

## **Trade Unionsim, Asymmetrical Relations and Diverse Processes of Enslavement in Selected Organizations in Nigeria**

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**Abstract:** The paper examines the intersections of trade unionism, asymmetrical power and modern enslavement to the oil and gas industry of Nigeria in the three oil and gas companies of strategic importance, i.e., Indorama Eleme Chemicals Limited (IECL), Dangote Refinery and Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC). In the formal organisations, the research investigates the character of labour flexibilisation, the reduced collective institutions and the dependency tactics as a control mechanism by the managerial control are exploitative employment relations based on the Marxist theory of labour exploitation and reliance on theory of power. It is a qualitative multiple-case study design that is analysed on the basis of secondary data, such as judicial decisions, compliance and appraisal reports, international labour documentation that were published from the year 2020-2025. The thematic analysis reveals that massive casualization and decentralization of the workforce, and low unionization increase power inequality and enable the application of coercive types of labour, which align with internationally defined signs of modern enslavement. The weak regulatory framework and job insecurity are a serious crippler to the ability to fight the issue of exploitation, whereas trade unions have become a place of resistance. The paper contributes to the literature on industrial relations by theorising the idea of modern slavery as a continuum of coercive labour relations internalised to extractive capitalism in the Global South and initiating the consequences of the labour regulation, union policy and the agendas of decent work..

**Keywords:** Trade unionism, power asymmetry, labour exploitation, modern slavery, oil and gas industry, Nigeria.

### **Introduction**

Trade unionism has been documented as an important institutional mechanism of protecting rights of employees, enhancing collective bargain besides balancing the labour exploitation in capitalistic economies. They are also relevant to Nigeria in particular, where the oil and gas sector occupies the leading position in the economic history of the nation with its export turnover and fiscal revenues [11]. The sectoral unions, such as the Nigeria Union of Petroleum and Natural Gas Workers (NUPENG) and the Petroleum and Natural Gas Senior Staff Association of Nigeria (PENGASSAN) have been traditional negotiators of the wages, occupational safety and job security. However, due to the neoliberal reforms and cross-border structural adjustment programs of 1980s, there have been radical changes in the labour relations within the industry.

The processes of globalization and liberation of the markets have intensified casualization, outsourcing and subcontracting, eroded the institutions of collective bargaining and further led to unbalanced power distribution between the employer and the employee. Empirical and comparative studies have shown that such processes are especially high in the extractive industries,

where the capital concentration, regulatory laxity, and absence of alternative sources of employment make the workers more vulnerable to exploitation [2], [7]. These circumstances have contributed to the employment regimes in the Oil and Gas industry in Nigeria which is characterised by precarious contracts, unsafe working environment and systemic preventive of collective voice.

The modern slavery issues go hand-in-hand with these processes. The International Labour Organization defines the concept of modern slavery as the forced labour, compelled employment, and exploitative actions that are perpetuated by the economic reliance rather than the legal ownership [8]. Nigeria is one of those countries, which have been most severely struck by the world practices [13]. The expatriate labour in the oil sector experiences long-term contractual work, wage insecurity, dangerous work environment and discouragement of trade union membership as some of the internationally recognized indications of forced and coerced labour.

Even with the legal provisions such as the Trade Unions Act, there is the labour exploitation due to the bad enforcement and the power of the employers plus the loss of union power. This paper discusses these dynamics through a critical review of labour relations in three organisations of strategic importance namely; Indorama Eleme Chemicals Limited (IECL), Dangote Refinery and Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC) in an endeavour to elucidate the interplay between trade unionism and asymmetrical power relations and contemporary enslavement in the Oil and Gas industry in Nigeria.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical basis prepared on the two approaches that are complementary in this paper is Marxist labour theory of exploitation and the power-dependence theory. All these frameworks represent a powerful analytic prism by which they can appreciate structural inequality, the regulation of labour and dependency at the workplaces of capitalism and, in particular, at resource-extractive workplaces.

