

Stress and Burnout among Student Volunteers: An Exploratory Study in a Private Higher Education Institution in Kerala, India

InhamulHaque A¹ and Moorshid Mon Thayyil²

¹ MSW Student, Department of Social Work, SAFI Institute of Advanced Study (Autonomous), Vazhayur, Malappuram, Kerala, India

² Assistant Professor, Department of Social Work, SAFI Institute of Advanced Study (Autonomous), Vazhayur, Malappuram, Kerala, India Email: murshid@siasindia.org

ABSTRACT

Student volunteering is increasingly recognized as an important component of higher education, contributing to personal development, skill building, and civic engagement. However, the psychological costs of volunteering, particularly stress and burnout, remain underexplored in the Indian higher education context. This exploratory cross-sectional study examines the levels of perceived stress and burnout experiences among student volunteers at a private higher education institution in Kerala. A convenience sample of 60 student volunteers was surveyed using a self-structured questionnaire assessing five stress indicators and five burnout indicators on a five-point Likert scale (1 = Never to 5 = Very Often). Findings indicate that the majority of student volunteers report low to moderate levels of stress and burnout. Mental stress, physical exhaustion, emotional strain, work overload, and motivational decline were infrequently reported. However, a minority of respondents (13–20%) experienced moderate to high levels across these dimensions, suggesting the presence of a vulnerable sub-group. Major challenges included poor coordination (43.3%), lack of rest (36.7%), and long working hours. Intrinsic motivation was identified as a protective factor. The study concludes that while volunteering is largely a positive experience, structural and organizational deficiencies can contribute to psychological strain. Implications for institutional volunteer management are discussed.

Keywords: *student volunteering, stress, burnout, higher education, India, exploratory study*

1. INTRODUCTION

Volunteering has long been recognized as a mechanism through which individuals contribute to collective welfare and civic life. In higher education, student volunteering has emerged as an important vehicle for experiential learning, personal development, and social responsibility. Universities in India actively promote volunteering through structured

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programs such as the National Service Scheme (NSS), National Cadet Corps (NCC), and a range of institutional community outreach initiatives.

Despite its many developmental benefits, volunteering is not without psychological costs. Student volunteers often manage multiple competing roles, balancing academic coursework, examinations, family responsibilities, and intensive volunteering commitments simultaneously. Event-based volunteering, in particular, can involve extended working hours, performance pressure, and coordination demands that generate stress and fatigue.

When stress becomes prolonged and unmanaged, it may culminate in burnout—a syndrome characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). While burnout research has primarily focused on professionals in healthcare and social work, Schaufeli et al. (2009) demonstrated that volunteers are equally susceptible when exposed to high demands and insufficient support.

Empirical research on stress and burnout among student volunteers in the Indian higher education context remains limited. The present exploratory study addresses this gap by examining levels of perceived stress and burnout among student volunteers at a single private higher education institution in Kerala. The study is positioned as a preliminary, single-institution pilot study; findings are descriptive and institution-specific rather than generalizable.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Astin and Sax (1998) demonstrated through longitudinal research that student participation in volunteer activities positively influences leadership skills, interpersonal competence, and civic engagement. However, they also noted that excessive involvement in service activities sometimes interfered with academic responsibilities, indicating potential stress pathways.

Thoits and Hewitt (2001) found that volunteering is associated with improved psychological well-being and life satisfaction, but emphasized that these positive outcomes are strongest when participation is intrinsically motivated rather than externally pressured. This distinction is theoretically grounded in Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), which posits that autonomy-supportive contexts enhance well-being and protect against burnout.

The Transactional Model of Stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) provides the theoretical framework for understanding stress in volunteering contexts. Stress arises when

individuals perceive demands as exceeding their available coping resources. In student volunteers, sources of such imbalance may include time pressure, role ambiguity, performance expectations, and the challenge of managing academic and volunteering responsibilities concurrently.

Maslach and Jackson (1981) conceptualized burnout as comprising three dimensions: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment. Vecina et al. (2012) found that emotional exhaustion was the strongest predictor of volunteer dropout, while Hwang and Kim (2007) identified unclear role expectations and inadequate organizational support as significant stressors among university student volunteers. The Job Demands-Resources model (Bakker, Demerouti & Sanz-Vergel, 2014) further suggests that burnout occurs when demands are high and resources such as guidance, recognition, and support are limited.

3. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The study was guided by the following objectives:

- (i) To measure the level of perceived stress among student volunteers during volunteering activities.
- (ii) To assess the level of burnout experiences among student volunteers.
- (iii) To identify the major challenges faced by student volunteers that may contribute to stress and burnout.

4. METHODOLOGY

The study adopts a descriptive cross-sectional research design. Data were collected from 60 student volunteers at SAFI Institute of Advanced Study (Autonomous), Vazhayur, Kerala, using convenience sampling. This is a single-institution exploratory study; findings are descriptive and not intended for generalization to broader student volunteer populations.

A self-structured questionnaire was used as the data collection instrument. The questionnaire comprised two sections relevant to the present paper: (a) a five-item Stress Scale measuring mental stress, physical exhaustion, difficulty balancing volunteering with academics, pressure to meet expectations, and emotional strain; and (b) a five-item Burnout Scale measuring feelings of overwork, emotional exhaustion, loss of motivation, detachment, and thoughts of discontinuing volunteering. All items were measured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Never) to 5 (Very Often). An additional section captured the major challenges faced during volunteering.

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The questionnaire was distributed through Google Forms and informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Ethical principles including voluntary participation, confidentiality, and anonymity were maintained throughout.

The sample comprised predominantly female respondents (76.7%) and Muslim respondents (86.7%), reflecting the demographic composition of the institution. The age range was 17–25+ years, with the majority (28.3%) aged 18 years, consistent with first-year undergraduate enrolment. Respondents came from diverse academic disciplines including Arts/Humanities (28.3%), Commerce/Management (20%), Science (18.3%), and Social Work (18.3%).

5. RESULTS

5.1 Volunteering Profile

The majority of respondents (66.1%) reported that their volunteering participation was completely voluntary and driven by personal interest, reflecting strong intrinsic motivation. A smaller group (16.6%) reported mostly voluntary participation with some academic or institutional influence, while 8.85% described participation as both voluntary and pressure-based. Cultural programmes (65%) and literary festivals (50%) were the most common volunteering contexts. A substantial proportion (40%) reported spending more than eight hours per day during volunteering events, indicating significant time commitment.

5.2 Stress Among Student Volunteers

Table 1 presents the frequency distribution of responses across the five stress indicators.

Indicator	Never %	Almost Never %	Sometimes %	Fairly Often %	Very Often %
Mental stress during volunteering	48.3	25.0	13.3	8.3	5.0
Physical exhaustion while volunteering	41.7	22.0	20.0	10.0	7.0
Difficulty balancing volunteering with academics	43.3	30.0	13.3	6.7	7.0
Pressure to meet expectations	35.0	22.0	23.3	10.0	10.0
Emotional strain while volunteering	35.0	22.0	26.7	13.3	3.0

Table 1. Frequency Distribution of Stress Indicators (n = 60)

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Across all five stress indicators, the majority of respondents reported experiencing stress either never or almost never. Mental stress was the most infrequently reported, with 73.3% of respondents indicating they never or almost never felt mentally stressed during volunteering. Physical exhaustion was similarly low, with 63.7% reporting absence of physical fatigue. Difficulty balancing volunteering with academic life was reported as never or almost never by 73.3% of respondents.

However, pressure to meet expectations showed a comparatively wider distribution, with 20% reporting fairly often or very often experiencing such pressure. Emotional strain showed the broadest distribution of all stress indicators, with 26.7% reporting it sometimes and 13.3% fairly often, suggesting that emotional demands constitute the most prevalent stress dimension among this sample.

5.3 Burnout Experiences

Table 2 presents the frequency distribution of responses across the five burnout indicators.

