



**OXFAM CANADA** REPORT

# **TOURISM'S DIRTY SECRET:** **THE EXPLOITATION OF HOTEL HOUSEKEEPERS**



**OXFAM**  
Canada



Anne Toralles Leite / Oxfam

**TOURISM IS BOOMING** and generates millions of jobs for women around the world. Yet the hotel industry exemplifies the vast inequality of today's world. The women who make hotel beds and clean hotel toilets labour long hours for meagre pay, face sexual harassment and intimidation, are exposed daily to toxic chemicals and live in fear of arbitrary dismissal. Meanwhile, the top-earning hotel CEOs can earn more in an hour than some housekeepers do in a year. Such systematic exploitation is not inevitable. The hotel industry, consumers and governments must all be part of the solution to end the economic exploitation of women.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**TOURISM** can be a positive force for development. It is the largest and fastest-growing economic sector in the world, providing millions of jobs and generating about ten percent of global GDP.<sup>i</sup> Tourism's benefits, however, are not shared equally, especially between women and men. Entrenched gender stereotypes and discrimination have often restricted women to jobs that are low-paid, undervalued and precarious.

In the hotel industry — where the gender divide is glaringly obvious — millions of women work as housekeepers cleaning a total of 15.5 million hotel rooms worldwide. Every day, millions of travellers rely on these women to keep their rooms clean, safe and comfortable, yet housekeepers' working conditions are deplorable. In an economic climate of high competition, hotels are in a race to the bottom to scale profits at the expense of workers' rights, health and safety. The systematic exploitation of these women is a clear example of how our economy is designed for the wealthy few, at the expense of the majority.

Housekeepers earn poverty wages, enjoy little to no job security and face serious risks to their health and safety. Contrary to the common assumption that housekeeping is domestic work and therefore easy, it is backbreaking and dangerous. In dozens of interviews in three countries, housekeepers reported feeling invisible, undervalued and disrespected. Often condemned to poverty, many of them visible minorities, new immigrants or migrant workers, housekeepers are the victims of working conditions that silently destroy their health. Many are forced to exit the labour market prematurely, their bodies broken and their pockets empty.

The hotel industry seems to view housekeepers as a disposable commodity. Rather than improve working conditions in a highly-competitive globalized industry, hotel companies have prioritized client satisfaction over worker safety. Beds are heavier than ever, cleaning chemicals are toxic, and stress levels and injury rates for housekeepers are rising, along with the number of rooms they must clean daily.

Housekeeping is based on a room quota system, where by housekeepers are expected to clean a certain

number of rooms each day. The greater the room quota, the faster they must work, since they are not paid overtime to finish the quota.

Employers regularly fail to report and prevent injuries, chronically understaff housekeeping departments and thwart workers' efforts to organize to improve their situation.

However, housekeeping can provide for decent and stable employment. In workplaces where they have managed to organize, housekeepers earn decent wages and benefits, have greater job security and experience less stress and fewer injuries.

This report examines the working lives of housekeepers in Toronto, Canada, Punta Cana, Dominican Republic and Phuket, Thailand. In dozens of interviews with hotel housekeepers, representatives of workers' organizations and hotel managers, Oxfam found five overarching trends common to the three locations.

- Housekeepers working in non-unionized hotels earn wages that fall below living wage standards, receive scant benefits and have little to no job security. They have to clean a large number of rooms every day and are expected to work overtime without pay if they cannot meet the room quota within their eight-hour shift.
- Housekeepers face serious health risks and suffer high rates of injury from muscling king-sized beds weighing more than 100 pounds and using harsh cleaning chemicals all day long. Housekeepers worry about their future, since lasting injuries prevent them from seeking other work once they need to transition for health reasons.

- Women working as housekeepers also face high rates of sexual harassment. Particularly in North America, the ‘I would like an additional pillow’ phenomenon is widely known among housekeepers as an early warning that guests might exhibit inappropriate behaviour upon delivery. The women often suffer in silence because customers are rarely held to account for their actions.

- Organizing in the hotel sector has been extremely difficult due to employer resistance and a climate of fear generated by negative management practices. The industry’s reliance on a segment of the population that is economically and socially disenfranchised, isolated and vulnerable limits workers’ willingness to speak out. The recent trend to outsource housekeeping services to temporary work agencies has put workers further at risk.
- In addition to the hardships they face at work, housekeepers also struggle to find adequate care for their children. Universal child care is not provided by the state and their erratic and long work schedules make it difficult to find affordable child care. The situation is worse for migrant women who live far from their family support networks.

The hotel industry exemplifies the growing divide between low-wage workers and highly-paid management in large corporations, as well as the gendered nature of today’s economy in which women’s work is underpaid and undervalued. The working lives of hotel housekeepers and those of hotel CEOs graphically depict the unacceptable inequality that plagues today’s world.

**IT DOES NOT HAVE TO BE THIS WAY.**

## RECOMMENDATIONS

**MUCH** can be done to address the economic insecurity and hazards women face working as hotel housekeepers. Change is possible. The hotel industry, consumers and governments must all be part of the solution to housekeepers’ plight. Here are steps that each can take to right this wrong:

**1. THE HOTEL INDUSTRY** must uphold labour rights and the principle of pay equity, and take tangible steps to improve the safety and overall working conditions of their employees. This can range from supplying fitted sheets and less toxic cleaning products, to establishing measures to prevent sexual harassment. Hotels should provide housekeepers with regular schedules and predictable work hours, and move towards paying all of their employees a living wage. In no instances should hotels attempt to thwart organizing efforts.

**2. GOVERNMENTS** can enact public policy in four key areas to make a lasting difference in the lives of housekeepers, and to reduce the yawning gap between rich and poor and between the working lives of men and women.

- **ENSURE** that all workers are paid a living wage and receive benefits. This must include steps to uphold the principle of pay equity and ensure that migrant workers’ rights are respected.
- **PROTECT** workers’ right to organize and hold corporations accountable for violations of labour rights, including when operating abroad.
- **INVEST** in quality, accessible and universal child care to ensure women can access the labour market and pursue economic opportunities.
- **SUPPORT** women’s rights organizations working to end violence against women and improve women’s working conditions.

**3. CONSUMERS** can make a difference by speaking out and choosing to spend their money at businesses that treat their workers with respect and dignity. When travelling, choose to stay in unionized hotels whenever possible and avoid hotels that are known to violate workers’ rights. Consult [www.Fairhotel.org](http://www.Fairhotel.org) to learn more.

We all have a role to play in ending the economic exploitation of women. Join Oxfam Canada and a growing movement of people committed to speaking out against extreme inequality and ensuring the work women do is fairly paid and equally valued. Sign up now at **SHORTCHANGED.CA.**

# THE UNEQUAL ECONOMICS OF TOURISM

**TOURISM IS THE LARGEST** and fastest-growing economic sector in the world. In many countries, tourism acts as an engine for development by earning foreign exchange and creating jobs. In 2016, international tourist arrivals reached more than 1.2 billion — a new record — and the numbers are expected to grow by three to four per cent annually.<sup>ii</sup> Travel and tourism accounts for 10.2 per cent of global GDP (US\$7.6 trillion) and employs 292 million people, equivalent to one in ten jobs worldwide.<sup>iii</sup>

According to the Global Report on Women in Tourism (2011), women make up half of all employees in the hotel and restaurant industry.<sup>iv</sup> Because of gender stereotyping and discrimination, the vast majority of these women work in low status, poorly-paid and precarious jobs, many of which are seasonal. Women rarely reach managerial or professional positions, and when they do, they are usually paid less than men. In addition, many of the women in the hotel industry's insecure jobs are immigrants or migrants, and/or women of visible minorities. The feminization and racialization of such occupations tend to trigger a further decline in wage rates, job security and social value.

Housekeeping is no exception. The hotel industry relies heavily on immigrant, minority and migrant women to do the back-of-house jobs. The titles 'maid' or 'chambermaid' — underscored by the slogan *a home away from home* — indicate that housekeeping is considered women's domestic work, and therefore not skilled labour. It is considered dirty and stigmatized through association with personal servitude. Housekeepers are expected to be invisible, going about their work without disturbing guests. All the housekeepers interviewed for this study complained that they are viewed as subservient and undervalued, which helps explain why few of them can move into front-of-house jobs.

## TOURISM AND THE SDGs

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development consists of 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to end poverty, combat inequality and injustice, and address climate change. Tourism has the potential to contribute — directly or indirectly — to all of the goals, especially Goal 1 (end poverty), Goal 5 (gender equality), Goal 8 (decent work and economic growth) and Goal 12 (responsible consumption and production). Tourism can make a decisive contribution by creating decent jobs, promoting entrepreneurship and helping empower disadvantaged groups, particularly young people and women.

The World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), a specialized agency of the United Nations created to promote tourism's contribution to the SDGs, provides technical assistance and training, and has developed guidelines and tools to assist businesses. In collaboration with the United Nations Global Compact — the world's largest corporate sustainability initiative — UNWTO works to ensure the sector provides decent and stable jobs, especially for women and people with disabilities, minimizes the impact on the ecosystem, and increases responsible production in supply chains and responsible consumption among tourists.

