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## EXPLORING ASYMMETRICAL RELATIONS AND DIVERSE PROCESSES OF ENSLAVEMENT IN THE OIL AND GAS INDUSTRY IN NIGERIA

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### Abstract

The oil and gas sector is at the core of the political economy in Nigeria, but it is characterized by a deep set of structural inequalities that define labour relations and working conditions. This article comprehensively reviews the asymmetrical power relations theoretically and the various processes by which enslavement-like labour conditions are created and maintained within the sector. The paper relies on modern literature in political economy, unfree labour theory, and analysis of state-corporate power to analyse the intersectionality between global production networks, labour contracting regimes and weak regulatory governance to limit the agency of workers. The review shows that outsourcing, contractualisation and casualisation are practices that institutionalize the power imbalances and legitimize economic coercion, job insecurity and limited choice. It argues that these inherent conditions and contradictions are not merely incidental but are deliberately crafted and structurally embedded in extractive capitalism and reinforced by state-corporate alliances and regulatory capture. The article adds to discussions surrounding modern slavery and labour governance through the conceptualisation of enslavement as a modern, systemic process in legally constituted industries and implications to labour rights and development in resource-dependent economies.

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### Introduction

Oil and gas sector is at the centre of political economy in Nigeria and was one of most strategic sectors that dictate state revenues, global integration and labour relations. Nigeria is the biggest oil producer in Africa and obtains a significant share of its export revenues and government income out of the petroleum work, so the sector is essential in the national development planning [1]. In addition to its macroeconomic significance the oil and gas industry has a direct and indirect effect on thousands of workers in terms of multinational corporations, subcontractors and host-community labour arrangements. Nonetheless, in spite of economic importance, the industry has been traditionally marked with intense structural inequality, unequal relationships of power, and disputable labour practices.

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The politics of labour relations in the oil and gas industry of Nigeria are defined by multifaceted relationships between multinational oil corporations, the Nigerian state, labour contractors, and local populations. Such relationships can hardly be equal. Rather, they are integrated into international production networks that focus on accumulation of capital at the expense of labour needs, especially those of casual and contract workers as well as community-based workers [2]. The prevalence of multinational companies, the laxity of regulatory authorities, and high unemployment have led to the situation when the bargaining power of workers is often low, and coercive employment terms are made. Labour contracting and outsourcing is another way in which asymmetrical power relations in the oil and gas industry are strengthened. The industry has also seen a growing dependency on third-party labour contractors, short-term contracts, and informal employment arrangements over the last 20 years. Such practices push the risk back on the corporations and compromise employment and workplace security and collective bargaining [3]. When applied to the Nigerian setting, these arrangements have a disproportionate impact on both the local and migrant workers who often lack formal employment benefits regardless of the fact that they carry out essential operational duties.

In this scenario, researchers and international bodies have been raised on issues of labour conditions that are closer to the modern equivalents of enslavement. Although they are not directly comparable to historical chattel slavery, the characteristics of such conditions are economic coercion, limited mobility, dependence, and the lack of real alternatives to exploitative labour [4]. These dynamics can be observed in the oil and gas industry in Nigeria in the form of debt-bonded labour, forced overtime, the threat of firing employees without a due process, and the deployment of security forces to curb labour opposition in certain working areas [5].

The continued existence of such conditions cannot be explained only in the terms of particular companies. Instead they are indicative of larger structural processes of state-corporate coalition, regulatory capture and extractive revenues being placed over labour rights. The Nigerian state is a dual regulator and economic beneficiary of oil production, which tends to undermine the readiness or ability to implement the labour standards in an effective manner [6]. This contradiction in structure also helps create a setting where exploitative labour practices are accepted as a normal and hardly punishable entity.

The idea of enslavement in this article is thus discussed in an analytical, but not a rhetorical way. It denotes the modern labour relations where power asymmetry is extreme, choice is limited and the extraction of labour value is systematic and occurs in the context which denies workers dignity, security and agency. This practice is consistent with the contemporary international research on modern slavery, unfree labour, and extreme labour exploitation in the global extractive sectors [7], [4].

This paper aims to provide a theoretical inquiry into the asymmetrical power relations and the various mechanisms by which the Nigeria oil and gas industry continues to create and maintain enslavement-like labour practices. Based on the current literature on political economy and labour process theory, as well as modern slavery studies, the paper will synthesize the available literature to study the interaction of structural forces, institutional arrangements, and global production relationships in determining labour results in the industry. The theoretical review based approach will allow the study to make contributions towards a greater understanding of concepts and serve as a baseline to future empirical research and policy intervention.

