

# Humanizing the Business: A Legal Analysis on Business and Human Rights Law in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

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**Abstract**— *Whilst economic growth is important for a country to develop, it is also important that the said development is achieved in a humane manner with due recognition given to the rights of people living in that country. Although when the concept of human rights first emerged in history, the prevalent mischief that it sought to remedy was the abuse of political power, the society has now changed following a period of technological evolution, which facilitated the emergence of a new type of power commonly known as economic power wielded by businesses. It has been identified that economic power is as much as dangerous as political power if exercised in an abusive manner. Thus, it is important that the existing legal framework relating to human rights should extend to include the corporate abuse of economic power in order to safeguard the rights of vulnerable humans. Hence, this research was conducted to analyse the existing national and international human rights regimes in order to discover the new developments therein to deal with the predominant human rights issues in the business environment in the 21<sup>st</sup> century following the black letter approach. It was revealed that despite certain issues that are yet to be addressed, both national and international legal systems have developed rapidly during the last decade to address these business and human rights issues. However, the legal system in Sri Lanka appeared to be vastly outdated in addressing these issues despite such issues being evidently prevalent in the country.*

**Keywords**— **Business, Human Rights, Technology, Economic Power, 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

## I. INTRODUCTION

“One of the great ironies of this period in history is that, just as technology remakes our world, the need to maintain the human dimension of our work, and a company's sense of its social responsibility, is growing at an equally rapid pace” (Robinson 2000).

As much as economic growth is important for a country to thrive, it is equally important that each and every member of the society is protected against exploitation, and treated with fair and equitable terms while achieving the said economic growth. In early history, where the concept of human rights first emerged, it was mainly focused on establishing a protective mechanism to safeguard the individuals from unjustifiable and

inequitable acts and practices of their rulers. This objective was achieved by giving various rights and entitlements to human beings and holding their rulers responsible and accountable for potential and actual violations of those rights and entitlements. The earliest reference to this concept could be found in the English charter of Magna Carta which was designed to impose limitations on King's arbitrary power over his subjects. As it appears, starting from that point, this concept has now travelled a long way and moved in many directions pursuing new avenues to safeguard the rights of individuals in various different situations. Thus, the term ‘human rights’ was accordingly coined to refer to this set of rights developed over time to guard the realms of men against the possible exploitations of their States.

In terms of the international aspect of human rights, it could be seen that it was the vast abuse of political power which resulted in prolonged horrors of World War II, that laid the foundation stone in propelling human rights onto the global arena and into the global conscience (Flowers 1993). This journey began with adopting the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) in 1948, soon after the United Nations Organisation was founded, and continued through the enactment of International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) which together formed the ‘International Bill of Human Rights’. Based on the principles enshrined in these international instruments, the worldwide nations strengthened their own human rights regimes.

As aforementioned, the underlying reason behind the need for human rights to safeguard the individuals in both domestic and international levels, was the arbitrary abuse of political power by the rulers and the governments headed by them. The bottom line here is that human rights was a mechanism that was invented to protect the ‘power-less’ from the ‘power-full’. Seventy years ago when the UDHR was drafted, the ‘power-full’ whose actions had the potential of making a drastic impact on the mankind, were mainly the State organs with ‘political power’. Thus, the international human rights arena founded upon the International Bill of Human Rights formulated its objectives mainly on establishing a mechanism to protect the citizens from harmful activities and practices of their States. However, as the time passed, the technological evolution that made the world anew, also paved the way

for the creation of a new type of great power together with a new species of the mighty 'power-full' that is currently making a radical impact on the humankind in the contemporary world. This species is called, 'business entities' with 'economic power'.

It appears that both political power and economic power are equally dangerous if exercised in an abusive manner as both "are instances of control over others" (Thomas 2013). Thus, it is of equal importance to establish a similar mechanism to regulate businesses as well, by setting the boundaries within which they can operate while safeguarding the interests of humans who are directly or indirectly affected by the activities of such businesses. Hence, it is high time that the human rights jurisdiction, which was once formulated to shield the individuals from the abuse of political power, expand its scope to bring the businesses as well within its ambit thereby upholding its sworn duty to protect the 'powerless' individuals in the society, from that of the 'power-full', regardless of what power they possess, whether political or economic. Hence, in the light of the above mentioned factors, this paper focuses on analysing one of the latest emerging trends in human rights law – business and human rights.

