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The Intersection of Labour Law and Environmental Concerns in the Workplace in Nigeria: A Review

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Abstract

This study examined the intersection of labour law and environmental concerns in Nigeria and Sub-Saharan Africa, focusing on the effectiveness of existing legal frameworks in addressing environmental issues in the workplace. It provides in-depth knowledge of how labour and environmental laws collectively protect workers from occupational and environmental hazards. The methodology adopted for this study is qualitative, utilising predominantly legal frameworks. The findings revealed that while labour and environmental statutes exist in Nigeria, weak enforcement and limited inter-agency coordination undermine their effectiveness in protecting workers from environmental hazards. Climate change and the prevalence of informal sector employment intensify workplace vulnerabilities, exposing the limitations of existing legal frameworks in addressing emerging occupational risks. The study concluded that an integrated legal and institutional approach is necessary to harmonise labour protection with environmental governance, strengthen enforcement mechanisms, and incorporate climate-responsive measures. Implementing such reforms would enhance workplace safety, promote environmental justice, and ensure sustainable development in Nigeria and Sub-Saharan Africa.

Keywords: Occupational Health and Safety, Environmental Governance, Corporate Accountability, Climate Adaptation, and the Just Transition Framework

Introduction

The intersection of labour law and environmental concerns has become an increasingly important area of legal and policy discourse in the twenty-first century, particularly as environmental degradation and climate change continue to reshape workplace conditions globally (International Labour Organisation [ILO], 2023). Environmental issues are perhaps the most relevant part among the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) proposed by the United Nations (Foster et al., 2022). Traditionally, labour law has focused on regulating employment relationships and ensuring safe working conditions, while environmental law has concentrated on protecting natural resources and controlling pollution (Deakin & Morris, 2021; Peel & Osofsky, 2022). However, contemporary scholarship recognises that workplace environments are directly affected by broader ecological systems, thereby necessitating an integrated legal approach (Schlosberg & Collins, 2021). Workers in sectors such as oil and gas, manufacturing, mining, and agriculture are increasingly exposed to environmental hazards, including toxic chemicals, air and water pollution, and extreme climatic conditions (Keith et al., 2021). These risks not only threaten occupational health and safety but also undermine productivity and long-term economic sustainability (ILO, 2023). In developing regions such as Sub-Saharan Africa, weak regulatory enforcement and institutional capacity further exacerbate these challenges (Adeleke, 2022). Consequently, the traditional separation between labour law and environmental governance is becoming increasingly inadequate for addressing modern workplace risks (Peel & Osofsky, 2022). Effective workplace protection requires a convergence of legal frameworks that incorporate environmental sustainability into labour regulation (Bogg & Novitz, 2020). This shift reflects a broader movement toward recognising environmental protection as an integral component of decent work and social justice (ILO, 2023). The growing relevance of environmental, social, and governance (ESG) standards further reinforces the need for integrated regulatory approaches that address both labour and environmental concerns (Bright, 2021).

In the Nigerian and broader Sub-Saharan African context, the intersection of labour law and environmental concerns presents unique challenges shaped by socio-economic conditions, regulatory limitations, and high levels of informal employment (Adeleke, 2022). Although various legal frameworks exist, including labour statutes and environmental protection laws, they often operate in isolation, resulting in fragmented regulatory oversight (Ekhatior, 2021). This fragmentation limits the ability of legal systems to effectively address environmental hazards in workplaces, particularly in high-risk industries such as oil exploration and mining (Peel & Osofsky, 2022). Empirical evidence indicates that workers in these sectors frequently experience exposure to hazardous substances and unsafe environmental conditions without adequate legal protection or enforcement mechanisms (ILO, 2023). Climate change further compounds these issues by introducing new occupational risks, such as heat stress and extreme weather conditions, which are not sufficiently addressed in existing labour laws (Keith et al., 2021). Moreover, the dominance of the informal sector excludes a

significant portion of the workforce from legal protection, thereby deepening environmental and social inequalities (Schlosberg & Collins, 2021). Institutional challenges, including weak enforcement capacity and poor inter-agency coordination, also hinder the effective implementation of both labour and environmental regulations (Adeleke, 2022). As a result, there is an urgent need to critically examine the legal frameworks governing workplace environmental issues and to develop integrated approaches that enhance worker protection and environmental sustainability (Deakin & Morris, 2021). Addressing these gaps is essential for promoting safe, equitable, and sustainable workplaces in Nigeria and across Sub-Saharan Africa (ILO, 2023).

Statement of the Problem

The increasing convergence of labour law and environmental concerns has exposed significant regulatory gaps in protecting workers from environmental hazards in Nigeria and Sub-Saharan Africa (Adeleke, 2022). Despite the existence of labour and environmental statutes, workplace exposure to pollution, toxic substances, and unsafe environmental conditions remains widespread across key sectors (International Labour Organisation [ILO], 2023). Labour laws in Nigeria largely focus on traditional occupational safety and welfare, with limited integration of environmental sustainability and climate-related risks (Deakin & Morris, 2021). Conversely, environmental regulations prioritise ecological protection without adequately addressing workers as direct victims of environmental harm (Peel & Osofsky, 2022). This regulatory disconnect creates ambiguity regarding employer obligations for environmental protection within workplaces (Adeleke, 2022).

