

Salary Stoppage amidst COVID-19 Lockdown and Coping Strategies by Members of the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) in Nigeria

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Abstract: Globally, nations have been facing serious socio-economic hardship occasioned by the novel COVID-19 virus. Nigeria as a nation has had its own share of socio-economic downturn as many activities were shutdown to contain the spread of the virus in the absence of vaccine. Apart from general lockdown and inter-state border closure, which crippled economic activities in Nigeria and plunged many Nigerians into hardship and starvation, lecturers in federal universities and their families were further subjected into harsh living conditions as the Nigerian government stopped their salaries for months without COVID-19 palliatives for failure to register with Integrated Payroll and Personnel Information System (IPPIS). This study seeks to find out how lecturers coped with the lockdown without salaries. In-depth interview was used for data collection, and analysed using themes and quotes. Twenty-four lecturers were purposively selected for the study. Findings from the study revealed that most lecturers took loans to enable them feed, while others used their cars for shuttles/taxis. The results further indicated that lecturers who have lands went into farming for food production, while some others engaged in home lessons for the children of the rich to make ends meet. The study recommends amongst others that both the Federal Government (FG) and ASUU should always have their seats in the round table to negotiate and resolve differences instead of recurrent industrial crisis. Social workers as conflict resolution specialists should also be employed in the federal ministry of labour and employment as well as have them in the leadership of ASUU.

Keywords: ASUU, Coping Strategies, COVID-19 Lockdown, Salary Stoppage, Social Work

I. Introduction

The 21st century is currently experiencing the most devastating and unprecedented global pandemic in the history of mankind as a result of an outbreak of a novel virus known as coronavirus. Though the World Health Organization (WHO) announced the outbreak of the new virus (SARS-CoV-2) at the beginning of the year 2020, it was first reported in the city of Wuhan, China, in December 2019 and has since then spread to other countries, making it a global pandemic with devastating effects (Adhikari et al., 2020; Adnan et al., 2020; Congressional Research Service., 2020; Harapan et al., 2020; Unhale et al 2020; WHO, 2020).

The first case of covid-19 in Nigeria was discovered on February 27, 2020 through a traveler who arrived Lagos from Europe. Since then, the virus has spread across all the states of the federation with confirmed cases and death tolls increasing on daily basis (Ohia et al, 2020; Nigeria Centre for Disease Control {NCDC}, 2020). In response, measures such as lockdown, social distancing, self-isolation, and observation of simple hygiene habits have been recommended globally to contain the spread of the disease among people (Adnan et al., 2020; Ohia et al, 2020).

Amidst these challenges posed by COVID-19 pandemic, the Nigerian government led by President Muhammadu Buhari ordered the stoppage of salaries of lecturers in the federal universities across the country

that refused to enroll into the IPPIS. According to Fawole (2020) and Onyekpe (2020), lecturers' salaries were stopped by the federal government allegedly because of their refusal to be forcefully migrated into a payment platform (IPPIS) that has been convincingly proved to be highly defective, that violates university autonomy and provisions of subsisting negotiated agreements, which the government has bluntly refused to implement, among others.

IPPIS is a centralized payment platform introduced by the federal government for the payment of all federal workers that draw their salaries from the central purse of the government. The government claimed that IPPIS has helped it fished out thousands of ghost workers and saved billions of naira. It further claimed that IPPIS entrenches transparency and accountability and reduces corruption in Ministries, Agencies, and Departments (MDAs), and therefore would curb waste and corruption in public service by eliminating ghost workers as well as help in determining the accurate number of its workforce (This day, 2020). However, ASUU argued that IPPIS is unfit to take care of the peculiarities of the university, and accused government of trying to erode the university autonomy and make lecturers' career civil servants through the imposition of IPPIS.

As an alternative to IPPIS, ASUU presented a more robust and university friendly payment platform called University Transparency and Accountability Solution (UTAS), which government jettisoned and ordered the stoppage of salaries of ASUU members. Angered by the stoppage of their salaries and government's failure to implement previous agreements it entered with the union, ASUU embarked on warning strike on March 9, 2020, which snow-balled into total, comprehensive and indefinite strike on March 23, 2020. Though the strike had to do with government's failure to implement previous agreements it entered with ASUU; it was unarguably triggered by government insistence on forceful enrolment of ASUU members into IPPIS and the consequent stoppage of their salaries. According to Adebayo (2020), ASUU declared an indefinite strike over the withholding of salaries of their members who defied government's order to enroll on IPPIS.