### **Literature Review**

This section of the review examines modern literature on asymmetrical power relations, labour exploitation, and processes akin to the enslavement in the oil and gas sector, especially in Nigeria and other similar extractive economies. In line with a theoretical review-based approach, the literature is thematically arranged to emphasize the role played by structural conditions, institutional arrangements, and global dynamics in production in shaping labour relations in the sector.

**A. Labour Structures and Employment Regimes in Nigeria's Oil and Gas Industry.**

The Nigerian oil and gas sector is a highly stratified labour structure that involves permanent core workers, contract workers, outsourced workers, informal or community-based workers. This categorization is indicative of larger tendencies within global extractive sectors as companies are increasingly integrating the concept of flexible labour through more cost-effective and risk-externalising methods [3]. In Nigeria, multinational oil companies usually have few permanent employees, all of whom are highly paid, as most of their activities are conducted by contract and casual workers hired by labour contractors [8].

The labour policies of neoliberalism, high unemployment rates in the country, and laxity of labour laws influence employment patterns in the industry. These factors enormously reduce the bargaining power of workers and predisposes them to exploitative actions [2]. According to scholars, these regimes of labour are not random but are actively designed towards the maximization of surplus extraction at minimal corporate responsibility to take care of the welfare of the workers [9]. This has led to a massive unemployment in oil and gas industry in Nigeria, inequality in payment systems and social exclusion.

**B. The Contractualisation, Outsourcing and Case Study labour.**

Contractualisation and outsourcing is one of the most notable aspects of labour relations in the oil and gas industry of Nigeria. Outsourced labourers frequently work under temporary contracts that may be canceled at any time without any warning, which restricts their rights to complain about unfair labour practises [8]. This type of labour control presents a dependency relationship where workers are left to accept poor working conditions as they have no possible alternative.

The literature stresses that contractualisation is a labour discipline mechanism. The companies can also undermine wage demands and opposition by disorganizing the workforce and undermining collective organization [3]. Contract workers are often seen to do the same work as permanent employees, but are paid lower salaries, fewer benefits and have less access to a grievance mechanism in Nigeria. These inequalities support unequal power dynamics and entrench inequality in the workplace.

**C. State-Corporate Relations and Weakness of Regulation.**

The Nigerian state is the key determinant towards the labour performance in the oil and gas industry. Although there are labour laws and international conventions, they are not always enforced with inconsistency especially on the extractive sector [2]. Scholars blame this weakness to regulatory capture, corruption, and excessive fiscal reliance of the state on oil revenues [6]. The state is often unwilling to confront the multinational corporations or even sanction them on the violation of labour as both a regulator and a beneficiary.

This regulatory ecosystem allows exploitative ways of doing things to continue with little responsibility. Research observes that inspections are not continuous and penalties are not strong and any worker that reports abuse may face retaliation or unemployment [5]. The ensuing governance gap enables asymmetric power relations to thrive in ways that exposes the workers to coercive employment terms that bear similarities to the unfree labour terms and conditions.

**D. Extractive Sector Asymmetrical Power Relations.**

Asymmetrical power relation is a characteristic aspect of the oil and gas business in the world, but in Nigeria, there exist structural inequalities among multinational corporations, the state, and labour hence the prevalence of asymmetrical power relations. Power asymmetry is a situation where a single actor has an unequal access to resources, matters, and consequences to leave the other actors without much agency [7].

Multinational companies in the oil and gas industry of Nigeria have been able to gain high economic and political influence in most cases more than the local institutions and societies. On the other hand, workers work in some of the most vulnerable positions influenced by poverty, unemployment, and ineffective legal safeguards [8]. The imbalance also enables employers to create terms and conditions that employees might appreciate as unfair yet they cannot oppose them.

**E. Marginalisation in the Community and hierarchies in labour.**

The host communities in oil producing areas tend to face a dual marginalisation, that is, the degradation of the environment besides being marginalised in terms of getting secure jobs. Although local labour is often employed to perform low-skilled or dangerous jobs, the community members are not often incorporated into the oil companies into stable and well-paid jobs [6]. This instills internal labour stratifications which reflect larger social imbalances.

According to the literature, these hierarchies are supported by informal hiring systems, ethnic distinction, and discriminating inclusion that only weaken the workforce [9]. Asymmetrical relations are further enforced by these processes that oppose workers to each other and centralize corporate authority over labour.

