

UNION INVOLVEMENT AND WORKPLACE SAFETY OF OIL FIRMS IN RIVERS STATE.

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Abstract

This research looked at oil companies' worker safety and union participation in Rivers State, Nigeria. The study's goals were to find out how advocacy and physical safety are related, how conflict resolution and psychological safety are related, and how lobbying and environmental safety of Rivers State's oil companies are related. The Systems Theory of Industrial Relations served as the study's foundation. The study design used was correlational. Due to the modest size of the population—198 management employees from 22 oil service companies in Rivers State—a census sample approach was used. A systematic questionnaire was used to collect the data, and 187 copies, or 94.4% of the total, were successfully recovered and examined. The data was analyzed using Spearman's rank order correlation. The findings showed that there was a statistically significant, somewhat favorable link between physical safety and advocacy. Additionally, there was a moderate, positive, and statistically significant correlation between lobbying and environmental safety and a high, positive, and statistically significant correlation between psychological safety and conflict settlement. The results highlight the importance of active lobbying, credible conflict settlement, and successful union representation in enhancing safety outcomes in the oil industry. The research comes to the conclusion that union membership has a major impact on worker safety in Rivers State's oil companies. Among other things, it was suggested that in order to maintain and enhance worker psychological safety, unions and management in oil companies should set up more precise deadlines and conflict resolution procedures.

Keywords: Union involvement, Workplace safety, Advocacy, Dispute resolution, Lobbying, Oil firms, Rivers State.

Background to the Study

Oil firms occupy a central position in the economy of Rivers State, providing employment, generating government revenue, and supporting exploration and servicing activities (Nwafor et al., 2020). However, the nature of oil operations exposes workers to heavy machinery, hazardous chemicals, high-pressure equipment, and difficult environments where accidents can easily occur, making workplace safety an important concern (Aliyu & Okorie, 2022). Workplace safety refers to the measures put in place by organizations to protect employees from harm while carrying out their duties, and it covers physical, psychological, and environmental safety.

One of the major ways in which workers' safety and welfare are protected in oil firms is through union involvement, which refers to the active participation of trade unions in protecting the rights, interests, and welfare of employees (Okolie & Uche, 2022). Three concerns, namely advocacy, dispute resolution, and lobbying, represent the key dimensions through which union involvement can be understood and measured. Advocacy involves speaking on behalf of workers to promote safe workplaces and fair treatment (Aliyu & Okorie, 2022); dispute resolution involves settling disagreements between workers and management through dialogue, mediation, and collective bargaining (Edeh & Nwachukwu, 2023); while lobbying involves influencing government agencies and regulators on labour laws and safety standards (Okonkwo & Ibe, 2021). Workplace safety, measured through physical safety, psychological safety, and environmental safety, is one of the most important indicators of employee protection in the oil industry, particularly in Rivers State where oil spills, pipeline failures, and pollution are persistent concerns (Wikipedia, 2025). It is

against this background that this study examines the relationship between union involvement and workplace safety of oil firms in Rivers State.

Statement of the Problem

Oil firms in Rivers State operate in environments where employees are exposed to many workplace hazards, including heavy machinery, hazardous chemicals, high-pressure equipment, oil spills, gas leaks, and explosions. Although government regulations and company safety policies are designed to protect workers, workplace accidents, equipment failures, toxic chemical exposure, and unsafe working conditions continue to occur. These challenges threaten the health and lives of employees, reduce productivity, and increase operational costs, which suggests that existing safety measures are not always effectively implemented or consistently enforced.

Trade unions are expected to protect workers by advocating for better working conditions, resolving disputes between employees and management, and lobbying government agencies for stronger labour and safety policies. However, it is still not clear how much union involvement has improved workplace safety in oil firms operating in Rivers State, as workers continue to experience physical dangers, psychological stress, and environmental risks. Furthermore, many previous studies have examined union involvement and workplace safety from a general perspective, and few have specifically investigated how advocacy, dispute resolution, and lobbying relate to physical, psychological, and environmental safety in oil firms. It is this gap that the current study seeks to address.

