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Digitally Enabled Gender-Inclusive HRM Driving Sustainability in Women-Centered NGOs in Bangladesh

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Abstract- Amid rising digital innovation, gender-sensitive HRM practices in Bangladeshi NGOs, such as BRAC and BNPS, are evolving from traditional frameworks toward more scalable and sustainable models. This study explores how digitally-enabled, gender-inclusive HRM practices contribute to the sustainability of these two leading women-centered NGOs in Bangladesh. Through a comparative analysis of publicly available documents, including safeguarding frameworks, digital reporting platforms, gender equity policies, and HR dashboards, this paper uncovers how formal policy structures are paired with technological tools to support gender inclusion. At BRAC, the AR NA web application has empowered over 800 field staff across 435 sub-districts to confidentially report incidents of gender-based violence, while e-learning modules on safeguarding and gender awareness have reached more than 5,400 employees. BNPS, by contrast, demonstrates strong internal gender policies with clear commitments to non-discrimination, inclusive recruitment, and regular gender-sensitivity training, though without the same level of digital enhancement. Both organizations report measurable outcomes such as higher female leadership representation and increased parental leave uptake, yet they also reveal policy-practice gaps, including inconsistent enforcement of post-maternity transfer protections. Overall, the evidence suggests that integrating formal gender policies with digital HR tools significantly enhances organizational inclusion, resilience, and sustainable impact by offering a scalable model for NGOs striving for modern, digital HRM aligned with • sustainability goals.

Keywords: digital HRM, gender inclusion, organizational, sustainability, women-centered NGOs, policies

I. INTRODUCTION

Human Resource Management (HRM) serves as a cornerstone for building equitable workplace cultures and sustaining organizational performance in mission-driven NGOs. In Bangladesh, BRAC and Bangladesh Nari Progati Sangha (BNPS) have embedded gender-sensitive HRM frameworks for decades, aligning recruitment, training, and workplace governance with principles of fairness and inclusion [2]. Yet, the rise of digital innovation in the nonprofit sector is reshaping how these frameworks are implemented, creating opportunities to expand reach, improve accessibility, and strengthen institutional resilience.

BRAC, one of the world's largest development organizations, has embraced digital integration to enhance gender-inclusive HRM. The AR NA web application, launched in 2021, enables more than 800 frontline staff across 435 upazilas to confidentially report gender-based violence (GBV) and access timely case management and referrals [8]. Complementing this, the Shongjog platform maps eight survivor support services, from legal aid to psychosocial counseling, ensuring survivors can locate assistance across both rural and urban areas [13].

BNPS, founded in 1986, applies a well-defined Gender Policy, non-discrimination guidelines, and HR manuals that institutionalize equitable recruitment and gender-awareness training. While these mechanisms are comprehensive, they largely rely on in-person engagement and paper-based administration, with limited use of digital systems to complement or extend their impact [4].

Existing literature underscores that gender-focused HRM enhances employee engagement, retention, and legitimacy within NGOs [2]. Similarly, digital tools in HR processes, including e-learning modules and online grievance reporting, have been shown to increase transparency and accessibility [11]. However, the combined impact of digital transformation and gender-inclusive HRM remains underexplored in the Bangladeshi NGO context.

Research Questions

How do the policy frameworks of BRAC and BNPS support gender-inclusive HRM?

In what ways do these organizations employ digital tools to enhance HRM processes?

- How effective are these approaches in achieving gender outcomes and building institutional resilience?

Research Objectives

a) To compare the policy frameworks of BRAC and BNPS in supporting gender-inclusive HRM.

b) To evaluate how each NGO employs digital tools to enhance HRM processes.

c) To assess implementation effectiveness, focusing on gender outcomes and institutional resilience.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The role of gender-sensitive Human Resource Management (HRM) in strengthening organizational equity and resilience

has been a recurring theme in both global and local development discourse. Within the context of Bangladesh, women-centered NGOs such as BRAC and Bangladesh Nari Progati Sangha (BNPS) have played a central role in embedding gender equity into their internal policies, recruitment systems, and staff development practices. As highlighted in [2], inclusive HRM frameworks not only improve staff engagement and retention but also enhance the legitimacy of mission-driven organizations in the eyes of both beneficiaries and donors. Gender mainstreaming in the NGO sector, as documented by [1], demonstrates the importance of integrating gender considerations systematically into organizational policies and practices to ensure sustainable equity outcomes.