## II. METHODOLOGY

This research was conducted as a doctrinal legal research using the black letter approach. Moreover, the international and comparative research methodology was used to analyse the international legal principles and new developments in national legal systems.

## III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### A. *What is Economic Power?*

The term 'economic power' could briefly be defined as the "ability to control or influence the behaviour of others through the deliberate and politically motivated use of economic assets" (Ellen 2009). Moreover, this includes one's ability to resist and preclude the outside pressure and control by making external forces dependant on oneself. The main difference between economic power and political power is that while the former is granted by money, the latter is granted by people who are subject to that political power (Amadeo 2019). However, despite this inherent difference, as iterated, both of these powers involve control over the others thereby making their subjects vulnerable to the effects of the whims and wishes of the wielders. As often stated, economic power is regarded as the prime moving force in today's world. Although economic power could also be possessed by States, for the purpose of this paper, economic power is defined with reference to which is possessed by business enterprises.

### B. *Human Rights Issues in the Business Environment*

The impact of businesses in the human environment mainly occurs on two planes. That means, on the internal plane as well as the external plane. Internal issues relating to human rights mainly affect the labourers. Whereas, external issues primarily affect the general public. However, certain issues could have more or less impact on both of these categories. There could be identified three main internal human rights issues involving abuse or potential abuse of economic power by respective businesses in the contemporary era. These are namely; artificial Intelligence and automation, gig economy, and modern slavery. The main external issues that could be identified as triggered by unethical use of economic power by business enterprises are; undermining privacy by the use of surveillance technology and the impact of businesses on the natural environment. Each of these issues would be analysed as follows.

### C. *Internal Human Rights issues*

1) *Artificial Intelligence and Automation:* The term 'artificial intelligence' refers to "an area of computer science that emphasizes the creation of intelligent machines that work and react like humans" (Techopedia 2019). Whereas 'automation' could be defined as the use of machines or computers to perform a task including a process which was once handled by human beings. Thus, both artificial intelligence and automation are new developments in technology that could be used in businesses to replace their labour force with machines. As observed by Business and Human Rights Resource Centre (2019), this "could fundamentally change the nature of work, resulting in mass job losses and increasing income inequality". Moreover, it is believed that blending machines with humans to work in the same business environment also results in increased competition over efficiency and quality of work and products. Hence, this could also result in adverse work conditions and exploitations of labour for comparatively cheap payments. Thus, it could be seen that rapid growth of the use of artificial intelligence and automation in business has a drastic adverse impact on employment rights of humans.

2) *Gig Economy:* Gig economy is one of the latest trends in the market economy where traditional businesses are being replaced by their technologically advanced versions. According to BBC, the term gig economy is used to refer to "a labour market characterised by the prevalence of short-term contracts or freelance work, as opposed to permanent jobs" (Wilson 2017). Some of the examples of businesses that operate under the principles of this concept include; Deliveroo, Ola Share, as well as, Uber and PickMe in Sri Lanka. As Prassl (2018) points out, gig economy work arrangements have objectified humans

and presented them as a service. This is mainly effected by categorising gig economy workers as independent contractors rather than employees, despite the very nature of their employment. Thus, it is believed that such misclassified work arrangements have resulted in unethical exploitation of labour which often produce shocking results. The classic example is the recently reported case of Don Lane who worked as a courier for the gig economy delivery service called DPD, that collapsed and died of diabetes after being fined by the company for attending a hospital appointment to treat his disease without finding a person to cover for him whilst he was absent. It was also revealed that he had missed several previous appointments as well, due to the fear that he would be fined. At the time of his death he was fifty three years old and was a father of one child. As it appeared, although the company made more than £100 million in profit, which was similar to £20,000 per courier, it refused to provide sick pay or a paid holiday for one of its workers (Booth 2018). Thus, this clearly demonstrates an instance of abuse of economic power by a business enterprise which is unregulated as it belongs to the segment of gig economy. Hence, gig economy could be viewed as another product in the 21st century that violates the human rights of labourers to a great extent.

