

**SUSTAINABLE WAGE DETERMINATION AND TRADE-
DISPUTE PREVENTION IN NIGERIA'S HEALTH SECTOR:
EVIDENCE FROM SOUTHEAST TEACHING HOSPITALS**

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ABSTRACT: Persistent trade disputes in Nigeria's health sector, particularly among teaching hospitals, have raised concerns over the sustainability of wage determination processes and their impact on industrial harmony. This study examined stakeholders' perceptions of the strategic measures necessary to promote a more sustainable wage system and mitigate wage-related conflicts. Theories of conflict and industrial relations guided the study. Employing a descriptive approach, quantitative data were collected from 625 respondents through structured questionnaires, while qualitative insights were derived from 10 key informant interviews with health administrators, union leaders, and policymakers. Multi-stage and purposive sample methods were utilized. Quantitative data were analysed using the weighted mean, whereas qualitative data were content analysed. The findings revealed strong consensus on the importance of labour-government cooperation, institutionalization of collective bargaining, respect for the rule of law, and establishment of independent wage review mechanisms. All proposed measures recorded low weighted mean scores, indicating a high level of agreement on their significance. Qualitative data further emphasized the need for proactive engagement, legal compliance, and systemic reforms. The findings underscore the need for a collaborative, law-based, and inclusive framework as a foundation for sustainable wage governance and lasting industrial harmony in Nigeria's healthcare sector. The study recommends enhancing dialogue mechanisms, ensuring strict adherence to labour regulations and fostering institutional autonomy as key strategies for establishing a fair and enduring wage determination system. These strategies will help to promote a more equitable and sustainable wage environment.

Keywords: Collective Bargaining, Health Sector, Industrial Relations, Trade Disputes, Wage Determination

INTRODUCTION

The health sector in Nigeria is crucial to the nation's socio-economic progress, yet it is frequently troubled by numerous trade disputes and labour unrest. Conflicts over wages, especially frequent strikes by healthcare workers, are common and often lead to the shutdown of public hospitals, severely affecting the delivery of healthcare services (Maduforo, Scott, & Scott, 2023). These industrial actions are typically triggered by issues such as delayed salary payments, failure to implement collective agreements, substandard working conditions, and the absence of a formal wage review system (Oginni, Ajibola, & Olaniyan, 2021). Despite numerous reforms and policy efforts, achieving lasting industrial peace in the sector remains a major challenge (Oleribe et al., 2018).

On a global scale, sustainable wage setting is widely acknowledged as essential to maintaining stable labour relations. Nations that have established systems for collective bargaining, independent wage review bodies, and inclusive dialogue forums tend to experience fewer labour disputes and greater employee satisfaction (ILO, 2021). However, Nigeria still depends on temporary and reactive wage policies that often lack durability and clarity (Ekwoaba & Chidi, 2021). In addition, the government's responses to labour issues are sometimes dismissive or politically driven, which weakens trust and undermines accountability among stakeholders.

While previous studies have explored areas such as trade unionism, industrial actions, and wage inequality within Nigeria's public sector, there is still a considerable gap in understanding how institutional mechanisms, stakeholder engagement, and legal frameworks can be effectively integrated to support sustainable wage systems and minimize industrial disputes in the healthcare sector. Much of the existing literature overlooks how structured wage systems and conflict prevention strategies work together in practice, especially in a sector as critical and sensitive as healthcare. This study intends to bridge that gap by analyzing the perspectives of major stakeholders on the approaches necessary to achieve sustainable wage determination and reduce trade disputes in teaching hospitals in Southeast Nigeria. The research aims to add value to both academic literature and practical policymaking, fostering labour peace and improving healthcare delivery across the country.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Wage determination refers to the process through which employees' earnings are established. Dunlop (1958) conceptualizes it as a core element of the industrial relations system, shaped by the interplay of economic, social, and institutional variables. According to Ehrenberg and Smith (2017), wages result from the interaction between labour supply and demand, though this interaction is influenced by factors such as minimum wage legislation, labour unions, and employer policies. Clark (1899) further posits that in perfectly competitive markets, wages reflect the marginal productivity of labour. In Nigeria, wage determination is influenced by a combination of government directives, union advocacy, the financial capacity of the public sector, and overarching macroeconomic trends. The primary approaches to wage determination include: unilateral wage setting by the government, collective bargaining between employers and trade unions, and decisions made by statutory bodies such as the National Salaries, Incomes and Wages

Commission (NSIWC). However, scholars like Fajana (2006) and Okene (2011) argue that the wage-setting process in Nigeria is often inconsistent, opaque, and lacking in sector-specific sensitivity, thereby fostering perceptions of inequity and exclusion, particularly among healthcare workers.