### The Marxist Labour Theory of Exploitation.

One of the industrial relations approaches that has been conceptualised is the Marxist labour theory, which is the place where natural fight between the capitalists and the wage earners would occur. Such extraction of surplus value enables exploitation, and this is facilitated by the fact that the employers control the labour processes and terms of employment besides the work organization [9]. This exploitation has been explained in the modern capitalist society as precarious contracts, working harder and unemployment insecurity rather than coercion.

Political economy demonstrates that the neoliberal globalization has augmented such forces in the Global South through the boost of outsourcing, casualization of the labour market, and fragmentation of the latter [1], [7]. Through these kinds of strategies, the capital is able to drain out excess and undermine worker unity and resistance in extractive business where the greatest challenge is to lower the costs and reap the benefits by arbitrating between the regulatory regimes. The exploitative employment relations are also established through the strategic marginalization of the unions and lenient labour inspection rules in the oil sector in Nigeria [10].

### Power-Dependence Theory

The power-dependence theory is the invention of Emerson that explains power as a type of unequal dependency of actors. Employment relations workers are also susceptible to wage and job security that grant the employer the structural power but the primary instrument to balance this power is a collective organization [3], [4].

The empirical analysis of labour demonstrates that there is no bargaining power, and labour is more dependent particularly in extractive and industrial sectors of labour because of high unemployment, outsourcing, and contractual insecurity [12], [6]. The oil sector of Nigeria has a disjointed system of employment including permanent, contract and outsourced employees that

weaken unity and reinforce the position of managers. The power-dependence interpretation augments the Marxist theory that the theory illuminates the microprocesses through which the structural exploitation in terms of organization is recreated.

### **3. Conceptual Review**

#### **Trade Unionism**

The group institutions include trade unions, whose establishment is meant to protect the workers interests through bargaining, representing and advocacy [5]. Unions have traditionally opposed colonial and post-colonial exploitation in Nigeria, however, has been weakened due to political intervention, deregulation of the labour market, or a rise in precarious employment [10]. The decline in the union density has adverse effects on the contract workers, as they might lack formal structures of bargaining [2].

#### **Asymmetrical Power Relations.**

Asymmetrical power relations imply that there is the prevailing domination in the bargaining power between the employers and workers which is further promoted by unemployment, non-security in the contract, and the right of the managers to hire and fire [12]. These asymmetries are compounded by the intensity of capital and absence of alternative jobs in extractive industries and this provides the management to impose the process of negotiations and suppress the collective voice [6].

#### **The Modern Workplace Enslavement.**

The principle of modern workplace enslavement is used in the context of contemporary labour market that characterises the practice of coercive labour schemes of denying autonomy without legal ownership in the form of forced overtime, denial of payment, hazardous working conditions and even termination [8]. These are practices rooted on economic reliance and inability of the institutions as opposed to chattel slavery. Some of the examples of this form of enslavement include the long process of casualization of labour, hazardous working conditions and suppression of labour unions in the oil sector in Nigeria [13].

### **4. Empirical Literature Review.**

As the empirical evidence continuously demonstrates, the laxity in the enforcement of the regulatory regulations, the division of the employment relations, and the declining union bargaining power are invariably the contributing factors to the perpetuated labour exploitation in the Nigeria Oil and Gas industry. The analysis of the studies on African extractive industries indicates that the two factors that are most prone to exploitation and lack of collective bargaining coverage are outsourcing and contract labour [7], [6]. Low bargaining coordination has also been given by macro level studies, which point out to low wages, poor safety and labour insecurity [2].

The institutional evidence of contract labour inspection and compliance tests support the findings of these results because they indicate that workers on contract and outsourcing are disproportionately vulnerable to occupational hazards and job insecurity [8]. The overall evidence of the empirical literature indicates the fact that asymmetrical relations of power in Oil and Gas industry in Nigeria are never casual but structural, they reproduce the regimes of exploitation and enslavement in labour market.

