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Combating Employment Discrimination and Advancing Decent Work: The Strategic Role of Trade Unions in Nigeria

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Abstract

This paper argues that eliminating employment discrimination is a prerequisite for achieving the International Labour Organization's (ILO) Decent Work Agenda and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 8 (SDG 8) in Nigeria. Drawing from the ILO's Decent Work Indicator Framework, the paper explores how entrenched gender bias, weak labour administration and poor policy enforcement undermine fair wages, job security, and social protection, thereby hindering inclusive economic growth. It further highlights the crucial role of trade unions particularly the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC) and the Trade Union Congress (TUC) and their affiliates in combating inequality through collective bargaining, advocacy, and social dialogue. However, trade unions themselves face internal gender disparities that limit their representative capacity. The paper proposes a coordinated approach involving legal reform, capacity-building, integration of equality clauses into collective agreements, and international solidarity among unions. These strategies are essential to dismantle systemic discrimination, strengthen labour institutions and advance a non-discriminatory, equitable, and productive work environment that upholds the dignity and rights of all Nigerian workers.

Keywords: Decent Work, Employment Discrimination, Trade Unions, Collective Bargaining, Labour Rights, Nigeria

Introduction

Employment discrimination remains a persistent challenge that undermines the attainment of decent work and social justice in Nigeria. Despite the country's ratification of major International Labour Organization (ILO) conventions and its commitment to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 8 (SDG 8), many Nigerian workers continue to experience unequal access to employment opportunities, unfair treatment and gender-based bias (Ogundipe, 2023). These inequalities erode workers' dignity, weaken productivity and obstruct inclusive economic growth. The ILO's Decent Work Agenda underscores the need for employment that promotes equity, safety

and human dignity while ensuring fair income, job security and social protection for all. Yet, in Nigeria, weak labour administration, inconsistent policy enforcement and socio-economic disparities have perpetuated what the ILO terms as decent work deficit. Addressing this challenge requires the active involvement of trade unions, which historically emerged to redress the imbalance of power between employers and employees.

Trade unions such as the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC) and the Trade Union Congress (TUC) and their affiliations are pivotal in safeguarding workers' rights, promoting fair labour practices and advancing equality through collective bargaining and advocacy. Strengthening their role in combating workplace discrimination is vital to achieving a fair and inclusive labour market aligned with global decent work standards and Nigeria's developmental aspirations. This paper examines the interconnection between employment discrimination and the Decent Work Agenda, demonstrating how discriminatory practices hinder fair employment and sustainable growth. It also

analyses the strategic role of trade unions in addressing inequality through collective bargaining, social dialogue and institutional reform while proposing actionable strategies to promote inclusion and equality in Nigeria's labour system.

Understanding Decent Work and Employment Discrimination

The ILO (2013) defines decent work as opportunities for all individuals' men and women alike to obtain equitable and productive employment under conditions of freedom, justice, security and human dignity. The United Nations (2021) similarly identifies decent work as a driver of sustainable and inclusive economic growth. Decent work ensures fair wages, job security, social protection and equal opportunities, while fostering social cohesion and national development. Employment discrimination directly violates these principles. It manifests through unfair treatment based on gender, disability, ethnicity, or social background, leading to reduced productivity, limited job access and inequality (Garcia-Yeste, et al., 2022; Ogundipe, 2023; Salari et al., 2024). Discrimination deprives individuals of the dignity and justice that define decent work and undermines national efforts toward sustainable development. In Nigeria, achieving decent work is particularly vital to reducing poverty, unemployment and insecurity. The ILO's Decent Work Indicator Framework identifies ten interrelated components ranging from adequate earnings and job stability to social dialogue and equal opportunity all of which are necessary for equitable employment relations (ILO, 2013). However, poor policy implementation and weak governance from all stakeholders continue to hinder progress toward these goals in Nigeria.

The Nigerian Context: Decent Work Deficits and Legal Imperatives

Understanding the dynamics of decent work in Nigeria requires an examination of the structural, administrative and legal factors shaping the nation's labour environment. While the International Labour Organization (ILO) provides a global framework for achieving fair and dignified employment, local realities in Nigeria reveal significant implementation gaps. Persistent administrative inefficiencies, weak institutional enforcement and limited legal reforms continue to undermine workers' rights and fair labour practices. These challenges have created what scholars describe as a "decent work deficit," where the promise of equitable employment remains largely unfulfilled despite existing national and international laws and policies. International Labour Organization's Nigeria Decent Work Country Programme II (2015–2018) observes that labour administration challenges remain a major cause of the decent work deficit in Nigeria by highlighting persistent deficits such as inadequate funding for labour inspection, weak institutional coordination, limited technical capacity and outdated legal frameworks, conditions that continue to hinder the effective promotion of decent work in Nigeria (ILO, 2015).

Although Nigeria has ratified several ILO conventions and enacted domestic labour laws, enforcement remains inconsistent. Labour laws form the legal foundation for protecting workers' rights and ensuring fair employment practices but weak institutional frameworks have allowed discriminatory practices, arbitrary dismissals and gender inequality to persist. The ILO (2013) stresses that legislation alone cannot achieve decent work; rather, commitment to effective implementation, institutional reform, and sustained advocacy are essential. Ensuring non-discrimination in the workplace must, therefore, be reinforced through functional legal systems, empowered trade unions, and firm political will.