The lecturers were without salaries between February and April/May 2020 and were subjected to economic hardship with their families. Following public outcry and backlash, President Muhammadu Buhari on April 22 ordered the immediate payment of 2 months (February and March) salaries to ASUU members to cushion the effects of COVID-19 lockdown on the lecturers, their family members and dependents. The public opinion had been that it was utterly wrong, unreasonable, and insensitive for the government to have stopped salaries in the COVID-19 situation (Onyekpe, 2020). However, these salaries were not paid until May 2020 as some top government officials like the Accountant General of the Federation (AGF), insisted that the lecturers must submit their Bank Verification Numbers (BVNs) before their salaries could be paid.

Again, ASUU rejected the directive, claiming the government wanted to enroll them into IPPIS through the back door. It took the intervention of high-powered individuals and groups before the lecturers were paid through the same IPPIS but with another name (*hybrid payment platform*). According to Adejumo (2020), it took a high level of intervention before our members were paid amputated salaries for three months, after which the government resorted to blackmail and intimidations of our members. The government further paid some ASUU members their salaries up to June 2020 before finally stopping the salaries. It is worthy to note that after paying some lecturers the said salaries up to June, the federal government again ordered the stoppage of lecturers' salaries effective July 2020. This development continued until December 2020 with the government withholding salaries of ASUU members (Adeyemi, 2020).

As a result of the effects of salary stoppage, ASUU members found it difficult to feed their families. According to Premium Times (2020), Nigerian university lecturers are facing serious economic hardship after being denied their salaries for refusal to enroll in IPPIS, as they are now living on debts or depending on family members and friends for survival. However, not minding their sufferings, ASUU maintained that government should accept UTAS as a method of payment before it would suspend its strike. According to Adejumo (2020), ASUU is not ready to suspend its ongoing strike until government pays outstanding withheld salaries, approve UTAS, and meet other demands by the union. The demands according to him includes, the implementation of outstanding components of 2009 FG-ASUU agreement, revitalization funding of universities, unpaid Earned Academic Allowance (EEA), and renegotiation of the 2009 agreement for upward review of salaries of lecturers to conform with contemporary reality. Ogunyemi (2020) stated that the federal government has neither

implemented nor fulfilled any of the offers it made to ASUU, therefore, members would not return to classes on empty stomachs after 8 months. This therefore means that the federal government is still starving the lecturers and their family members by unlawfully withholding their salaries. As a result, ASUU leadership asked its members to seek acceptable means of feeding themselves and dependents. According to Lagi (2020), our members have been advised to seek other legitimate means of survival as the government has not released salaries withheld since February 2020. This study is therefore aimed at finding out how ASUU members were coping without salaries in the midst of COVID-19 lockdown.

II. Materials and methods

Study area

The study was carried out in Nigerian federal universities across the country and included all lecturers in the federal universities. According to Ahmed (2020), there are about 130, 000 lecturers across the 43 federal universities in Nigeria. The rationale behind the choice of this study in Nigerian federal universities is because of hunger and starvation experienced by the lecturers in these institutions as a result of withholding their salaries by the government. According to Onyekpe (2020), payment was originally stopped in February 2020 because of the refusal by the teachers through their union, ASUU to enroll on IPPIS.

Sampling procedure

Multistage sampling technique was used in the selection of institutions and participants. First, the entire universities in Nigeria were clustered into the existing 6 geopolitical zones. The zones are Northeast, North central, Northwest, Southeast and Southwest. Thereafter, simple random sampling method was used to select 12 universities (2 from each zone). The selected universities were University of Nigeria, Nsukka (UNN) and Alex Ekwueme Federal University, Ndufu-Alike (AEFUNAI) [South-East], University of Benin (UNIBEN) and University of Calabar (UNICAL) [South-South], University of Lagos (UNILAG) and University of Ibadan (UI) [South-West], University of Ilorin (UNILORIN) and University of Abuja (UNIABUJA) [North-Central], University of Maiduguri (UNIMAID) and Abubakar Tafawa Balewa University, Bauchi (ATBU) [North-East], and Bayero University, Kano (BAYERO) and Usmanu Danfodio University, Sokoto (UDU) [North-West]. Furthermore, the researchers adopted purposive sampling technique in the selection of 2 participants from each of the already selected universities to constitute the sample size. The choice of purposive sampling method stemmed from the researchers' awareness and conviction that the concerned lecturers were knowledgeable, part and parcel of the topic under investigation, and were willing to share their knowledge and experience with the researchers. In all, 24 lecturers were selected across the universities for the study. The rationale behind the choice of academic staff only as participants was because of their knowledge of coping strategies adopted to survive by lecturers whose salaries were withheld by the federal government amidst COVID-19 lockdown in the country. They were also included in the study based on convenience and willingness to participate.