Conceptual Framework

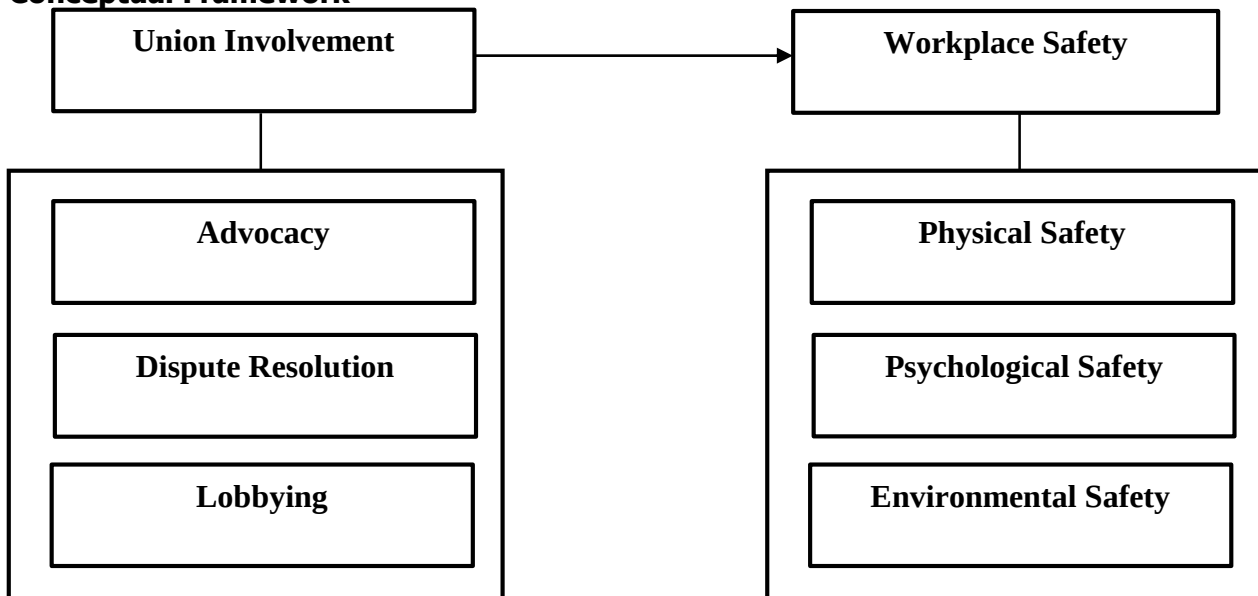


Figure 1.1: Conceptual framework showing Union Involvement and Workplace Safety.

Source: Dimensions of Union Involvement were adopted from Thacker & Fields, (2006) while measures of Workplace Safety were adopted from Christian et al., (2009).

Aim and Objectives of the Study

The aim of the study was to examine the relationship between union involvement and workplace safety of oil firms in Rivers State. The specific objectives are to:

1. investigate the relationship between advocacy and physical safety of oil firms in Rivers State.
2. determine the relationship between dispute resolution and psychological safety of oil firms in Rivers State.
3. examine the relationship between lobbying and environmental safety of oil firms in Rivers State.

Research Questions

The study was directed by the following research questions:

1. What connection exists between Rivers State's oil companies' physical safety and advocacy?
2. How do psychological safety and conflict resolution relate to oil companies in Rivers State?
3. How do environmental safety and lobbying relate to oil companies in Rivers State?

Research

Hypotheses

The study developed and examined the following research hypotheses:

H01: Advocacy and the physical safety of oil companies in Rivers State do not significantly correlate.

H02: The psychological safety of oil companies in Rivers State and conflict settlement do not significantly correlate.

H03: There is no meaningful connection between Rivers State oil companies' environmental safety and lobbying.

