

The Impact of Autocratic Leadership on Employee Well-Being in Bangladeshi Non-Profit Humanitarian NGOs

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ABSTRACT

This study looks at how autocratic leadership affects the well-being of employees in small humanitarian NGOs in Bangladesh. Based on interviews with 15 staff members, including project managers, supervisors, and field workers from various NGOs, the research finds that workers face long hours, unpaid salaries, and no clear balance between work and personal life because top leaders make decisions without talking to others. Employees described tough schedules, like working 15 to 16 hours a day without breaks, even during important events like Eid. They also had to do extra tasks without being asked. These conditions caused physical issues like body pain, malnutrition, and sunburn, and mental health problems like depression, anxiety, and even thoughts of suicide. The study also notes that many of these issues are made worse by a lack of funding and resources, which makes exploitation more common in small NGOs.

The paper highlights a gap in existing literature, pointing out that not enough research focuses on leadership styles in developing countries like Bangladesh, where traditional cultural structures often support autocratic leadership. To address this, the study introduces the Supportive Leadership and Management (SLM) model. This model promotes a more inclusive and democratic work environment with set working hours, holidays, ongoing training, stable pay that isn't tied to donor funds, and systems for feedback and support. Thematic analysis of the interview data supports the idea that autocratic leadership harms well-being, while supportive leadership improves job satisfaction and productivity. The findings suggest that NGO leaders, policymakers, and donors should put employee well-being first to ensure long-term success. The SLM model can be useful beyond NGOs and in different organizations around the world. Future studies should include quantitative validation of the model and comparisons across different sectors. This research contributes to discussions about ethical leadership, especially in challenging environments, by promoting humane practices that help retain valuable workers and help reach important goals.

Keywords: Autocratic leadership, Employee well-being, Humanitarian NGOs, Supportive Leadership Model, Bangladesh, Organizational constraints, Psychological impacts, Work-life balance, Donor funding, Thematic analysis

INTRODUCTION

Humanitarian NGOs in Bangladesh play a key role in tackling social issues, including disaster response, poverty reduction, education, and healthcare. With over 2,500 registered NGOs, these organizations step in where government support is limited, especially in rural areas. However, many of these small NGOs face internal issues related to their leadership styles. Autocratic leadership, where top leaders make decisions on their own without consulting others, is common in these settings due to the urgent nature of humanitarian work and limited financial resources. While this style can help respond quickly to emergencies like floods or cyclones, it often leads to employee burnout, health problems, and high turnover.

This study examines how autocratic leadership affects employees based on firsthand accounts from 15 NGO workers. For example, project managers and field workers often start work at 6 am and leave after midnight,

with little time for personal life. These experiences are part of a broader problem in Bangladesh's NGO sector, where pressure from donors and limited resources increase stress. It's important to understand this impact because well-motivated staff are essential for effective service delivery. Poor well-being can reduce productivity, cause mistakes in projects, and prevent NGOs from meeting community needs.

The paper explores the connection between autocratic leadership, organizational challenges, and the psychological effects on employees. It begins by outlining the problem and gaps in current research, then sets clear goals. A review of existing studies follows, leading to the proposal of the SLM model as a framework for change. Qualitative analysis of interview data supports the study's hypotheses, and findings are presented thematically. The discussion links these insights to broader implications, justifying the need for leadership changes and offering recommendations. By focusing on small NGOs, which employ a large portion of the sector but get less attention than bigger organizations like BRAC, this research highlights an important area that needs more attention. In Bangladesh, where NGOs contribute about 5-7% of GDP through social services, ignoring employee well-being can harm the whole system. Traditional respect for authority in the culture also makes autocratic leadership more common, making reform difficult but necessary. This introduction sets the stage for a detailed look at how supportive leadership can change the situation, emphasizing that humane leadership is not optional but essential for long-term success in humanitarian work.

Problem Statement/Research Gap

The prevalence of autocratic leadership in Bangladeshi humanitarian NGOs poses significant challenges to employee well-being. In small organizations, leaders often adopt a command-and-control style to navigate funding uncertainties and meet stringent donor requirements, but this comes at a high human cost. Employees face relentless demands, such as working through holidays and handling unrelated tasks, which erode their physical and mental health. For example, interview participants described borrowing money to survive salary delays and suffering from chronic stress, illustrating how these practices create a toxic work environment.