# HOUSEKEEPERS IN TORONTO

**OXFAM** interviewed housekeepers in Toronto at several major hotel chains. With over 60 per cent of their employees born outside Canada, hotels provide an important gateway to the labour market for newcomers. But there is a stark difference between back-of-house jobs such as housekeeping, and front-of-house jobs such as desk clerks. A York University study found that over 85 per cent of female housekeepers in Toronto were born outside the country (the majority of them being Filipina, Chinese and Jamaican), while less than half of service managers are immigrants.<sup>viii</sup>

Many of the women interviewed came to Canada under the Live-In Caregiver Program, which until 2014 provided a pathway to Canadian permanent residency for young women from developing countries who spent two years taking care of children, elderly people and the sick.<sup>ix</sup> These women said that in the hotel industry they continued to be perceived as disposable second-tier economic immigrants; for some, the exploitation and abuse they suffered in the Live-In Caregiver Program continues.

Although precise statistics on the percentage of women working in housekeeping in Toronto are not available, the housekeepers interviewed all said that



More than 30 million people visited Canada in 2016.<sup>v</sup>



That same year, the tourism industry generated 2.05 per cent of GDP, US\$31.3 billion, and employed 721,600 people.<sup>vi</sup>



Canada's 8,000 hotels employ more than 300,000 workers, one quarter of them as housekeepers.<sup>vii</sup>

between 95 and 100 per cent of the housekeepers were women of visible minorities. Foreign-born housekeepers have a hard time moving to other jobs within hotels, especially front-of-house positions, and generally feel stuck, as is the case with Luz Flores, profiled below.

Luz came from the Philippines to Canada under the Live-in Caregiver Program and worked as a nanny for many years before moving into housekeeping 18 years ago. As a single mom, she found it difficult to juggle work with motherhood. When asked why she stayed in housekeeping, Luz said:

*"We are immigrants in this country. The last time I tried to find another job, they told me 'do you have Canadian experience?' But I don't have that. So cleaning is the only thing we can do, not because we cannot do anything else, it's just that this is the only job you can hold on to right now. You have a family to feed, you cannot even go to school and upgrade because you already have a family. So I'm stuck here in housekeeping."*

Luz Flores,  
Toronto.



# HOUSEKEEPERS IN PUNTA CANA

**OXFAM** interviewed housekeepers in Punta Cana, a resort town in the Yuma region, which has at least 64 hotel establishments offering more than 36,000 hotel rooms. While tourists enjoy the luxuries offered by hotels, Dominicans living in the area lack basic public services such as drinking water, paved roads, garbage collection and medical care, and are facing a severe housing shortage. Hotel development has also caused major environmental problems. New hotel construction has destroyed sensitive mangrove swamps, discharge of untreated sewage has undermined water quality and is killing coral reefs, and the mountains of solid waste that hotels generate has polluted much of the soil. <sup>xii</sup>

Many of the housekeepers working in the Punta Cana region have migrated from other parts of the country or from neighbouring Haiti to escape poverty. Despite their success finding work in the hotels, many of the women — like Cristina profiled below — exit the industry as poor as when they began.



Fifty-year-old Cristina<sup>xiii</sup> has worked as a housekeeper in several hotels in the Punta Cana region. She has to clean 16 rooms during the day and refresh 90 rooms in the evening. Despite working full time for higher wages than

## DOMINICAN REPUBLIC



In 2016, tourism and travel accounted for 5.4 per cent of GDP in the Dominican Republic and employed close to 200,000 people.<sup>x</sup>



Nearly 1/2 million Canadians visited the Dominican Republic in 2015.<sup>xi</sup>



More than 500 hotels provide close to 70,000 rooms for some six million visitors a year.



Most hotel housekeepers are employed in the capital city (Ozama region), the North (Cibao region) and the East (Yuma region).

Haitian migrants are paid less and face more insecurity than their Dominican counterparts, as their uncertain residency status strips them of any labour rights.

the majority of housekeepers in the area, she cannot make ends meet and finds it necessary to supplement her earnings. Cristina believes her employer does not pay out the full tips she receives from customers. *“If they really gave us the correct tip percentage, we would be able to earn a good salary but they give us pennies. Our bi-weekly salary is between 8,000 and 9,000 pesos”* (C\$200-\$230). When she is not working at the hotel, Cristina operates a beauty salon in her home. She has long sought to transfer to the beauty section at the hotels she worked. *“From what I saw, the girls working at the beauty salon earn good salaries and have a cleaner environment, and they work less. They can even sit down for a while when waiting for a client. As a housekeeper you are on your feet all day.”* One hotel cancelled her contract before she finished her beauty training. At her current hotel, she is not allowed to transfer because she was caught carrying her personal cell phone at work.

# HOUSEKEEPERS IN PHUKET

**THAILAND'S** hotel industry is one of Southeast Asia's biggest importers of migrant workers. Despite their contribution to Thailand's economic growth, many of them face exploitation and ill treatment. Migrant workers are generally employed in so-called '3D jobs' — dangerous, dirty and demanding. Housekeeping is one of those jobs.

Many of the housekeepers in Phuket are Burmese women who paid smugglers to take them by boat to Thailand and arrange work for them. While migrant workers can apply for a work permit, the permits are linked to a specific employer, which increases the risk of abuse and exploitation. What's more, migrants are often obliged to hire brokers to handle the cumbersome procedure at a cost of more than a month's salary.<sup>xviii</sup> Migrant housekeepers, like Lae Lae, profiled below, face the additional challenges of being paid less than minimum wage, having to work excessive hours, and having no holidays or sick leave.

Many other housekeepers in Phuket are Thai women from rural areas where there are few jobs besides farming. While they enjoy the protection of labour laws, few are aware of their rights and a general climate of impunity gives workers little incentive to lodge complaints.



More than 32 million international visitors travelled to Thailand in 2016, including close to 250,000 Canadians.<sup>xiv</sup>



In 2016, the tourism industry generated roughly 20 per cent (US\$83 billion) of Thailand's GDP.<sup>xv</sup>



Tourism directly employs 5.7 million people, representing 15 per cent of all jobs in the country.<sup>xvi</sup>



The island of Phuket, one of the most developed resort destinations in Southeast Asia, has more than 60,000 hotel rooms for 9.1 million annual visitors.<sup>xvii</sup>

Lae Lae left Myanmar when she was 21 years old, hoping for a better future. She paid a broker 5000 baht (C\$184) to smuggle her into Thailand. After six years on a rubber plantation and four in the hotel sector, she still finds it hard to save money. As a housekeeper at a small hotel where all the housekeepers are Burmese migrant women, she earns 10,000 baht (C\$367) a month, plus tips. Because the work is seasonal, for six months of the year, Lae Lae works in a noodle shop. Strapped for money and time, she had no choice but to send her two children, six and 11 years old, back to Myanmar to stay with relatives. Her dream is to return to Myanmar one day and open her own store.





# DANGEROUS, DIRTY AND DEMANDING

**HOTEL HOUSEKEEPERS** perform a wide range of duties that have expanded over time as a result of global trends and the competitive nature of the hotel industry. Housekeepers typically make beds, tidy rooms, clean and polish toilets, taps, sinks, bathtubs and mirrors, wash floors, remove stains and vacuum carpets. They may also dust furniture, push carts and — in fancier hotels — supply trays of food, wash dishes and replace coffee making supplies.

Housekeepers generally work alone. They spend the beginning of their shift getting room assignments, replacing soiled linens with clean ones and preparing their supply carts. Housekeepers are expected to clean a certain number of rooms each day, also known as the room quota. Meeting the room quota is one of the main challenges for housekeepers as the room quota is generally upwards of 15 rooms a day. It typically takes anywhere between 15 and 90 minutes to clean a room, depending on its condition and whether it has been vacated. While housekeepers are generally offered two short breaks and a longer lunch break, most must work right through their breaks to meet their daily quota of rooms or expect to work overtime without pay.

While housekeepers in Toronto are only cleaning hotel rooms, housekeepers in Punta Cana and Phuket are also expected to clean other areas of the hotel. Candida, a 44-year-old housekeeper in Punta Cana, told Oxfam she found her workday extremely demanding and exhausting. She started work at 5 a.m. and never knew when she would finish. Candida explained, *“I have a couple of minutes for breakfast, then start work in the public areas, then the swimming pool, the beach chairs, and around ten in the morning I would start cleaning the assigned rooms. I would get ten rooms, but you are really cleaning 20 rooms, as they are all double rooms with three beds. So 30 beds in total.”*

The cleaning tasks performed by housekeepers are chores that societal norms expect women to do at home for free. Therefore, little attention is paid to the risks and hazards that come with them in the hotel setting. The workload of housekeepers is growing and so are injury rates. According to one general manager in Toronto, not only do hotel rooms require much more cleaning than they did years ago, but guest expectations have increased. Housekeepers are under constant time pressure to clean as many rooms as possible, and they face significant physical, biological, chemical, sexual and psychological hazards.

Housekeepers interviewed expressed concern about job security and compensation, threats to health and safety, sexual harassment, lack of child care and employer hostility to workers organizing. Let’s examine each of these individually.

## JOB INSECURITY

Job security is a concern for housekeepers in all three countries, except those with high seniority working in unionized hotels in Toronto. Generally, housekeepers start on an on-call or casual basis, and it can take years before they are employed full time. Grace Gualzon — who works at an unionized hotel in downtown Toronto — told Oxfam that even after working at the hotel for 10 years, she was still employed on an on-call basis. In the beginning, she only had two shifts a week. She recalls, *“Usually I just got hours for the weekend. Sometimes I would get a call on Sunday just as I’m leaving my apartment to go to work and be told my shift is cancelled. I don’t know how I survived that time.”*

Seasonal peaks and lows in the hotel industry contribute to job insecurity. One Toronto hotel employs 28 housekeepers at peak, while at low season the number drops to eight, leaving 20 housekeepers never knowing how long they will have work and requiring them to arrange for alternative sources of income.