Review of Related Literature

Union Involvement

Union involvement refers to the active participation of trade unions in defending, promoting, and safeguarding the rights and interests of workers within the workplace and the broader economic system. Trade unions act as collective voices for employees, especially in industries where labour is vulnerable to unsafe conditions or inadequate compensation. Olatunji and Ahmed (2021) explained that union involvement encompasses actions such as collective bargaining, advocacy, dispute resolution, workplace representation, and lobbying for favourable labour laws, all of which aim to improve the working conditions, welfare, and safety of employees in high-risk sectors such as oil and gas. In Nigeria, unions such as the Petroleum and Natural Gas Senior Staff Association of Nigeria (PENGASSAN) and the Nigeria Union of Petroleum and Natural Gas Workers (NUPENG) play significant roles in advocating for oil workers' rights (Chukwu & Omodero, 2022).

Advocacy: Advocacy refers to the deliberate and strategic actions taken by trade unions to represent, defend, and promote the rights and interests of workers by amplifying their voices in conversations about workplace policies, safety standards, and welfare initiatives (Aliyu & Okorie, 2022). Onuoha and Adebajo (2021) reported that union advocacy in Nigeria's oil sector has led to the implementation of hazard allowances, the review of outdated safety protocols, and the inclusion of employee welfare in corporate policies. Advocacy also serves a preventive function, as proactive advocacy in high-risk industries helps to build a culture of safety and mutual respect in the workplace (Nwachukwu & Udeh, 2023).

Dispute Resolution: Dispute resolution refers to the methods and processes employed by trade unions to address and manage conflicts between employees and employers over issues such as unfair treatment, poor working conditions, unpaid benefits, and unsafe working conditions (Okafor & Ayoola, 2022). Unions often adopt dialogue, mediation, arbitration, and collective bargaining, which provide a platform for employees to express grievances without fear of victimization and reduce the likelihood of strikes and protests (Musa & Ogunleye, 2021). Effective union-led dispute resolution improves trust and communication between workers and employers, leading to a more stable work environment (Olayemi & Chukwuma, 2023).

Lobbying: Lobbying refers to the deliberate efforts made by trade unions to influence government policies, legislative frameworks, and regulatory decisions in favour of workers' rights and welfare. Unlike advocacy, which often focuses on internal organizational matters, lobbying is directed towards external stakeholders such as lawmakers, ministries, and regulatory agencies (Okonkwo & Ibe, 2021). In Rivers State, lobbying by trade unions has contributed to attention on unsafe working

conditions, the exploitation of contract workers, and environmental degradation (Ezenwa & Bello, 2022), and it has supported the establishment of regulatory bodies such as the Nigerian Upstream Petroleum Regulatory Commission (NUPRC) that monitor labour and safety compliance in oil firms.

Workplace Safety

Workplace safety is the set of strategies, policies, and practices put in place to protect workers from hazards and risks that could result in injury, illness, or fatality within their work environment. It encompasses physical, psychological, and environmental measures aimed at creating a secure and conducive atmosphere for employees to perform their tasks effectively. In high-risk industries such as oil and gas, workplace safety is particularly crucial due to the presence of flammable substances, heavy machinery, and exposure to toxic chemicals, and maintaining it is not only a legal and ethical responsibility but also a critical component for enhancing productivity and organizational performance (Alabi & Odu, 2021).

Physical Safety: Physical safety refers to the protection of employees from bodily harm, injuries, or accidents that may occur during the execution of work-related duties, such as falls, equipment malfunctions, fire outbreaks, and electrical accidents (Iroanya & Akpan, 2022). Effective physical safety practices include risk assessments, safety training, the use of personal protective equipment such as helmets, gloves, boots, and flame-resistant clothing (Olayemi & Eze, 2021), and continuous safety drills that enhance workers' preparedness for emergencies (Uche & Nwosu, 2023).