In the oil and gas, mining and manufacturing industries, workers are disproportionately exposed to environmental hazards occasioned by degradation, without effective legal remedies (Ekhatior, 2021). Climate change further intensifies workplace risks through heat stress, extreme weather conditions, and declining labour productivity (Keith et al., 2021). However, existing occupational health and safety frameworks in Nigeria and Sub-Saharan Africa do not sufficiently incorporate climate adaptation measures (ILO, 2023). The problem is compounded by weak enforcement mechanisms and limited institutional coordination among regulatory agencies (Adeleke, 2022). Labour inspectorates and environmental agencies often operate independently, resulting in fragmented oversight and ineffective compliance monitoring (Peel & Osofsky, 2022). Additionally, the dominance of the informal sector excludes a large proportion of workers from legal protection against environmental hazards (Schlosberg & Collins, 2021). Informal workers, such as waste collectors and artisanal miners, face severe environmental risks without access to regulatory safeguards or social protection systems (ILO, 2023). Furthermore, corporate accountability mechanisms remain underdeveloped, limiting the enforcement of environmental responsibilities within workplaces (Bright, 2021).

The absence of an integrated legal framework undermines efforts to achieve environmental justice and safe working conditions in Nigeria (Adeleke, 2022). Therefore, the existing body of knowledge reveals a significant gap regarding the integration of labour law and environmental law as complementary mechanisms for addressing environmental challenges in workplace settings. This study seeks to fill this gap by critically examining the legal frameworks governing environmental issues in the workplace in Nigeria and Sub-Saharan Africa, with a view to identifying regulatory deficiencies and proposing strategies for enhancing worker protection, environmental sustainability, and environmental justice.

Environmental Issues in the Workplace

Environmental issues in the workplace have become increasingly complex as industrialisation, globalisation, and climate change reshape the nature of work and production systems (International Labour Organisation [ILO], 2023). According to Foster et al. (2022), many countries have formed policies for pollution management in industries by reducing greenhouse gas emissions while preserving natural resources from depletion. Workplace environmental issues refer to ecological and environmental conditions arising from work processes that directly or indirectly affect workers' health, safety, and well-being (Deakin & Morris, 2021). These issues extend beyond traditional occupational accidents to include toxic exposure, air and water

pollution, hazardous waste disposal, and climate-related risks such as extreme heat and flooding (Peel & Osofsky, 2022). Modern workplaces operate within broader ecological systems, meaning environmental degradation inevitably translates into occupational health challenges (Schlosberg & Collins, 2021). One major environmental issue in the workplace is exposure to toxic substances and hazardous chemicals, particularly in sectors such as oil and gas, mining, agriculture, and manufacturing (ILO, 2023). Workers exposed to substances such as silica dust, mercury, asbestos, and industrial solvents face long-term health consequences, including respiratory diseases, cancers, and neurological disorders (Keith et al., 2021). In developing regions, weak regulatory enforcement and inadequate monitoring mechanisms heighten workers' vulnerability to such exposure (Adeleke, 2022). Environmental pollution within and around workplaces, including gas flaring, oil spills, chemical discharge, and improper waste management, further exacerbates occupational risks (Peel & Osofsky, 2022).

Climate change also represents a significant workplace environmental challenge, as rising temperatures increase the prevalence of heat stress, dehydration, and reduced labour productivity, especially for outdoor workers in tropical climates (Keith et al., 2021). Researchers note that millions of workers globally are already affected by excessive heat exposure linked to climate change, demonstrating the urgent need for climate-responsive workplace regulation (ILO, 2023). Industries around the globe are key players adding fuel to the risk of environmental degradation; i.e., Pakistan, being a developing nation, is experiencing the serious challenge of changing climatic conditions, due to which the country is facing several problems, including heavy floods, droughts, extreme temperatures and a poor air quality index (Kong et al., 2021). Employees spend a considerable amount of time at work, and their working environment has an impact on their performance in integrated ways. Employees who are satisfied with their work environment are more likely to have positive work output (Zhenjing et al., 2022).

Roles of Labour Law towards Environmental Issues in the Workplace

Labour law plays a central role in guiding environmental issues in the workplace because it establishes the legal framework for ensuring safe and healthy working conditions (Deakin & Morris, 2021). The foundational principle of labour law imposes a duty of care on employers to provide workplaces free from hazards that may cause injury or illness (Bogg & Novitz, 2020). Occupational health and safety (OHS) regulations, which form part of labour law systems, require employers to identify, assess, and mitigate environmental risks affecting employees (ILO, 2023). These regulations often mandate protective equipment, environmental monitoring, risk assessments, and safety training programs designed to prevent harm arising from environmental exposure (Deakin & Morris, 2021). Scholars emphasise that although labour law was not originally designed as environmental legislation, it functions as a critical regulatory tool for addressing workplace environmental hazards (Adeleke, 2022).