Practices such as split shifts or combined jobs, or scheduling an insufficient number of staff, keep housekeepers fearful of losing their jobs and oblige them to work ever harder. Haphazard scheduling keeps workers employed, but significantly limits their capacity to find additional employment or apply for unemployment insurance where it is available. The fear of being allocated fewer hours of work encourages housekeepers to clean as thoroughly as possible.

In order to stay competitive, hotels are using fewer hotel housekeepers to do more strenuous work. In 1988, hotels in Toronto employed about 70 workers per 100 rooms; by 2008, the statistic had fallen to 53 workers per 100 rooms.<sup>xx</sup> The number of supervisors also fell from three to just one during that time. Yet housekeepers are held accountable for strict quality standards, and managers do not always develop routines to help them do their job effectively and safely.<sup>xx</sup>

Hotel housekeepers are paid according to the number of rooms they clean. In Toronto, the average is between 10 and 17 rooms. In Phuket and Punta Cana, the average is much higher. Cristina, a housekeeper in Punta Cana, cleans between 16 and 20 rooms daily and has to refresh an additional 90 rooms in the evening. *“You close the curtains so the light does not come in, you fold the bed sheets, the bedspread, you decorate the room, you put some chocolates down and place the remote control next to the right side of the bed so the client feels comfortable,”* she said. *“You replace the wet towels with new ones. Sometimes, there are so many rooms that you cannot service all of them.”*

Employees have a right to basic labour protections in all three locations, including minimum wage, daily rest periods and breaks for meals. However, housekeepers frequently skip breaks and work overtime without compensation to finish their quotas or help colleagues finish theirs. Refusal to work extra hours could result in dismissal. One Punta Cana housekeeper said, *“It is not worth asking for payment for extra hours, because the pay is insignificant.”* Housekeepers expressed fear of dismissal for demanding overtime pay.

## MEAGRE COMPENSATION

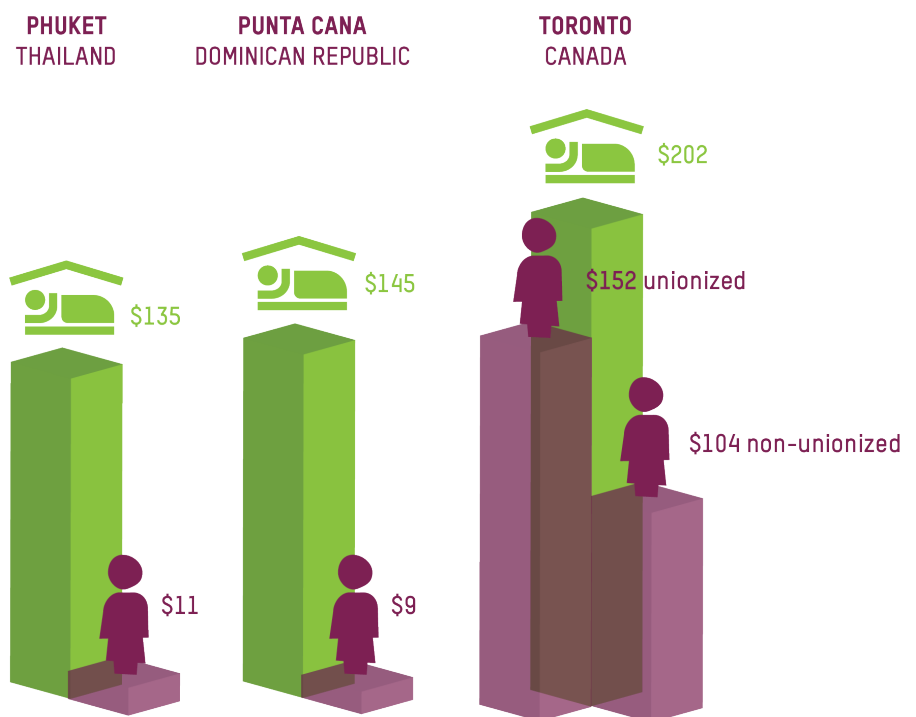
The median wage for housekeepers working in non-unionized hotels in Ontario ranged from C\$12.13 to \$14.55 per hour in 2012, and for unionized hotels from C\$16.51 to \$19.93.<sup>xxi</sup> In unionized hotels in Toronto, housekeepers make about C\$20 an hour and are allotted sick and vacation days. Some non-unionized hotels now pay wages slightly higher than unionized hotels in order to forestall organizing and ensure workers do not complain about the room quota. While the higher wages are welcome, once you factor in erratic schedules with less than full time hours and the need to regularly work overtime without pay to finish room quotas, these housekeepers do not necessarily end up earning a decent wage at the end of the month.

Housekeepers in Punta Cana earn minimum wage (C\$225 a month), which is higher than the rest of the country, and sometimes receive their share of the mandatory ten per cent gratuity charged to customers. For those who receive tips, their total monthly income can reach roughly C\$465, which is still well below

the living wage estimated at C\$720. Housekeepers in the Dominican Republic do not get raises based on seniority or length of employment. One housekeeper said, *“From our first working day to our last, we receive the same salary. Only if we move to another job position, the hotel can increase our salary, but the difference is very little.”*

In Thailand, housekeepers start at minimum wage, 300 baht (C\$11) per day, which totals C\$270 a month for a six-day work week. Housekeepers also receive a share of the mandatory gratuity charged to customers, unless they break something at work. The Asia Floor Wage Alliance sets the living wage for Thailand at 445 baht (C\$16) per day or 10,700 baht (C\$384) a month.<sup>xxii</sup> The Thai housekeepers interviewed by Oxfam in Phuket all receive minimum wage, but the migrant workers earn less — a discrepancy that has been well documented.<sup>xxiii</sup>

## Comparison of daily wage and daily cost of a hotel room<sup>xxiv</sup>



The fact that employers in Thailand are not required to sign written contracts can leave employees especially vulnerable to changes imposed by employers. None of the housekeepers interviewed in the Phuket region had a work contract and their salaries were negotiated verbally.

Sick days and holidays are not a given for housekeepers in Punta Cana or for migrant workers in Phuket. The housekeepers we spoke to mentioned the lack of sick days as a problem, considering the high rate of injury in the profession. Sick or injured, women generally have to take days off at no pay. The women in Punta Cana complained that employers would deduct pay for a full day if they called in sick, even if they were only scheduled to work half a day.

Except in unionized settings, housekeepers do not have pension plans or drug plans, and their earnings are insufficient to save for retirement.

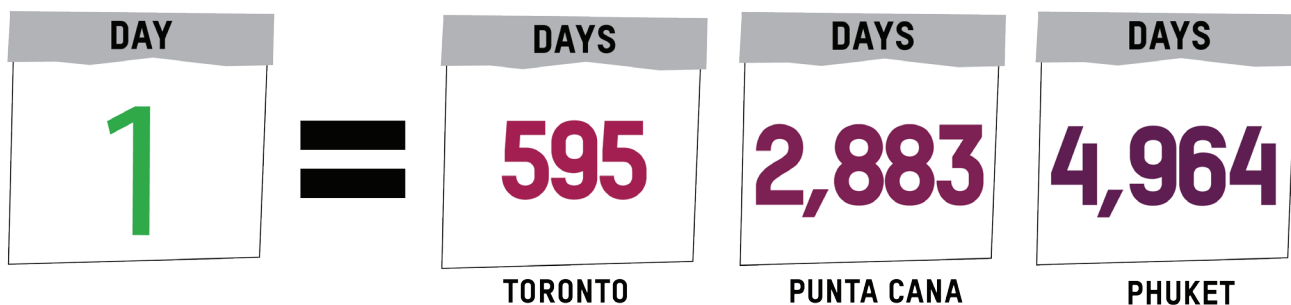
## THREATS TO HEALTH AND SAFETY

**HOUSEKEEPERS** suffer some of the highest injury rates in the hospitality sector due to heavy workloads in a fast-paced environment and significant workplace hazards. Among the biological, chemical, physical and psychological risks associated with the work are harsh and irritating cleaning products, contact with bodily fluids and sharp objects, risk of falling, slipping, tripping, and sustaining contusions, sprains and strains.

**“THE INJURY RATE FOR ROOM ATTENDANTS IN NORTH AMERICA’S HOTEL INDUSTRY IS BIGGER THAN THAT IN THE MEAT PACKING INDUSTRY.”**

— DAVID SANDERS

How many days does it take a housekeeper to earn the same as the highest six paid hotel CEOs?<sup>xxvi</sup>



The stress of not being able to accumulate savings is exacerbated by the high incidence of injury — which may oblige workers to quit, yet become an impediment to finding other work.

While housekeepers can barely make ends meet, CEOs running the hotels have seen their compensation soar. On average, the six highest paid hotel CEOs made over C\$11.5 million in 2016 or C\$44,084 a day.<sup>xxv</sup>

Several studies conducted in Canada, the United States and Australia have found that cleaning bathrooms and lifting beds quickly puts housekeepers at risk of disabling injury.<sup>xxvii</sup> In 2005, UNITE HERE — a union representing hotel workers across North America — conducted a survey of its members on injuries and pain in several cities, including Toronto. Of those surveyed, 91 per cent reported physical pain associated with their work.<sup>xxviii</sup>

The union also looked at records of worker injuries at 87 unionized hotels and found the injury rate for housekeepers to be 86 per cent greater than for other employees.<sup>xxix</sup> Union representatives told Oxfam that 95 per cent of workers use painkillers to make it through the day. According to David Sanders, Organizing Director for UNITE HERE Local 75 in Toronto,

# 8,000

A housekeeper changes body positions every three seconds while cleaning a room. Over the course of a shift, a housekeeper assumes 8,000 different body postures.<sup>xxx</sup>

It's backbreaking and often leaves women with injuries and long term disabilities.