### **Methodology**

The study applies a qualitative multiple-case research design based on secondary sources so that it may align with future research on the subject of industrial relations, which has the predominating emphasis on theoretically motivated research on power dynamics, regulation and employment relations across different political economies. The phenomenon of an agglomeration of asymmetrical power relations and labour exploitation is the phenomenon which a qualitative approach is specifically effective in studying because these phenomena are inculcated in the

institutional practices, regulatory frameworks, and organizational action plans, which are not adequately measured by pure quantitative indicators. A comparison by analytics can be drawn between the firms with different ownership and governance schemes because the multi-case studies are made which supports the explanatory profundity in comparison to the statistical generalization. The relying on secondary data, i.e. judicial decisions, compliance reports, and international labour audit, is methodologically sound given the risks of retaliation against the workers in extractive industries that have been reported on, it is also consistent with the practice of qualitative research that is established in high-risk labour areas. Thematic analysis associates the trends of the empirical findings to the general discourse of labour market in terms of union decline, labour precariousness and coercive employment relations and adds to the general discussion of power, regulation and employment relations in the Global South through a Marxist approach to labour theory and a power-dependence theory of labour.

### Research Design

It is a qualitative research design that is a multiple case study to examine the trade unionism, asymmetrical power relations and modern enslavement processes in the Oil and Gas industry of Nigeria. Qualitative methodology is appropriate because the study will focus on finding meanings, structures, and power relations behind labour relations and not the quantification of the variables. The case study approach allows analysing detailed and contextualized based on the complex social phenomena in particular organizational and institutional conditions [15].

This research is interpretivist based in which, the creation and continuation of exploitation and dependency is founded on the institutional practices, regulatory failures, as well as on the organizational power relations.

### Analytical Rationalization of the Case.

The current research paper rests on three organizations that are strategically significant in the oil and petrochemical business of Nigeria i.e. Indorama Eleme Chemicals Limited (IECL), Dangote Refinery and Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC). The cases have been chosen on a selective basis as they are representative of diversity in the ownership structure, the size of the company, and position in the extractive value chain but with recorded experience of labour conflict, casualization and investigation by the government. These two together form analytical full-bodied contexts on how the trade unionism would operate in the condition of asymmetrical power relations.

The possibilities of trade unions to be different according to the organizational settings in the cases. The existence of the unions can be seen to be less in the environment with high levels of subcontracting and high rates of growth and the existence of the unions is seen to be more formal in the long running operations but with less bargaining power. Despite all these, it is evident in all the instances that there are the persistence asymmetries in labour-management relations (in employment insecurity, discretionary management prerogative and restricted collective voice).

Such unequal relations constitute the diverse, but associated processes of contemporary labour enslavement. Even though the manifestation forms vary with the contexts of different organizations i.e. process of long-term casualization, occupational risk exposure, economic coercion and dependency as a method of compliance, the principle mechanism is identical workers are structurally dependent on the job within the settings which lack alternative choices. The comparative analysis between nations, therefore, indicates that present-day enslavement within the oil sector in Nigeria is not the firm-based, but sectoral-based and created by general trends of flexibilisation of labour, labour less bargaining power and the lax regulation.

### Data Sources and Collection

Only secondary evidence that was collected from the year 2020- 2025 was used in the analysis. Such an approach is also quite justified since it is extremely unsafe to aim retaliation at the workers,

who work in the Oil and Gas industry and the ethical concern of primary information gathering in the strained workplace setting. Access to secondary data should not be an issue, but a methodological choice because evidence based on documents will be easier to study legally verifiable labour practices without the necessity to confront any ethical issue of provoking testimony among employees working in a high-risk and retaliatory employment context.

Data sources include:

- a) National Industrial Court of Nigeria Judicial rulings.
- b) Reports of the compliance and appraisal of international monitoring agencies (e.g. labour and accountability institutions).
- c) International labour statements with the forced labour and employment practice indicators.
- d) Peer-reviewed journal articles on peer-reviewed journal articles on trade unionism and labour exploitation.
- e) Official documents accessible to the organizational ones.