Labour law also provides mechanisms for worker participation and collective bargaining, which can incorporate environmental protection measures into workplace agreements (Bogg & Novitz, 2020). Through trade unions and social dialogue structures, employees can demand safer environmental standards, thereby strengthening accountability within enterprises (ILO, 2023). Furthermore, international labour standards increasingly integrate environmental sustainability into the concept of decent work, particularly through the "Just Transition" framework that seeks to balance environmental reform with employment protection (ILO, 2023). However, scholars observe that in many Sub-Saharan African countries, labour laws remain outdated, fragmented, or weakly enforced, limiting their effectiveness in addressing emerging environmental risks such as climate change (Adeleke, 2022). Organisations with a high Workplace Safety Climate Policy to promote employee participation will strengthen mutual communication and emotional support, thus enhancing the degree of affect-based trust. In contrast, cognition-based trust will improve safety and stability and will reduce the possibility of threats to stability (Liu & Lu, 2020). Protecting the environment through human activities is known as "PEB", "green behaviour", "environment-friendly behaviour", or "low-carbon behaviour".

Human activity is one of the major driving factors of climate change, which has led to a worldwide consensus that PEB must be encouraged (Foster et al., 2022). As organisations draw essential inputs from the natural environment, business sustainability depends greatly on how they treat it. Research has found that organisations can generally increase their levels of brand recognition and sales by having a set of green policies in place (Chen et al 2021). Governments and organisations worldwide have been implementing efficient measures to combat the rapid environmental degradation. Many governments have prescribed sustainable policies, whereas organisations adopt the policies to engage in environmentally friendly workplace practices. Employee behaviour and the scope of their ecological behaviour determine the success of these practices (Farooq et al., 2021). According to Bugada et al. (2020), the functional approach to Corporate Social Responsibility is largely relevant to individual working Relationships, i.e., the prevention of occupational risks in the company (immediate issues), which is extended by environmental risk management (media issues). The normative approach is more concerned with collective aspects, i.e., the so-called voluntary standards, which some companies have adopted, i.e., technical standards, ethical standards, OECD principles, certification systems, adoption of ethical charters or other codes of good conduct. The content of these standards includes principles relating to the health, safety, and fundamental rights of employees as well as principles relating to environmental law. The law imposes an obligation on some companies to publish a social and environmental risk prevention plan annexed to the management report, for which the debtor company must ensure execution, at the risk of being held liable. The fulfilment of this new obligation could have implications for labour relations (Bugada et al., 2020).

Intersection of Labour Law and Environmental Issues

Regulation (EU) 1257/2013 on ship recycling aims to prevent accidents, injuries and other adverse effects on human health and the environment caused by ship recycling (Article 1) (Arabadjieva & Tomassetti, 2024). According to Liao (2024), global environmental issues have emerged in recent years. Environmental damage endangers human health and poses great challenges to sustainable economic development. As a fundamental component of the market economy, environmental management practices play an important role in promoting the sustainable development of industries and countries. The intersection of labour law and environmental issues arises where environmental harm directly implicates workers' rights and occupational safety (Peel & Osofsky, 2022). Environmental degradation within workplaces constitutes not only a breach of environmental standards but also a violation of labour rights to safe and dignified working conditions (Deakin & Morris, 2021). Scholars argue that treating labour law and environmental law as separate regulatory domains creates enforcement gaps and institutional fragmentation, particularly in developing economies (Adeleke, 2022). Environmental governance frameworks often focus on ecological protection at the community or national level without explicitly recognising workers as distinct environmental rights holders (Schlosberg & Collins, 2021). Conversely, labour law frameworks may address workplace safety without adequately incorporating broader sustainability and climate considerations (Bogg & Novitz, 2020). Corporate environmental accountability mechanisms further demonstrate this intersection, as environmental, social, and governance (ESG) standards increasingly require companies to assess both ecological and labour impacts of their operations (Bright, 2021). Mandatory human rights and environmental due diligence laws in some jurisdictions illustrate how labour rights and environmental protection are converging within global regulatory discourse (Bright, 2021). Climate change governance also intersects with labour law through policies aimed at transitioning to low-carbon economies, which have direct implications for employment security and workplace restructuring (ILO, 2023).

The Just Transition framework emphasises that environmental sustainability must advance alongside worker protection, social dialogue, and social justice principles (ILO, 2023). Ultimately, the intersection of labour law and environmental concerns reflects an evolving recognition that environmental protection is inseparable from workplace justice and human dignity (Schlosberg & Collins, 2021). Scholars increasingly contend that sustainable development requires integrated legal frameworks that harmonise occupational safety standards, environmental regulation, and corporate accountability mechanisms (Peel & Osofsky, 2022). In contexts such as Nigeria and other Sub-Saharan African countries, strengthening this intersection is particularly critical due

to high levels of environmental degradation, informal employment, and regulatory enforcement challenges (Adeleke, 2022). Therefore, understanding how labour law guides environmental issues and how both domains interact is essential for promoting safe, equitable, and sustainable workplaces in the contemporary era (Deakin & Morris, 2021). Environmental training and development denote a system of activities that encourage employees to study environmental conservation skills and focus on environmental issues critical in achieving environmental objectives. Saeed et al. (2018) have discovered that environmental training could expand employees' awareness, knowledge, and skills, resulting in improved employees' ecological behaviour. An example of provisions protecting both the natural environment and workers' health comes from chemical regulation. Regulation (EU) 1907/2006 (REACH Regulation) lays down provisions for the Registration, Evaluation, Authorisation and Restriction of Chemicals (REACH). Manufacturers, importers and downstream users need to ensure that they manufacture, place on the market or use chemical substances that do not adversely affect human health or the environment (Article 1(3)) (Arabadjieva et al., 2024).