Indicator	Never %	Almost Never %	Sometimes %	Fairly Often %	Very Often %
Felt overworked during volunteering	41.7	23.3	16.7	13.3	5.0
Emotional exhaustion due to volunteering	41.7	30.0	16.7	10.0	2.0
Lack of motivation after continuous volunteering	50.0	20.0	13.3	8.3	8.0
Detachment or reduced interest over time	56.7	21.7	13.3	5.0	3.0
Thoughts of discontinuing due to stress	56.7	20.0	15.0	5.0	3.0

Table 2. Frequency Distribution of Burnout Indicators (n = 60)

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Burnout indicators showed a pattern similar to stress, with the majority of respondents reporting low frequency across all dimensions. The strongest positive finding was motivational resilience: 50% of respondents reported never experiencing a lack of motivation, and 56.7% reported never feeling detached or less interested in volunteering over time. The same proportion (56.7%) reported never having thought about discontinuing volunteering due to tiredness or stress.

The most frequently reported burnout dimension was feeling overworked, with 18.3% reporting this fairly often or very often. Emotional exhaustion was reported fairly often or very often by 12% of respondents. Notably, 16% reported sometimes experiencing a lack of motivation, and 8% each reported fairly often and very often, indicating a small but identifiable sub-group at risk of motivational burnout.

5.4 Challenges Contributing to Stress and Burnout

Respondents identified several organizational and structural challenges during volunteering. Poor coordination or communication was the most commonly reported challenge (43.3%), followed by lack of rest or breaks (36.7%), lack of guidance or supervision (28.3%), physical strain (28.3%), long working hours (27.7%), role confusion (23.3%), academic workload (20%), and emotional pressure (18.3%). When asked about the overall impact of these challenges on mental well-being, 51.7% reported no impact, 43.3% reported impact to some extent, and 5% reported a great impact.

6. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study indicate that student volunteering at this institution is predominantly a low-stress, low-burnout experience for the majority of participants. This outcome is consistent with Thoits and Hewitt (2001), who found that intrinsically motivated volunteering is associated with positive psychological outcomes, and with Ryan and Deci's (2000) Self-Determination Theory, which predicts that autonomy-driven engagement buffers against burnout. The high rate of intrinsic motivation reported in this sample (66.1% completely voluntary) likely explains the low overall stress and burnout levels observed.

However, the data also reveal a consistent minority—approximately 13–20% across indicators—who report moderate to high levels of stress and burnout. This sub-group warrants institutional attention. The pattern of challenges identified points clearly to organizational rather than personal factors as the primary stress drivers: poor coordination,

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insufficient rest, long working hours, and lack of supervision. This is consistent with the Job Demands-Resources model (Bakker et al., 2014), which predicts burnout when demands are high and organizational resources are limited, and with Hwang and Kim's (2007) finding that unclear role expectations and poor management are primary stressors among student volunteers.

The finding that emotional strain showed the broadest distribution among stress indicators—with 26.7% reporting it sometimes—aligns with Bride, Radey and Figley's (2007) work on emotional exposure in helping roles. Volunteers engaged in direct service activities such as medical camps and community relief work may be particularly vulnerable to this dimension.

The high rate of future volunteering intention (76.7%) and the strong endorsement of volunteering's developmental value suggest that, despite the challenges, the overall experience remains positive. This finding supports the proposition that organizational improvements rather than reduced volunteering load should be the primary institutional response.

7. CONCLUSION

This exploratory study provides preliminary evidence that student volunteering at a single Kerala institution is associated with low to moderate levels of stress and burnout for the majority of participants, with intrinsic motivation serving as a key protective factor. A consistent minority experiences moderate to high psychological strain, primarily attributable to organizational deficiencies rather than the nature of volunteering itself.

Institutional interventions should focus on improving coordination and communication structures, ensuring adequate rest periods, clarifying role expectations, and providing supervisory support. These measures can protect the psychological well-being of the minority at risk while preserving the developmental benefits of volunteering for all participants.

The limitations of this study must be acknowledged explicitly. The single-institution convenience sample ($n = 60$) with marked demographic homogeneity (86.7% Muslim respondents) limits generalizability. The self-structured questionnaire, while adequate for exploratory purposes, lacks the psychometric validation of established instruments such as the Perceived Stress Scale (Cohen et al., 1983) or the Maslach Burnout Inventory (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). Future research should employ validated instruments, larger diverse samples

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across multiple institutions, and longitudinal designs to establish causal relationships between volunteering conditions and psychological outcomes.

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