Data collection

The instrument for data collection was In-depth interview (IDI). The IDI schedules were pretested and reviewed by the researchers to ensure consistency and objectivity. Because of COVID-19 pandemic, lockdown order, and distance, telephone interviews were adopted as the method of data collection. Smart phones with call recording features were used for the interview after obtaining the consents of the respondents. The language used for the interviews was English language since the participants were all academics. The interviews took place at the convenience of the participants with each interview lasting about 45 to 60. This exercise took place between August 2020 and July 2021.

Data analysis

The transcribed interviews were compared with the notes taken during the telephone interviews to ensure that no response was omitted. The notes on emerging themes written by the researchers were then exchanged and double-checked for validation (Ekoh et al, 2022). The researchers independently read and reread the transcripts to familiarize themselves with the data. The transcribed and translated interviews were imported into Nvivo9

software using thematic analysis, it was read while being coded and emerging themes was reviewed by the researchers for uniformity, frequency and validity. In forming thematic analysis, major themes include reasons for COVID-19 lockdown, reasons for salary stoppage and survival mechanisms adopted by lecturers to survive the nonpayment of salaries. These themes emerged from the analysis but were guided by the research questions.

III. Results

Demographic characteristics of participants

Twenty-four lecturers participated in the study, out of which 13 were males, while 11 were females. All the participants had completed postgraduate programmes (MSc and PhD); and aged between 25 and 65 58 years. All participants are academic staff. With regards to their religion, 15 were Christians, 8 were Muslims, while 1 was a freethinker.

Reasons for COVID-19 lockdown

We enquired for reasons for the COVID-19 lockdown in Nigeria, which generated mixed reactions among the respondents. Some of the respondents noted that Nigerian government enforced lockdown throughout the country to help in the containment of the virus, which was spreading very fast and adjudged one of the most contagious and deadly pandemic ever witnessed in the history of mankind. Others believed that the government enforced lockdown and claimed the existence of COVID-19 to enable them siphon public funds and enrich themselves. One of the respondents stated thus:

Lockdown was enforced to checkmate the spread of the virus from other countries to Nigeria, from one state of the country to another, or from one community to another. Further, lockdown was put in place because of poor medical facilities in Nigeria, high cost of diagnosis, treatment and management of COVID-19 patients, death of high-profile individuals to the pandemic, and to encourage Nigerians to observe safety measures such as constant hand washing, use of alcohol based sanitizers, wearing of facemask, and observation of social distance (*Male Lecturer, UNIABUJA*).

Another respondent added:

Government enforced Covid-19 lockdown due to the high increase of the virus in Nigeria. It was also enforced because the WHO saw that through that way the rate at which the spread of the virus was occurring could stop or subside. It was also gathered that it was a medium for government officials to embezzle public funds for their own selfish interest (*Female Lecturer, UNICAL*).

Still on the issue of lockdown, another respondent noted, '*government had to enforce COVID-19 lockdown to curb the spread of the disease since it is easily transmitted once a healthy individual comes in contact with an infected person*' (*Male Lecturer, BAYERO*). Another respondent said:

It was discovered that COVID-19 is a highly infectious disease and to curtail its spread, scientists recommended lockdown. To this effect, governments all over the world acceded to the recommendations and imposed lockdown (*Female, Lecturer, ATBU*).