**F. Enslavement, Unfree Labour and Extreme Labour Exploitation.**

Recent scholarship has oriented towards conceptualizing exploitative labour practices in extractive industries in terms of modern slavery and unfree labour. According to the International Labour Organization, modern slavery is the cases of exploitation which a person is unable to refuse or quit because of the threats, coercion, deception or power abuse [4]. Although the situation in the oil and gas sector in Nigeria might not necessarily be the legal definition of slavery, most of the practices are enslaving in nature.

Research records the trends of economic coercion such as owing to labour contractors, blocking pay rates, overworking, and threats of termination or blacklisting [7]. There are also particular situations where the existence of private or state security forces further undermines the freedom of workers, which strengthens relations of domination and control [5].

**G. Structural Coercion and Structural Constrained Choice.**

One of the major themes of the literature is the idea of constrained choice. There is a tendency to believe that workers come to work on their own, yet their decisions rely on the structural factors like poverty, absence of other jobs, and social pressures [9]. These limitations are compounded in Nigeria by the oil and gas industry due to region underdevelopment and degradation of the environment that erode the traditional lives.

This type of structural coercion obscures the distinction between the free and the unfree labour. According to the scholars, labour relations increase the properties of slavery-like situations, despite the fact that there is no physical force to coerce employees to accept those conditions, to survive [2].

International Production Networks and Workforce Control.

The further influence of labour is the integration of oil and gas industry of Nigeria into the global production networks. Firms are motivated by global demand, investor pressure and cost-cutting imperatives to focus on efficiency as opposed to labour rights [8]. Labour conditions are often decentralized through the complicated subcontracting chains and therefore, it becomes a challenge to establish accountability.

This diffusion helps corporations to be separated when it comes to exploitation and still enjoy the privileges of it. According to the literature, these gaps in governance are at the core of comprehending how the reproduction of enslavement-like conditions occurs in the context of seemingly regulated and legalized industries [7].

**Theoretical Framework**

This section presents the theoretical approaches that guide the discussion of the asymmetrical relationship and enslavement like in the oil and gas industry in Nigeria. In line with theoretical review-based methodology, the discussion is informed by the current understanding of classical theories and the recent critical literature to clarify the manner in which power, labour control, and exploitation is organized and perpetuated in extractive industries. It uses three interconnected frameworks, including political economy of extractive capitalism, unfree labour and modern slavery theory, and principal-agent and state-corporate power relations. A combination of these views offers a strong analytical tool to interpret labour domination not only through the standalone practices in the workplace.

### **A. Political Economy of Extractive Capitalism**

The political economy approach is focused on the structural relationships of capital, labour and the state in extractive industries. Extractive capitalism is marked by priority of resource rents over productive diversification in the oil-dependent economy, which lowers labour safeguarding and uneven growth in most cases [6], [1]. In that sense, labour exploitation does not constitute a singular but a structural aspect of accumulation in extractive situations.

The recent political economy literature emphasizes the political economy of global oil corporations that exist within transnational regimes of capital that allow them to shift social and labour costs outside onto their workers and host populations [10]. This process is strengthened in Nigeria through the fiscal reliance of the state on oil incomes that limits its capability to enforce labour practices in a firm-minded way. This brings about structural imbalance where capital interests prevail and labour is very vulnerable.

This model is especially helpful in understanding the reasons of exploitative labour relations that are still present even in the face of formal laws. Political economy theory places the concept of exploitation in the context of the wider dynamics of capitalist accumulation, regulatory compromise and world inequality, as opposed to considering exploitation as a failure of governance.

### **B. Unfree Labour and Modern Slavery Theory**

Unfree labour theory offers a critical approach to the analysis of labour relation between free wage labour and historical slavery. According to modern researchers, unfree labour is a spectrum, and it includes such practices as debt bondage, coercive contracting, movement restriction, and economic vulnerability abuse [7]. These types of labour are becoming more and more acknowledged as part and parcel of contemporary capitalist production as opposed to pre-modern remnants.

The modern slavery notion designed by both the International Labour Organization and the Walk Free Foundation is when people are not allowed to refuse or leave the employment because of the use of coercion, threats, misleading actions, and power abuse [4]. Using this framework in the case of the oil and gas industry in Nigeria, it is possible to trace the processes of enslavement that are carried out through the economic and institutional coercion but do not involve the physical force.