Selection criteria were the credibility, relevance and correspondence of secondary data with the theoretical framework of the study.

#### Data Analysis Technique

The data were analysed through the thematic analysis, according to the appropriate qualitative procedures. The analysis involved:

1. Acquaintance with documents through re-reading.
2. Open coding in order to develop recurring concepts that relate to the dynamics of exploitation, dependency and union.
3. Axial coding to group codes into broader themes which served the purpose of the study.
4. Theoretic explanation of the Marxist labour theory and the power-dependence theory.

The key themes in the analysis included: casualization, the repression of unions, control of dependency, exposure to occupational risks and failure of regulation. The theory has informed this thematic approach by hypothesizing that there was a systematic relationship between empirical evidence, structural and relational explanations of exploitation.

#### Validity and Reliability (Trustworthiness)

To ensure that the study was more credible a variety of schemes were adopted:

- i) Data triangulation based on legal, institutional and scholarly sources.
- ii) Marxist and power dependence theory triangulation.
- iii) Data process of the selected information and analysis is described in a clear manner.

#### Ethical Considerations

The ethical consideration led to the research design. Only the use of secondary data assisted in skipping the possibilities of injuries, retaliation or exposing the workers. The sources were all easily available and used in this manner. The article is not sensational and shows the outcomes in a critical manner; it is also aware of the socio-economic susceptibility of the victimized employees.

#### Limitations of the Study

The researchers also lack because they employ secondary data which may not be sufficient to guide them to get a comprehensive picture of the imagination of the workers and informal work practices. Besides, internal organizational documents were secret. Despite these weaknesses, official institutional and judicial resources are used in order to provide sufficient richness to the meaning of structural exploitation and power relations within the sector.

## Findings

The information is derived through interpretative thematic analysis of documentaries materials rather than through direct observation of the workers. As shown in the analysis, there are four intertwined themes that outline how oil sector exploitation of labour is brought about and sustained in Nigeria. These themes cut across these three case organizations and present patterns based on structure rather than a particular managerial to misbehave.

**Flexibility and Unstable Work Relations** Flexibility is federalized.

The other important finding is that, institutionalization of casual and contract employment is one of the main labour strategies. In the situations, a high percentage of the workforce is in short term or rolling contracts that tend to be in the long term and they are not transformed to permanent employment. This kind of arrangement leads to long-term labour market insecurity, low access to benefits, and low bargaining by the workers.

The record of fact is that the contract workers perform some of the main operation activities as permanent employees but under poor working conditions, which is an indication of the unequal evaluation of labour. This fragmented labour force shatters unity of identity and gives employers the opportunity to make surplus value by reducing the labour cost and labour that is more replaceable. The job insecurity is thus a structural control and not a short term adjustment policy.

**Union Marginalization and weak Collective Voice.**

The second significant finding is institutional marginalization of trade unions. The legal and compliance documents have recurrent and controversial matters in terms of union recognition and sluggish negotiations and restriction of the union activities. In several occasions, the management had a leeway concerning entry into the working places, determination of bargaining units, and communication with employees representatives.

These were significant drawbacks to collective voice particularly to contract and outsourced workers who were either prohibited to join the union or very much dissuaded to do so. The fact that the collective bargaining power was taken away further consolidated the dependence of the workers to the management to renew their contracts and get their jobs back and thus made the dynamic of power asymmetry even more dominant in the organizations.

**Managerial Control as Dependency.**

The findings reveal that labour control in the industry is also centred on economic dependence. The oil sector and its high employment rate makes workers even more dependent on the working conditions in the oil sector since it has low unemployment in the region, low alternative livelihoods and low economic marginalization in the region. This dependency is exploited by the management by threatening to cancel the contract, penalty and discrimination in applying work rules.

It is a subtle means of control, which is based on dependency but does not coerce, still. The threat of losing the job does not allow the resistance, reporting the safety violations, and the union activity. Relational power is thus exercised in an illegitimate way by using valuable resources, continuity of employment and income rather than using legitimate way that is by direct force.