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study is anchored upon an interdisciplinary synthesis of Labour Law Theory, Environmental Governance Theory, Environmental Justice Theory, Regulatory Enforcement Theory, and the Just Transition Framework. This integrated perspective posits that effective workplace regulation emerges from the interaction of legal protection of workers' rights, participatory environmental governance, equitable environmental outcomes, robust enforcement mechanisms, and transition policies that safeguard both employment and environmental sustainability. Together, these theories provide a holistic explanation of how labour and environmental objectives can be harmonised within contemporary workplaces, thereby illuminating the complex relationship between labour law, environmental responsibility, and organisational sustainability (Deakin & Morris, 2021). The framework proceeds from the assumption that workplace environmental protection is not merely a technical regulatory issue but a normative question concerning rights, power, and social justice within employment relations (Bogg & Novitz, 2020).

Labour Law theory

Labour law theory provides the foundational lens for understanding how legal systems structure the employment relationship and correct inherent inequalities of bargaining power between employers and workers (Deakin & Morris, 2021). According to this theory, the primary objective of labour law is to ensure decent work, dignity, and protection against workplace harm, including risks arising from unsafe environmental conditions (International Labour Organisation [ILO], 2023). Scholars argue that labour law embodies a protective function designed to safeguard workers' physical integrity and socio-economic security, thereby positioning occupational health and safety regulation as central to its normative core (Bogg & Novitz, 2020). Within the Nigerian and Sub-Saharan African context, labour protection theory is particularly relevant because weak enforcement mechanisms and high levels of informal employment undermine the effective realisation of safe working environments (Adeleke, 2022).

Environmental Governance Theory

Environmental governance theory complements labour law theory by conceptualising environmental protection as a system of regulatory mechanisms aimed at preventing ecological degradation and promoting sustainable development (Peel & Osofsky, 2022). This theory emphasises the role of the state, corporations, and transnational actors in managing environmental risks through statutory standards, compliance monitoring, and accountability structures (Bright, 2021). Scholars contend that environmental governance increasingly operates through hybrid regulatory models that combine public law instruments with private compliance mechanisms such as environmental, social, and governance (ESG) standards (Peel & Osofsky, 2022). In Sub-Saharan Africa, however, environmental governance is often constrained by institutional fragmentation, limited technical capacity, and regulatory capture, which weaken the protection afforded to workers exposed to environmental harm (Adeleke, 2022).

Environmental Justice Theory

It highlights the distributive and procedural inequities associated with environmental harm (Schlosberg & Collins, 2021). This theory posits that environmental risks are disproportionately borne by marginalised and economically vulnerable populations, including low-income workers and those employed in hazardous industries (Schlosberg & Collins, 2021). Within Nigeria's extractive and informal sectors, workers frequently encounter toxic exposure, pollution, and unsafe climatic conditions without meaningful participation in environmental decision-making processes, reflecting systemic injustice (Adeleke, 2022). Environmental justice therefore reframes workplace environmental hazards as issues of rights recognition, equitable risk distribution, and participatory governance (Schlosberg & Collins, 2021).

Regulatory Enforcement Theory

This theory provides an additional analytical dimension by examining the gap between formal legal provisions and practical implementation (Deakin & Morris, 2021). Scholars observe that the mere existence of labour and environmental statutes does not guarantee effective protection unless supported by strong institutions, inspection regimes, and access to remedies (Adeleke, 2022). In many Sub-Saharan African jurisdictions, enforcement deficits arise from corruption, underfunded regulatory agencies, and judicial inefficiencies, thereby limiting the operational intersection of labour and environmental protections (Adeleke, 2022). This theoretical lens underscores the importance of institutional capacity in determining whether legal frameworks meaningfully address environmental issues in the workplace (Peel & Osofsky, 2022).

Just Transition Framework

The Just Transition framework, advanced prominently by the International Labour Organisation, integrates labour protection with environmental sustainability by advocating for climate policies that safeguard employment and promote social dialogue (ILO, 2023). This framework is grounded in the principle that environmental reforms, including decarbonization and energy transition policies, must not undermine workers' rights or socio-economic stability (ILO, 2023). Scholars argue that the Just Transition approach represents a normative bridge between labour law and environmental governance by aligning ecological sustainability with decent work objectives (Bogg & Novitz, 2020). In oil-dependent economies such as Nigeria, this framework is particularly significant because environmental regulation of fossil fuel industries has direct implications for employment security and social welfare systems (Adeleke, 2022).

Collectively, these theoretical perspectives converge to support the central proposition of this study: that the intersection of labour law and environmental concerns requires an integrated legal framework capable of addressing workplace environmental risks while advancing social justice and sustainable development (Peel & Osofsky, 2022). Labour law theory establishes the protective mandate for safe working conditions; environmental governance theory defines regulatory standards for ecological protection; environmental justice theory highlights inequities in risk distribution; regulatory enforcement theory explains implementation gaps; and the Just Transition framework harmonises sustainability with employment security (ILO, 2023). In the Nigerian and broader Sub-Saharan African context, this integrated theoretical approach provides a robust analytical foundation for examining whether existing legal frameworks adequately protect workers from environmental harm and for proposing reforms that promote institutional coherence, accountability, and equitable workplace sustainability (Adeleke, 2022).