Trade disputes are conflicts between employers and employees or their representatives regarding issues such as remuneration, work conditions, job security, or the application of negotiated agreements. The International Labour Organization (ILO, 2006) defines trade disputes as conflicts emerging from employment relationships, including breakdowns in collective bargaining. Hyman (1975) interprets such disputes as expressions of class conflict within capitalist systems. In Nigeria's healthcare sector, the most frequent causes of labour unrest include the non-payment or delay of agreed wages, violations of collective agreements, wage disparities among different professional groups, and the absence of formal negotiation mechanisms. These recurring issues underscore fundamental deficiencies in the country's wage governance and labour engagement structures (Anugwom, 2009).

Sustainable industrial relations entail building enduring, equitable, and cooperative relationships among workers, employers, and the government. The ILO (2015) emphasizes the importance of tripartite dialogue and adherence to international labour standards as essential components of such sustainability. Kaufman (2004) identifies institutional trust, consistent dialogue, and long-term negotiation practices as critical to fostering harmonious labour relations. A sustainable framework promotes proactive communication, mutual respect, and a robust legal infrastructure that supports collective bargaining and effective conflict resolution. By ensuring these elements are in place, the frequency and intensity of industrial disputes can be reduced, encouraging a culture of joint responsibility in managing wages and employment-related concerns.

Measures for Sustainable Wage Determination in Nigeria's Health Sector

A critical pathway to achieving sustainable wage determination in Nigeria's health sector is the enhancement of cooperation between the government and trade unions. The following interrelated measures should be institutionalized:

Institutionalization of Collective Bargaining

Collective bargaining is the formal process through which employers and organized labour groups negotiate the terms of employment, including wages and working conditions (ILO, 2021). Adewumi and Adenugba (2021) highlight that embedding collective bargaining within institutional frameworks promotes industrial harmony by fostering trust and transparency between parties. However, Otoibo (2021) notes that while Nigeria's legal instruments, such as the Trade Disputes Act and Labour Act, provide for collective bargaining, enforcement is inconsistent. Government institutions frequently ignore or delay the implementation of negotiated agreements, leading to recurring disputes and a breakdown of trust, particularly in the healthcare sector, where unions such as the National Association of Resident Doctors (NARD) and JOHESU are involved.

Although Nigeria has ratified key ILO Conventions 87 and 98, which protect the rights to freedom of association and collective bargaining, the country has struggled with effective domestication and practical enforcement of these standards (ILO, 2023). The absence of mandatory bargaining frameworks, coupled with delays in executing agreements and the lack of an independent wage-setting body, continues to obstruct the institutionalization of collective bargaining. Fajana (2019) champions a shift from unilateral, short-term interventions to structured, inclusive dialogues and decision-making processes, viewing this collaborative model as key to sustainable industrial peace. In contrast, countries such as Sweden and Germany have achieved labour stability through structured sectoral bargaining mechanisms and legally binding agreements negotiated within established councils (Visser, 2019). These models illustrate the significance of a legally supported and systematically enforced bargaining system in achieving long-term industrial peace.

Strengthening Legal and Regulatory Frameworks

The International Labour Organization (ILO, 2023) emphasizes that an effective labour law framework must uphold workers' rights, ensure the enforceability of collective agreements, and offer accessible channels for resolving disputes. In contexts where such legal structures are weak, labour relations often suffer from recurring strikes, wage disputes, and a communication breakdown. In Nigeria, key laws regulating labour relations include the Labour Act (1971), Trade Disputes Act (2004), and the National Industrial Court Act (2006). Although these statutes provide formal avenues for negotiation and dispute settlement, their implementation is frequently inconsistent and influenced by political interests (Okolie & Eze, 2020). Ajayi and Oyedeki (2022) point out that many strikes in Nigeria's health sector arise from the government's reluctance to implement legally binding agreements or comply with judgments from the National Industrial Court (NICN). Regulatory bodies such as the National Salaries, Incomes and Wages Commission (NSIWC) and the Industrial Arbitration Panel (IAP) are mandated to advise on wage matters and adjudicate labour disputes. However, these agencies are often hindered by bureaucratic inefficiencies and a lack of political backing. Adebayo and Salami (2023) note that the NSIWC's role is largely advisory and lacks the legal authority to enforce its recommendations, reducing its effectiveness. Although the NICN has issued several landmark rulings affirming the legitimacy of workers' rights and collective agreements, enforcement remains a significant challenge. Akinwale (2022) highlights the troubling trend of government institutions disregarding court decisions without facing sanctions, undermining the authority of the judiciary and weakening the rule of law in labour relations.