BRAC has developed one of the most comprehensive gender-inclusive HR systems in the NGO sector, underpinned by a formal Gender Policy [6] and organizational safeguarding mechanisms [10]. These policies are reinforced by training programs, grievance mechanisms, and leadership accountability. In recent years, BRAC has taken a significant step towards integrating digital innovation into these frameworks. The AR NA web application, launched in 2021, allows more than 800 frontline staff to confidentially report cases of gender-based violence (GBV) from 435 upazilas, enabling centralized monitoring and faster referral to services [8]. Complementing this, the Shongjog platform serves as a digital directory mapping eight categories of survivor services, from legal assistance to psychosocial counseling, across both rural and urban contexts [13].

III. These digital platforms align with findings from [5] and [11], which argue that online grievance mechanisms, digital wages, and e-learning systems can improve accessibility and accountability, particularly for staff in remote or marginalized areas. They also bring a level of transparency and case traceability that is difficult to replicate in paper-based systems. By embedding such tools within its HRM structure, BRAC illustrates how digital transformation can operate in synergy with gender policy to enhance both the reach and sustainability of inclusion practices.

In contrast, BNPS has taken a more traditional route, grounded in strong human-led processes. Established in 1986, the organization's Gender Policy and HR manuals explicitly commit to non-discrimination, equitable recruitment, and gender-focused staff training [4]. These measures are reinforced through regular workshops, participatory planning sessions, and an emphasis on in-person communication between staff and HR leadership. BNPS has also extended its gender capacity-building efforts to local government actors, training them on gender-responsive planning and budgeting in collaboration with UN Women [18]. While these approaches foster trust and direct accountability, they are primarily manual and lack the digital infrastructure that could enable real-time case reporting or broad-based training delivery at scale.

This difference in technological integration reflects broader trends identified in the literature, where digital tools are increasingly positioned as enablers of institutional transparency, speed, and inclusivity ([2]; [11]; [3]; [5]). However, the literature also leaves important questions unanswered, particularly in the Bangladeshi NGO context, about whether the mere introduction of digital systems guarantees better outcomes, or whether these systems must be coupled with a deeply embedded gender-sensitive HR framework to have a lasting effect.

Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM) practices in Bangladesh's NGOs have been found to significantly influence employee productivity, strengthening both organizational capacity and mission delivery [12]. This suggests that gender-inclusive HRM not only fosters equity but can also enhance overall organizational performance. Furthermore, the programs undertaken by NGOs have shown potential to positively contribute to fostering equity and reducing social exclusion in urban Bangladesh [17]. Yet, despite these efforts, recent reports indicate that gender equality in Bangladesh remains limited, and women-led NGOs continue to advocate for greater integration of gender considerations into organizational policies and service delivery ([19]; [20]).

Against this backdrop, the comparative lens of this study focuses on three interconnected areas:

Policy Frameworks — assessing the foundational HRM structures that govern gender equity in BRAC and BNPS.

Digital Capacity — examining the presence and role of digital tools in supporting HRM functions.

Implementation Effectiveness — evaluating how both policy and technology translate into measurable gender outcomes and institutional resilience.

By positioning BRAC and BNPS side by side, this review sets the stage for exploring how different balances of policy strength and digital integration shape the long-term sustainability of gender-inclusive HRM in Bangladesh's NGO sector.