3) *Modern Slavery*: Although slavery is said to have been abolished decades ago, it is evidenced that there are modern ways of slavery in the 21st century that produce the same unacceptable, immoral result that was once attempted to eradicate from this world. As far as businesses are concerned, slavery is believed to be present in supply chains of multinational, multibillion companies, as well as in the form of commercial sexual exploitation of children, women, as well as vulnerable men. For example, Nike, which is considered to be one of the major global brands in apparel industry was recently accused of exploiting its workers “for excessive hours in high-pressure work environments while not earning enough to meet the basic needs of their children” (Wazir 2001). Thus, the vast economic power possessed by this global brand has enabled it to ‘fly under the radar’ and exploit its workers to maximize the profits. Moreover, companies in Thailand, which account for the world’s third largest seafood production have been accused of trafficking Burmese and Cambodian people and selling and forcing them to work in boats as slaves without any payment. The International Labour Organisation assures that there are at least 24.9 million people in forced labour across the world at any given time. It further states that one fourth of these victims are children under the age of 18. Thus, it could clearly be seen that this unethical business practice has resulted in a mass violation of human rights.

#### *D. External Human Rights Issues*

Apart from the above internal human rights issues which mainly affect the workers who are engaged in the internal business of the particular company, there could be identified several external human rights issues triggered by businesses that mainly affect the community at large. Two of such issues would be discussed as follows.

1) *Use of surveillance technology*: Use of surveillance technology by private companies to gather personal information of users of information and telecommunication technology, and selling those information to States and other entities have posed a great threat to the right to privacy in 21st century. As Privacy International observes; “Surveillance, by its very nature, impacts on personal privacy. Sharing surveillance intelligence with other governments greatly exacerbates the interference with personal privacy. It might not just be your own government that holds sensitive information about you, but potentially many other governments all over the world”. As revealed by Edward Snowden, the former contractor for the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) of the United States of America (USA) in 2013, the National Security Agency of the USA has been collecting the records of private telephone conversations of tens of millions of Americans through the telecommunications company called Verizon and had tapped into nine internet firms, including Facebook, Google, Microsoft and Yahoo, to gather information relating to online communication for the surveillance programme known as Prism (BBC 2019). Thus, the business of collecting personal information using surveillance technology and selling them to State entities and other organisations has raised a major human rights issue in the contemporary era.

2) *Environmental pollution*: Corporate responsibility in environmental pollution has been subjected to widespread discussions in recent times. This is due to the fact that several incidents relating to vast air, land, and water pollution which were directly linked to business activities have raised serious human rights issues throughout history. One of the significant examples to this end is the tragic Bhopal Disaster which killed nearly 4,000 people and injured approximately 558,125 people in India. As per the records, this disaster was caused by a gas leak in one of the plants of the chemical company called Union Carbide India Limited (Dutta 2017).

Another notable environmental issue in the 21st century which is significantly connected to business activities is the climate change also known as global warming. As Business and Human Rights Resource Centre observes (2019); “Climate change is one of the greatest human rights challenges of our time. It has enormous consequences for the rights to life, health, housing and food, and will cause widespread displacement. Climate

change has a disproportionate impact on certain groups, especially the poor and marginalised groups such as women, children, and the elderly". It is believed that carbon and other greenhouse gas emissions in industrial processes have a large impact on accelerating this major environmental issue.

Thus, it appears that in addition to the internal human rights issues in the business environment, there are significant external human rights issues as well, which need addressing. The next part of this paper analyses the existing national and international legal frameworks in order to discover the new developments in human rights law that attempt to provide solutions for the above discussed issues.

#### *E. New Developments in International Law that Address Business and Human Rights Issues*

1) *United Nations' Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights of 2011*: This is a set of guidelines issued by the United Nations Organisation in 2011 to strike the balance between business and human rights. As iterated, in today's business world, companies operate on a global level having their subsidiaries and production plants in multiple countries including poor countries and post conflict countries where the national governments are unable to operate their laws in an effective manner due to the vast economic power wielded by those companies. Thus, taking the advantage of this lacuna companies pay low salaries to their workers below the global poverty line and employ them below the international employment standards. Thus, the Guiding Principles were issued to resolve this issue and thereby prevent the corporate abuse of human rights.