According to the recent researches, modern slavery in extractive industries has a tendency to be the inherent part of the legal hiring framework such as subcontracting and outsourcing agreements [9]. In Nigeria, the employees that are hired under labour contractors can endure non-payment of wages, overworking hours and risk being terminated without any appeal. These circumstances are ideal illustrations of the ways in which unfree labour can be manufactured with the help of market forces and loopholes in regulations.

### **C. State–Corporate Power Relations and Regulatory Capture**

The third theoretical prism is the interaction between the state and corporate actors and the formation of labour outcomes. State-corporate theory looks at the relationship between governments and corporations in creating regulatory conditions conducive to capital accumulation and in some cases at the cost of labour rights [11]. This association is usually characterized by regulatory capture in extractive economies where corporate powers have disproportionate power in policy decisions and their implementation.

The dual nature of the state in Nigeria in terms of regulation and getting of rather than giving revenue in the oil and gas industry causes conflict of interest. Researchers believe that such structurally undermines labour control and makes it easier to condone exploitative operations [6]. The regulatory bodies might not have independence, funds, or political support to confront multinationals, which translates to the discrimination of the application of labour standards.

This framework contributes to understanding why the enslavement-like labour conditions exist even in the situations when the international labour conventions and national laws are in place. It also emphasizes the relevance of institutional level of power relations and the role of governance failures in being produced not necessarily as technical.

### **D. Integrating the Frameworks**

Combined, these theoretical points of view provide an overall control of labour exploitation in the oil and gas sector in Nigeria. The theory of political economy describes how our structure leads to

exploitation, the unfree labour theory describes how the conditions of enslavement are created, and the state-corporate power analysis explains how governance structures make these processes possible. Through a combination of these frameworks, the research goes beyond explanations of bad working conditions to a more profound explanation of how asymmetrical relations are embedded in the extractive industry. Such a comprehensive approach serves as a good starting point in the analysis and discussion of how various processes of enslavement are put into practice.

## Analysis and Discussion

This part gives a critical synthesis of the literature reviewed and theoretical frameworks provided in the section above. It examines the construction and maintenance of asymmetrical power relations in the oil and gas sector of the Nigerian economy and the ways in which such relations generate various processes of labour exploitation that are increasingly similar to modern enslavement. Three interconnected themes are used to organize the discussion, including the role of labour control devices, the effects of state-corporate alliances on governance, and the consequences of enslavement-like labour relationships on workers and developmental results in the long term.

### A. Asymmetrical Relations of Power and Mechanisms of Control of Labour.

The review of the current literature shows that the institutionalisation of asymmetrical power relations in the oil and gas sector in Nigeria relies and is supported by certain labour control mechanisms. Contractualisation, outsourcing and casualisation is not only a strategy of employment, but also a form of domination that diminishes the collective ability of labour to counter exploitation. The oil corporations amass power, by dividing the labour force into various groups with dissimilar rights and protections, and by limiting responsibility [3].

The mechanisms create an imbalance in structure where employers have unilateral powers in the hiring, firing, wage, and working environment. Employees, especially those who are hired by the third-party contractors, tend to be deprived of official grievance mechanisms or union membership. This is further aggravated by the high level of unemployment and underdevelopment in the region, which decreases the level of workers leaving and makes them accept precarious terms [2].

Theoretically, this trend is consistent with works of political economy that perceive labour exploitation as the structural attribute of extractive capitalism and not its anomaly. The monopoly of the economy in multinational corporations, and the fact that Nigeria is oil-dependent, precondition a situation when labour control becomes a matter of course and can hardly be a point of dispute at an institutional level [6].

### B. State-Corporate Alliances and Governance Failures.

One of the main conclusions that can be drawn on the basis of the literature is the importance of state-corporate coalitions in perpetuating exploitative labour relations. The Nigerian state is a dependent state on oil revenues, which places it in a position of regulator and stakeholder, thus creating inherent conflicts of interest, which weaken labour governance [1]. Regulatory bodies are usually not politically independent and do not have the means to enforce their controls on multinational corporations.

Such a governance failure is manifested through weak inspection regimes, limited penalties to violations of labour, and lack of protection to whistle-blowers. Through this, exploitative practices are continued with very little risk to the employers, which strengthens asymmetrical power relations. According to scholars, this dynamic has been a form of regulatory capture, where corporate interests influence the implementation of policy in their favour [11].

The labour consequences are far reaching. Employees working in such a system of governance are more susceptible to coercive political behaviours such as sacking at will, working overtime, and discouragement of organizing. Under such circumstances, the line between formally free employment and unfree labour becomes unclear, and it is in support of the fact that the enslavement-like relations are possible in the realm of the legally regulated industries [9].