Reasons for stoppage of salaries of lecturers

Our interviews with the respondents revealed that Nigerian government stopped the salaries of lecturers to compel them into enrolling with the IPPIS, which the lecturers earlier rejected for its inability to capture the peculiarities in the university system, and instead embarked on strike to demand for the implementations of 2009 agreements reached with the government. Some respondents said that the government stopped salaries of ASUU members because of breakdown in negotiations between the government and ASUU. Reacting further, a respondent narrated how government's failure to honor agreements it voluntarily entered with ASUU, and the union's refusal to be forcefully enrolled into IPPIS led to the salary stoppage. Listen to him:

The ASUU embarked on a total, comprehensive and Indefinite strike action due to continuous failure of the federal government to implement several agreements, such as Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) and Memorandum of Action (MoA) aimed at rehabilitating and improving learning conditions in the 93 public universities in the country. Recall, there was a truce between ASUU and FG that led to the

suspension of an ASUU strike on the 7th February 2019 called the FGN/ASUU MoA, which collapsed and led to the current strike (**Male Lecturer, AEFUNAI**).

Still on the reason for salary stoppage, a respondent had this to say:

The government stopped the salaries of the lecturers because of the non-compliance attitude on the part of the lecturers as regards to the lecturers not enrolling in IPPIS platform for the payment of their salaries. There was also other speculation that there was no fund to pay lecturers due to the outbreak of the pandemic as the government concentrated more efforts to the provisions of palliatives. However, I refused to subscribe to this as government at the period, was also paying other federal government staff including some lecturers who enrolled into IPPIS (**Male Lecturer, UNIMAID**).

Another respondent quipped:

Due to the refusal of ASUU to enroll in IPPIS, the government withheld the salaries of its members to intimidate them into going back to classrooms. This followed the earlier directive by the government that any MDA that refuses to enroll in IPPIS will not be paid through any other platform. Coincidentally, this salary stoppage happened during COVID-19 lockdown, and this put the poor lecturers in a very tight corner (**Female Lecturer, UNIBEN**).

Another respondent stated:

The federal government stopped the salaries of lecturers in the federal universities because they embarked on strike to demand for funds for the revitalization of public universities in Nigeria, following the agreements reached in 2009, 2013 and 2019, which includes proliferation of state universities, non-constitution of visitation panels to federal universities, and non-payment of Earned Academic Allowance (EAA) etc. Salaries were also stopped because of lecturers' refusal to enroll in IPPIS. They had earlier rejected imposition of IPPIS by the government and rather opted for UTAS. In all, the government's major reason was to use hunger as a strategy to make lecturers quickly drop their demands and agitation for better funding of universities and return to classrooms (**Female Lecturer, UNN**).

Experiences/effects of salary stoppage on lecturers and families

We asked to find out the effects of non-payment of salaries on the striking lecturers, their families and dependents. Findings revealed that lecturers and families were facing untold hardship as a result of salary stoppage by the federal government. They were forced to cut down on their expenditure, abandon some of their financial and social responsibilities, trekking long distances and doing other forms of menial jobs to survive. One of the respondents had this to say:

The effects/experiences of lecturers during the salary stoppage were better imagined than experienced. The qualities and quantities of food prepared in lecturers' homes were drastically reduced as they and their families ate what was available and not what they would have liked to eat. Social activities were reduced only to the inevitable and of necessity. Egos and self-esteem of lecturers dropped as they became laughing stock of the non-academic staff, the uninformed public, students and their parents, whose interest the lecturers were partly protecting (**Male Lecturer, UNN**).

It was observed through the interviews that withholding of salaries of lecturers for long led to hunger, frustration and starvation on the university teachers, as there were cases of attempted suicide among the starving lecturers. According to a respondent, '*there was no motivation for lecturers to do research and other academic studies as they concentrated on how to feed themselves and families amidst their frustrated situations*' (**Female Lecturer, UI**). Another respondent noted, '*lecturers were exposed to hunger and unnecessary stress to make ends meet. Some colleagues who could not cope died out of frustrations and sicknesses*' (**Male Lecturer, BAYERO**).

Another respondent narrated the effects of salary stoppage through the following quotes:

Saying that our families experienced hardship will be an understatement. You can imagine lectures and their families coping during the lock down/restriction order by the government with no reliable source of income. Not even the palliatives that most workers received were given to lecturers. Most colleagues were ejected by their landlords for their inability to renew their house rents. To me, it was a very sad/ugly experience (**Male Lecturer, ATBU**).

