

## **Empowering Voices: Insights from the 8th Business and Human Rights Young Researchers' Summit**

In the heart of New York City, from August 10th to 12th, 2023, a cohort of twelve scholars hailing from multiple countries, backgrounds and disciplines converged for the 8th Business and Human Rights (BHR) Young Researchers' Summit. Since it was first organised in 2016, the Summit has become a well-established platform for PhD students and early post-doctoral researchers to showcase their work in an interdisciplinary and collaborative format.

This year's dynamic event was hosted by the NYU Stern Center for Business and Human Rights, with the support of the University of St. Gallen and the University of Geneva. The Summit proceeded under the guidance of distinguished Professors Dorothee Baumann-Pauly and Florian Wettstein, and benefited from the contributions of eminent scholars and practitioners such as Michael Posner, Sarah Dadush and Batia Wiesenfeld.

### **Three Themes, One Message**

The Summit set the stage for the exploration of a wide variety of issues from which three pivotal themes emerged: the essential role of rights holders' voices, the persistence of asymmetrical power dynamics, and the significance of empirical research in addressing these challenges. Over the course of three days, conversations around these themes produced a resounding message: the need and aspiration to usher in a new era of BHR characterised by diversity, introspection, and an unwavering focus on placing rights holders squarely within the discourse at the practical core. The power of their voices recognised and amplified.

### **The Criticality of Rights Holders' Voices**

The research studies presented at the Summit underscored the central role of rights holders' voices in understanding risks, improving accountability, and securing remedies in relation to adverse corporate human rights impacts. Yet they also highlighted the ways in which corporate behaviours, power dynamics, and the BHR field and discourse itself have presented barriers to rights holders' voices being sought, heard, and prioritised. Researchers from this multi-disciplinary cohort stressed the importance of approaches that centre the voices of rights holders to advance the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGPs) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Other discussions highlighted the potential of multi-stakeholder collaboration in amplifying these voices, fostering meaningful change, and challenging the status quo.

It is a truism that voices have the power to change the world. At its core, a voice symbolises individual empowerment and asserts the most fundamental freedoms and human rights. Scholars at the Summit emphasised that the voices of rights holders matter, and promote fairness and autonomy, thereby driving corporate accountability and ethical standards. When absent or suppressed, this silence perpetuates oppression, for which we all bear the consequences. Yet the silencing, suppression, and appropriation of the voices of rights holders is often perpetuated by the asymmetrical power relations that underpin the international legal, economic, and political order - making the rebalancing of power dynamics another central theme of the Summit.

### **The Dynamics of Power & Politics**

The leitmotifs of power and politics, and the intimate links between the two, were threaded throughout the Summit. Questions were raised about where power takes root, who wields it, how it is exercised, and to what effect. A notable spotlight was cast on the power of information, the increasing 'marketization' of BHR, and Global North/South divides that privilege certain sources of information and perpetuate inequalities between business and

communities. The Summit also grappled with the pervasive nature of discursive power and knowledge production, unravelling the narratives woven by corporations and practitioners and how these may lead to epistemic injustices.

The connections between politics and power were also evidenced in presentations that touched on the global arms trade and the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Participants explored the roles played by corporate actors in volatile geopolitical contexts, delving into the moral and economic dimensions entwined in a company's decision to either maintain or withdraw operations from an aggressor country. The responsibilities of business in times of conflict were further framed in light of inherently harmful products and business models that facilitate and exacerbate violence.

### **The Value of Empirical Explorations**

For participants, empirical research stood out as a potent tool to navigate the interconnected challenges of power imbalances and marginalised voices. There was a collective aspiration to move beyond theory-heavy arguments and embrace the realm of observation and experience, acknowledging the invaluable insights that empirical research can provide. Drawing from the unique contexts of Brazil, Australia, Ethiopia, Luxembourg, and beyond, scholars magnified crucial issues such as environmental regulation; due diligence regulation; modern slavery; civil society participation; and the intersection of business and human rights in conflict zones.

Presentations of empirical research proposals and findings were striking in their efforts to respond to the challenges of the marginalisation of rights holders and entrenched power imbalances. One empirical research project involved field work in a shale gas extraction operation in provincial China, looking at issues of accountability, politics, and processes for enabling dialogue between communities and businesses. Projects like these actively seek to reshape prevailing discourses by foregrounding empirical research methods and incorporating disciplines that have often been excluded from BHR academic debates and policy spaces.

### **Can we start a new BHR chapter already?**

The core themes converged in a final reflection around the future of BHR research. In a world where voices resonate with power, scholarship transcends academic and geographical boundaries, and critical perspectives are maturing and thriving, the stage is set for a new era of BHR practice and thought.

The Summit's message was unequivocal. Rather than charting a single path forward, the diversification of disciplines, theories, and methods in BHR research and practice must continue. Scholars must carve out space for introspective and critical approaches, whilst placing rights holders' voices at the forefront. This promise was embodied by the participants' commitment to realising the radical and monumental simplicity at the heart of BHR: the protection of every individual's inherent and inalienable dignity and equality, unbounded by distinctions.

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