These guidelines provide for a three pillar mechanism to prevent human rights violations by companies. Under the first pillar, it states that governments should pass laws that prevent human rights violations and implement them accordingly. Thus, this pillar imposes the main responsibility on governments. However, the second pillar which states that business enterprises should refrain from violating human rights, imposes the primary responsibility on corporations. This means even if the governments do not comply with their obligations under the first pillar to enact laws, the companies must know their human rights and respect them. The third and final pillar provides for access to remedy. This imposes an obligation on the governments to provide for a judicial or other legitimate mechanism to allow the victims to file complaints regarding the corporate abuse of human rights.

Thus, as it appears, the three pillars of UN Guidelines together provide for a 'complete' mechanism to protect, respect, and remedy the human rights violations in the business environments. However, it is to be noted that these guidelines are not legally binding. Hence,

discussions are currently taking place to draft a legally binding treaty on business activities and human rights.

2) *Protocol of 2014 to the Forced Labour Convention of 1930*: A Convention Concerning Forced or Compulsory Labour (No.29) was adopted by the International Labour Organisation as early as in 1930 for the purpose of eradicating all forms of forced labour regardless of the nature of work. A Protocol to this convention was entered into force in 2014 to strengthen the implementation of the above convention by requiring the State parties "to adopt new measures designed to prevent all forms of forced labour, including trafficking in persons, to protect victims and guarantee them access to justice and compensation" (ILO). Thus, this is an important legally binding instrument in the international arena which attempts to combat modern slavery.

3) *Right to privacy*: Right to privacy is one of the most effective mechanisms to suppress the use of surveillance technology to gather personal information. Article 17 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) expressly states that "no one shall be subjected to arbitrary or unlawful interference with his privacy, family, home or correspondence, nor to unlawful attacks on his honour and reputation and everyone has the right to the protection of the law against such interference or attacks". It was further recognised in the United Nations General Assembly Resolution on the Right to Privacy in the Digital Age of 2018 (U.N. Doc. A/RES/73/179) that "surveillance of digital communications must be consistent with international human rights obligations and States that are parties to the ICCPR must take the necessary steps to adopt laws or other measures as may be necessary to give effect to such rights".

4) *Paris Agreement of 2015*: As iterated, climate change is one of the most significant business and human rights issues relating to environment in the 21st century. Thus, Paris Agreement of 2015 was adopted under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) of 1992 to expressly provide solutions to tackle global warming and other connected issues of climate change. This agreement is the first universally applicable legally binding agreement dealing with climate change and one of its primary objectives is to keep the percentage of global warming below 2 degrees of Celsius by the end of 21st century and take measures to limit the temperature rise to 1.5°C by implementing the recommendations of the Agreement.

Thus, as discussed above, there are several notable new developments in the international arena dealing with both aforementioned internal and external human rights issues in the business environment. Yet, it appears that certain

issues such as artificial intelligence and automation, as well as, gig economy are not effectively dealt with under the international legal framework.

#### F. New Developments in National Laws that Address Business and Human Rights Issues

1) *Modern Slavery*: It appears that several countries in the world have enacted transparency legislations to mandate the companies to publish the measures taken by them to eradicate slavery in their supply chains and thereby enable the consumers make an informed decision regarding the purchase of goods supplied by those companies to the market.

For instance, Transparency in Supply Chains Act of 2010 enacted by the State of California in the USA requires that companies that generate over \$ 100 million per year must comply with the public reporting requirement. Moreover, the Modern Slavery Act of 2015 passed by the UK goes beyond the above requirement and expressly provides for the offences of slavery, servitude, forced or compulsory labour, as well as, human trafficking and make them punishable under the Act. Furthermore, Modern Slavery Act of 2018 of Australia which came into effect in 2019 also mandates certain entities that fulfil the applicability criteria to report on the risks of modern slavery in their operations and supply chains and actions taken to address those risks, and for related purposes. Overall, it could be stated that the UK Act is the most comprehensive and effective law in combatting modern slavery as it goes beyond the transparency requirement in both California and Australian Acts by expressly recognising all forms of modern slavery as penal offences.