**Professional Hazardous and Slave-like Working Conditions.**

The other observation is that there is the slavery-like labour practice particularly in the instance of non permanent employees. Jurisdictional reports and reports of non-compliance report that they have excessive working hours, absence of proper working safety facilities, wages delays or denials, and working in a dangerous working environment in the absence of proper protecting gears.

Such conditions are in line with the internationally recognized indicators of the current forced labour that are restricted freedom of choice, economic threats, and vulnerability. Even though

workers are not legally slaves, there is a lack of choice, and an ability to earn a living, which depends on a job, which causes the conditions similar to the modern-day variant of the enslavement.

#### Cross-Case Patterns

The three organisations share same labour control strategies which are; despite the differences in the corporate ownership structure and the corporate size.

- 1) Reliance on contingent employment relations,
- b) Working capital, labour force division.
- c) Limited group delegation, and
- d) And there is misuse of economic dependence.

This intersection shows that exploitation is structural and sectoral in nature as defined by the political economy of Nigeria, regulatory gaps and extractive capitalism throughout the globe as compared to firm specific managerial culture.

#### Summary of Findings

The findings indicate that the Oil and Gas industry of Nigeria continues to engage in labour exploitation through the inter-relation techniques of casualization, subduing trade unions, dependency type of control and enslavement in the form of the working conditions. They are reinforcing processes and they inoculate an imbalanced power relationship within the practice of the organization and within the institutional environment.

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this paper was to examine the meeting point between trade unionism and the asymmetrical power relations in contemporary processes of enslavement in the Oil and Gas industry of Nigeria. The findings reveal that labour exploitation does not occur as a single or isolated incidence but is deeply embedded in terms of organizational culture, and the political economy of extractive capitalism in general. The Marxist labour theory and the power-dependence theory are merged in this paper to add value to the knowledge of reproduction of exploitation by macro-structural and micro-relational processes. The findings suggest that the trade unions still have a formally recognised name, but substantially their capability to avert labour exploitation has declined significantly. This confirms past studies as it links neoliberal restructuring, flexibilisation of the labour market to the decline of union strength in the Global South [2], [10]. The sidelining of unions in the cases being considered was not executed to a blatant unlawfulness but instead done by delay in the procedure, unfair precedence, and denying the contract workers a significant voice.

Marxist terminology, akin to this diminution in collective organisation, is handy in facilitating the excess extraction through disorganizing the solidarity of workers as well as lowering the cost of reproduction through labour. The paper continues to state that union erosion is also a form of discipline strategy that gets firm among the workers to obey the union due to fear of being laid off and not because they are repressed. One can find this finding subtle in the Marxist classicism in that it demonstrates the increasing reliance of modern exploitation on institutional and contractual instruments rather than applied coercion. Following the power-dependence theory, the power of the labour-management relations is grounded in the unequal dependency and not grounded on the formal power [3], [4]. This reliance of the workers on the wages where the unemployment level is bigger, and the replacements of livelihood are the smallest means enhances the influencing power of the managers and leads to the subtle but working sources of control. The threat of non-renewal of contracts, inequality in treating the staff members, and arbitrary use of the regulations became the primary method of control.

The paper is a contribution to the field of literature related to industrial relations due to the fact

that it empirically illustrates that dependency works as a structural precondition, and not an individual disposition in the extractive economies. Further dependency asymmetries are instilled by the permanent versus contract segregation of the workforce which is aligned with comparative outcome in other resource based economies [6]. These processes indicate that power inequality is formed and reinforced as an employment design and not a natural phenomenon in a market. The key worth of this work is that it manages to conceptualize the contemporary enslavement as coercive labour relations as a continuum and not as an exception and a criminal contingency. The mentioned circumstances that qualify as enslavement, i.e. the prolonged deficiency of security, insecure working environments with no apt and suitable actions, anomalies in wages, and the limited representation are consistent with the internationally-defined, forced labour indicators [8]. The paper goes further than present literature by locating the circumstances within the framework of the normal organizational activities of mainstream oil firms and not within the realms of the informal or criminal sectors. It is a criticism of the narrow definitions of the modern slavery that only focus on the issues of trafficking or unlawful detention. Instead, the findings are in line with the emerging research that characterizes modern slavery in legalized forms of employment systems of extreme dependent and regulative inefficiency [14].