Psychological Safety: Psychological safety refers to the extent to which employees feel safe to express themselves, report concerns, and admit mistakes without fear of ridicule, punishment, or exclusion (Okafor & Jimoh, 2021). Employees who perceive a psychologically safe environment are more likely to speak up about unsafe practices (Adeoye & Igwe, 2022), and supportive leadership, anti-bullying policies, and counselling services help to reduce work-related stress and strengthen this climate (Balogun & Alade, 2020).

Environmental Safety: Environmental safety refers to the protection of employees from hazards in their physical surroundings, including chemical and environmental factors, through practices that manage waste, prevent pollution, and control exposure to toxic substances (Ibrahim & Nwachukwu, 2021). In environmentally sensitive areas like Rivers State, spills, gas flaring, and hazardous chemical handling expose workers and communities to significant health risks, and continuous environmental monitoring and early-warning systems help firms to detect and control hazards before they escalate (Nwosu & Ekanem, 2023).

Theoretical Review: Systems Theory of Industrial Relations

The Systems Theory of Industrial Relations was propounded by John Dunlop in 1958. The theory views the workplace as a subsystem of society in which three main actors, namely employees (represented by unions), employers, and government, interact within a framework of rules and institutions. Dunlop's framework emphasizes the need for balance and cooperation among these actors to maintain workplace harmony and safety. In oil firms, union involvement through advocacy, dispute resolution, and lobbying forms part of the interaction mechanism that helps maintain standards of physical, psychological, and environmental safety.

Assumptions of the Theory: The Systems Theory of Industrial Relations is built on several key assumptions:

1. The workplace is a subsystem of a larger social, economic, and political environment.
2. Employers, employees (through unions), and government are interdependent actors who influence one another.
3. Formal and informal rules govern the behaviour of the actors in the workplace.

4. The system seeks stability and equity in employment relationships.
5. Feedback mechanisms help the system to adapt and improve over time.

Relevance of the Theory to the Study

The Systems Theory of Industrial Relations is relevant because the study examines the relationship between union involvement (comprising advocacy, dispute resolution, and lobbying) and workplace safety (comprising physical, psychological, and environmental safety) within oil firms. It provides a conceptual lens for understanding how the interaction among unions, management, and government shapes safety policies and practices, and how union feedback prompts organizations and regulators to adapt and improve safety measures.

Empirical Review

Okafor and Ibrahim (2021) examined union involvement and workplace safety in oil and gas firms in Delta State and found a strong positive relationship, as union advocacy pressed for safer working conditions, dispute resolution reduced tensions that could lead to accidents, and lobbying influenced the implementation of safety standards. Similarly, Balogun and Eze (2022) investigated oil and gas firms in Bayelsa State and reported that safety advocacy and participation in safety committees significantly improved hazard reporting, reduced workplace accidents, and enhanced compliance with environmental safety standards, while Okonkwo and Ibrahim (2021) found that union lobbying significantly influenced the enforcement of safety regulations and the provision of safety equipment in oil servicing companies. These findings suggest that union involvement is an important contributor to safety in oil firms. However, gaps remain in understanding how these relationships play out specifically in Rivers State, which the current study addresses. Also, Onuoha and Adebajo (2021) found that advocacy and trade union effectiveness significantly shaped organisational safety and welfare practices in Nigerian multinational firms, while Alabi and Odu (2021) established that workplace safety was strongly linked to organised employee representation in Nigeria's oil sector. Chukwuma and Adebayo (2022) argued that collective bargaining and dispute resolution mechanisms in the oil and gas sector reduce prolonged workplace tension and support employees' emotional wellbeing, and Eze and Okwoli (2023) observed that workplace conflict resolution was significantly related to employees' psychological outcomes in the Nigerian energy industry. Furthermore, Agbo and Nwachukwu (2022) found that union lobbying exerted meaningful influence on policy outcomes in Nigeria's extractive industries, including environmental regulation, while Ekanem and Ojo (2021) established that trade unions' environmental advocacy in the Niger Delta contributed to improved attention to environmental hazards, and Onyekwere and Udoh (2022) found that workplace environmental safety was significantly related to the extent of union lobbying. Despite these insights, limited empirical work has examined advocacy, dispute resolution, and lobbying in relation to physical, psychological, and environmental safety within a single study focused on oil firms in Rivers State. The current study aims to bridge this gap by examining how the dimensions of union involvement relate to the measures of workplace safety in the sector.