2) *Gig Economy*: As reiterated, gig economy is one of the latest trends in the job market which also poses a great threat to the employment rights of the persons engaged in companies that are established under the principles of that concept. This violation of employment rights is caused by classifying these workmen as independent contractors rather than employees thereby denying their inherent employment rights, despite the fact that the very nature of the work performed by them strictly suggests the characteristics of a contract of employment rather than a contract for service. There could be identified several progressive developments in the case law of the UK that attempt to prevent this violation of employment rights in the gig economy. For instance in the cases of *Aslam v. Uber BV* (2016), *Dewhurst v. CitySprint UK Ltd* (2016), and *Pimlico Plumbers Ltd v. Smith* (2017) it was held that certain categories of gig economy workers did not belong to the class of independent contractors but rather they were workers with employment rights. At present, the government in the UK is in the process of drafting a legislation to grant employment rights to gig economy

workers based on the findings of Taylor Review of Modern Employment Practices (Gov.UK 2018).

3) *The Situation in Sri Lanka*: It appears that all the above discussed internal and external human rights issues triggered by businesses are equally available in Sri Lanka. However, the domestic laws in the country appear to be vastly outdated and thereby highly ineffective in addressing those issues relating to corporate abuse of human rights. Although Sri Lanka is a party to most of the prevalent treaties in this area such as the ICCPR, Paris Agreement, and the Protocol of 2014 to the Forced Labour Convention, due to the dualist effect recognised in the case of *Nallaratnam Singarasa v. The Attorney General* (2006), the international conventions signed by the country do not get incorporated into the national law automatically. Thus, the legal system of Sri Lanka remains outdated despite the ratification of new developments in international law owing to this reason. Moreover, there cannot be found any national legislation concerning modern slavery or any case law concerning gig economy.

#### IV. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

21<sup>st</sup> century is a technologically advanced era where businesses operate on a global platform making a large impact on the society. This ability of business enterprises to make a social impact is called the 'economic power'. As it appears, economic power is equally dangerous as political power due to the fact that both are forms of exercising control over the others. In the past, when human rights were developed, the implementation mechanism of which was mainly focused on providing a remedy against the abuse of political power as economic power was not much of a prevalent phenomenon in that society. However, due to the fact that economic power is often regarded as the prime moving force in today's society, the need to expand the human rights jurisdiction to prevent the abuse of economic power is felt significantly.

As it appears, the corporate abuse of human rights takes place in two spheres as both internally and externally. Whilst internal abuse mainly affects the labour force of the particular company, the external abuse affects the society at large. Internal corporate abuse of human rights include the use of artificial intelligence and automation to replace human workers, engaging workers under gig economy contracts, as well as modern slavery. External issues involve the use of surveillance to gather private information and impacting on environmental issues such as climate change which pose a great risk to human rights.

Although there are several new developments in both national and international levels to address these issues legally, certain issues pertaining to artificial intelligence

and automation, and gig economy are not dealt with effectively. With regard to the former, it appears that there is no legal mechanism to address the potential human rights issues neither on the international level, nor on the domestic level. With regard to the latter, there cannot be found any legal binding instrument in the international law that clarifies the ambiguities posed by the modern concept of gig economy. Thus, this lacuna has provided the businesses to use their economic power for their own advantage in a way that it adversely affects the employment rights of the workers. Moreover, although the issues relating to modern slavery are addressed both at the international and national levels of certain countries, statistics show that still a large number of children, women, and vulnerable men are employed as slaves in various different industries and their supply chains. Thus, this evidence poses a significant question to the implementation of those laws.

With regard to Sri Lanka, it is regrettably mentioned that the current legal system in relation to human rights is vastly outdated and does not provide any protection against corporate abuse of human rights. Although, several futile attempts have been made to ratify the international human rights instruments that deal with corporate abuse, due to the dualist status awarded to the legal system by the judiciary, such instruments do not form a part of the domestic law without an enabling legislation enacted by the parliament. Thus, it appears that Sri Lankan human rights regime is lagging far behind in addressing the issues relating to business and human rights.

Thus, by considering above mentioned factors, this study recommends that appropriate measures should be taken by both the international and national bodies which are responsible for the law making, in order to address the pointed out loopholes in the area of business and human rights to cope with the rapid growth of economic power and protect the individuals from abuses of it simultaneously.

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