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Visiting Professor's Report – Research visit to the Centre of Excellence on BHR at FECAP

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The Business and Human Rights (BHR) field in Brazil has been overshadowed by two recent scandals. A couple of months ago, the minister of Human Rights and Citizenship, Silvio Almeida, was sacked by President Lula da Silva over sexual harassment allegations by several women, including Anielle Franco, Brazil's racial equality minister. And just last week, the two directors of the UN Global Compact Brazil, the second-largest Global Compact network in the world, with about 2,000 members, were put under investigation for workplace harassment.

These scandals stand in stark contrast to the vibrant and thriving BHR scene that I experienced during a recent 10-day visit to Brazil. I was invited by FECAP, a business school that received EU funding to launch the Jean Monnet Centre of Excellence on Business and Human Rights in 2023.

The school seeks to build human capacity for managing human rights challenges in global business. It offers interdisciplinary courses in business and international relations as well as executive programs attended by employees of more than 50 business organizations, in partnership with Ethos Institute of Business and Social Responsibility. Under the leadership of Professors Claudia Alvarenga Marconi and Rafael Miranda, FECAP organized a visiting lecture series in which I was joined by Professors Florian Wettstein of University of St Gallen, Karin Buhmann of University of Southern Denmark and Copenhagen Business School, and Danielle Pamplona of Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Paraná.

Other institutions in Brazil also have taken on BHR, including Fundação Getulio Vargas (FGV-São Paulo), the Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Paraná and the Homa – Human Rights and Business Institute, from the Federal University of Juiz de Fora.

Among the most pressing issues from a Brazilian perspective is the protection of human rights in global supply chains. The Homa – Human Rights and Business Institute, for example, in collaboration with several social movements and civil society organizations, has advocated for Brazilian legislation that would strengthen business accountability for human rights issues, including in supply chains.

Events in Europe are helping heighten interest in BHR in Brazil. Newly enacted EU regulations require business partners of EU companies in Brazil to comply with new human rights due diligence requirements. Examples include the EU Deforestation Directive and the EU Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive. Some people I talked to during my visit commented that EU companies often demand that their Brazilian business partners conduct human rights due diligence on their behalf. This requires Brazilian businesses to develop more transparent supply chains to monitor compliance with human rights standards and remediate human rights violations such as health and safety issues in mining or indigenous land rights issues. Brazilian businesses need to do so in a way that does not avoid human rights risks by eliminating informal parts of the supply chain in the mining sector or the agriculture sector. Simply shutting down such operations can hurt local communities that have relied on small-scale mining or small-holder farming.

Initiatives like the UN Global Compact have an important role to play: providing collective feedback to companies in the EU and demanding that responsibility for human rights due diligence is shared, not merely outsourced to Brazilian companies.

The current leadership turmoil in key human rights institutions in Brazil should not linger. Brazilian businesses need political support as well as strong peer-to-peer learning networks to address the implementation challenges of human rights in business. And they need educational opportunities focused on business solutions like the ones at FECAP to develop a skill set that is still new to business managers. This includes understanding rights holders' perspectives, how to set up meaningful stakeholder dialogues, and the development of business models with human rights at the core.

To complement these initial reflections, I want to offer three directions for future BHR research that could advance BHR in Brazil and could develop transferable models for advancing human rights in corporate practice:

1. Brazilian BHR researchers should conduct empirical studies

Brazilian researchers have unique access to human rights data on the ground. Understanding how companies address human rights challenges in different industry contexts can help to document specific good and bad management practices, which can offer learning opportunities for students and corporate practitioners. It will also help to assess, how extraterritorial legislation (e.g. from the EU) plays out in global supply chains in Brazil and how Brazilian corporations can offer a competitive advantage by taking on human rights due diligence themselves. Empirical studies can also investigate if lead firms outsource responsibility for human rights to entities in their Brazilian supply chains or if models of shared responsibility are being developed. These studies are particularly relevant now as US tariffs threaten Brazilian businesses that are part of global supply chains. Empirical studies can provide ideas of what works in practice and what good human rights due diligence could look like.

2. Brazilian BHR researchers are best positioned to make the case for the intersection of human rights and the environment

Brazil is the home of the biggest rainforest in the world. Its protection is critical for curbing climate change, yet climate change strategies need to be supported by local communities to be effective. Our case study of Veja in Brazil highlights how companies can advance climate targets by economically empowering local communities to protect the rainforest. The BHR field could benefit from more studies that make concrete what companies could do through core business operations to advance social and environmental sustainability. Past crisis could serve as starting points for industry-specific studies e.g. in the Brazilian mining sector (e.g Bauxit mining on indigenous land) to identify corporate strategies that establish more effective environmental and social risk management procedures.

3. More Brazilian business schools should join international BHR networks and collaborate among each other to institutionalize BHR for the next generation

The BHR work in Brazil sometimes appears insular and mainly focused on Brazil only. However, the Brazilian perspective and the work of Brazilian BHR scholars need to be better represented in global networks such as the GBSN for BHR Impact Community or the Teaching Business and Human Rights Forum.

Both these networks have no membership fees and offer a range of advantages for individual scholars and academic institutions. For example, joining the GBSN network offers access to open source teaching resources and it provides opportunities for developing locally relevant teaching resources. It also enables engaging with business schools around the world that work on the integration of human rights in the business school curriculum. Learning from and contributing to these networks could help to accelerate the institutionalization of BHR in Brazilian academic institutions which train the next generation of leaders in Brazil. The GBSN network recently published a toolkit for integrating human rights in business school education which could help individuals at Brazilian institutions to make the case for human rights. The toolkit also offers insights from other business schools that have begun to integrate human rights in the curriculum and links to open access teaching resources.

To build a strong academic BHR field in Brazil, Brazilian institutions also need to collaborate among each other. For example, I have seen that in Sao Paulo, leading academic institutions are not well-connected and could benefit from greater exchange and collaboration to put forward a Brazilian research agenda and action plan for BHR.

The research stay sponsored by the FECAP EU Jean Monnet Excellence grant in November 2024 allowed me to get good insights into the state of play of Business and Human Rights (BHR) in Brazil.

Following this time in Brazil, I published some reflections on the website of the NYU Stern Center for Business and Human Rights (Nov. 7, 2024).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dorothee Baumann-Pauly is an internationally renowned expert on business and human rights. She earned her PhD in Economics (summa cum laude) at the University of Zurich in 2010 while working for the Fair Labor Association, a multi-stakeholder initiative with the mission to improve labour rights in global supply chains.

Dorothee is Professor at Geneva University's School of Economics and Management and directs the Geneva Center for Business and Human Rights and, since 2013. She has also served as the Research Director at the NYU Stern Center for Business and Human Rights.

In these roles, she works with companies to advance human rights in corporate practice. Her applied research is focused on embedding human rights in organisations and developing business models that enable profits and human rights principles to coexist. She also teaches Business and Human Rights and co-edited the first textbook on Business and Human Rights (Routledge 2016).

In 2016, she co-founded the Global Business School Network for Business and Human Rights to integrate human rights in business education as well as the Business and Human Rights Young Researchers Summit for emerging scholars.