Existing research on NGO leadership in Bangladesh largely focuses on large entities like BRAC or Grameen Bank, examining their success through inspirational or transformational models [Haque (2019); Rahman (2022)]. However, small NGOs, which number in the thousands and operate with minimal budgets, are underrepresented. Studies on autocratic styles in other sectors, such as restaurants or corporate firms, highlight negative outcomes like low morale [Jony (2019); Alam (2019)], but few apply this to humanitarian contexts where emotional labor is intense. Globally, literature on NGOs in developing countries discusses servant leadership's benefits [Khan (2024)], yet there is a gap in models tailored to Bangladesh's unique blend of cultural hierarchy, donor dependency, and seasonal demands like Ramadan distributions.

Another gap lies in gender-specific impacts; women employees in the interviews reported additional burdens, such as family criticism for late hours, but research seldom addresses this intersection. Psychological consequences, including depression noted by participants, are understudied in local NGOs, with most work focusing on general job satisfaction [Mufti (2020)]. There is also limited exploration of transitioning from autocratic to supportive leadership, especially in resource-poor settings. This study bridges these voids by using qualitative data from diverse roles to propose practical solutions, emphasizing the need for culturally sensitive reforms to prevent talent drain and enhance organizational resilience.

Without addressing these gaps, NGOs risk perpetuating cycles of exploitation, where staff turnover hampers project continuity. This research underscores the urgency for evidence-based interventions, contributing to a more equitable humanitarian sector.

Research Objectives

The primary objective of this study is to investigate the detrimental effects of autocratic leadership on the physical, mental, and emotional well-being of employees in small humanitarian NGOs in Bangladesh, based on thematic analysis of 15 in-depth interviews.

Secondary objectives include:

- To extract and summarize key themes from the interviews, including excessive work hours, salary irregularities, health deteriorations, and family strains, to illustrate organizational constraints.
- To develop and propose the Supportive Leadership and Management (SLM) model as a framework for creating a staff-friendly environment that promotes satisfaction and reduces fear.
- To evaluate the potential applicability of the SLM model beyond NGOs, suggesting its utility in various organizational types for improved employee engagement and productivity.
- To identify directions for future research, such as empirical testing of the model and comparative analyses across different sectors or countries.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Leadership styles significantly influence organizational culture and employee outcomes, particularly in non-profits where mission-driven work intersects with resource limitations. Autocratic leadership, characterized by unilateral decision-making and strict control, is often adopted in high-stakes environments to ensure rapid execution [Hossain (2025)]. In Bangladesh's NGO sector, this style arises from external pressures like donor timelines and internal factors such as limited staffing, leading to overworked employees and reduced well-being [Rahman (2022)]. Studies show that autocratic approaches correlate with higher stress levels, as seen in corporate settings where they decrease job satisfaction by up to 20% [Alam (2019)].

Contrasting this, democratic leadership, which involves employee participation, has been linked to better outcomes. In Bangladeshi mobile financial services, it improved well-being and productivity compared to autocratic methods [Rahman (2024)]. For NGOs, inspirational leadership in organizations like BRAC fosters motivation through clear vision and support, resulting in lower turnover [Haque (2019)]. Internationally, servant leadership prioritizes employee needs, enhancing trust and performance in Thai NGOs [Srisathanonchai (2011)]. Khan (2024) argues that this approach "unlocks success" by addressing individual growth, which is crucial in humanitarian work where emotional exhaustion is common.

Transformational leadership, blending inspiration with structure, has proven effective during crises, as in Lebanese NGOs where it boosted satisfaction amid uncertainty [Bagga (2024)]. Shared or collective models move beyond hierarchies, empowering teams and reducing burnout [Lodestar Center (2023); Annie E. Casey Foundation (2025)]. In non-profits, these styles align with ethical goals, but adoption in Bangladesh is hindered by cultural norms favoring authority [Jony (2019)].