Another said:

Experiences and effects of salary stoppage include economic hardship leading to poverty, inability to feed our families, pay school fees, renew our tenancy, health deterioration and death of some members (**Female Lecturer, UNILORIN**).

Periods of salary stoppage

The researchers probed to find out how long the government withheld the salaries of ASUU members. From the analysis of the interviews, it was discovered that the government withheld the lecturers' salaries for the cumulative period of 11 months (February to December 2020). Though some lecturers were later paid up to June after initial stoppage on February, others were not paid a dime till December 2020. Yet, some others did not receive any salary up to July, 2021 (18 months). This group of people was claimed by the OAGF to have irregularities and inconsistencies in their bank details. Majority of the respondents opined that the FG had withheld their salaries from February to December 2020. In lending his voice, a respondent phrased, '*the Federal government has withheld the salaries of lecturers for a period of eleven months*' (**Male Lecturer, UNICAL**). Another said, '*the federal government withheld our salary from February to December, 2020*' (**Female Lecturer, UDU**). Still on the above subject, another respondent opined, '*the government delayed lecturers' salaries for nine months, and even now, there is still down of salary payment*' (**Female Lecturer, UNILAG**). Another respondent notified, '*depending on individuals and universities, the period of stoppage ranges from six to eighteen months, as some lecturers have not been paid salaries since February 2020 to July, 2021*' (**Male Lecturer, UNN**).

Another stated:

The first stoppage was from February 2020 to June 2020 (5 months). The second one started from July 2020 till December 2020 (6 months). However, over 1000 lecturers across the country have not being paid their salaries for cumulative periods of 18 months. Nobody knows when it will actually be paid as the government is not trustworthy. They say one thing today and do another thing tomorrow (**Male Lecturer, UDU**).

Coping strategies by lecturers during salary stoppage

Questions were raised to ascertain strategies adopted by the starving lecturers to feed themselves and families during the period of salary stoppage amidst COVID-19 lockdown. Responses from the participants revealed that the lecturers had to device other legitimate means to make sure they survive hunger, frustration and starvation. It was discovered that while some went into farming and menial jobs, others took soft loans for petty businesses. For example, a respondent stated that he had to go into farming and turned his car into taxi to enable him feed his family. Another said, '*some lecturers have other businesses running for them, while some engaged in entrepreneurial skills and activities to feed*' (**Female Lecturer, FUNAI**). Specifically, a respondent said:

Some lecturers took loans from banks to enable them feed and take care of their families, while others who have cars used them for taxis or shuttles. Lecturers also resorted to long distance trekking to avoid the expenses of buying petrol as cars were used sparingly on serious necessities, while their children engaged in hawking and menial jobs to support parents. Similarly, some lecturers who have farmlands or spaces went into farming for production of food, meat and vegetables; while some others engaged in home lessons for the children of the rich, just to make ends meet (**Male Lecturer, UNIMAID**).

Another said:

Most colleagues sourced soft loans from financial institutions which they used to open up small businesses. Some colleagues took up menial jobs like taxi driving using their personal cars, some went into business centers using their laptops and copiers, some took up building project supervisions. Personally, I opened a drinking water shop where I sold and supplied drinking water using my deep freezer. Though it was tasking but we have to do something to feed our family. Recall it was during the period of COVID -19 pandemic when most businesses were adversely affected. You can imagine your new business thriving in such environment (**Male Lecturer, AEFUNAI**).

Another stated:

Some lecturers ventured into businesses like selling and buying of goods, rendering of services; while those that have cars/vehicles used them for transport services. Others were surviving on friends and extended

families, baking and selling of cakes and other snacks by their wives and daughters, relying on old savings and public goodwill, and drastic change of eating pattern in our families to enable us survive (*Male Lecturer, UNIBEN*).

Ways to address the salary stoppage saga

We requested suggestions on how to solve the problem of salary stoppage to facilitate school resumption. The findings revealed different suggestions, which were reflected in the following quotes:

I suggest that the federal government should honor the agreement it entered with the ASUU. Once the contents of that agreement is totally implemented, our universities would have been revitalized and lecturers will begin to enjoy good working conditions and improved welfare package that will make them more productive and help restore the lost glory of our universities. I am very optimistic that when all these are achieved, our universities will begin to be visible on the global stage (*Female Lecturer, UNILORIN*).