*"The injury rate for room attendants in North America's hotel industry is bigger than that in the meat packing industry."*

Bed making has changed substantially over the years as hotels are engaged in a 'bed race'<sup>xxxi</sup> to provide the most comfortable and luxurious beds. While these changes occurred in top-tier, multinational hotel chains, it effectively raised the standard for all. As a result, housekeepers are now lifting and dressing plush mattresses that weight more than one hundred pounds.<sup>xxxii</sup>

Housekeepers have to use a range of cleaning products that can be toxic, cause irritation and/or dermatitis, heighten the risk of respiratory disease and cancer, and damage kidneys and reproductive organs. Several housekeepers interviewed for this report said they developed a cough from the cleaning products they use on a daily basis. The latex in cleaning gloves can also cause allergic reactions.<sup>xxxiii</sup> One housekeeper in Punta Cana reported having complained several times to her supervisor about the cleaning products hurting her eyes. Yet her supervisor forced her to keep using them until she was hospitalized with severe vomiting.

Another grave problem for housekeepers is exposure to mold or dangerous waste, such as broken glassware, used needles, microbial contaminants and bodily fluids — all of which heighten the risk of infectious disease or other illness. One housekeeper interviewed in Toronto spoke of a co-worker who was injured by a used syringe and needed to leave work to receive prophylactics and get tested for disease.

As housekeeping is highly physical, workers are susceptible to injuries. Body postures — standing, walking, stooping, squatting, kneeling, stretching, reaching, bending, twisting, crouching — can be uncomfortable and put workers at risk of repetitive motion injuries, particularly in the back, neck,

shoulders and arms.<sup>xxxiv</sup> Workers can slip and fall on wet surfaces, trip on phone cords and sprain or strain body parts.

Bedding alone can weigh 14 pounds. Triple-sheeting has now become standard, and the size and number of pillows have also increased. Carts with poor ergonomic design that are overloaded with linens and amenities can weigh as much as 300 pounds.<sup>xxxv</sup> These may be too heavy to push across the carpeted floors or cause strain for workers when push bars are too high. Some hotels forbid housekeepers from using carts altogether — viewed as detracting from the luxurious customer experience — and expect them to carry the loads of supplies themselves.

Lei Eigo works at a five-star hotel in Toronto, which considers carts unsightly in a luxury setting. Three years ago, she felt severe pain when bending and has been coping with chronic back pain ever since. After taking all of her sick and vacation days, she needed more time to recover, but was denied short-term disability.

She had to return to work with a full workload. Her back never fully recovered and she continues to take unpaid sick days when it becomes too painful. She worries about the day when she is unable to continue, but is too injured to get other work. Lei told us, *"We are not allowed to use carts and have to carry everything. It's really tough. We weren't allowed to return rooms if we couldn't finish the quota. Sometimes I worked four hours overtime without pay. I always stayed late to finish the rooms without getting paid. You feel slow and feel you're not a good employee, but if you follow the standard up to the dot it's hard to finish."*

One housekeeper in Punta Cana told Oxfam, *"When you start working at a hotel you feel healthy but after spending some time fixing beds or using cleaning products your back starts hurting and your lungs get infected. And then when you are finally sick the company no longer needs you because you are sick."*

A former housekeeper in Punta Cana quit her job in a resort after two months because the workload was unbearable. Besides the 14-hour shift, the hotel had no elevator and she had to carry everything up the stairs — especially burdensome when clean sheets or towels had stains and she had to return for new ones.

The high rate of injury makes housekeeping even more precarious. Workers have to take days off to recover, often at no pay, and have to request modified work duties, which puts them at risk of dismissal. Cases have been documented in Toronto where employers intimidated workers from reporting workplace injuries to curb the involvement of the Workplace Safety and

Kerry Ann is a young woman who came from Jamaica to work as a housekeeper in Toronto. She has been working in a downtown hotel for the past four years. Three years ago, she injured her wrist and now needs to use a brace at all times. When she first hurt herself, her supervisor did not believe her and made her carry on without any modifications. As her condition worsened, she obtained a doctor's note requesting changes to her work routine, but her employer never accommodated her. Kerry Ann explains, *"If you hurt yourself and try to tell them, they don't believe us. A lot of us hurt ourselves, but we don't say anything, we just keep on working. And it gets worse. Sometimes we just keep things inside, we don't say anything. If you say something they look down on you. They don't trust you, they don't believe you."*

Kerry Ann Palmer,  
Toronto.



Insurance Board. Older workers also face the risk of being laid off when the heavy workload becomes unmanageable.<sup>xxxvi</sup>

On top of chemical and physical hazards, hotel housekeepers also experience work-related stress, violence and bullying. These psychosocial hazards are exacerbated by the racialized and gendered nature of the work. Housekeepers report being perceived as servants, not human beings with rights and needs. One housekeeper in Toronto said the hardest part of her work was the fact that she did not feel she was treated with respect, *"Housekeeping is considered the lowest category of job in the hotel. They don't even realize that without us they can't run the hotel. Housekeepers are the backbone of the business."*

Housekeepers interviewed by Oxfam in Punta Cana all complained of a stressful environment in which they were constantly at risk of being fired for failure to keep up. Housekeepers also said they are frequently accused of theft, which they felt was one of the most difficult aspects of their work, *"Customers can accuse you of robbery; even if you did not do it, the customer is always right."*

There is much employers can do to prevent injuries and make the workplace safer. They can supply fitted sheets so that housekeepers do not have to lift mattresses. They can provide better equipment such as long-handled mops and dusters, lightweight or motorized carts and self-propelling vacuum cleaners. Safety training programs, less toxic cleaning

products and protective equipment for chemical and biological waste could also contribute to a safer work environment.<sup>xxxvii</sup> One manager at a Toronto hotel adopted a partnering program to allow housekeepers

## ONE LESS ROOM

Decreasing a housekeeper's daily room quota by just one room would create seven additional jobs for every one hundred full-time housekeepers. In large hotels, this could mean employing an additional seven to 14 housekeepers on busy days.

to work in pairs, so they are better able to manage the heavy workload.

Most importantly, employers could ease the pace of work, which appears to be the most important factor in workplace injuries.<sup>xxxviii</sup> The likelihood of injury is heightened when housekeepers are paid per room cleaned, rather than an hourly wage, because housekeepers must constantly rush to meet the room quota.<sup>xxxix</sup> The women Oxfam interviewed in Toronto were all of the opinion that a union could provide workers with the clout to ease their workload and thus the pace. A key demand of housekeepers

interviewed by Oxfam in Toronto is to attenuate their unmanageable quotas, so they can take breaks and be more careful with their movements. Being able to use carts is a key demand of housekeepers working in hotels that do not allow carts.

Workplace hazards and limited health and safety protections, often coupled with the reality of migrant life, have deep personal consequences for many hotel housekeepers. Chronic fatigue, stress and pain leave housekeepers too depleted to care for their families

or get involved in their communities. Keeping up relationships and support systems is a real challenge for housekeepers, particularly for single parents.

Many of the women we spoke with told us that they wanted to leave their jobs for better work, but were too tired at the end of day to pursue additional education or training. There was an overwhelming sense that they were stuck in their current jobs.



## ACCUSATION OF THEFT

Margarita,<sup>xi</sup> a 27-year-old housekeeper in Punta Cana was accused of having stolen a ring from a hotel room. She was interrogated several times and subjected to a lie detector test, during which she was restrained and yelled at. Though she was crying and kept professing her innocence, no one believed her. Only when she fainted did they desist. She had to see a cardiologist and required medical treatment following the ordeal, which she described as a nightmare. But as a single mother of four, she did not have the choice to quit.

## NO TIME FOR FAMILY

Bety,<sup>xii</sup> a young mother working as a housekeeper in Punta Cana, could not take time off to care for her mother after an accident, because she he was not entitled to vacation or sick days. She knew that workers often get laid off when they take vacation or sick days, and did not want to take that risk. Bety also tried to finish her high school diploma, but long working hours prevented her from continuing her studies. She dreams of becoming a lawyer, but she must feed her family and so cannot leave her current job.