III.METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a comparative qualitative approach to examine the gender-inclusive HRM practices of BRAC and Bangladesh Nari Progati Sangha (BNPS). The choice of method reflects the study's aim: to understand not only the stated policies of each organization but also how these are operationalized, particularly in the integration of digital tools for policy delivery and monitoring.

3.1 Data Sources

Data was drawn exclusively from publicly available organizational documents, official reports, and verified publications to maintain reliability and traceability. Key sources include BRAC's Gender Policy [6], safeguarding guidelines [10], and documentation on its AR NA and

Shongjog platforms ([8]; [13]). Additional contextual insight was taken from [10] commentary on digital grievance mechanisms and gender-based violence prevention. For BNPS, primary materials included its Gender Policy and HR & Management Manual as presented in its official communications [4], supplemented by publicly available capacity-building and advocacy reports.

3.2 Analytical Framework

The analysis proceeded in three stages, aligned with the study's objectives:

- a. Policy Framework Comparison – A document-based review comparing the core HRM and gender-related policies of BRAC and BNPS. This involved identifying explicit commitments to gender equity, inclusivity, and protection against discrimination or harassment.
- b. Digital Integration Assessment – A mapping of each NGO's use of digital tools in HRM, with specific attention to grievance redressal, training delivery, and data-driven monitoring. For BRAC, this included a detailed review of AR NA and Shongjog functionalities. For BNPS, emphasis was placed on its offline, process-oriented systems to highlight contrasts in approach.
- c. Implementation Effectiveness Review – A qualitative synthesis of reported outcomes, such as staff gender composition, participation in training, and operational reach of support systems. Where available, data such as BNPS's reported staffing breakdown (54% women; 22% ethnic or religious minorities) was incorporated to contextualize impact.

3.3 Data Analysis Approach

The collected data were analyzed using thematic content analysis, which allowed for the systematic identification of recurring concepts, policy commitments, and operational patterns. First, all documents were read in full to familiarize with the context. Then, key information was coded into three categories corresponding to the study's dimensions: policy provisions, digital infrastructure, and implementation evidence. Within each category, specific sub-themes (e.g., grievance redressal, training delivery, gender composition) were identified.

Comparisons were made by placing BRAC and BNPS side by side in a cross-case matrix, highlighting both convergence (shared commitments or approaches) and divergence (differences in tools, reach, or depth of implementation). This comparative coding process ensured that conclusions were grounded in explicit evidence rather than assumptions.

3.4 Scope and Limitations

The study focuses on organizational-level HRM frameworks and does not extend to direct beneficiary impact. No primary data collection (e.g., interviews or surveys) was undertaken, which limits the scope for assessing on-the-ground perceptions. However, by relying on vetted and official sources, the study ensures the accuracy of policy descriptions and reported digital initiatives.

This structured comparative method allows for a nuanced analysis of how two prominent Bangladeshi NGOs, operating in similar socio-political contexts but with distinct operational models, design and implement gender-inclusive HRM, and how digital tools interact with policy frameworks to shape outcomes.

IV. RESULTS

The analysis reveals distinct yet overlapping approaches by BRAC and Bangladesh Nari Progati Sangha (BNPS) in embedding gender inclusivity within HRM frameworks, particularly in how they integrate policy commitments, operational practices, and technology.

4.1 Policy Frameworks

Both organizations have codified gender equity as a formal HRM priority, but the depth and structure of their frameworks differ.

BRAC's Gender Policy [6] is integrated into its overall organizational governance, outlining recruitment targets, workplace harassment safeguards, and mandatory gender-sensitivity training. This policy is reinforced by its Safeguarding Policy [10], which clearly details responsibilities for managers and grievance handling protocols.

BNPS's Gender Policy [4] similarly mandates equal opportunity recruitment and explicitly includes ethnic and religious minorities in its inclusion agenda. Its HR & Management Manual emphasizes staff participation in decision-making and decentralized grievance resolution, though with less formalized digital integration compared to BRAC.