Empirical Review

Empirical scholarship examining the intersection of labour law and environmental concerns demonstrates growing recognition that workplace environmental protection is deeply shaped by regulatory enforcement, institutional capacity, and socio-economic context, particularly in developing economies (Adeleke, 2022). Studies conducted across Nigeria and Sub-Saharan Africa reveal that environmental hazards in workplaces

persist despite the existence of formal labour and environmental statutes, largely due to enforcement gaps and institutional fragmentation (International Labour Organisation [ILO], 2023). In Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria, Ordinioha and Brisibe (2013) conducted an empirical study titled *“The Human Health Implications of Crude Oil Spills in the Niger Delta”*, which examined the occupational and environmental exposure of oil workers and host communities to hydrocarbon pollution. Using field surveys and medical assessments, the study found that workers in oil exploration sites were regularly exposed to toxic substances without adequate protective measures, thereby linking environmental degradation directly to occupational health risks. The study concluded that weak enforcement of environmental standards and inadequate occupational safety compliance contributed significantly to workers’ vulnerability in the Niger Delta region (Ordinioha & Brisibe, 2013).

In Lagos, Nigeria, Akinwale (2018) conducted a study titled *“Occupational Health and Safety Systems in Nigeria’s Manufacturing Sector”*, which assessed compliance with workplace environmental and safety regulations in selected manufacturing firms. The study revealed poor implementation of environmental monitoring standards and limited integration of environmental risk management into workplace safety policies. The findings showed that although labour laws and environmental regulations formally required hazard control measures, enforcement agencies lacked adequate inspection capacity. The study concluded that institutional weaknesses undermined the practical intersection of labour and environmental governance in industrial workplaces (Akinwale, 2018). In Johannesburg, South Africa, Godfrey and Oelz (2016) examined labour inspection systems in a study titled *“Labour Inspection and Occupational Safety in South Africa”*. Through qualitative interviews and policy analysis, the researchers found that environmental hazards such as chemical exposure and mining-related dust were insufficiently addressed due to coordination gaps between labour inspectors and environmental regulatory authorities. The study concluded that improved inter-agency collaboration was necessary to protect workers from environmentally induced occupational diseases (Godfrey & Oelz, 2016).

In Accra, Ghana, Clarke and Bisung (2019) conducted research titled *“Environmental Health Risks and Informal Waste Work in Urban Ghana”*, which explored the experiences of informal waste collectors exposed to hazardous environmental conditions. Using mixed methods research, the study found that informal workers faced significant health risks due to poor waste management systems and lack of labour protections. The researchers concluded that the exclusion of informal workers from formal labour law frameworks exacerbated environmental injustice and weakened workplace environmental governance (Clarke & Bisung, 2019). In Nairobi, Kenya, Mutuku and Owuor (2021) conducted a study titled *“Climate Change and Occupational Heat Stress among Outdoor Workers in Nairobi”*, which investigated the impact of rising temperatures on construction workers. Using temperature monitoring and survey data, the study found a strong correlation between extreme heat exposure and increased workplace accidents and productivity loss. The study concluded that existing occupational safety regulations did not adequately incorporate climate adaptation measures, thereby exposing workers to preventable environmental risks (Mutuku & Owuor, 2021).

At the regional level, the International Labour Organisation (2023) conducted a multi-country assessment across Sub-Saharan Africa in its report *“World Employment and Social Outlook 2023”*, which evaluated how environmental sustainability policies intersect with labour protections. The report found that while environmental reforms were expanding across African states, labour law integration remained limited, particularly in climate adaptation planning and green economy transitions. The ILO concluded that a “Just Transition” approach was necessary to harmonise environmental governance with labour protection mechanisms across African jurisdictions (ILO, 2023). Similarly, in Abuja, Nigeria, Ekhatior (2020) examined environmental governance and oil sector regulation in a study titled *“Environmental Protection in the Nigerian Oil and Gas Industry”*. Through doctrinal and empirical analysis, the study found that regulatory agencies such as NESREA and the Department of Petroleum Resources often operated with overlapping mandates, leading to weak enforcement outcomes. The study concluded that fragmented regulatory frameworks limited the effectiveness of environmental protection for both communities and workers in Nigeria’s extractive industries (Ekhatior, 2020).

Across these empirical studies, several consistent themes emerge. First, environmental hazards in workplaces, particularly in extractive, manufacturing, and informal sectors, remain prevalent across Sub-Saharan Africa. Second, although labour laws and environmental regulations formally exist, enforcement deficits significantly weaken their impact. Third, informal employment structures exclude large segments of workers from regulatory protection. Finally, climate change introduces new workplace environmental risks that are not yet fully integrated into labour law frameworks. Collectively, the empirical evidence demonstrates that the intersection of labour law and environmental concerns in Nigeria and Sub-Saharan Africa is characterised by legal fragmentation, institutional weakness, and insufficient integration of sustainability into workplace governance. The studies consistently conclude that stronger inter-agency coordination, climate-responsive occupational health standards, and inclusion of informal workers within labour protection systems are essential to improving environmental conditions in workplaces across the region.

