

Human Rights Centre Clinic

Business and Human Rights Unit

Partner: UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)

About

The Business and Human Rights Unit ([BHRU](#)) is a specialised unit launching within the Human Rights Centre Clinic launched in the 2025-26 academic year. It marks a collaboration between the Clinic and the Essex Business and Human Rights Project ([EBHR](#)). The BHRU builds on two decades of business and human rights scholarship and education expertise at Essex Human Rights Centre and Essex Law School.

The BHRU is led by [Dr Anil Yilmaz](#) and supported by [Dr Jessica Lawrence](#).

Dr Anil Yilmaz directs the EBHR. She teaches and researches in the fields of business and human rights and international investment law. For over a decade, she led numerous projects involving students and academics that aimed to advance business accountability for human rights and environmental harms.

Dr Jessica Lawrence's research focuses on issues relating to international economic integration, including trade, investment and human rights. She has extensive experience in providing research and training for governmental and non-governmental organisations on issues related to trade and investment agreements and their impact on social policy goals.

Project overview

BHRU participants will work with academic supervisors and partner organisations to conduct research and develop outputs that support the advancement of human rights and environmental protection in the context of business operations across the globe. Students will have the opportunity to work on a range of projects, including conducting investigative research on corporate human rights reporting and carrying out background research on potential court claims for remediation of corporate harms. The work will allow students to develop their understanding of human rights challenges in the world of corporations, develop skills in assessing facts and determining their pertinence to a given human rights issue, identifying possible legal pathways to hold corporations accountable, and understand practical challenges involved in tackling human rights and environmental harm caused by business activity. Students will strengthen

their research and writing skills while working on practical business and human rights issues. The expected time commitment for BHRU members is 4-6 hours per week.

In 2026-27, we are partnering with the UN Refugee Agency ([UNHCR](#)) to support its work on how business activities impact refugee protection and how existing legal frameworks on business and human rights might apply to the refugee-business nexus.

Background

UNHCR leads the protection of people forced to flee conflict and persecution, and those that are left stateless. It operates in 122 countries. For the past 75 years, it has been safeguarding the rights of refugees and providing protection and assistance to millions of forcibly displaced and stateless people. UNHCR's Private Sector Engagement Strategy recognises that businesses are vital actors in addressing humanitarian crises. Businesses can play an important role in supporting refugee access to critical products and services. However, business practices may also undermine the rights of refugees, with particularly complex business and human rights issues arising in contexts of conflict and displacement.

Project output

The BHRU team will research and analyse how companies address human rights risks/risks affecting refugees in their reporting. The team will conduct an in-depth analysis of whether and how businesses from selected key sectors address refugee rights in their human rights due diligence processes and reporting. The focus sectors will be selected in consultation with the UNHCR team. The team will review publicly available information to assess how businesses assess, identify and report human rights risks affecting refugees and other forcibly displaced people; examine whether corporate HRDD includes mechanisms for identifying particularly vulnerable groups; and analyse how companies address issues such as forced labour, recruitment practices, working conditions, discrimination, access to remedy and risks within supply chains. The team will produce a report for the UNHCR's Private Sector Partnerships Team.

The team will also submit a 1,000-word blog post in May 2027.

Timeline

Phase 1: November – December 2026:

- Learning about business and human rights frameworks and understanding the project.
- In-depth review of the UNHCR's existing work on refugee rights and business.
- Attending one Zoom meeting with the UNHCR team and regular meetings with the supervisors to plan the research.
- Identifying the focus sectors for the research.

Phase 2: January – March 2027:

- Literature review of refugee rights and business.
- In-depth analysis of selected corporate reports and published materials on HRDD.
- Start drafting the report.

Phase 3: April – May 2027:

- Finalise the report.
- Blog post about the main findings of the project.
- Presentation of research findings to the partner organisation.

Initial reading

- [United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights](#)
- Jerome Nhan, Safeguarding Refugee Rights in Business: <https://www.unhcr.org/blogs/safeguarding-refugee-rights-in-business/> Samentha Goethals, Joe Bardwell, Mariam Bhacker And Bahaa Ezzelarab, “[Business Human Rights Responsibility for Refugees and Migrant Workers: Turning Policies into Practice in the Middle East](#)” Business and Human Rights Journal, 2 (2017), pp. 335–342.

Focal point

- Jerome Nhan, Senior Private Partnerships Officer, UNHCR, nhan@unhcr.org