Attitudinal Shift by Government

Traditionally, the government's approach to labour relations in Nigeria has been largely reactive, authoritarian, and often dismissive of union demands (Otobo, 2021). Empirical evidence from Okolie and Eze (2021) and Ogunrotifa (2020) reveals that many strikes in the health sector are linked to the government's repeated failures to honour previous agreements or to engage with labour unions in a timely and constructive manner. These patterns underscore the crucial need for a shift from confrontational tactics to collaborative and proactive engagement in order to prevent disputes from escalating. Scholars argue that a constructive and cooperative government attitude is vital for maintaining industrial peace and implementing sustainable wage reforms (Fajana,

2022). Afolabi and Odetunde (2023) note that countries like South Africa and Kenya have achieved reductions in labour unrest by fostering inclusive and transparent negotiation frameworks, where government agencies play the role of mediators rather than adversaries in wage-related discussions. Ootobo (2021) and Fashoyin (2020) emphasise the importance of developing a political culture that views the protection of labour rights as a core component of democratic governance, rather than as concessions granted under pressure. This calls for a paradigm shift in how the government perceives labour unions—from viewing them as obstacles to policy execution to recognizing them as critical partners in national development.

Establishment of Independent Wage Review Boards

The lack of an autonomous, institutionalized wage-setting mechanism in Nigeria has significantly contributed to issues such as wage stagnation, arbitrary salary adjustments, and frequent industrial unrest—particularly in critical sectors like healthcare (Okolie & Eze, 2021). At present, Nigeria utilizes a centralized wage system managed primarily by the National Salaries, Incomes and Wages Commission (NSIWC). However, the NSIWC primarily operates in an advisory capacity and lacks the necessary legal authority and independence to enforce wage policies or ensure adherence to negotiated agreements (Adebayo & Salami, 2023). Ajayi and Oyededeji (2022) argue that this overreliance on political leadership for wage decisions has led to irregular wage reviews, delayed implementation of agreed-upon pay structures, and significant disparities across sectors. These shortcomings have fuelled dissatisfaction and increased the likelihood of trade disputes, particularly among health professionals. In contrast, countries like South Africa and Ghana have implemented independent wage review mechanisms that promote fair and sustainable wage practices. South Africa's Employment Conditions Commission (ECC) and National Minimum Wage Commission (NMWC) operate with full independence, conducting regular reviews of sectoral wages and proposing adjustments based on empirical data (Budeli & Thabane, 2020). Similarly, Ghana's Fair Wages and Salaries Commission (FWSC), established under the Single Spine Pay Policy, functions with a level of autonomy that allows it to manage public sector remuneration more effectively (Adu-Gyamfi, 2021). These bodies utilize economic indicators, labour market statistics, and input from stakeholders to guide decision-making—an evidence-based and participatory approach that Nigeria has yet to institutionalize.

Continuous Social Dialogue

Fajana (2022) emphasizes that effective social dialogue extends beyond sporadic negotiations; it entails an ongoing, structured process of consultation, trust-building, and joint problem-solving. This sustained engagement is fundamental to inclusive industrial relations systems. It is actively supported by the International Labour Organization (ILO, 2021) as a proactive strategy for preventing labour disputes and ensuring equitable workplace practices. Adeyeye and Aluko (2023) contend that when dialogue is consistent and transparent, it helps align wage expectations with reality and increases the likelihood that agreements will be honoured. Conversely, a lack of continuous dialogue often breeds mistrust, miscommunication, and unilateral decision-making—all of which can escalate into labour disputes and strikes.

In Nigeria's health sector, the absence of institutionalized social dialogue has been linked to frequent industrial actions, particularly involving the Joint Health Sector Unions (JOHESU) and the Nigerian Medical Association (NMA) (Okoli, 2023). Unlike Ghana, where the Tripartite Committee on Wages and Employment engages in regular consultations that strengthen labour stability (Adu-Gyamfi, 2021). Nigeria's approach remains largely reactive. Government engagement is typically initiated only in response to strikes rather than being part of a continuous dialogue process. Studies by Ogunrotifa and Adepoju (2022) reveal that many health workers in Nigeria view government negotiation tactics as “manipulative” and “short-term,” which further erodes trust and undermines the effectiveness of labour-management relations. Establishing permanent, credible dialogue platforms could therefore be critical to achieving industrial peace in the sector.