METHODOLOGY

A correlational research design was used in the study. 198 managerial employees from 22 oil service companies in Rivers State made up the study's population. Finelib (2026) provided population and participating company data. Because the population was small and controllable, a census sample approach was used, and a purposive sampling strategy was utilized to find respondents who had firsthand experience of union activity and workplace safety. The Union Involvement and Workplace Safety Questionnaire (UIWSQ), a self-designed structured questionnaire with a four-point Likert scale, was used to gather data. The study supervisor validated the instrument, and a pilot study utilizing the Cronbach Alpha approach verified its reliability; a coefficient of 0.70 or above indicates good internal consistency. Human resource managers from each of the 22 companies assisted in the personal administration of the questionnaires. Out of the 198 copies that were distributed, 187

copies, or 94.4%, were successfully recovered and determined to be useable. Spearman's Rank Order Correlation Coefficient was used to analyze the data using SPSS at a significance threshold of 0.05.

Results

H0₁: There is no significant relationship between advocacy and physical safety of oil firms in Rivers State.

Table 1: Correlations between advocacy and physical safety

		Advocacy	Physical Safety
Spearman's rho	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.412**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000
	N	181	181
Physical Safety	Correlation Coefficient	.412**	1.000
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.
	N	181	181

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Source: SPSS Output, 2026

With a significance level of 0.000 and a Spearman's rho value of 0.412, the correlation result falls below the 0.01 cutoff. This suggests that advocacy and the physical safety of oil companies in Rivers State have a modest, positive, and statistically significant link. Practically speaking, this implies that physical safety conditions at oil companies tend to improve in tandem with the effectiveness of union campaigning efforts. The null hypothesis (H0₁), which asserts that there is no significant association between the two variables, is rejected since the p-value is less than 0.01.

H0₂: There is no significant relationship between dispute resolution and psychological safety of oil firms in Rivers State.

Table 2: Correlations between dispute resolution and psychological safety

		Dispute Resolution	Psychological Safety
Spearman's rho	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.558**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000
	N	181	181
Psychological Safety	Correlation Coefficient	.558**	1.000
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.
	N	181	181

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Source: SPSS Output, 2026

A substantial, positive, and statistically significant association between dispute settlement and the psychological safety of oil companies in Rivers State is shown by the correlation analysis for Hypothesis Two, which shows a Spearman's rho value of 0.558 with a significance value of 0.000. This implies that how well unions arbitrate and settle workplace conflicts has a significant impact on how psychologically secure employees feel in their companies. The null hypothesis (H0₂) is rejected since the result is statistically significant because the p-value (0.000) is less than the 0.01 significance level.

H0₃: There is no significant relationship between lobbying and environmental safety of oil firms in Rivers State.

Table 3: Correlations between lobbying and environmental safety

			Lobbying	Environmental Safety
Spearman's rho	Lobbying	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.336**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000
		N	181	181
	Environmental Safety	Correlation Coefficient	.336**	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.
		N	181	181

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Source: SPSS Output, 2026

The correlation result for Hypothesis Three shows a Spearman's rho value of 0.336 with a significance level of 0.000, indicating a moderate, positive, and statistically significant relationship between lobbying and environmental safety of oil firms in Rivers State. This suggests that union lobbying efforts, though modest in their current reach, contribute meaningfully to improvements in environmental safety practices within oil firms. Since the p-value is below 0.01, the null hypothesis (H0₃) is rejected.