The incorporation of the Marxist theory of labour with the dependence theory of power brings about the richness of the analysis since it offers a connection between the structural and relation concepts of exploitation. The Marxist theory justifies the existence of exploitation, both because of the need to accumulate capital and the commodification of labour and the power-dependence theory of how it can take place in the day-in day-out operations of organizations. This type of theoretical synthesis contributes to the literature of industrial relations because it demonstrates that exploitation in contemporary extractive industries is reproduced in a stratified manner: structural inequality, contractual insecurity and relational dependency. These results thus surpass the dichotomous definitions of coercion versus consent and prove the essence of modern day enslavement by limited options in the officially legalized systems of employment. The implications of the study to the industrial relations theory are far-reaching in the sense that it foreshadows the modern enslavement as a central problem of the modern employment relations rather than a fringe problem of human rights. It suggests the fact that the drop in the union density and flexibility of labour market should not only be seen as reforms that were necessary to maintain the efficiency but as the process that enables the existence of coercive labour regimes.

On the policy front, the findings allude to the limitations of the formal labour rights poorly enforced. Increased reach of the unions to the contract workers, the implementation of the occupational safety laws and restriction subcontracting play a significant role in ensuring dependency-based exploitation is eliminated. The protections provided by laws alone are unlikely to be able to disrupt the power asymmetries that are created, unless some action is taken concerning the systemic drivers themselves. Generally, the discussion indicates that the relationship of undermined trade unionism, disequilibrium of power relations, and the labour control by means of dependency are the factors, which sustain labour exploitation in the Oil and Gas industry in Nigeria. The Marxist and power-dependence approaches also serve to add really important insights in terms of the study offering a theoretically informed explanation of modern-day enslavement as a natural consequence of extractive labour regimes in the Global South.

## **Conclusion**

The paper has addressed the intersections of trade unionism, asymmetrical power relations and modern day enslavement practices in oil and gas industry in Nigeria using qualitative multiple-case study approach. The findings demonstrate that the labour exploitation in the business is not the consequence of the isolated managerial misconduct, it is the structural feature of employment relations, which is established by the process of neoliberal restructuring, regulatory laxity and extractive capitalism. The Marxist labour theory combined with the power-dependence theory in the research indicates that exploitation is a stratified form. Facilitating excess extraction at the structural level occurs via the rife casualization, outsourcing and fragmentation of the workforce.

At the relational level, economic dependency of workers, which is enhanced by high unemployment and lack of alternative strategies to make a living, can be used by employers to silence the collective voice and to relax into the norm of coercive labour to earn their living. All these mechanisms combined make employment conditions comply with the internationally recognized standards of modern enslavement even in the officially legal organizing framework. The work has ramifications in industrial relation sphere since it redefines modern day slavery as extension of coercive labour relations in the mainstream extractive industries and not an exception that only occurs in the informal or rather unregulated sectors. It also extends the points of the fall of unions by demonstrating how dependent institutions of collective action enable dependency-based power to be applied and power disequilibrium to be solidified in the Global South. The outcomes provided to the policy-makers indicate the ineffectiveness of formal labour protection in the view of inefficient enforcement of laws and comprehensive collective representation. The cycle of exploitation should be broken by using the assistance of the strengthening of the union access to the contract workers, regulation of subcontracting, and the application of the occupational safety standards. Without the focus on such structural drivers, therefore, the efforts to promote decent work and sustainable development within the Oil and Gas industry in Nigeria have a very thin chance of succeeding.

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