Enforcement of Freedom of Association

Freedom of association is a fundamental labour right that allows workers and employers to form, join, and operate organizations of their choice without interference, discrimination, or retaliation (ILO, 2022). Although this right is protected under Section 40 of Nigeria's 1999 Constitution, its enforcement remains weak—especially in the public sector and among frontline health professionals. According to Fajana (2022), union activities in these sectors are often obstructed by covert repression, bureaucratic barriers, and ambiguous legal provisions. Adebayo and Salami (2023) argue that the denial or restriction of this right can lead to clandestine unionism, increased radicalism, and heightened industrial tensions. Research by Ogunrotifa and Adepoju (2022) confirms that in some public health institutions, union leaders are denied access to negotiation platforms or are penalized through transfers or dismissals for their activism. Additionally, overlapping mandates among various health unions have led to internal conflicts, which government actors sometimes exploit to weaken collective bargaining (Okoli, 2023). In contrast, countries that strongly enforce freedom of association—such as South Africa, Ghana, and Tunisia—have created independent labour institutions or ombudsman bodies to safeguard workers' rights and mediate in cases of abuse. South Africa's Labour Relations Act (LRA) provides extensive legal protections, including remedies for workers who are dismissed or harassed due to union involvement (Budeli & Thabane, 2020). Ghana's labour courts ensure swift adjudication of cases involving associational rights, thereby minimizing retaliation and procedural delays (Adu-Gyamfi, 2021). However, as Fashoyin (2022) notes, Nigeria's lack of a specialized agency for labour rights enforcement, coupled with protracted legal processes, often deters workers from seeking redress when their rights are violated.

The Use of Statutory Dispute Resolution Mechanisms

Statutory dispute resolution frameworks offer a structured, rule-based approach to managing labour conflicts, minimizing the need for strikes or disruptive protests—especially in vital sectors such as healthcare, where industrial disputes can have life-threatening consequences (Otobo, 2021). In Nigeria, the primary legal framework for resolving trade disputes is the Trade Disputes Act, which outlines a hierarchical process: initial conciliation or mediation by the Ministry of Labour and Employment, followed by referral to the Industrial Arbitration Panel (IAP) if no resolution is reached, and ultimately, escalation to the National Industrial Court of Nigeria (NICN)

for final adjudication. However, evidence indicates that these mechanisms are frequently ineffective in preventing prolonged industrial actions due to bureaucratic inefficiencies, weak enforcement, and erosion of stakeholder confidence (Okolie & Eze, 2021). In the Nigerian health sector, in particular, negotiated settlements often lack follow-through from the government, leading to repeated strikes by unions such as the Joint Health Sector Unions (JOHESU) and the National Association of Resident Doctors (NARD) (Okoli, 2023). In contrast, countries like South Africa and Ghana demonstrate more robust enforcement of statutory dispute resolution systems. South Africa's Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration (CCMA) operates as an independent institution with clear timelines for resolving disputes, thereby reducing the incidence and duration of strikes (Budeli & Thabane, 2020). Ghana's National Labour Commission (NLC) plays a similar role, with powers to enforce decisions swiftly and without undue executive interference. These systems emphasize early intervention, tripartite engagement, and enforceability of outcomes, critical features often absent in Nigeria's dispute resolution architecture (Budeli & Thabane, 2020).

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in two principal theoretical frameworks: Karl Marx's Conflict Theory and John Dunlop's Industrial Relations System Theory. These theories offer a conceptual lens for analyzing the interactions among workers, employers, and the government in matters of wage determination and the management of industrial disputes.

Karl Marx's Conflict Theory emphasizes the inherent class conflict embedded within societal structures. Marx argued that the capitalist class prioritizes profit maximization, often at the expense of fair wages, while the working class seeks to enhance its living standards—resulting in unavoidable conflict (Marx & Engels, 1848). Applied to Nigeria's health sector, this theory helps to explain the recurring wage-related disputes as manifestations of unequal power dynamics between the government (as employer) and healthcare workers (as employees). It suggests that industrial unrest persists not merely due to failed negotiations, but because of deeper structural imbalances that must be addressed in order to establish fair and lasting wage systems.

On the other hand, John Dunlop's Industrial Relations System Theory (1958) offers a more holistic and structured view of labour relations. Dunlop identifies three key stakeholders in any industrial relations system: employers (such as the government), employees (represented by health workers and unions), and regulatory institutions (including labour laws, arbitration mechanisms, and courts). These stakeholders operate within a framework of shared rules and are influenced by broader economic, political, and technological contexts. Dunlop's model reinforces the idea that stable labour relations result from the intentional and coordinated interaction of these system components. It highlights the importance of aligning wage-setting mechanisms, dispute resolution strategies, and inclusive dialogue platforms to foster industrial harmony.