However, gaps persist. Few studies examine small NGOs' unique challenges, such as funding-linked salaries, and even fewer propose localized models [Mufti (2020)]. Global literature on non-profit leadership often overlooks developing contexts [Central Michigan University (2023)], while innovations in talent investment highlight the need for training and feedback [Sharp Eizinger (2022)]. Transformational leadership has been shown to positively influence employee well-being through mechanisms such as increased motivation, empowerment, and reduced stress, as evidenced in various organizational contexts. However, applications of these findings to resource-constrained settings like Bangladeshi NGOs remain limited, particularly in small-scale humanitarian organizations where autocratic practices dominate. This review synthesizes these insights, setting the foundation for the SLM model, which integrates democratic elements with practical supports to address autocratic pitfalls.

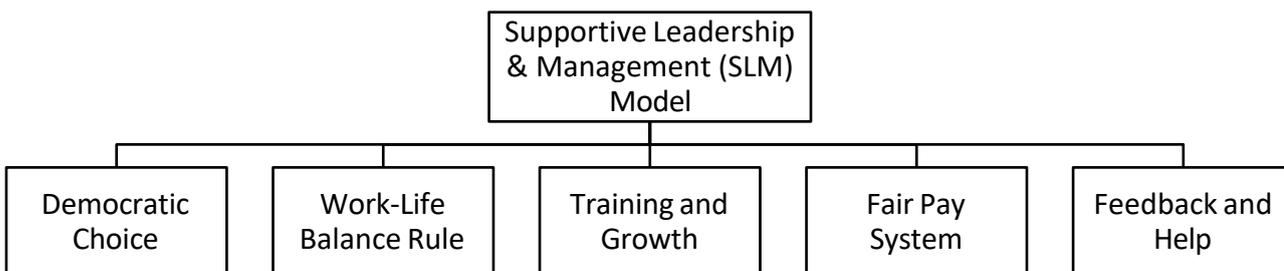
By building on these works, the study advances understanding of how leadership can be reformed for sustainability, emphasizing that supportive practices yield long-term benefits like retained expertise and better community impact.

Conceptual/Theoretical Framework

The conceptual framework illustrates the interplay between autocratic leadership, organizational factors, and employee well-being in Bangladeshi NGOs. At its core, autocratic style—marked by boss-centric decisions—drives constraints like donor pressures and funding shortages, resulting in outcomes such as extended hours and task overload. These, in turn, lead to physical (e.g., fatigue, injuries) and psychological (e.g., anxiety, isolation) harms, creating a vicious cycle.

To break this, the Supportive Leadership and Management (SLM) model is proposed. SLM reimagines leadership as collaborative and nurturing, incorporating five key pillars:

- **Democratic Choice:** Encourages staff involvement in decisions, such as project planning, to foster ownership and reduce resentment. This counters autocratic exclusion, building team cohesion.
- **Work-Life Balance Rule:** Mandates fixed hours, mandatory holidays (including Eid), and no after-hours calls, ensuring rest and family time to prevent burnout.
- **Training and Growth:** Provides regular skill-building workshops, like IT or videography training, to equip staff for diverse tasks without overload, promoting career advancement.
- **Fair Pay System:** Establishes salaries independent of project funding, with timely payments and bonuses, to eliminate financial stress and debt cycles.
- **Feedback and Help:** Implements anonymous channels for voicing concerns, coupled with mental health support like counseling, to address issues early.



Additional elements include transparent communication and recognition programs to boost morale. SLM is designed for easy implementation, starting with pilot teams. Its effectiveness stems from adaptability; while tailored for NGOs facing donor volatility, it applies universally—to businesses, governments, or schools—where well-being drives performance [Khan (2024); Mufti (2020)]. By shifting focus from control to support, SLM promises enhanced satisfaction, lower turnover, and stronger organizational resilience.

Hypothesis

- **H1:** Autocratic leadership negatively influences employee well-being in Bangladeshi NGOs by imposing excessive demands and limiting autonomy, leading to health and family strains (This hypothesis is grounded in interview evidence of fear-based compliance and stress).
- **H2:** Incorporating democratic choice and feedback in leadership enhances staff satisfaction and reduces psychological distress (Proposing that participatory elements, as in SLM, counteract autocratic isolation [Rahman (2024)]).
- **H3:** The SLM model improves overall organizational outcomes, including retention and efficiency, across various sectors (Hypothesizing broad applicability based on supportive style benefits [Khan (2024)]).