4.2 Digital Integration in HRM

BRAC has significantly embedded digital tools into its HRM operations. The AR NA platform, launched to streamline internal grievance reporting, allows staff to file complaints securely and track case progress [8]. The Shongjog initiative extends support mechanisms by connecting survivors of gender-based violence with relevant services via a referral network [13]. Additionally, [11] reporting highlights how these digital systems have enhanced confidentiality, responsiveness, and organizational accountability.

In contrast, BNPS maintains largely offline grievance and training processes. While the organization has adopted basic digital communication for coordination, its HRM implementation remains grounded in in-person engagement, which allows for community-based trust-building but limits scalability.

4.3 Implementation Outcomes

BRAC's digital systems have improved reporting rates and reduced response time to grievances, as evidenced in internal reporting summaries [8]. Gender-sensitivity training reaches a wide proportion of staff, with modules integrated into onboarding and periodic refreshers.

BNPS's impact is reflected in its workforce composition — with 54% of staff being women and 22% from ethnic or religious minorities [4] — indicating success in maintaining diversity targets. However, without an integrated digital HRM infrastructure, tracking of training participation and grievance resolution outcomes relies heavily on manual record-keeping.

4.4 Comparative Perspective

The comparative review shows that while both NGOs share a commitment to gender-inclusive HRM, BRAC's approach is more systematized and technology-driven, enabling scalability and consistency across its large workforce. BNPS prioritizes community-rooted, participatory processes that are highly context-sensitive but less equipped for rapid scaling. These differences reflect organizational scale, resource availability, and operational philosophy, rather than divergence in underlying values.

Table 1: Summary Table of Results

Dimension	BRAC (Digital + Policy)	BNPS (Manual + Policy)
Policy Documentation	Comprehensive safeguarding policies; GJ&D unit	Gender & non-discrimination policies; 54% female staff
Digital Tools	AR NA (800+ users), Shongjog (435 districts)	Manual workshops and printed policy guides
Training Reach	5,400+ staff trained digitally	23 master trainers developed.
Diversity Metrics	Documented women's leadership improvement.	54% women, 22% minorities among staff
Monitoring & Reporting	Digital referral tracking with occasional access issues	Local-level monitoring; lacks digital oversight

V. DISCUSSION

The findings reveal critical insights into how BRAC and BNPS operationalize gender-inclusive HRM, highlighting both convergences and divergences shaped by organizational scale, resource allocation, and operational philosophy.

5.1 Policy and Institutional Commitment

Both BRAC and BNPS have formalized gender inclusion within HRM policies, reflecting a shared organizational commitment ([4]; [6]). BRAC's policy framework, supported by its Safeguarding Policy [10], emphasizes structured accountability mechanisms and clear grievance reporting pathways, illustrating a top-down institutional approach.

BNPS, while also embedding gender equity in its HR manuals [4], relies on participatory, community-oriented implementation. This distinction suggests that policy formalization alone is insufficient; the effectiveness of gender-inclusive HRM depends on both structural clarity and contextual sensitivity.

5.2 Digital Integration and HRM Efficiency

The analysis demonstrates that BRAC's integration of digital tools, such as the AR NA platform and Shongjog initiative, has strengthened transparency and responsiveness in handling gender-related grievances ([8]; [13]). Digital mechanisms streamline grievance reporting, enhance confidentiality, and facilitate monitoring at scale, which is critical for large organizations like BRAC. In contrast, BNPS's largely offline HRM system emphasizes direct human interaction, fostering trust and contextual understanding but limiting systematic data tracking. This comparison underscores the trade-off between technological efficiency and localized engagement in gender-inclusive HRM. As Pal and De' note, while ICT diffusion can open new possibilities for women's empowerment through greater participation and digital equality, it also risks deepening gendered digital divides and exposing women to online harms if not paired with protective measures [15].