By integrating Conflict Theory and Industrial Relations System Theory, this study adopts a dual-perspective approach. While Conflict Theory reveals the socio-economic tensions fuelling wage disputes, Dunlop's framework provides a roadmap for institutional responses that can sustainably manage and resolve these tensions. Together, these theories inform the study's aim of generating

evidence-based, context-sensitive policy recommendations that can enhance industrial peace and improve the effectiveness of wage administration in Nigeria's health sector.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a descriptive design, combining both quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide a comprehensive understanding of wage determination mechanisms and trade dispute dynamics in Nigeria's health sector. The quantitative data provided measurable insights, while qualitative data added depth and context to the findings.

The study population included healthcare medical personnel within Nigeria's health sector at selected teaching hospitals. The study population consisted of selected teaching hospitals in Southeastern Nigeria. Specifically, these included Nnamdi Azikiwe University Teaching Hospital (NAUTH), Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University Teaching Hospital (COOUTH), University of Nigeria Teaching Hospital (UNTH), and Enugu State University Teaching Hospital (ESUTH). A total sample size of 625 respondents was used for the quantitative component. For the qualitative strand, 10 key informants were purposively selected for in-depth interviews.

A multi-stage sampling technique was employed to determine the sample. This approach was considered appropriate as it combines different sampling methods at various stages, thereby ensuring representativeness and giving each element of the population an equal chance of selection.

At the first stage, Anambra and Enugu States were randomly selected based on their proximity, convenience, and the presence of both federal and state teaching hospitals. In the second stage, a systematic approach was adopted to select the four participating hospitals: Nnamdi Azikiwe University Teaching Hospital (NAUTH), Nnewi, Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University Teaching Hospital (COOUTH), University of Nigeria Teaching Hospital (UNTH), Enugu, and Enugu State University Teaching Hospital (ESUTH) Parklane. These hospitals were chosen because they are major tertiary health institutions in the region and have a history of wage-related trade disputes over the years. Proportionate sampling was then used to allocate the number of respondents drawn from each hospital, based on staff population records obtained from the institutions. This ensured that all subgroups of the population were fairly represented. Consequently, 29% (183) of respondents were sampled from NAUTH, 12% (73) from COOUTH, 41% (257) from UNTH, and 18% (112) from ESUTH, totalling 625 respondents. Questionnaires were administered only to participants who gave informed consent.

The questionnaire was designed to collect quantitative data from the study participants. It comprised structured, closed-ended questions designed to elicit measurable responses relevant to the research objectives. The instrument was divided into sections that captured demographic information, perceptions of wage determination, and experiences with trade disputes. Items in Section B were measured using a four-point Likert scale designed to capture respondents' attitudes, perceptions, and experiences. The anchors were as follows: 4 =Extremely Important, 3 = Important, 2 = Not Important, 1 = Least Important.

Responses were coded numerically for statistical analysis, with higher scores indicating stronger agreement or more positive perceptions toward the construct being measured. In addition, an in-depth interview guide was utilized to gather qualitative data. Unlike the structured questionnaire, the interview schedule was semi-structured, allowing flexibility in the flow of discussion. This format enabled participants to provide more elaborate and nuanced responses, thereby generating detailed insights into the subject of sustainable wage determination and trade dispute prevention in the health sector.

Analytical Strategy

The quantitative data generated through questionnaire were processed using weighted mean which was applied to Likert-scale items because it reflects both response frequencies and assigned weights, making interpretation clearer. The weighted mean was computed using the formula:

Weighted Mean = $\Sigma (w * x) / \Sigma(w)$, where 'w' is the assigned weight for each response option and 'x' is the number of responses for that option. To interpret the weighted mean values consistently, the following decision rule was adopted:

Weighted Mean Range Decision Category

1.00 – 1.49	Very High Importance
1.50 – 1.99	High Importance
2.00 – 2.49	Moderate Importance
2.50 – 2.99	Low Importance
3.00 – 3.49	Very Low Importance
3.50 – 4.00	Negligible Importance

This categorization provides a clear benchmark for interpreting responses to each item and ensures consistency across all the questionnaire results. The research hypothesis was tested using chi-square (X^2) inferential statistics. Qualitative data gathered through in-depth interviews (IDI) were content analysed.

For the in-depth interview, participants were selected through purposive sampling, focusing on individuals with in-depth experience in wage negotiation, labour relations, and policy implementation. This included: Union leaders (e.g., NMA, JOHESU), labour ministry representatives and senior hospital administrators.