# SEXUAL HARASSMENT

**SEXUAL HARASSMENT** is a real and constant threat faced by hotel housekeepers. Observers attribute their vulnerability in part to working alone in bedrooms, sometimes in inappropriate uniforms. But equally important is the power dynamic created by the contrasting social and economic status of housekeepers and guests. Like other instances of sexual harassment and violence against women, the problem is mostly invisible, only coming into the public eye in 2011 after a hotel housekeeper in New York alleged sexual harassment by former IMF Managing Director Dominique Strauss-Kahn. Even since that high-profile case, the hotel industry has done little to prevent harassment or address incidents when they occur. Housekeepers interviewed by Oxfam expressed reluctance to report incidents of sexual harassment. Luz Flores told us, *“You cannot say anything because if you say something you don’t know if you’re there tomorrow. If you report it, they don’t even believe it.”*

A survey of 500 Chicago housekeepers by the union UNITE HERE revealed that 58 per cent of housekeepers had been sexually harassed by guests.<sup>xiii</sup> Housekeepers told of guests answering the door naked, exposing themselves or flashing them. Others had been groped and pressured to provide sexual favors. One housekeeper described how a guest grabbed her by her breasts and cornered her between the beds. Another was blocked from leaving the room by the guest’s naked body. Over half (56 per cent) of the women surveyed said that they did not feel safe returning to work after the incident, indicating that management’s responses were ineffective. Following the survey, UNITE HERE launched an awareness campaign called ‘Hands Off, Pants On.’<sup>xliii</sup>

For hotel workers in Toronto, the threat of sexual harassment is also high. Lei Eigo described sexual harassment as a daily occurrence. She told us of a time when she was asked to deliver an additional pillow to a guest at the five-star hotel in downtown Toronto where she works. When the guest opened the door naked, she left the room and complained to management. Her manager at first didn’t believe her and was upset with Lei. Lei insisted that the guest was naked and eventually the houseman was sent up to deliver the pillow, finding himself exposed to the naked guest as well.

Eulogia Familia, a union leader in the Dominican Republic, insists that, *“Sexual harassment is very common in this kind of work. At least 90 per cent of women workers are harassed by both the customer*

*and the owners.”* She explained that in most cases women do not report the incidents because the police and courts are hostile to their complaints. *“Justice is on the side of companies,”* she said.

**“SEXUAL HARASSMENT IS VERY COMMON IN THIS KIND OF WORK. AT LEAST 90 PER CENT OF WOMEN WORKERS ARE HARASSED BY BOTH THE CUSTOMER AND THE OWNERS. JUSTICE IS ON THE SIDE OF COMPANIES.”**

**— EULOGIA FAMILIA**

The unequal power dynamic between customers and housekeepers lies behind another relatively common occurrence in Thailand and the Dominican Republic: guests will profess love and promise marriage or offer to bring the women home with them. For poor women, such propositions can represent the hope of an escape from poverty. In reality, rarely are the promises more than a ruse to obtain sexual favours, and most housekeepers have nowhere to turn for support when they are abandoned.

A few hotels have taken steps to address the prevalence of sexual harassment. In Toronto and elsewhere some provide housekeepers with portable electronic alarms known as panic buttons, which give housekeepers a greater sense of security and empowerment.<sup>xliv</sup> The city of Seattle even went so far as to require hotels to provide panic buttons and post signs in hotel rooms denouncing harassment and informing guests of the buttons.<sup>xlv</sup> By establishing clear preventative measures, the Seattle municipal code marks a historic step forward in hotel housekeepers’ safety. In the Dominican Republic and Thailand, however, the issue of sexual harassment remains unaddressed.

# LACK OF CARE SERVICES



**IN ALL THREE** countries studied, housekeepers face difficult decisions when it comes to the care of their children. Universal child care is not provided by the state and their erratic and long work schedules make it difficult

to find affordable child care. Some of the women interviewed for this report had no other option but to leave their children with relatives.

None of the hotels in Punta Cana provide child care services for their employees, and neither does the government. One housekeeper said even school spots for older children can be hard to come by, since the area is served by only one primary school. In resort areas, education and other public services are often overwhelmed by the influx of families who move from other parts of the country to seek work.

Housekeepers in Phuket report mostly relying on relatives for child care, even when they live far away. One woman with two children aged six and one had to leave her children with their grandmother in their hometown, seven hours away. She saw her children only five days a year, during holidays, since she had not worked long enough to get vacation days. The situation is worse for migrants.

Some housekeepers who have no relatives and cannot afford the high cost of caregivers either leave their children home alone or take them along to work. One woman in Phuket brings her 10-year-old son and seven-year-old daughter to the hotel with her during the school summer break and they spend the day in the lobby watching cartoons. She felt this was preferable to them staying home alone.

Long commutes to and from work also strain women's ability to balance work with care responsibilities. Julia, a 37-year-old housekeeper in Punta Cana, said it takes her two hours to get to work. Adding the commuting time to the workday, women can find themselves away from home 12 to 14 hours a day, especially if they are required to work overtime. One single mother was leaving home at 5 a.m. and not returning until eight or nine in the evening, so she quit her housekeeping job. *"I knew the arrival time but I did not know when I would leave work,"* she said.

The situation is hardly better for housekeepers in Toronto. Grace, a Filipina housekeeper working at a unionized hotel, recalls her years as a new single mother as one of the most stressful experiences of

her life. After giving birth to her son, she received six months of maternity leave, which she had to extend by another month, since she could not find a daycare spot for her child. When she finally found one, it was 30 minutes out of her way, and she would have to race to meet her room quota and get to the daycare before it closed. She also had to hire a babysitter to take care of her son when working weekends, which added additional financial stress at a time when she was struggling to get enough hours to cover her living costs.

**"I DON'T HAVE ANY ENERGY AT THE END OF THE DAY. AFTER AN EIGHT-HOUR SHIFT, I'M DONE. I DON'T SOCIALIZE, I JUST WANT TO REST, EVEN ON THE WEEKEND."**

**— LEI EIGO**

Grueling work schedules and care responsibilities give housekeepers little time for leisure and rest. Yet, socializing is particularly important for single mothers and migrant women to cultivate relationships and build a support network. The housekeepers interviewed in Toronto all felt isolated because they were too tired to do much besides work and take care of their families. Lei wondered how her co-workers could even care for a family. *"I don't have any energy at the end of the day. After an eight-hour shift, I'm done. I don't socialize, I just want to rest, even on the weekend."*



# MAKING SENSE OF THE HOTEL INDUSTRY

**THE HOTEL INDUSTRY** represents a large and growing share of overall tourism revenues; from 2011 to 2016, hotel revenues rose from US\$457 billion to US\$550 billion.<sup>xlvi</sup> Unlike other aspects of tourism, providing accommodations is dominated by a handful of large corporations. Seven companies hold the keys to millions of hotel rooms globally: Marriott International Inc., Starwood Hotels & Resorts Worldwide Inc., Hilton Worldwide Holdings Inc., Intercontinental Hotels Group PLC, Wyndham Worldwide Corp., Choice Hotels International, Accor S.A. and Hyatt Hotels Corp. Together, these companies own dozens of brands and generated over US\$40 billion in revenues in 2015.<sup>xlvii</sup> The biggest chain, InterContinental Hotels Group, alone brought in more than half the total (US\$24.5 billion in 2015), roughly US\$7 billion more than the second biggest company, Marriott International.<sup>xlviii</sup>

Changes over the past decade have rendered the industry more opaque. In 2005, global hotel corporations began shedding their real estate assets, separating the functions of branding, management and property ownership. For example, the hotel franchise or brand may handle reservations and loyalty programs, a separate management company may conduct the day-to-day operations — including training and supervising employees — while a third company or a consortium of investors such as a hedge fund may own the land and building. Even when these three roles are played by the same company, the functions are increasingly distinct.

Such hotel management and ownership changes have complicated matters for workers. While some owners relinquish their employment role to management companies, they may retain decision-making power over questions of union representation, subcontracting or collective bargaining. The picture grows more complicated when subcontractors and temporary work agencies enter the scene, as they increasingly have.

In some countries, such as the UK, outsourcing has been extreme, and hotel management companies contract staff solely through employment agencies.

The growing phenomenon of outsourcing housekeeping services to temporary work agencies has left housekeepers in an even more precarious situation, with lower wages and less job security. It undermines the clout of unions and poses a real risk to worker mobilization and rights. The International Labour Organization (ILO) lists housekeeping as the job most likely to be outsourced in the hotel industry.<sup>xlix</sup>

The fact that hotel owners are often also in the real estate business has further implications. In cities with skyrocketing real estate markets, hotel owners are tempted to convert hotel rooms into condos, leading to job losses first and foremost among

housekeepers. One of the women interviewed by Oxfam working in a downtown Toronto hotel was facing this reality. She told Oxfam that if she had to move to another hotel, she was worried about

losing seniority, which comes with guaranteed work hours and convenient schedules.

The splitting of management and ownership has contributed to frequent changes of administration, often with a direct impact on labour practices. Hotel workers interviewed in the Dominican Republic noted that new management systematically brings along its own staff, leading to layoffs. Even in unionized hotels in Toronto — where the law ensures collective agreements are honoured in the case of ownership change — housekeepers have had to push for enforcement of agreements made with previous owners.



# MOBILIZING FOR CHANGE

The relatively few hotel workers who have an effective union enjoy greater job security, better benefits and pay, and safer working conditions. However, many hotels have thwarted organizing efforts and governments have done little to address the precarious nature of housekeepers' jobs.

Both Canada and the Dominican Republic have enshrined the right to organize in legal instruments and ratified ILO Conventions 87 and 98, which provide for the rights to organize and to collective bargaining. In Thailand, however, the law denies the majority of the country's 39 million workers their trade union rights.<sup>i</sup>

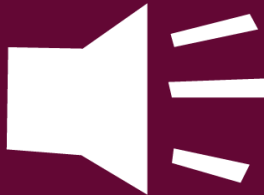
Less than six per cent of all workers in the Dominican Republic belonged to a union in 2015, and of these less than 40 per cent were employed in the private sector. Despite these low numbers, the country is not short of trade unions. The Ministry of Labour has registered 145 in the tourist sector alone.<sup>ii</sup> But the

fact remains that organizing in the hotels has proven challenging.