5.3 Outcomes and Effectiveness

The observed differences in outcomes indicate that organizational scale and resources influence the implementation of gender-inclusive practices. BRAC's systematized, tech-driven approach allows broader coverage, including consistent gender-sensitivity training and timely grievance resolution [8]. BNPS demonstrates measurable success in workforce diversity, with significant female and minority representation [4], but faces limitations in monitoring and documenting outcomes due to reliance on manual processes. These findings are consistent with prior research indicating that SHRM practices can positively influence employee productivity in Bangladeshi NGOs [12]. Thus, BRAC's systematized, tech-driven approach and BNPS's participatory HR practices may both contribute to enhanced workforce effectiveness, albeit through different mechanisms. Furthermore, programs undertaken by NGOs have shown potential to positively contribute to fostering equity and reducing social exclusion in urban Bangladesh [17], suggesting that gender-inclusive HRM also aligns with broader social objectives.

5.4 Broader Implications for Social Inclusion

These organizational-level findings align with broader research on the societal role of NGOs. Initiatives led by NGOs have demonstrated the capacity to advance equity and lessen social exclusion in urban areas of Bangladesh [17]. This broader perspective reinforces the idea that strengthening gender-inclusive HRM is not solely about internal efficiency, it also contributes to reducing structural inequalities in the communities these NGOs serve. BRAC's

scalable, tech-supported systems and BNPS's trust-based local engagement represent two distinct, yet complementary, pathways for sustaining such societal impact.

5.5 Implications for Policy and Practice

The comparative insights have broader implications for NGOs seeking to enhance gender-inclusive HRM. Large-scale organizations may benefit from investing in digital platforms to ensure consistent policy implementation and monitoring. Smaller, community-rooted NGOs can achieve meaningful inclusion through participatory approaches, even without extensive technological infrastructure. Importantly, the findings highlight that both formal policies and contextualized practices are necessary; neither alone is sufficient for sustained gender equity.

5.6 Alignment with Existing Literature

These findings resonate with prior research emphasizing the interplay between formal HRM frameworks and organizational context ([7]; [4]). BRAC's digitally mediated mechanisms reflect literature advocating for tech-enabled accountability in large NGOs, while BNPS exemplifies approaches prioritizing human-centered, context-sensitive inclusion. Together, these cases demonstrate that diverse operational strategies can effectively advance gender equity, provided that organizational values, resources, and local context are carefully considered.

VI. CONCLUSION

This comparative study critically examined how digitally enabled, gender-inclusive HRM practices are implemented within two leading women-focused NGOs in Bangladesh, BRAC and Bangladesh Nari Progati Sangha (BNPS), and their role in fostering organizational sustainability. The introduction established the theoretical nexus between gender-sensitive HRM and digital transformation in non-profit institutions. The literature review then emphasized the independent benefits of inclusive HR systems and digital HR tools, highlighting the need for integration. The study employed a qualitative document analysis targeting formal HR policies, digital HR mechanisms, gender-equity outcomes, and the fidelity of implementation. Results demonstrated that BRAC's extensive digitalization with tools like AR NA and Shongjog enabled significant gains in training reach, reporting, and women's leadership, although some access challenges remained. BNPS, while firmly grounded in explicit HR and gender policies, relies on analog implementation and lacks scalable digital systems. The discussion clarified how BRAC's integrated strategy aligns with broader HRM and e-HRM research ([3]; [14]), whereas BNPS reflects traditional approaches with strong policies but limited digital capacity.

The findings reveal a clear pattern: BRAC's combined approach of robust gender-inclusive policy and strategic digital enablement enhances inclusion, accountability, and

resilience, providing a replicable model for NGOs seeking sustainable HR transformation. BNPS's effective policy framework, though commendable, highlights the limitations of manual implementation, particularly in scalability, monitoring, and timely responsiveness. The synthesis underscores that digital HR tools are not mere augmentations but essential mechanisms to operationalize and scale pro-gender policies effectively. For organizations committed to digital transformation and social sustainability, this study affirms that sustainable impact results from thoughtfully integrating gender equity with accessible, monitored digital systems and calls for innovation, sustainability, and digital transformation in business.

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