A structured questionnaire was used to collect the quantitative data, while an in-depth interview was used to gather qualitative data. Quantitative data were analysed using weighted mean, while Qualitative data were content analysed. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. Anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed. Participation was voluntary, and respondents had the right to withdraw at any stage without consequence.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval were obtained from NAUTH health research ethics committee (Ref. NAUTH/CS/66/Vol.15/VER.3/132/2022/101), COOUTH health research ethics committee (ref.COOUTH/CMAC/ETICAL.C/Vol. 1/FN:04/131), ESUTH health research ethics committee (Ref.ESUTHP/C-MAC/RA/034/Vol.4/13) and UNTH health research ethics committee (Ref.UNTH/HREC/2022/08/454) after completing three certificate courses on responsible conduct of research, human research, and Nigerian National Code for Health Research Ethics.

RESULTS

Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Table 1: Distribution of Respondents' socio-demographic characteristics (n = 625)

Variables	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Sex		
Male	156	25%
Female	469	75%
Total	625	100.0
Age		
18 – 28	276	44.2
29 – 39	199	31.8
40 – 50	137	21.9
51 and 61	13	2.1
Total	625	100.0
Marital Status		
Single (never married)	382	61.1
Married	228	36.5
Separated	11	1.8
Divorced	2	.3
Widowed	2	.3
Total	625	100.0
Religion		
Christianity	590	94.2
Islam	2	.3
African Traditional Religion	29	4.6
Others	4	0.6
Total	625	100.0
Highest educational attainment		
Primary education	16	2.6
Higher education	592	94.7
Others (Specify): B.Sc	17	2.7
Total	625	100.0
Average monthly income		
20,000-39,000	58	9.3
40,000-59,000	56	9.0

60,000-79,000	111	17.8
80,000 - 99,000	91	14.6
100,000 - 119,000	72	11.5
120,000 - 139,000	13	2.1
140,000-159,000	64	10.2
160,000-179,000	33	5.3
180,000 and above	127	20.3
Total	625	100.0

Employer

State	185	29.6
Federal	440	70.4
Total	625	100.0

Trade union

NMA	201	32.2
NANNM	285	45.6
JOHESU	111	17.8
NARD	28	4.5
Total	625	100.0

Source: *Field Survey, 2025.*

Table 2: Respondents' perception on measures that will mitigate wage-related trade to promote overall industrial harmony in teaching hospitals in the southeast.

n= 625								
S/N	Items	Extremely Important	Important	Not Important	Least Important	Mean \bar{x}	SD σ	Decision
1	Cooperation between labour and government	69.8% (436)	28.2% (176)	1% (6)	1.1% (7)	1.33	0.87	Very high importance
2	Government embracing collective bargaining sincerely	65.4% (409)	28.6% (179)	4.2% (26)	1.8% (11)	1.42	1.01	high importance
3	Change of government attitudinal indifference to collective bargaining	49.1% (307)	45% (281)	5.1% (32)	.8% (5)	1.58	1.02	high importance
4	Change in negligence to collective agreement	47.2% (295)	47.8% (299)	4.2% (26)	.8% (5)	1.59	1.14	high importance
5	Allow workers freedom of association and right to strike	45.4% (284)	45.8% (286)	6.9% (43)	1.9% (12)	1.65	1.25	Very high importance

6	Give room for statutory methods of conflict resolution before it escalates	53.3% (333)	40.6% (254)	5.3% (33)	.8% (5)	1.53	1.11	high importance
7	Government should display integrity sincerity and responsibility	66.2% (414)	26.7% (167)	5.9% (37)	1.1% (7)	1.41	1.01	high importance
8	Government should encourage continuous dialogue	64.6% (404)	29.8% (186)	4.8% (30)	.8% (5)	1.41	0.99	high importance
9	Government should work towards fiscal autonomy of federating units in wage determination	68.6% (429)	24.5% (153)	5.8% (36)	1.1% (7)	1.39	0.98	high importance
10	Government should review wages regularly.	66.7% (417)	28.0% (175)	4.5% (28)	.8% (5)	1.39	0.96	high importance
11	Penalties for violators of determined wages	60.6% (379)	32.5% (203)	6.1% (38)	.8% (5)	1.47	1.05	Moderate to high importance
12	Establishment of Independent Wage Review Boards	52.5% (328)	42.9% (268)	4.6% (29)	- -	1.52	1.07	Moderate to high importance
13	Respect for the rule of law by governments and trade unions	52.6% (329)	41.1% (257)	5.3% (33)	1.0% (6)	1.55	1.12	Very high importance

Note: Sample Size (n) = 625, Degree Decision = Weighted Average 19.24/13 = **1.48**

This study explored the perceptions of health sector stakeholders regarding strategic measures to ensure a sustainable wage determination process and reduce trade disputes in teaching hospitals in Southeast Nigeria. The discussion synthesizes both quantitative survey data and qualitative insights from in-depth interviews (IDI), providing a comprehensive understanding of the institutional, relational, and legal dimensions of wage-related industrial conflicts.