Research Gap

The review of existing literature on the intersection of labour law and environmental concerns reveals significant gaps at the conceptual, theoretical, and empirical levels, particularly within the Nigerian and broader Sub-Saharan African context. Although scholarship has examined labour protection, environmental governance, occupational health, and sustainability transitions independently, there remains a limited integrated analysis of how these domains converge within workplace regulation (Deakin & Morris, 2021; Peel & Osofsky, 2022). At the conceptual level, much of the literature treats labour law and environmental law as separate regulatory regimes with distinct objectives and enforcement structures (Deakin & Morris, 2021). Labour law scholarship traditionally focuses on employment relationships, collective bargaining, and workplace safety, often framing occupational health and safety narrowly as protection against immediate physical hazards (Bogg & Novitz, 2020). Conversely, environmental law literature prioritises ecological sustainability, pollution control, and climate governance, frequently centring on community-level or global environmental impacts rather than workplace-specific risks (Peel & Osofsky, 2022). This disciplinary separation creates a conceptual gap in understanding environmental harm in the workplace as simultaneously a violation of labour rights and a failure of environmental governance. In Sub-Saharan Africa, where environmental degradation directly affects industrial and extractive workers, the absence of a unified conceptual framework weakens regulatory coherence. It obscures workers' status as environmental rights holders (Adeleke, 2022). Furthermore, while climate change is increasingly recognised as a major environmental challenge, its conceptualisation as an occupational hazard requiring labour law reform remains underdeveloped in African legal scholarship (International Labour Organisation [ILO], 2023).

At the theoretical level, the literature lacks a fully integrated interdisciplinary framework capable of explaining the structural interaction between labour protection theory, environmental justice theory, and sustainability governance in developing economies. Labour law theory emphasises correcting power imbalances in employment relationships and safeguarding worker dignity (Deakin & Morris, 2021), while environmental justice theory highlights the disproportionate exposure of vulnerable populations to environmental harm (Schlosberg & Collins, 2021). However, few studies explicitly apply environmental justice theory to workplace settings in Nigeria and Sub-Saharan Africa, despite evidence that workers in extractive, agricultural, and informal sectors bear significant environmental risks (Adeleke, 2022). Additionally, regulatory enforcement theory, while acknowledging implementation gaps, has not been sufficiently employed to analyse how institutional fragmentation between labour ministries and environmental agencies undermines integrated workplace protection (Peel & Osofsky, 2022). The Just Transition framework promoted by the ILO provides a normative bridge between labour and environmental concerns. However, its application in African contexts remains largely policy-oriented rather than grounded in enforceable legal analysis (ILO, 2023). This reveals a theoretical gap in adapting global sustainability principles to local legal and institutional realities.

Empirically, the literature demonstrates further limitations. Existing studies in Nigeria and Sub-Saharan Africa frequently focus on specific sectors such as oil and gas, mining, or informal waste management, documenting environmental degradation and occupational hazards without systematically evaluating how labour and environmental statutes operate in conjunction (Adeleke, 2022). Many empirical investigations examine either

environmental pollution or occupational safety independently, rather than assessing the coordinated effectiveness of labour inspectorates and environmental regulatory agencies. Moreover, there is limited empirical research measuring the actual enforcement outcomes of statutes such as occupational health regulations or environmental compliance mechanisms in African jurisdictions (ILO, 2023). Climate-related occupational risks, including heat stress and extreme weather exposure, remain insufficiently documented at the national level despite global recognition of their growing impact (Keith et al., 2021). The informal sector, which constitutes a significant proportion of the workforce in Nigeria and Sub-Saharan Africa, is also underrepresented in empirical legal research, leaving a substantial gap in understanding how environmental hazards are regulated or unregulated outside formal employment structures (Schlosberg & Collins, 2021).

Collectively, these conceptual, theoretical, and empirical gaps indicate that the intersection of labour law and environmental concerns remains insufficiently explored within an integrated African legal framework. Existing scholarship does not adequately synthesise labour protection, environmental governance, justice principles, and enforcement realities in a manner that reflects the socio-economic and institutional conditions of Nigeria and Sub-Saharan Africa (Adeleke, 2022). Consequently, there is a pressing need for research that bridges these fragmented strands of literature, develops a context-sensitive interdisciplinary framework, and empirically evaluates the effectiveness of legal mechanisms addressing environmental issues in the workplace. By addressing these deficiencies, the present study seeks to contribute to a more coherent and practically grounded understanding of how labour law can respond to environmental challenges within developing economies.

Methodology

The study used a qualitative research methodology supported by theoretical, conceptual, and empirical literature reviews. To investigate the Intersection of Labour Law and environmental concerns, secondary data sources such as books, peer-reviewed journals, and credible accounts were examined. To synthesise important themes such as occupational health and safety, environmental governance, corporate accountability, and climate adaptation, the study employed content analysis. Labour law theory, Environmental governance theory, Environmental justice theory, Regulatory enforcement theory, and the Just Transition framework served as the theoretical foundation. This was done to understand how labour law intersects with environmental concerns in workplace regulation. This integrated methodological design ensures that the study not only evaluates the adequacy of existing legal frameworks but also situates them within broader institutional and socio-economic realities, thereby contributing to policy-relevant and context-sensitive legal scholarship in Nigeria and Sub-Saharan Africa.

