

Columbia's Marcela Manubens On Corporate Responsibility and Human Rights

Interview by Elizabeth Howard

Marcela Manubens doesn't walk into a room; she usually sprints. As an individual who is center stage in raising issues about human rights to the business community, it is clear that there are just too few hours in the day for her. In her capacity as vice president for human rights at Phillips-Van Heusen Corporation, PVH, Marcela seems to always be on the phone with factories somewhere across the globe, helping them solve conflicts regarding their workers rights. For the past two years, Marcela has also been teaching a graduate course on human rights and business in developing countries with the Center's executive director. "We need corporate leaders who are not afraid to give some priority to human rights considerations," she says. Marcela has been an instructor on human rights training and awareness to vendors, factories and agents in many countries around the world.

As vice president for human rights, Marcela's function is two-fold. The first is external: to work on the ground, worldwide, monitoring factory compliance with the Phillips-Van Heusen code of corporate conduct. The second is internal: to build and maintain a corporate culture that supports PVH's values throughout the company. "Our code of conduct, operations, and company culture embody a strong commitment to promoting decent workplace conditions for the people who make our products," she says.

In class, Marcela explains that her job is to help employees understand that PVH supports the underlying principles of human rights, and that all people are entitled to dignity, respect, and common basic standards of treatment. "All employees are educated on the principles of our code of conduct, and the specific issues related to compliance with human rights and working conditions in any factory," she says. "These range from fire safety and living conditions in dormitories, to wages, hours of work and freedom of association."

Marcela represents the company in organizations such as the Fair Labor Association, and she develops and implements standard operating procedures, as well as the compliance program. A significant part of the monitoring program is to engage the vendor or factory in positive change, and to educate them on the issues at hand.

"The human rights compliance auditor who evaluates the factory is simply a fact-finder," Marcela tells her students, pointing out that the PVH compliance program and the audit procedures are quite comprehensive. Once the auditor has discovered a potential problem, the findings are reported to the human rights regional officer who, after conducting a thorough, independent review, forwards the report and a recommendation to the human rights approval committee.

This committee, comprised of three executives, including Marcela, makes the final decision on whether or not PVH will work with the factory in question. "If a factory that has not been



Marcela Manubens, center, with colleagues while visiting New Delhi, India. File Photo

approved comes to us and says, 'Look, we weren't educated on this; we didn't know that this was important,' we tell them exactly what improvements must be implemented to meet our standards," she says.

When the students ask why are there so few corporations out there doing what PVH is doing, Marcela replies that many companies don't dare speak out on human rights for fear of the media. When the consumers and the media penalize even companies making sincere and meaningful efforts to improve conditions for workers, she says, it is hard to convince companies to get involved.

Phillips-Van Heusen felt the brunt of the media ten years ago when it faced a labor issue in a factory in Guatemala. In that case, there was significant disagreement between PVH management and a human rights organization about prevailing conditions in the factories, Marcela says.

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A non-governmental organization, NGO, had claimed the factories were preventing workers from unionizing. PVH, on the other hand, claimed that these factories maintained excellent conditions for workers. Bruce Klatsky, CEO of PVH, who is on the Board of Human Rights Watch and committed to human rights, suggested inviting Human Rights Watch to make their own assessment of the situation at these factories. Human Rights Watch undertook two audits. The first time, conditions were mostly in line with what PVH had reported. The second time, the review disclosed problems in the factory.

"PVH responded positively," Marcela recalls. "Our chairman said: 'If this is true, and the workers want to organize, they have the right to organize.'"

Marcela argues that the media should have given the company more credit for being able to solve a complex conflict through dialogue. The media has been very good at disclosing workplace injustices and raising public awareness, but they

have neglected to report the progress. "Only when we achieve a critical mass, i.e., a significant number of companies upholding the same values and compliance efforts, will we see an authentic positive impact in the lives of workers around the world. "We need recognition and encouragement for the companies that are making honest efforts," Marcela says.

NGOs such as Human Rights Watch, Greenpeace, and Amnesty International play an important part in helping corporations to get involved. Multinationals even reach out to them. Although some corporations just engage in dialogue to be politically correct, Marcela says, the NGOs should take requests for dialogue at face value.

Her presence at Columbia enables students to hear and debate with an executive first hand. "The trend is for more executives of the corporations to be genuinely involved in that dialogue," she says. "Society is looking for moral leadership from CEOs, presidents, and chairmen of corporations. You can no longer just run your operations based on the bottom line. Take a look at corporate contributions. No one talks about charity any more. Instead, people talk about social commitment, community involvement, and socially responsible corporate performance. You don't just write a check, you get involved."

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At the end of the two-week event, many expressed the feeling that racism was a fundamental issue that should be addressed in every sector. And a more contentious, but equally productive, debate ensued regarding the inclusion of gay and lesbian rights within the larger struggle for rights protection.

Next Steps for the Colloquium

We believe that the Colloquium has the potential to establish Brazil as an important Southern voice for human rights. Many participants said they felt a sense of empowerment from participating in a South-led process, which generated a great deal of energy and enthusiasm. Perhaps most remarkable was the commitment and confidence that this was the beginning of something very new on the part of all involved.

Recently, a grant of nearly \$2 million dollars from the UN Foundation was given in part to support the Annual Colloquium as well as link University-based human rights programs in the South. A number of advocate alumni from Africa will participate in a three day conference to be held during the May 2002 Colloquium, and we hope that this will provide another opportunity to build on this process.

Holly Bartling is the Director of Training at the Center for the Study of Human Rights.