Another respondent quipped:

The university community should be given full autonomy to operate as earlier agreed between the union and the federal government. All the lingering MoUs between the union and the government should be honored to avoid subsequent and further industrial actions by the union (*Female Lecturer, UNIABUJA*).

Still on how to solve the impasse between the union and the government and release the withheld salaries of lecturers, a respondent opined:

There should be mutual understanding between the government and the ASUU on the platform for the payment of salaries. They should reach a consensus on issue of method of payment to save the public universities from total collapse (*Male Lecturer, UI*).

Another noted:

Government and ASUU should make concerted effort to resolve the differences. Government should pay all EEAs to ASUU members even if on installment basis and meet other demands of ASUU in terms of infrastructural developments in the universities, while ASUU on its own side should be considerate and show patriotism in some of its demands (*Male Lecturer, UNICAL*).

Another respondent made several suggestions on how to end the salary stoppage problem. Listen to his suggestions:

First, the government should declare state of emergency in education sector, where at least 20% of the annual budget should be appropriated to education; while university autonomy should be sacrosanct and not to be messed up by politicians or government. Second, the welfare of lecturers should be enhanced, particularly in the area of salary increase, while EEA should be mainstreamed into lecturers' monthly salaries. Third, there should be harmony among the trade unions in the universities to prevent antagonism. Fourth, ASUU should always engage in exhaustive dialogue with the government before embarking on strike. Fifth, Social Workers should be part of the reconciliation move to ensure a level playing ground between the parties to allow for healthy and amicable resolution of the current crisis (*Female Lecturer, UNILAG*).

IV. Discussions

This study was carried out to find out how the lecturers in Nigeria's federal universities were coping without salaries during the COVID-19 lockdown. Recall that COVID-19 lockdown was imposed in Nigeria to help contain the spread of the pandemic, which was fast spreading across the country and lacked vaccine at that time. As a result, social, political and economic activities were shut down and personal and public hygiene measures were introduced. With these measures on ground, economic activities were paralyzed and Nigerians, especially the poor ones were finding it difficult to meet up with their financial obligations. Coincidentally, lecturers' salaries were stopped at the same period of lockdown for refusing to enroll into IPPIS.

Findings revealed that within these periods of salary stoppage, lecturers and their dependents were subjected to serious economic hardship as it was difficult for them to carry out their responsibilities under lockdown without salaries. Some of the participants stated that they were forced to minimize their spending and made do with what

was available to sustain themselves and their family members. Nigerian university lecturers faced serious economic hardship after being denied their salaries for refusal to enroll in IPPIS (Premium Times, 2020).

On how the lecturers were coping without salaries, findings revealed that they had to devise other legitimate means to enable them survive with their families. As a result of the effects of salary stoppage, ASUU members who were already facing economic hardship caused by COVID-19 lockdown devised other means of income to enable them survive and take care of their dependents. Our members have been advised to seek other legitimate means of survival as the government has not released salaries withheld since February 2020 (Lagi, 2020). Lecturers were finding it difficult to cope with the lockdown without salaries, as they were living on debts or depending on family members and friends for survival, with others cutting down on their spending to make ends meet (Premium Times, 2020).

On what could be done to solve the problem of salary stoppage and facilitate school resumption, participants suggested that federal government should honor agreements it entered voluntarily with ASUU. There should also be mutual understanding between the government and ASUU on agreements reached on payment platform to resolve the current faceoff and avoid subsequent crisis between the two parties, which no doubt is already affecting the university education in Nigeria. This is because almost all the industrial disharmony between federal government and ASUU were as a result of breach on agreements especially from the federal government. Most importantly, conflict resolution specialists and crisis intervention experts like the social workers should be involved in settling the labor dispute between the ASUU and federal government to save the soul of university education in Nigeria. As conflict resolution specialists, social workers can mediate on the faceoff between the two parties by playing conciliatory role. Social work professionals continually work in areas where conflict is prevalent on a daily basis and provide services to help people in conflict find their way to a healthier and more productive resolution (Kelly, 2014; Master of Social Work Careers, 2019).