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study uses thematic analysis to explore how leadership affects employees. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with 15 participants from 15 different small NGOs in areas like Dhaka, Netrokona, Kurigram, and others. The sample includes 4 project managers and supervisors, 9 field workers, and 2 other staff members, with 13 men and 2 women, ensuring a mix of roles and experiences.

Interviews, conducted in Bengali and later translated to English, covered seven areas: typical workdays, long hours and pressure, holidays, tasks outside job descriptions, refusing work, salary and funding issues, and the impact on health and family. All transcripts were kept anonymous for ethical reasons, and participants gave their consent. The analysis involved coding data in stages: first, reading through the information to find patterns, then grouping these into themes, such as "long hours," using manual methods to gain deeper insights. The reliability of the findings was ensured by checking quotes across different sources. The study has some limitations, including a small sample size that might skew results toward negative perspectives and personal interpretation of the data. Future research using quantitative surveys could help confirm the findings.

Findings

Thematic analysis of the 15 interviews uncovered six core themes, revealing systemic issues under autocratic leadership. Participants' narratives paint a picture of exploitation, with bosses wielding absolute power.

Table of Themes Summary

Theme	Description	Frequency (15 Interviews)
Long Working Hours	Employees endure 12-17 hour days routinely, driven by unrelenting deadlines and lack of boundaries, often extending into nights without compensation.	15/15
No Holidays	Denial of rest days, including religious holidays like Eid and Fridays, as work is framed as "social service" without breaks.	15/15
Tasks Outside Description	Assignment of unrelated duties, from manual labor to technical work, due to understaffing, humiliating staff.	15/15
Refusing Work	Attempts to decline lead to threats of dismissal or pay cuts, instilling fear and silencing protests.	15/15
Salary & Funding Issues	Irregular payments tied to funding, causing months of delays and financial hardship like debt.	15/15
Health/Family Impact	Widespread physical (pain, malnutrition) and mental (depression, suicidal ideation) effects, straining families.	15/15

These themes dominate, with women noting extra societal pressures. Overall, staff feel dehumanized, likening themselves to "robots" or "prisoners," underscoring autocratic control's toll.

DISCUSSION

Findings align with literature on autocratic leadership's harms, particularly in resource-scarce NGOs [Hossain (2025)]. Long hours and holiday denials mirror burnout patterns in high-pressure sectors [Jony (2019)], amplified by donor demands. Salary issues reflect funding dependency, a common NGO vulnerability [Rahman (2022)], leading to shame and debt as described.

Health impacts, from physical injuries to mental crises, echo psychological studies on stress [Mufti (2020)]. Refusal threats erode trust, contrasting servant leadership's empathy [Khan (2024)]. Women's added burdens highlight gender gaps, warranting targeted research.

SLM addresses these by promoting democracy and balance, akin to shared models [Sharp Eizinger (2022)]. Training mitigates task overload, while fair pay stabilizes finances. Feedback fosters support, like in transformational approaches [Bagga (2024)]. In Bangladesh, overcoming hierarchy is key, as BRAC demonstrates [Haque (2019)]. SLM's versatility extends to all organizations, reducing turnover universally [Srisathanonchai (2011)].

Limitations: Qualitative nature limits generalizability; positive cases may exist. Still, patterns demand action for ethical humanitarianism.

Implications

Practically, NGO leaders should use the SLM model by organizing training workshops. Donors can tie funding to improvements in employee welfare. Policymakers may create labor laws that apply to NGOs, requiring them to provide holidays and ensure timely pay. Theoretically, this study adds to leadership discussions in developing countries by suggesting hybrid models that blend different approaches.

Justification

This study is important because Bangladesh's NGO sector is growing, but small NGOs are often overlooked. The interviews provide real voices from the field, making the SLM model based on real experiences. The study justifies changes by connecting well-being to sustainability and aligns with global trends [Rahman (2024)].

CONCLUSION

Autocratic leadership in Bangladeshi NGOs has serious consequences, as shown by interviews revealing exhaustion and distress. The SLM model offers a way to improve things by focusing on support, which can lead to lasting positive change. Embracing this model can help workers thrive and improve community outcomes. Applying it widely might lead to better conditions in workplaces around the world.

Future Research

More studies could expand on this by using surveys with larger samples to test the effectiveness of the SLM model. Research could also look at how gender plays a role or compare the model across different sectors. Long-term studies would help understand the effects of implementing the model over time.

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