In Punta Cana hotel companies have been known to threaten workers involved in organizing activities with dismissal. Although firing employees for joining a union is against the law, the labour code fails to establish any punitive measures for employers who violate labour laws and authorities only rarely act.<sup>iii</sup>

Hotel companies in Punta Cana have also found more creative ways to discourage workers from organizing. Some have signed agreements with unions without the inconvenience of involving their employees.<sup>iiii</sup> Others have set up their own 'unions' to avoid real organizing. The few housekeepers interviewed who belong to a union were hard pressed to name their union leaders or explain how the union functions.

## WHAT CAN YOU DO



### JOIN US:

Sign your name at **SHORTCHANGED.CA** to become part of a movement that is standing up against injustice not only for housekeepers, but for all women. Oxfam Canada will provide you with tools and tactics to uphold decision-makers in ensuring work is paid, equal and valued for women.



### USE YOUR MONEY WISELY:

Choose to stay in unionized hotels whenever possible, and avoid hotels that are known to violate workers' rights. Check out **FAIRHOTEL.ORG** for more information.



### SUPPORT WOMEN'S ORGANIZING:

Women's rights organizations are at the forefront of struggles to increase women's economic security and end violence against women, yet they are severely underfunded. Consider making a donation to a local women's rights organization today!

They recalled signing documents, though did not know what they were, and they knew that a union fee was subtracted from their pay.

One female labour activist in the Dominican Republic told Oxfam that unions in the tourist industry — all run by men — recruit few female members, which is surprising for a sector dominated by women. *“It is as if they do not want women to participate,”* she said.

In Thailand, where labour laws give employers great leeway and workers’ rights are rarely enforced, less than two per cent of the workforce is unionized, of which less than half a per cent are in the private sector.<sup>liv</sup> Employers often use contract or migrant workers, both of whom are restricted from organizing; migrant workers make up about 10 per cent of the workforce. As women are highly underrepresented in labour unions, the movement rarely addresses gender issues.

Less than three per cent of Thai hotels are unionized, most of them in the five-star category.<sup>lv</sup> One hotel union leader interviewed in Bangkok told Oxfam that discrimination spurred his members to organize. At a major international chain, the foreign managers received much higher pay and benefits for their work, creating an ‘us-vs.-them’ dynamic that helped create a sense of collective solidarity.

Such solidarity is rare in the Thai hotel industry, where turnover is high. Many workers fear reprisals—not getting promoted, for example, or being branded a union sympathizer and thus blacklisted from all hotel employment.

Although 30.3 per cent of all Canadian workers were unionized in 2016,<sup>lvi</sup> rates in the accommodation and food services industry range from 8.9 per cent in Quebec to six per cent in Ontario and 5.4 per cent in British Columbia.<sup>lvii</sup> Three factors have been suggested to explain this discrepancy: the perception that hotel work is not difficult or dangerous, the diversity of the workforce and opposition by employers.<sup>lviii</sup>

The first is the false belief that workers need no protection from abuse. The second, diversity, refers to the distrust of unions among some people of colour, as well as to systemic racism in hiring and promotion and legal barriers against unionization for certain groups.<sup>lix</sup> Systemic racism in the labour movement may also be a contributing factor.<sup>lx</sup> The third factor, opposition by employers, is clearly the most important. Employers have threatened to reduce hours and benefits, and used scheduling and promotions to discourage organizing.

UNITE HERE International is the leading union in the hotel sector in North America representing roughly

## WOMEN TAKING CHARGE

Women have been at the forefront of organizing for better working conditions for housekeepers in Toronto hotels. Lei Eigo, a young Filipina woman, came to Canada 12 years ago under the Live-In Caregiver Program hoping for a better future and decent work. Following four years as a caregiver in a disrespectful environment, she received her permanent residency and was able to look for other work. She was hired five years ago as a housekeeper at a downtown Toronto five-star hotel which was not unionized at the time. Housekeepers did not have carts and were expected to carry all the linens and amenities. Lei often had to work up to four hours of overtime without pay to finish her room quota, and she suffered several repetitive motion injuries.

**“THAT’S WHY I BECAME A LEADER: TO SHOW THAT WE ARE NOT INVISIBLE.”**

**— LEI EIGO, TORONTO**

Before opening, the hotel management had reached an agreement with the city to allow union certification if a majority of workers in a bargaining unit signed union cards. But when that happened, the company refused. When workers continued to organize, the company fought tooth and nail: union literature was destroyed, employees were yelled at, their schedules changed, and personalized letters were sent to all employees discouraging them from joining the union.

Even so, the workers persisted and won the vote. Now, as the union leader, Lei offers support to workers at other hotels and speaks publicly about the need to mobilize for worker’s rights in the hotel industry. *“We are an invisible minority,”* she told Oxfam. *“That’s why I became a leader: to show that we are not invisible.”*

75 per cent of all unionized hotel workers, more than 50,000 of whom are in Canada. UNITE HERE's organizing efforts succeeded in unionizing close to 80 per cent of major downtown Toronto hotels and setting a common standard for decent employment conditions. Unionized workers receive decent salaries, sick and vacation days, additional health and welfare benefits, and often a pension, a transit pass and other benefits such as access to training. In fact, unionization has raised wages for all Toronto housekeepers, including in non-unionized hotels. Marc Hollin, a researcher for UNITE HERE, told us, *"In any given city, once the number of union properties reaches a certain point, you can see how non-union operators feel pressure to keep up with union wages, in order to compete for workers and as a union avoidance strategy."*

Much of UNITE HERE's success can be attributed to their innovative community-driven organizing tactics, which include home visits and street theatre, as well as efforts to cultivate a sense of community. Local 75 in Toronto founded a choir, recognizing the prominence of protest music and singing in Caribbean culture. The same local provides financial support for artistic pursuits and community cultural activities.<sup>lxv</sup> Many of the union's organizers are immigrant and visible minority women, who were themselves employed in the sector, which further cultivates a sense of identification between workers and the union.<sup>lxvi</sup> One housekeeper told Oxfam that organizing to form a union *"has been fun, despite the resistance we are facing from the owners. Before we*

*were often fighting, but the organizing has brought us together."*

UNITE HERE's current campaign — FairHotel.org — speaks to some of the changes needed in the industry and allows consumers to access a 'FairHotel Guide' of socially responsible hotels, and to see which hotels are on its boycott list.<sup>lxvii</sup>

The hotel industry's transnational nature and increasing reliance on global supply chains, as services such as housekeeping are being outsourced, poses a real risk to worker mobilization and rights.

Local and national unions are not powerful enough to curb worker exploitation and international regulatory standards are too slow to keep up with industry changes.<sup>lxviii</sup>

At a global level, since 2012, the International Union of Food, Agriculture, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers' Associations, campaign 'Make My Workplace Safe' has held an annual Housekeepers Global Week of Action to highlight the

challenges faced by housekeepers and draw attention to their fight for justice, respect and improved working conditions. Unions and worker solidarity groups in more than 30 countries have taken part.

## COMPANIES MUST ADHERE TO INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS STANDARDS

The UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGPs) establish global standards to mitigate adverse impacts on human rights caused by business activities. At a minimum, the Principles oblige businesses to adhere to the rights set out in the International Bill of Human Rights and the fundamental labour rights contained in the core conventions of the International Labour Organization.<sup>lxv</sup> Companies are responsible for identifying and addressing infringements on these rights related to their operations, including in their supply chains.

# CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

**EVERY DAY**, millions of women around the world spend their days cleaning hotel rooms. Their efforts contribute to rising global prosperity and to the record profits the hotel industry enjoys. Sadly, hotel housekeepers are systematically denied their fair share of this wealth. Housekeeping work is precarious and dangerous and pays poverty wages. The work breaks women's bodies and they struggle to make ends meet.

In the course of research for this paper, Oxfam found five overarching trends common to Canada, the Dominican Republic and Thailand:

- Housekeepers working in non-unionized hotels earn wages that fall below living wage standards, receive scant benefits and have little to no job security. They have to meet a large quota of rooms every day and are expected to work overtime without pay if they cannot meet the quota within their eight-hour shift.
- Housekeepers face serious health risks and suffer high rates of injury from muscling king-sized beds weighing more than 100 pounds and using harsh cleaning chemicals all day long. Housekeepers worry about their future, since lasting injuries prevent them from seeking other work once they need to transition for health reasons.
- Women working as housekeepers also face high rates of sexual harassment. Particularly in North America, the 'I would like an additional pillow' phenomenon is widely known among housekeepers as an early warning that guests might exhibit inappropriate behaviour upon delivery. The women often suffer in silence, because customers are rarely held to account for their actions.
- Organizing in the hotel sector has been extremely difficult due to employer resistance and a climate of fear generated by negative management practices. The industry's reliance on a segment of the population that is economically and socially disenfranchised, isolated and vulnerable limits workers' willingness to speak out. The recent trend to outsource housekeeping services to temporary work agencies has put workers further at risk.
- In addition to the hardships they face at work, housekeepers also struggle to find adequate

care for their children. Universal child care is not provided by the state and their erratic and long work schedules make it difficult to find affordable child care. The situation is worse for migrant women who live far from their family support networks.

The hotel industry exemplifies the growing divide between low-wage workers and highly paid management in large corporations, as well as the gendered nature of today's economy in which women's work is underpaid and undervalued. The working lives of hotel housekeepers and those of hotel CEOs graphically depict the unacceptable inequality that plagues today's world.