Trade Unions and the Struggle against Employment Discrimination

Power imbalances in the labour market necessitated the emergence of trade unions to counter inequities between employers and employees. While unions have made progress in advancing workers' welfare and rights, many have overlooked their advocacy role in tackling workplace

discrimination (Seifert & Wang, 2018). The International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) the world's largest trade union body, representing 168 million workers in 155 countries champions global campaigns for workers' rights, equality, and social justice. Its regional branch, ITUC-Africa (ITUC-AF), of which Nigeria is a member, affirms the right to associate freely receive fair remuneration and enjoy safe and decent employment (ITUC-AF Constitution). It also prioritises eliminating all forms of workplace discrimination and promoting diversity and inclusion. In Nigeria, the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC) and Trade Union Congress (TUC) key affiliates of ITUC-AF safeguard workers' rights through advocacy, social dialogue and collective bargaining.

Evidence across Africa shows that unionised workers enjoy better pay, improved working conditions and stronger job security compared to non-unionised counterparts (Khabo, 2008; Otoo, 2012). Yet Ogundipe (2023) shows that trade union executives do not pay attention to discriminatory practices in the work place. Carta et al. (2019) compiled evidence on trade unions' contributions to promoting workplace diversity and preventing discrimination, revealing that when unions actively uphold their commitment to non-discriminatory practices, tangible progress becomes evident. Therefore, union efforts to address discrimination play a crucial role in reducing its prevalence within the labour system.

Promoting Equality and Inclusion within Trade Unions

While trade unions are vocal advocates of workplace equality, they must also confront internal inequities, particularly gender disparities in leadership. Seifert and Wang (2018) maintain that the limited representation of women in trade unions weakens their legitimacy and inclusiveness. Several other studies reinforce this position. Adefolaju (2013) reported that within Nigerian trade unions, women remain marginalised in leadership and decision-making structures, which diminishes unions' effectiveness as representative bodies. Similarly, Kaminski and Yakura (2008) discovered that although women account for a significant proportion of global union membership, they are still underrepresented in leadership roles a disparity that calls into question the credibility and commitment of unions to equality. Dean and Perrett (2020) also highlighted how gender stereotypes, insufficient mentoring and organisational barriers restrict women's progress into leadership.

The International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC, 2022) provides global evidence that women hold disproportionately fewer leadership positions in trade unions, reflecting a continuing gender imbalance that undermines inclusivity. Altogether, these studies reveal that gender inequity within trade unions compromises internal democracy and reduces their authority as champions of justice and equality. In light of the above the International Training Centre of the ILO (ITC-ILO) recommends addressing discrimination at four interconnected levels: intra-union, workplace, societal and international solidarity. Strengthening women's leadership through mentorship, training and inclusive policies is key to making unions reflective of the diverse workforce they represent and to show their commitment to elimination of discrimination in the labour system.

Towards a Non-Discriminatory and Inclusive Labour System

Collective bargaining remains the cornerstone of trade union operations. It facilitates negotiation between employers and employees, reduces conflicts and strengthens workplace democracy. As Otoo (2012) and Khabo (2008) assert, collective agreements address issues such as wages, working hours, promotion and conflict resolution, fostering mutual understanding and stability. However, in Nigeria, unions face political and structural constraints that limit their influence. Employers sometimes penalise unionised workers and state interference often weakens union autonomy. These

challenges underline the need for stronger legal protections and institutional reforms to ensure that unions can advocate freely and effectively.

Combating workplace inequality in Nigeria requires multi-stakeholder collaboration. Trade unions must work with employers to eliminate bias in recruitment, enforce grievance mechanisms and include equality clauses in collective agreements through the process of collective bargaining and other tools. Government must support these efforts by enforcing labour standards, promoting social justice and institutionalising social dialogue mechanisms. At the societal level, unions should partner with civil society organisations to raise awareness and advocate inclusive employment policies. International solidarity among unions, particularly within the ITUC and ITUC-Africa networks, can help Nigeria access best practices and build stronger advocacy frameworks for equality and decent work.

Conclusion

The pursuit of decent work and the elimination of employment discrimination are mutually reinforcing objectives. Nigeria's social and economic development depends on ensuring that all workers, regardless of gender, background, or ability, enjoy fair, secure, and dignified employment. Trade unions must transcend traditional wage-focused agendas to challenge systemic inequality and discrimination. Through collective bargaining, advocacy and inclusive leadership, they can reshape Nigeria's labour landscape. The government, employers, and international partners must, in turn, provide enabling conditions, strong institutions, effective legislation and fair enforcement to protect every worker's dignity and rights. Only by dismantling systemic discrimination and strengthening decent work frameworks can Nigeria achieve equitable and sustainable development where every worker contributes productively to the nation's prosperity.

Recommendations

1. The Nigerian government should review and update labour laws to align with the ILO's Decent Work principles and international human rights standards. Stronger enforcement mechanisms and regular workplace inspections should be instituted to ensure compliance with anti-discrimination and fair employment laws.
2. Trade unions such as the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC) and Trade Union Congress (TUC) should receive support for training and institutional development to enhance their advocacy, negotiation, and policy engagement skills, particularly in addressing workplace discrimination and promoting equality.
3. Unions should implement deliberate strategies such as leadership training, mentorship and gender quotas to increase female participation in leadership and decision-making positions. Sustained dialogue among these stakeholders should be institutionalised to promote equitable labour practices, improve grievance mechanisms and develop inclusive policies.
4. Nigerian trade unions should strengthen their collaboration with international bodies like ITUC and ITUC-Africa to share experiences, develop strategies, and advocate for global labour justice and equality. Moreover, trade Unions should launch National campaigns to raise awareness about workplace discrimination, workers' rights and the economic benefits of fair employment practices, targeting both employers and employees.

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