### C. Conditions of Enslavement and Restricted Labour Agency.

The literature has consistently pointed to constrained agency as one of the characteristics of the enslavement-like labour relations in the oil and gas industry in Nigeria. Although employees can be technically voluntary to join the workforce, structural reasons are forces that affect their decisions to

work in oil fields, including poverty, environmental losses, and absence of the other means of living [4], [12], [13].

This limited agency is supported by financial practices like withholding of wages, debts through labour contractors and threats of blacklisting. In certain areas of operation, workers are additionally restricted by the presence of private or state security forces [5]. These dynamics are very much in line with the updated concepts of modern slavery which is characterized by the use of coercion and exploitation of vulnerability, instead of explicit ownership.

Notably, the discussion indicates that slavery in this regard is not intermittent but institutionalized. It has been internalized as part of labour markets, structures of regulation and global systems of production that normalize exploitation. This discredits the legalistic reductionist explanations of slavery and underscores the need to broaden the pieces of analytical equipment that capture the experiences of workers in extractive industries [7].

#### **D. Implications for Developmental and Social stability.**

The continued existence of the enslavement-like labour relations in the Nigerian oil and gas industry has far-reaching developmental and social stability implications. Human capital development is compromised, inequality is enhanced, and poverty and social exclusion cycles in oil-producing groups become a part of the exploitative labour practices [6]. They also undermine trust towards institutions and create resentment which may lead to resistance, confrontation and insecurity.

In terms of development, these results are in contrast to what extractive-led growth promised. Although oil revenues are a part of the national income, the benefits are not equally distributed and the social costs incurred by the workers and communities are also quite significant. Scholars are placing the argument that unless labour exploitation is resolved, extractive industries will not achieve sustainable development outcomes [10], [14], [15].

#### **Conclusion**

This article has given theoretical overview of asymmetrical power relations and the various processes by which conditions of enslavement-like labour in the oil and gas industry of Nigeria can be produced and maintained. Based on modern political economy, unfree labour theory, and state-corporate power relations, the paper has successfully established that labour abuse in the industry is not an accident but inherent in the system of extractive capitalism, governmental structures, and global production networks.

It has been demonstrated that the oil and gas sector in Nigeria is being run under very stratified employment regimes where capital is favoured at the expense of labour and specifically, contract, casual and community based workers. Extensive outsourcing, contractualisation and regulatory laxity reinforce these regimes and, in combination, restrict the agency of workers and legitimize precarious and coercive working relationships. As much as the workers may be formally employed under legal constructs, their realities in practice may be characterized by constrained choice, insecurities due to economic pressure, and lack of freedom to reject or leave exploitative work systems.

One of the main contributions of this paper is that it views enslavement as a modern, structural process, but not a historical or purely illicit status. The study dispels single-minded notions of slavery based only on physical coercion or trafficking by locating the exploitation of labour within more general asymmetrical relations between multinational corporations, the Nigerian state, and global capital. Rather, it emphasizes the way contemporary enslavement can be created via the market-based mechanisms, failure in institutions, and exploitation of vulnerability systematically.

The review also highlights the importance of state-corporate alliances in perpetrating these conditions. The fiscal reliance of Nigeria on oil revenues and the power of the multinational corporations influence the strengthening of the regulations and promote the tolerance of the labour rights violations. Such a governance situation allows exploitative operations to thrive without much accountability compromise to labour protection and development goals at large. This makes the extractive-led growth promise to be undermined by the deep social and economic inequalities.

Theoretically, the amalgamation of political economy, unfree labour and state-corporate power structures offers a holistic view-point in the labour domination in extractive industries. This unitarist

strategy does not just stop at describing the case of poor working conditions, but it actually discloses the structural and institutional processes involved in recreating the relationships of enslavement, over time. By so doing, the paper has helped in continuing the academic discussion around the issue of modern slavery, labour governance and extractive development in the Global South.

In summary, the most effective way to solve the problem of enslavement-like labour conditions in the oil and gas sector in Nigeria is not isolated corporate reforms or legal changes. It requires an overhaul of the way labour relations are defined, the role of the state, and centres of power in extractive economies. Although this analysis is restricted to a theoretical review, it offers a base to the development of a future empirical study, which can further record the experiences of workers and assess policy interventions. Finally, addressing the asymmetrical relations and modern-day enslavement is not only necessary to safeguard the labour rights but also inclusive and sustainable development in the economy that is resource-based.

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