It does not have to be this way.

Much can be done to address the economic insecurity and hazards women face working as hotel housekeepers. Change is possible. The hotel industry, consumers and governments must all be part of the solution to housekeepers' plight. Here are steps that each can take to right this wrong:

**1. THE HOTEL INDUSTRY** must uphold labour rights and the principle of pay equity, and take tangible steps to improve the safety and overall working conditions of their employees. This can range from supplying fitted sheets and less toxic cleaning products, to establishing measures to prevent sexual harassment. Hotels should provide housekeepers with regular schedules and predictable work hours, and move towards paying all of their employees a living wage. In no instances should hotels attempt to thwart organizing efforts.

**2. GOVERNMENTS** can enact public policy in four key areas to make a lasting difference in the lives of housekeepers, and to reduce the yawning gap between rich and poor and between the working lives of men and women.

- **ENSURE** that all workers are paid a living wage and receive benefits. This must include steps to uphold the principle of pay equity and ensure that migrant workers' rights are respected.
- **PROTECT** workers' right to organize and hold corporations accountable for violations of labour rights, including when operating abroad.
- **INVEST** in quality, accessible and universal child care to ensure women can access the labour market and pursue economic

opportunities.

- **SUPPORT** women's rights organizations working to end violence against women and improve women's working conditions.

**3. CONSUMERS** can make a difference by speaking out and choosing to spend their money at businesses that treat their workers with respect and dignity. When travelling, choose to stay in unionized hotels whenever possible and avoid hotels that are known to violate workers' rights.

Consult [www.Fairhotel.org](http://www.Fairhotel.org). to learn more.

We all have a role to play in ending the economic exploitation of women. Join Oxfam Canada and a growing movement of people committed to speaking out against extreme inequality and ensuring the work women do is fairly paid and equally valued.

Sign up now at **SHORTCHANGED.CA**.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This paper was written by Diana Sarosi. Many colleagues gave inputs and support and special mention should be made of Lauren Ravon, Max Lawson, Gloria Amezquita, Jomkwan Kwanyuen and Jonathan Rose. Oxfam Canada acknowledges the invaluable contributions of UNITE HERE Local 75, Serwaah Frimpong, Virginia Rodríguez, Gabriela Read, Claudia Lucia Lopez and Puttanee Kangkun. The text was edited by Mark Fried. This paper is part of a series written to inform public debate on development and humanitarian policy issues.

For further information on the issues raised in this paper please Email [info@oxfam.ca](mailto:info@oxfam.ca).

This publication is copyright but the text may be used free of charge for the purposes of advocacy, campaigning, education, and research, provided that the source is acknowledged in full. The copyright holder requests that all such use be registered with them for impact assessment purposes. For copying in any other circumstances, or for reuse in other publications, or for translation or adaptation, permission must be secured and a fee may be charged.

E-mail [info@oxfam.ca](mailto:info@oxfam.ca).

## METHODOLOGY

This report is based on research conducted by Oxfam in Canada (Toronto), Thailand (Phuket and Bangkok) and the Dominican Republic (Bavaro-Punta Cana region) in 2016-2017. The research entailed 40 interviews with current and former hotel housekeepers, union leaders and organizers from workers' organizations, and hotel management. Most of the women interviewed, particularly in Thailand and the Dominican Republic, were afraid of reprisals and asked to remain anonymous.

A thorough literature review, including research by other non-governmental organizations and studies by academics who surveyed hotel housekeepers in other localities, revealed how little research has been done on hotel housekeepers. Current statistics are hard to come by and the few studies that exist focus on the United States, Europe, and most recently, Australia.

# NOTES

- i. Tourism as a category includes five different industry groups: Accommodation, Food and Beverage Services, Recreation and Entertainment, Transportation and Travel Services.
- ii. World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) (2017, January). *Sustained Growth in International Tourism Despite Challenges*. PR No. 17003. <http://www2.unwto.org/press-release/2017-01-17/sustained-growth-international-tourism-despite-challenges>.
- iii. See World Travel & Tourism Council (2017). *Travel and Tourism: Economic Impact 2017*. <https://www.wttc.org/-/media/files/reports/economic-impact-research/2017-documents/tt-economic-impact-2017-infographic-v2.pdf?la=en>
- iv. UN Women and World Tourism Organization (2011). *Global Report on Women in Tourism 2010*. <http://ethics.unwto.org/sites/all/files/docpdf/foletoglobalreport.pdf>
- v. Statistics Canada (2016). *Non-resident travelers entering Canada*. <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/tables-tableaux/sum-som/l01/cst01/arts34-eng.htm>
- vi. Destination Canada (2016). *National Tourism Indicators 2016 Highlights*. [https://www.destinationcanada.com/sites/default/files/2017-03/Intelligence\\_NationalTourismIndicators\\_2016Highlights\\_EN.pdf](https://www.destinationcanada.com/sites/default/files/2017-03/Intelligence_NationalTourismIndicators_2016Highlights_EN.pdf)
- vii. Hotel Association of Canada (2016). *Hotel Industry Fact Sheet*. Accessed at: <http://www.hotelassociation.ca/forms/Hotel%20Industry%20Facts%20Sheet.pdf>
- viii. Steven Tufts, Jeanette Chua, Stella Park, and Philip Kelly (2012). *Immigrants and the Toronto Food Services and Accommodation Services Sectors*. Toronto Immigrant Employment Data Initiative (TIEDI) Analytical Report 29. Accessed at: [www.yorku.ca/tiedi/doc/AnalyticalReport29.pdf](http://www.yorku.ca/tiedi/doc/AnalyticalReport29.pdf).
- ix. See Government of Canada *Live-in Caregiver Program* at: <http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/work/caregiver/index.asp>. The Live-In Caregiver Program has been criticized for decades for opening the door to abuse and exploitation of foreign workers. Caregivers in the program are tied to their employers and cannot accept a job elsewhere without jumping through bureaucratic hoops, thus tying workers' hands when their employer asks them to work unpaid overtime or perform tasks outside their job descriptions. The Live-In Caregiver Program as a pathway to permanent residency was closed in 2014 when the government put stringent eligibility requirements in place and capped the number of applications. Foreign workers in this program are also no longer able to appeal for their dependents to come to Canada on humanitarian and compassionate grounds. To reduce exploitation and precariousness, advocacy organizations such as the Caregivers Action Center are calling for caregivers and their families to be given permanent residency status upon their arrival in Canada.
- x. World Travel and Tourism Council (2017). *Travel and Tourism Economic Impact 2017 Dominican Republic*. <https://www.wttc.org/-/media/files/reports/economic-impact-research/countries-2017/dominicanrepublic2017.pdf>
- xi. Statistics Canada (2015). *Travel by Canadians to foreign countries, top 25 countries visited*. <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/tables-tableaux/sum-som/l01/cst01/arts37a-eng.htm>
- xii. Gabriela, R. (2016). *La Altigracia: marginalidad, desorden y contaminación en la meca del turismo dominicano*. <http://elgrillo.do/2016/04/la-altigracia-marginalidad-desorden-contaminacion-la-meca-del-turismo-dominicano/>
- xiii. Not real name.
- xiv. Department of Tourism, Government of Thailand (2017). *Statistics of foreign tourists entering Thailand in 2016: January-December* Accessed at <http://tourism2.tourism.go.th/home/details/11/221/25516>.
- xv. World Travel and Tourism Council (2017, June). *WTTTC applauds government commitment to strengthen Thailand tourism sector*. <https://www.wttc.org/media-centre/press-releases/press-releases/2017/wttc-applauds-government-commitment-to-strengthen-thailand-tourism-sector>
- xvi. Ibid.
- xvii. Hotels and Hospitality Group (2017) *Hotel Destinations Thailand*. Accessed at: <http://www.ap.jll.com/asia-pacific/en-gb/Research/HotelDestinations-Thailand-Jan2017.pdf>.
- xviii. Despite the opposition of employers who rely heavily on migrant workers, in June 2017 the Thai government passed a law that threatens unregistered migrant workers with long prison terms and large fines if caught working without a permit (Decree Concerning the Management of Foreign Workers' Employment). It caused a mass exodus of tens of thousands unregistered migrant workers who feared arrest and punishment.
- xix. Dugale, V. (February-March 2010) *Hotels & Hurting: Less Work, More Injuries for Women* 29:1 Our Times 29:1. Accessed at: [http://www.ourtimes.ca/Features/article\\_119.php](http://www.ourtimes.ca/Features/article_119.php)
- xx. Sherman, R. (2011). *Beyond interaction: customer influence on housekeeping and room service work in hotels*. 25:1 Work, Employment and Society 19.
- xxi. Malatest, R. A. & Associates (2012). *Canadian Tourism Sector Compensation Study*. The Canadian Tourism Human Resource Council. Accessed at: [https://www.otec.org/Files/pdf/resources/Compensation\\_Study\\_Report\\_EN.aspx](https://www.otec.org/Files/pdf/resources/Compensation_Study_Report_EN.aspx)
- xxii. See Asia Floor Wage at: <http://asia.floorwage.org/what>



