.

The suits argue staff should have recognized signs of trafficking: bottles of lubricant, boxes of condoms and excessive requests for sheets and towels. Staffers saw men come to the same rooms, often more than a dozen each night, without luggage. Some accusers alleged they screamed for help or were beaten while doors were open.

One accuser, H.H., says a hotel staffer found her chained in the bathroom in one Columbus, Ohio, hotel, and tied to a bed in a room in another, according to court documents. In Houston, one Jane Doe says she spent so much time at a hotel that she was befriended by its staff, who, seeing she was visibly malnourished, gave her snacks

and small gifts, her lawsuit says.

The suits also claim hotels should have known about online reviews that mention prostitution, arrests of traffickers on hotel premises and hospitality-industry presentations that document trafficking as a major concern.

In October, U.S. District Judge Algenon Marbley, the chief judge in the Southern District of Ohio, allowed one accuser's lawsuit against Wyndham to move forward. Judge Marbley found the accuser didn't sufficiently demonstrate Wyndham had knowledge of the purported trafficking, but did show it should have known, which is all the law requires.

Judge Marbley issued a similar ruling in another case in December.

In February, a federal judge in Georgia dismissed hotel parent companies including Hilton and Wyndham from a case but said he was open to reconsidering his decision if the plaintiff presented new evidence.

This January, lawyers for the women asked that the federal cases be consolidated in front of a single judge, much like those in other mass torts like opioid litigation against pharmaceutical companies. A panel of judges denied the request, noting the suits had many different defendants.

Lawyers for the victims say consolidating the cases would help uniformly address some legal issues, such as hotels' request for traffickers' names. Some hotels say they need the names to investigate the plaintiffs' claims, but lawyers for the women have argued the traffickers could retaliate against their clients.

"That's literally putting lives in danger," said Paul Pennock, another plaintiffs' lawyer involved in the effort. Mr. Pennock said the lawyers are considering renewing the consolidation request.

S.Y. filed her lawsuit about three years after she said local police wearing tactical gear came into her hotel room brandishing guns in 2016. They arrested her two pimps, who she said gave her unlimited drugs and kept all of her earnings.

Both have since been convicted of human trafficking and other crimes, according to her lawyer, Michael London. The men, now in state prison in Florida, couldn't be reached for comment.

S.Y. said the hotels and their employees—including some who she said saw her walking around with black-and-blue marks on her neck from being strangled—could have done more to help her.

“I wasn't chained here,” said S.Y., who has since moved to another state and spent the past three years working her way up the ranks at a supermarket. “But I had invisible chains holding me to these guys.”

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