Labour Law and Environmental Concerns

The analysis of existing literature, statutory frameworks, and empirical studies reveals several critical findings regarding the intersection of labour law and environmental concerns in Nigeria and the broader Sub-Saharan African context. The study finds that workplace environmental hazards remain widespread despite the existence of formal legal frameworks, indicating a substantial enforcement and implementation gap (Adeleke, 2022). Empirical evidence demonstrates that workers in high-risk sectors such as oil and gas, mining, manufacturing, and informal waste management continue to face exposure to toxic substances, unsafe working conditions, and climate-related hazards (Ordinioha & Brisibe, 2013; Clarke & Bisung, 2019). In particular, the Niger Delta region of Nigeria exemplifies how environmental degradation, including oil spills and gas flaring, directly affects occupational health, confirming that environmental harm in workplaces is inseparable from labour protection concerns (Ordinioha & Brisibe, 2013). The Labour Act (2004) and the Factories Act (2004) provide only limited protection against environmental risks, focusing primarily on traditional occupational safety measures such as accident prevention, minimum working conditions, and employee welfare (Deakin & Morris, 2021). Environmental statutes such as the National Environmental Standards and Regulations Enforcement Agency (NESREA) Act (2007) and the Petroleum Industry Act (2021) address ecological and public environmental concerns but lack explicit provisions safeguarding

workers' rights to a hazard-free workplace (Ekhatior, 2020; Peel & Osofsky, 2022). This duality creates regulatory fragmentation, whereby neither labour law nor environmental law sufficiently addresses the integrated risks posed to employees, particularly in informal and high-hazard sectors (Adeleke, 2022; Clarke & Bisung, 2019).

It was also revealed that Regulatory bodies in Nigeria and other Sub-Saharan African countries often operate in silos, with limited coordination between labour inspectorates and environmental agencies (Godfrey & Oelz, 2016; Adeleke, 2022). Consequently, compliance monitoring, enforcement inspections, and sanctions for environmental violations within workplaces are inconsistent, and many workers remain vulnerable to environmental hazards despite existing statutes. The limited technical capacity, funding constraints, and administrative overlaps contribute to persistent gaps in protection, particularly in small-scale, informal, or geographically remote workplaces (Akinwale, 2018; Mutuku & Owuor, 2021). Therefore, institutional weaknesses exacerbate the gaps between legal provisions and practical outcomes. Furthermore, the study finds that climate change introduces emerging environmental hazards that are largely unaddressed in current labour and environmental regulations. Rising temperatures, extreme weather events, and changing environmental conditions increase occupational risks, such as heat stress, dehydration, and decreased productivity, especially for outdoor and agricultural workers in Nigeria and Sub-Saharan Africa (Keith et al., 2021; ILO, 2023). Existing labour law and occupational health frameworks are largely silent on climate adaptation strategies and fail to incorporate proactive measures to protect workers from environmental and climate-induced harm. This finding underscores the urgent need for climate-responsive labour regulation and integration of environmental considerations into workplace governance (ILO, 2023; Peel & Osofsky, 2022).

The review revealed that informal sector workers remain largely unprotected by both labour and environmental laws, despite comprising a significant portion of the workforce in Sub-Saharan Africa (Clarke & Bisung, 2019). Artisanal miners, waste collectors, street vendors, and small-scale agricultural labourers often work under hazardous environmental conditions without legal recognition, social protection, or access to regulatory remedies. The exclusion of informal workers from legal safeguards highlights a critical equity gap, consistent with environmental justice theory, whereby vulnerable workers disproportionately bear environmental risks (Schlosberg & Collins, 2021). Finally, the study finds that global frameworks such as the ILO's Just Transition initiative provide normative guidance for integrating labour protection with environmental sustainability. However, their practical application in Nigeria and Sub-Saharan Africa remains limited (ILO, 2023). While the framework emphasises social dialogue, employment protection, and adaptation to climate policies, local enforcement mechanisms and statutory integration are weak, limiting the framework's effectiveness in operationalising environmental protections at the workplace level (Adeleke, 2022; Bogg & Novitz, 2020). This gap indicates that although international principles exist, domestic implementation and contextual adaptation remain critical challenges.

In summary, the findings of this study revealed several interrelated issues: persistent environmental hazards in workplaces, fragmented legal frameworks, weak institutional enforcement, insufficient climate adaptation measures, exclusion of informal workers, and limited operationalisation of global sustainability norms. Collectively, these findings highlight the urgent need for integrated legal frameworks that harmonise labour protection, environmental governance, and climate-responsive occupational health measures, ensuring that workers in Nigeria and Sub-Saharan Africa can operate in safe, sustainable, and legally protected environments (Adeleke, 2022; Deakin & Morris, 2021; ILO, 2023).

Conclusion

This study has examined the intersection of labour law and environmental concerns in the context of Nigeria and Sub-Saharan Africa, highlighting the complex interplay between workplace safety, environmental governance, and legal protection mechanisms. The analysis reveals that while formal labour laws, such as the Labour Act (2004) and the Factories Act (2004), provide foundational frameworks for occupational health and safety, they are largely inadequate in addressing environmental hazards that directly affect workers' health and productivity (Deakin & Morris, 2021). Similarly, environmental statutes, including the National

Environmental Standards and Regulations Enforcement Agency (NESREA) Act (2007) and the Petroleum Industry Act (2021), prioritise ecological protection but fail to integrate labour protections, creating a regulatory gap that leaves workers vulnerable to environmental harm (Ekhatior, 2020; Peel & Osofsky, 2022).