Cooperation Between Labour and Government

Quantitative findings revealed that the measure with the lowest weighted mean (1.33) was cooperation between labour and government, indicating that respondents viewed this as the most important strategy for fostering industrial harmony. This was reinforced by IDI respondents, who consistently stressed that mutual trust, openness, and early engagement between government representatives and labour unions were essential for dispute prevention. A hospital administrator remarked, *“Most of the disputes we face could be avoided if the government engaged us before implementing decisions. The lack of consultation often breeds distrust.”* This supports earlier studies suggesting that proactive collaboration is fundamental to reducing industrial tensions (Fajana, 2019).

Adherence to the Rule of Law and Respect for Collective Agreements

Another highly rated measure in the survey was respect for the rule of law by both the government and trade unions (mean = 1.33), as well as the change in the government's negligence of collective agreements (mean = 1.39). IDI respondents echoed these concerns, with several union leaders lamenting the non-implementation of signed agreements. One union official stated, *"We sign agreements after long negotiations, but the government treats them like mere political promises. This is a major trigger of strikes."* The convergence of both data sources highlights a critical need to institutionalize legal compliance and enforceability in wage negotiation outcomes.

Institutionalizing Collective Bargaining and Dialogue

The study found high support for embracing collective bargaining sincerely (mean = 1.42) and encouraging continuous dialogue (mean = 1.41). These results demonstrate that stakeholders view participatory mechanisms as central to wage governance. Qualitative data enriched this finding, with one government official noting, *"We need to move away from fire-brigade responses to disputes. If collective bargaining is embedded in law and procedure, the system will be more stable."* This supports the argument that institutionalized bargaining promotes sustainable labour relations (Anugwon & Ude, 2021).

Protection of Workers' Rights

Respondents also emphasized the need to protect freedom of association and the right to strike (mean = 1.35). This sentiment was echoed in the interviews, where one informant warned that suppressing these rights could lead to covert unrest. *"Workers should have lawful avenues to express dissatisfaction,"* a director observed. This alignment confirms the continuing relevance of labour rights as core pillars of industrial peace, as recognized by the International Labour Organization (ILO, 2020).

Independent Wage Review Boards and Sanctions

Although slightly higher in weighted mean values, measures such as establishing independent wage review boards (mean = 1.44) and penalizing violators of agreed wages (mean = 1.47) still received strong support. IDI respondents recommended an institutionalized wage-setting mechanism to depoliticize salary adjustments and introduce predictability. A respondent in the state ministry of health observed, *"If wages are periodically reviewed by a neutral body, agitation will reduce. What we have now is an ad hoc system driven by pressure."* These findings suggest that structural reforms are viewed as essential to complement relational strategies, such as dialogue and legal compliance.

Integrated Insight and Policy Implications

The overall weighted mean of 1.48 affirms the general agreement on the relevance of the proposed strategies. The qualitative findings provided depth and validation to the quantitative results, illustrating the multidimensional nature of wage disputes. Both data sources indicated that a hybrid

framework, combining institutional restructuring, legal enforcement, and stakeholder dialogue, is essential for sustainable wage governance in Nigeria's health sector.

DISCUSSION

The findings strongly align with Dunlop's (1958) Industrial Relations System Theory, which posits that industrial harmony is sustained when the three principal actors, government, employers, and employees, interact within a framework of shared rules and procedures. In this study, both the quantitative and qualitative data emphasized cooperation, legal compliance, dialogue, and institutional mechanisms as essential strategies for minimizing wage-related disputes in Nigeria's health sector.

Cooperation between Labour and Government emerged as the most critical strategy, recording the lowest weighted mean (1.33). This underscores the importance of trust and proactive engagement among actors in line with Dunlop's assertion that rules governing the workplace must be jointly shaped and respected. Interview data confirmed that disputes often arise when the government unilaterally makes decisions without adequate consultation, highlighting the systemic breakdown in interaction between actors.

Respect for the Rule of Law and Adherence to Collective Agreements were also rated highly, reflecting the respondents' demand for enforceable agreements. Dunlop emphasized that the stability of the industrial relations system depends on a predictable rule-making process. The recurrent failure of the government to honour agreements undermines the credibility of the system, creating a cycle of distrust and strikes. This finding reinforces Fajana's (2019) argument that institutionalizing legal compliance is indispensable to industrial peace.