Discussion of Findings

Advocacy and Physical Safety

The result of the first hypothesis revealed a moderate and statistically significant positive relationship between advocacy and physical safety of oil firms in Rivers State ($r = 0.412$, $p < 0.01$). This finding implies that when trade unions actively advocate for improved workplace safety policies, oil firms tend to experience better physical safety outcomes for their employees. This outcome aligns with the findings of Onuoha and Adebajo (2021), who reported that advocacy and trade union effectiveness significantly shaped organisational safety and welfare practices. Similarly, Alabi and Odu (2021) established that workplace safety was strongly linked to organised employee representation in Nigeria's oil sector, since represented workers were more able to press for protective equipment and safer working conditions, while Aliyu and Okorie (2022) found that union advocacy reduced exposure to occupational hazards. The relationship is moderate rather than strong because physical safety is also influenced by firm-level safety culture and management commitment (Iroanya & Akpan, 2022), and by the consistency with which management enforces the use of safety equipment (Olayemi & Eze, 2021).

Dispute Resolution and Psychological Safety

The analysis of the second hypothesis demonstrated a strong and significant positive relationship between dispute resolution and psychological safety among oil firms in Rivers State ($r = 0.558$, $p < 0.01$). This suggests that the effectiveness with which unions mediate workplace disputes and address employee grievances has a considerable influence on how psychologically secure workers feel. This finding is consistent with the work of Chukwuma and Adebayo (2022), who argued that effective dispute resolution mechanisms reduce prolonged workplace tension and support employees' emotional wellbeing. Additionally, Edeh and Nwachukwu (2023) found that dispute resolution processes were significantly associated with industrial harmony in oil and gas companies in the Niger Delta, and Eze and Okwoli (2023) observed that workers who trusted that their grievances would be fairly addressed reported lower stress and higher morale. The strong correlation observed in this study supports earlier evidence, although the timeliness of dispute

resolution remains an area of concern, in line with the observation of Ibrahim and Adeoye (2022) that dispute resolution mechanisms in the oil sector are often slowed by bureaucratic bottlenecks.

Lobbying and Environmental Safety

The result of the third hypothesis revealed a moderate and statistically significant positive relationship between lobbying and environmental safety of oil firms in Rivers State ($r = 0.336$, $p < 0.01$). This implies that where trade unions engage government agencies and regulatory authorities to promote stronger environmental and safety regulations, oil firms tend to record comparatively better environmental safety outcomes. This finding aligns with the work of Agbo and Nwachukwu (2022), who found that union lobbying exerted meaningful influence on policy outcomes in Nigeria's extractive industries. Similarly, Ekanem and Ojo (2021) established that trade unions' environmental advocacy in the Niger Delta contributed to improved attention to environmental hazards, even where enforcement remained inconsistent, and Onyekwere and Udoh (2022) found that environmental safety was significantly related to the extent of union lobbying. The relationship is moderate rather than strong because environmental safety is shaped by a complex interplay of regulatory, corporate, and community factors, of which union lobbying is only one element (Okoro & Ayoola, 2023), and because persistent oil spill incidents and compliance gaps continue to be documented in the Niger Delta (NOSDRA, 2025; NUPRC, 2025).

CONCLUSION

This study examined the relationship between union involvement and workplace safety of oil firms in Rivers State. The findings demonstrated that union advocacy is positively related to physical safety, that dispute resolution is a strong driver of psychological safety, and that lobbying contributes meaningfully to environmental safety. These outcomes underscore that workplace safety in oil firms is not shaped solely by firm-level safety management practices but is substantially influenced by the collective action of trade unions. When unions effectively advocate for workers, resolve disputes fairly and promptly, and engage government and regulatory agencies, oil firms are better positioned to provide workplaces that are physically, psychologically, and environmentally safe.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Trade unions should strengthen advocacy channels that allow individual workers to raise specific physical safety concerns, ensuring these concerns are reflected in the broader safety policies unions negotiate with management.
2. Unions and management in oil firms should establish clearer timelines and structures for dispute resolution to sustain and further improve psychological safety among workers.
3. Trade unions should intensify collaboration with environmental regulatory agencies such as NOSDRA and NUPRC to strengthen lobbying efforts and improve the practical control of environmental hazards in oil firms.

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