Empirical evidence indicates that workers in high-risk sectors such as oil and gas, mining, manufacturing, and informal waste management continue to face significant environmental and occupational hazards despite the presence of legal instruments (Ordinioha & Brisibe, 2013; Clarke & Bisung, 2019). Climate change exacerbates these risks, introducing heat stress, extreme weather exposure, and other emerging occupational hazards that are inadequately addressed in existing labour and environmental frameworks (Keith et al., 2021; ILO, 2023). Additionally, the predominance of informal employment in Sub-Saharan Africa leaves a significant portion of the workforce outside the reach of formal legal protections, highlighting issues of equity and environmental justice (Schlosberg & Collins, 2021).

The findings underscore that those institutional weaknesses, including fragmented regulatory mandates, limited enforcement capacity, and poor inter-agency coordination, significantly undermine the practical effectiveness of both labour and environmental laws (Godfrey & Oelz, 2016; Adeleke, 2022). While international frameworks, such as the ILO's Just Transition initiative, provide normative guidance for harmonising employment protection with environmental sustainability, their domestic implementation in African contexts remains limited, reflecting a disconnect between global principles and local regulatory practice (ILO, 2023; Bogg & Novitz, 2020).

In conclusion, the study establishes that the current legal frameworks in Nigeria and Sub-Saharan Africa are insufficiently integrated to provide comprehensive protection against workplace environmental hazards. Both conceptual and practical gaps persist, including the lack of a unified legal and institutional approach to labour-environment governance, limited adaptation of labour law to climate-related occupational risks, and inadequate coverage of informal sector workers. These findings indicate the urgent need for reforms that harmonise labour and environmental legislation, strengthen institutional enforcement, and embed climate-responsive occupational health standards. Doing so would promote safer, more sustainable workplaces, ensure equitable protection for all workers, and align domestic legal practice with global standards of environmental justice and decent work (Deakin & Morris, 2021; Peel & Osofsky, 2022; ILO, 2023). Implementing these reforms would advance the principles of environmental justice, occupational safety, and sustainable development across Nigeria and Sub-Saharan Africa (Deakin & Morris, 2021; ILO, 2023).

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations are proposed to strengthen the intersection of labour law and environmental governance in Nigeria and the broader Sub-Saharan African context. First, there is an urgent need for integrated legal frameworks that harmonise labour law and environmental legislation. Existing laws, including the Labour Act (2004), the Factories Act (2004), the National Environmental Standards and Regulations Enforcement Agency (NESREA) Act (2007), and the Petroleum Industry Act (2021), operate largely in isolation, resulting in regulatory gaps that leave workers vulnerable to environmental hazards (Deakin & Morris, 2021; Ekhatior, 2020). Legislative reforms should explicitly incorporate environmental protections into occupational health and safety provisions, ensuring that workplace hazards such as chemical exposure, air and water pollution, and climate-related risks are adequately addressed (Peel & Osofsky, 2022).

Secondly, there is a need to strengthen institutional enforcement and inter-agency coordination. Regulatory bodies responsible for labour and environmental oversight, including the Ministry of Labour, NESREA, and the Department of Petroleum Resources, should establish joint monitoring mechanisms, shared compliance databases, and regular inspection protocols to ensure effective enforcement of both labour and environmental standards (Godfrey & Oelz, 2016; Adeleke, 2022). Capacity-building initiatives, including training, technical support, and adequate funding, should be prioritised to address the resource constraints that currently limit regulatory effectiveness (Akinwale, 2018).

Thirdly, climate change adaptation measures should be incorporated into occupational health and safety regulations. Rising temperatures, extreme weather events, and other environmental changes significantly increase workplace hazards, particularly for outdoor and agricultural workers (Keith et al., 2021; ILO, 2023). Labour regulations should mandate proactive climate risk assessments, heat stress monitoring, provision of protective equipment, and guidelines for work scheduling to mitigate the effects of environmental and climate-related hazards. Embedding climate responsiveness into labour law would enhance the resilience and safety of workers in environmentally vulnerable sectors.

Fourthly, the study emphasises the importance of extending legal protections to informal sector workers, who constitute a substantial proportion of the workforce in Nigeria and Sub-Saharan Africa (Clarke & Bisung, 2019). Informal workers, including artisanal miners, waste collectors, and street vendors, often operate under hazardous environmental conditions without statutory protection. Legal reforms should explicitly recognise informal employment within labour and environmental laws and provide mechanisms for access to social protection, occupational health safeguards, and regulatory remedies (Schlosberg & Collins, 2021).

Furthermore, there is a need to domesticate and contextualise international frameworks, such as the ILO's Just Transition initiative, to ensure their effective implementation at the national and regional levels (ILO, 2023; Bogg & Novitz, 2020). Policies promoting sustainable and low-carbon workplaces should align with labour protection measures, including employment security, social dialogue, and worker participation, ensuring that environmental reforms do not undermine livelihoods but instead promote equitable and sustainable development.

Finally, there is a need for continuous research, monitoring, and data collection on workplace environmental hazards, legal compliance, and enforcement outcomes. Systematic empirical studies will provide policymakers and regulators with evidence-based insights necessary to update labour and environmental regulations, assess the effectiveness of enforcement strategies, and identify emerging risks in the context of climate change and industrial growth (Adeleke, 2022; Peel & Osofsky, 2022).

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