V. Implications to social work

The lingering crisis between ASUU and federal government calls for the urgent attention of conflict resolution specialists like the social workers. As a helping profession, social work functions in diverse areas of human existence to help people solve their problems and alleviate their distress. One of such areas is mediating in conflict situation between individuals and groups. Conflict resolution is an inherent part of social work environment, which they practice in a variety of areas including industrial and labor-related crisis or dispute by playing the role of conflict manager and negotiator. While mediating in a conflict resolution, social workers adopt prevention, reconciliation, decision-making, procedural assistance and substantive assistance to resolve the dispute to ensure industrial harmony (Mayer, 2000). Social workers are best suited to handle issues related to mediation/conflict resolution because they are trained in areas such as identifying and analyzing underlying interests, developing resources, and generating options (Kelly, 2014). According to Mayer (2013), mediation is the natural outgrowth of social work practice because its goal is to help empower people in conflict to solve their own problems.

According to the Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW, 2000), the on-going advancement of social work as a relationship-centered profession with a repertoire of person and environment oriented methods of practice make them uniquely qualified as mediators in conflict resolution. Thus, they can provide user-friendly services, helps employees to deal with social and interpersonal issues and enhances worker's ability to solve problems (Zhang, 2017). Therefore, social workers as mediators and negotiators can work with both government and ASUU to find a lasting solution to the recurring face-off between the duos, which no doubt has negative consequences on the nation's educational sector. They will achieve this by acting as a conciliator between the government and the union, and on a neutral ground persuade both parties towards reaching an understanding that will see the end of the crisis that led to closure of universities and subsequent stoppage of salaries. This will help stabilize the already shaking educational system in Nigeria, and produce quality citizens for national development.

In conclusion, university lecturers in some countries of the world played vital roles in trying to invent vaccine or cure for the novel COVID-19 pandemic. While some universities and colleges utilized their research facilities to help find a successful COVID-19 vaccine, others pooled resources and allowed for sharing of vital information

and breakthroughs (Plater & Shaker, 2020; Arrais et al, 2021). However, the case was different in Nigeria as universities were shut down over federal government's refusal to pay lecturers in public universities their salaries, and honor agreements reached with the union. The university teachers were almost starved to death as they struggle for months under COVID-19 lockdown to feed their family members. As a result, they paid little or no attention to research on the pandemic as they were worried more of hunger than the virus itself.

In view of the above, the study recommends that both the federal government and ASUU should always have their seats in the round table to negotiate and resolve differences instead of recurrent crisis and show of supremacy. This continuous industrial disharmony between the two parties have had deleterious effects on the university system with the students and their parents/guardians always at the receiving ends. They should always have some gentlemen agreements on how to thrash grey areas and strive to honor such agreements. Further, in times of industrial disputes, the parties rather than stick to their guns, should make sacrifices for peace and progress of university education in Nigeria. It is also our recommendation that salaries of lecturers should be enhanced, while EEA should be integrated into monthly salaries of lecturers. Also, federal government is enjoined to accept UTAS as payment platform for ASUU since it has been proven that government's IPPIS violates university autonomy and does not capture the peculiarities in the university system.

In addition, lecturers should find legitimate alternative means of income to support their salaries. This will help them escape the ugly economic experience they went through when their salaries were withheld for months under COVID-19 lockdown, whenever such or similar scenario repeats itself. Finally, social workers as conflict resolution specialists should be employed in the federal ministry of labor and employment as well as have them in the leadership of ASUU. With their knowledge, skills and expertise in conflict cases, they are best equipped to handle labor disputes like the current one between ASUU and the government. It is our utmost belief that, with their conciliatory role, they will be able to bring both parties to the table for amicable conflict resolutions.

This study has its limitations. The fact that only 12 out of 43 universities participated in the study is one. This means that opinions of staff of other universities were not considered. Their views might be different from the views of participants of this study, hence further research that will include more academic staff and universities are recommended. Furthermore, this study covered only ASUU members and failed to include government representatives for their opinions. Undoubtedly, their opinions on the topic under study differ from the opinions of the ASUU members. We therefore recommend that further studies in this area be conducted to include the representatives of the government, the ASUU and other critical stakeholders in education. Their views need to be considered too. Irrespective of the limitations, the study provided insights and firsthand information on how lecturers coped with the COVID-19 lockdown without salaries and suggested ways to forestall such experiences in the future.

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