- xxiii. See for example, Soderlund, A. (2015). *No Holidays for the Burmese*. Schyst Resande and Fair Action. [https://www.tourismconcern.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/No-Holidays-for-the-Burmese\\_Schyst-resande-2015.pdf](https://www.tourismconcern.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/No-Holidays-for-the-Burmese_Schyst-resande-2015.pdf)
- xxiv. Skift (May 16, 2017). *The 10 Most Highly Compensated Hotel CEOs of 2016*. <https://skift.com/2017/05/16/the-10-most-highly-compensated-hotel-ceos-of-2016/>.
- xxv. The top earning 6 hotel CEOs make on average Cdn\$44,084 a day. The average non-unionized housekeeper in Ontario makes Cdn\$27,040 a year. The average housekeeper in Punta Cana earns Cdn\$5,580 a year. The average housekeeper in Phuket makes Cdn\$3,240 a year.
- xxvi. Ibid.
- xxvii. UNITE HERE (2006). *Creating Luxury, Enduring Pain: How Hotel Work is Hurting Housekeepers*. [http://www.ezimaid.com.au/pdf/Creating\\_Luxury\\_Enduring\\_Pain.pdf](http://www.ezimaid.com.au/pdf/Creating_Luxury_Enduring_Pain.pdf)
- xxviii. Ibid.
- xxix. Ibid.
- xxx. Ibid.
- xxxi. Bauman, G. (April 13, 2006). *The Bed Race: Hotel Companies' Everlasting Pursuit of Differentiation*. Accessed at: [www.hospitalitynet.org/news/4027006.html](http://www.hospitalitynet.org/news/4027006.html).
- xxxii. UNITE HERE (2006). *Creating Luxury, Enduring Pain: How Hotel Work is Hurting Housekeepers*. [http://www.ezimaid.com.au/pdf/Creating\\_Luxury\\_Enduring\\_Pain.pdf](http://www.ezimaid.com.au/pdf/Creating_Luxury_Enduring_Pain.pdf)
- xxxiii. Hsieh, Yu-Chin et al. (May 2013). *The world at work: hotel cleaners*. 70:5 Occupational and Environmental Medicine 360.
- xxxiv. Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety (2016). Accessed at: [www.ccohs.ca/oshanswers/occup\\_workplace/hotel\\_housekeeping.html](http://www.ccohs.ca/oshanswers/occup_workplace/hotel_housekeeping.html).
- xxxv. UNITE HERE (2006). *Creating Luxury, Enduring Pain: How Hotel Work is Hurting Housekeepers*. [http://www.ezimaid.com.au/pdf/Creating\\_Luxury\\_Enduring\\_Pain.pdf](http://www.ezimaid.com.au/pdf/Creating_Luxury_Enduring_Pain.pdf)
- xxxvi. Dugale, V. (2010). *Hotels & Hurting: Less Work, More Injuries for Women*. Our Times 29:1. Accessed at: [http://ourtimes.ca/Features/article\\_119.php](http://ourtimes.ca/Features/article_119.php)
- xxxvii. Hsieh, Yu-Chin (2013).
- xxxviii. UNITE HERE (2006).
- xxxix. Ibid
- xl. Not real name.
- xli. Not real name.
- xlii. Lyons, S. (2016, July). *Hands Off, Pants On: Sexual Harassment in Chicago's Hospitality Industry*. UNITE HERE Local 1. <https://www.handsoffpantson.org/>
- xliii. See campaign website: <https://www.handsoffpantson.org/>
- xliv. Rafter, M. (2017, July). *More Firms Giving Employees Panic Buttons*. Talent Economy. <http://www.talenteconomy.io/2017/07/17/panic-buttons/>
- xlv. See Charter of the City of Seattle, Chapter 14.25 at [https://library.municode.com/wa/seattle/codes/municipal\\_code?nodeId=TIT14HURI](https://library.municode.com/wa/seattle/codes/municipal_code?nodeId=TIT14HURI)
- xlvi. See Statics & Facts on the Hotel and Lodging industry at: <https://www.statista.com/topics/1102/hotels/>
- xlvii. Skift (November 16, 2015). *Who owns what: making sense of the hotel chains and their brands*: <https://skift.com/2015/11/16/who-owns-what-making-sense-of-the-hotel-chains-and-their-brands/>
- xlviii. See Revenue of selected leading hotels worldwide in 2016 at: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/273064/revenue-of-the-largest-hotel-groups-worldwide/>
- xliv. International Labour Organization (2015). *Sectoral Studies on Decent Work in Global Supply Chains: Comparative Analysis of Good Practices by Multinational Enterprises in Promoting Decent Work in Global Supply Chains*. Accessed at: [www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed\\_dialogue/sector/documents/publication/wcms\\_467295.pdf](http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_dialogue/sector/documents/publication/wcms_467295.pdf).
- i. See "Organizing prevented in both law and practice" at <http://survey.ituc-csi.org/Thailand.html?lang=en#tabs-3>
- ii. The Ministry does not collect data on the number of union members affiliated with each trade union making it impossible to determine the number of unionized workers.
- iii. Fundación Juan Bosch (2015). *"Ser justos es lo primero..." La crisis de los trabajadores dominicanos bajo el actual modelo económico y los desafíos de una reforma al Código de Trabajo para más justicia y prosperidad. Informe de análisis y propuestas*. Accessed at: [http://www.juanbosch.org/image/data/biblioteca/Estudio%20Trabajo%20Rep%20Dominicana\\_FJBOSCH\\_FSOL\\_2015.pdf](http://www.juanbosch.org/image/data/biblioteca/Estudio%20Trabajo%20Rep%20Dominicana_FJBOSCH_FSOL_2015.pdf)
- iiii. Cañada, E. (2008). "Trade Union Organization facing Spanish hotel chains". *Opinions in Development, Responsible Tourism Program*. Article No.1. 29 de September de 2008. AlbaSud, Research and Communication for development. Accessed at: <http://www.albasud.org/publ/docs/13.pdf> Código de Trabajo de la República Dominicana (Ley 16-92). Santo Domingo, Rep. Dom.

- liv. See ILO: [http://www.ilo.org/asia/countries/thailand/WCMS\\_546209/lang--en/index.htm](http://www.ilo.org/asia/countries/thailand/WCMS_546209/lang--en/index.htm)
- lv. Interview with union leader.
- lvi. Statistics Canada, Labour Force Survey (CANSIM, Table 282-0220).
- lvii. Statistics Canada, Labour Force Survey (CANSIM, Table 282-0078).
- lviii. Zuberi, D. (2007). *Organizing for Better Working Conditions and Wages: The Unite Here! Hotel Workers Rising Campaign* 10 Just Labour 60, Accessed at: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/251213008\\_Organizing\\_for\\_better\\_working\\_conditions\\_and\\_wages\\_the\\_unite\\_here\\_hotel\\_workers\\_rising\\_campaign](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/251213008_Organizing_for_better_working_conditions_and_wages_the_unite_here_hotel_workers_rising_campaign)
- lix. Das Gupta, T. (2006). *Racism/Anti-racism, Precarious Employment, and Unions* in Leah F. Vosko, ed., *Precarious Employment: Understanding Labour Market Insecurity in Canada*. Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2006.
- lx. Sawchuk, Peter H. (2009).
- lxi. Tufts, S. (2006).
- lxii. Das Gupta, T. (2006).
- lxiii. See: <http://www.fairhotel.org/>
- lxiv. Seifert, A. and Messing. K. (2006) *Cleaning Up After Globalization: An Ergonomic Analysis of Work Activity of Hotel Cleaners* 38:3 Antipode 557.
- lxv. See: <http://www.ilo.org/global/standards/introduction-to-international-labour-standards/conventions-and-recommendations/lang--en/index.htm>

# OXFAM

© Oxfam Canada October 2017

Oxfam is an international confederation of 20 organizations networked together in more than 90 countries, as part of a global movement for change, to build a future free from the injustice of poverty.

Please write to any of the agencies for further information, or visit **OXFAM.CA**:

Oxfam America ([www.oxfamamerica.org](http://www.oxfamamerica.org))

Oxfam Australia ([www.oxfam.org.au](http://www.oxfam.org.au))

Oxfam-in-Belgium ([www.oxfamsol.be](http://www.oxfamsol.be))

Oxfam Canada ([www.oxfam.ca](http://www.oxfam.ca))

Oxfam France ([www.oxfamfrance.org](http://www.oxfamfrance.org))

Oxfam Germany ([www.oxfam.de](http://www.oxfam.de))

Oxfam GB ([www.oxfam.org.uk](http://www.oxfam.org.uk))

Oxfam Hong Kong ([www.oxfam.org.hk](http://www.oxfam.org.hk))

IBIS (Denmark) ([www.ibis-global.org](http://www.ibis-global.org))

Oxfam India ([www.oxfamindia.org](http://www.oxfamindia.org))

Oxfam Intermón (Spain) ([www.intermonoxfam.org](http://www.intermonoxfam.org))

Oxfam Ireland ([www.oxfamireland.org](http://www.oxfamireland.org))

Oxfam Italy ([www.oxfamitalia.org](http://www.oxfamitalia.org))

Oxfam Japan ([www.oxfam.jp](http://www.oxfam.jp))

Oxfam Mexico ([www.oxfammexico.org](http://www.oxfammexico.org))

Oxfam New Zealand ([www.oxfam.org.nz](http://www.oxfam.org.nz))

Oxfam Novib (Netherlands) ([www.oxfamnovib.nl](http://www.oxfamnovib.nl))

Oxfam Québec ([www.oxfam.qc.ca](http://www.oxfam.qc.ca))

Oxfam Brasil ([www.oxfam.org.br](http://www.oxfam.org.br))

Oxfam South Africa ([www.oxfam.org.za](http://www.oxfam.org.za))



**OXFAM**  
Canada



**OXFAM**  
Canada