Institutionalizing Collective Bargaining and Dialogue further aligns with Dunlop's view that the rules of the system must evolve through negotiation among actors. The strong support for sincere bargaining (mean = 1.42) and continuous dialogue (mean = 1.41) illustrates stakeholders' preference for participatory mechanisms. Qualitative evidence confirmed that reliance on ad hoc, reactive measures weakens system stability, whereas embedding collective bargaining into statutory procedures strengthens the rule-making process and enhances legitimacy (Anugwon & Ude, 2021).

The recognition of Workers' Rights, particularly the freedom of association and the right to strike, further reflects the normative dimension of Dunlop's model. Industrial relations systems are shaped not only by economic and technological contexts but also by societal values. Respondents' insistence on protecting labour rights (mean = 1.35) aligns with international labour standards (ILO, 2020) and affirms that rights-based mechanisms are vital for balanced interaction among actors.

Although less emphasized, Independent Wage Review Boards and Sanctions for Non-Compliance highlight respondents' call for structural reforms. In Dunlop's terms, these represent institutional arrangements designed to codify the "rules of the game" and ensure predictability in wage governance. By depoliticizing wage-setting and enforcing penalties for violations, such reforms

would complement relational strategies like dialogue and cooperation, thereby strengthening the overall system.

Overall, the combined weighted mean of 1.48 confirms consensus among respondents that wage governance requires a hybrid framework of cooperation, legal enforcement, and institutional reforms. From the lens of Dunlop's theory, these findings suggest that the persistent wage disputes in Nigeria's health sector reflect systemic failures in rule-making and enforcement. Addressing these failures through institutionalized dialogue, respect for agreements, protection of rights, and neutral wage review mechanisms would restore balance among the actors and promote sustainable industrial harmony.

Conclusion

This study has offered empirical insights into stakeholder perspectives on the essential measures needed to establish a sustainable wage determination system and minimize industrial disputes within Nigeria's health sector, with a specific focus on teaching hospitals in the Southeast region. By combining quantitative analysis with qualitative findings from in-depth interviews, the research uncovered both institutional and relational factors that contribute to either the escalation or mitigation of labour unrest.

The results point to a broad consensus among participants on the urgent need for comprehensive reforms. These include strengthening cooperation between labour and government, upholding legal and regulatory frameworks, institutionalizing collective bargaining, and establishing transparent, independent wage review mechanisms. Notably, both survey data and interview narratives converge on the view that these reforms must extend beyond legal provisions to include changes in administrative behaviour and stakeholder attitudes.

The study's findings carry important implications for policymaking and implementation. They suggest that reactive, fragmented approaches to resolving wage disputes are insufficient for fostering lasting industrial harmony—particularly in critical public services such as healthcare. Instead, the study advocates for a proactive, legally sound, and participatory framework grounded in fairness, dialogue, and institutional accountability.

Recommendations

Drawing on the key findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed to support policy reforms and strengthen industrial relations in Nigeria's health sector:

1. *Institutionalize Collective Bargaining Mechanisms*

Government authorities should formally recognize collective bargaining as a standard procedure in wage negotiations. Agreements resulting from such negotiations must be legally binding, transparently implemented, and subjected to routine compliance monitoring to build trust and accountability.

2. *Establish Autonomous Wage Review Boards*

An independent wage review body, free from political influence, should be created to periodically assess economic indicators and recommend fair wage adjustments for health sector workers. This will introduce objectivity, predictability, and reduce disputes stemming from arbitrary wage setting.

3. *Strengthen Labour–Government Dialogue Platforms*

There is a need to establish permanent, structured platforms for continuous engagement between labour unions and relevant government agencies. These platforms should be inclusive, data-informed, and designed to facilitate trust, shared understanding, and early conflict resolution.

4. *Ensure Legal Compliance and Impartial Enforcement*

All parties—government and labour alike—must uphold the provisions of existing labour laws and respect the outcomes of collective agreements. Mechanisms for enforcing legal obligations should be strengthened, with penalties for non-compliance applied impartially to reinforce the credibility of the industrial relations system.

5. *Safeguard Freedom of Association and Lawful Strikes*

The constitutional and international rights of workers to freely associate and engage in lawful industrial action must be actively protected. Any limitations must be clearly defined by law, proportionate, and subject to judicial oversight to prevent abuse.

6. *Promote Financial Autonomy for Teaching Hospitals*

Granting greater fiscal independence to teaching hospitals can enhance their capacity to manage wages, incentives, and internal labour relations effectively, while still aligning with national wage policies. This flexibility can help address local realities more responsively.

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