Exploring the Epidemiology of Suicide in Youth and the Potential of Higher Education Institutions

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Abstract

Social change is an inevitable feature of human society; further seeking changes in many forms of human grouping, the relative forms of interactions and also the social relationships. In this framework of sustenance and perseverance, the Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) hold a prominent place. They receive individuals who are almost rigidly formed with their notions, choices, personality orders and traits. The institutions of higher education are in fact meant to train people for being adaptive to a professional set up, by widening the possibilities of their employability. There are multiple challenges, these places of education combat, while marching ahead for the set aim. One of the toughest issues, the higher education institutions face in the contemporary India is 'Suicides' committed by the students. Suicide in youth is a major concern of sustainability and development today. The statistics reflect that in India, suicide is one of the major causes of death in Indian youth falling in the age of 15-29 years. Youth is usually tender in susceptibility and perception. It perceives situations in hurry, with lack of patience and logistics. In many situations, young boys and girls jump to the conclusion that ending life is the only option that can help them get rid of their agony or burdens. This happens because they find lack of guidance, hand holding and resolution mechanisms in the world they see. Referring to 'Ethno methodology' and 'Phenomenology'; the young boys and girls construct their own social reality, give a meaning to it and account for the methods they use to undertake this socio-psychological process. Until this age, the predominant influence on tem has been of the 'social institutions'; which socialized them in their own ways with their own value systems. The role of the HEIs begins here and that is very crucial. The present paper aims at understanding the Epidemiology of Suicide' in youth; by exploring the factors behind high number of incidences of suicides in youth of the nation. Alongside, the focus is to redefine the role of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in curbing the suicidal tendencies in youth. Suicide as a cause of death can be checked if the HEIs work on the areas likes mental health of the students and development of curriculum which is functional for happiness of youth; by increasing opportunities related to employability; financial self-reliance and above all emotional wellbeing through systematically available counseling provisions. The findings further state that HEIs can be instrumental in controlling suicides in youth, if there is an adequate emphasis on sex education; modernism; gender neutrality; juvenile culture and the like. This can be done directly by the institutions in case of residential campuses and in other cases, the parents can be involved on voluntary basis. The paper derives information and statistics from the secondary sources of information. Exploratory research design has been used to interpret and explain the issue of suicides in youth. The paper shall be a combination of analysis of the data; and doctrinal as well as theoretical developments on 'suicide' and 'institutions'.

The Epidemiology of Suicide in Youth

Suicide is a global issue today; the whole world reflects incidents of suicides. It is one of the identified and main reasons of death. However studies related to suicide in every particular nation are specific to its demography, its socio-cultural and economic features and situations (Radhakrishnan and Andrade, 2012). The experiences related to 'suicide' as a social issue are specific to every nation; and these experiences have to be interpreted in relative terms. Any single methodology cannot provide holistic understanding of suicide as a global problem. Suicide is not even a novel social happening; it has been featuring Indian society for long; having openness in approach of study and research on it now. One of the most contemporary developments in Indian academics is research on suicides; with a higher number of recordings of the cases.

The World Health Organization (2021) published report on data related to global occurrence of suicide. According to this report published by WHO, more than 700,000 persons in the world, kill themselves every year; making it the fourth leading cause of death among 15-19 years old. The age group is alarming, since it includes the youth of the world, which forms the pillar of all futuristic global developments. It has also been reported that majority of these suicides occur in low and middle-income countries including India also; not letting even high-income nations escape the frame. There is an endless gambit in which suicide can be interpreted, understood and explained; it is a public health issue, as accepted by the WHO also. The WHO Mental Health Action Plan 2013–2030 makes it obligatory for the member

nations to reduce the suicide rates in their boundaries by one-third by 2030; this also constitutes one of the Sustainable Development Goals to be achieved by 2030.
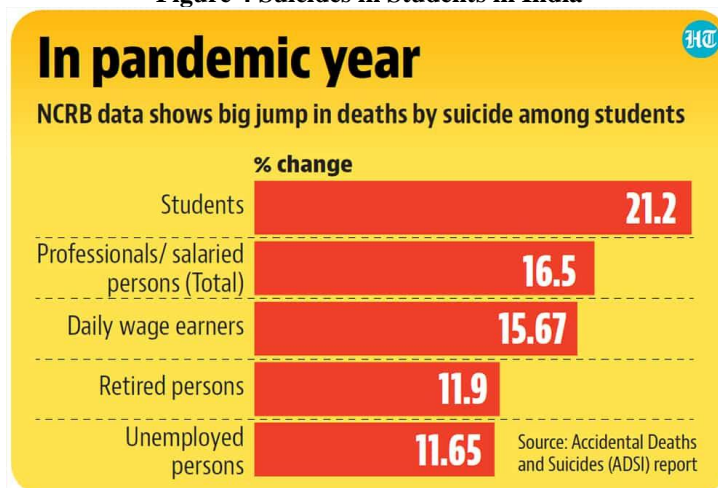
The Epidemiology of Suicide is a tool to understand the phenomenon of suicide in the world and in India too. Epidemiology of suicide discusses the factors and prevalence of suicide as a disease, which seems very workable too in terms of designing the strategies to curb it. The present paper focuses on 'Descriptive Epidemiology' and explains the prevalence of suicide in youth of India and the factors behind this public disease or may say health disorder. A sharp rise in the statistics of suicide in all over the world has made it feature as a global public health crisis calling for prevention strategies on urgent basis (Mueller, et. al. 2021).

India stand on a noticeable position in world statistics related to suicide. A report by the World Health Organization states that India has the highest suicide rate in South-east Asia; with 16.5 suicides per 100, 000 people; followed by Sri Lanka (14.6) and Thailand (14.4). The data pose a worry, to be addressed on all fronts; administrative, legal; social; cultural and structural (institutional) as well. The COVID-19 aggravated the issue even more; a sharp rise has been noted in cases of suicides during and as an effect of COVID-19 curfews and lockdowns. The crisis in academic life, closure of the academic institutions; delay in admission process and intake by institutions made the young generation suspicious and insecured about their future; leading them to be susceptible for suicidal tendencies. Nanisetti (2021) in an article entitled 'Students Suicide go up', published in *The Hindu* states that in the year 2016 the total number of suicides was 9,748; which rose to 12, 526 in the year 2020. Not only due to the pandemic, but otherwise also, there has been a sharp rise in suicide cases.

In 2020, The National Crime Record Bureau (NCRB) published that a student took his/her own life after every 42 minutes; everyday, more than 34 students die by suicide (Sarveswar and Thomas, 2020). Further, a report entitled, 'Accidental Deaths and Suicides in India (ADSI) published by NCRB states that in 2020 itself, 8.2 percent students died in the country with suicide. Youth is being heavily influenced by the suicidal flames and 64, 114 people under the age of 30 years, killed themselves in 2020.

Figure 4 depicts that maximum suicide have been committed by students, followed by professionals/persons; daily wage earners; retired persons; unemployed persons (Jha, 2021). Students and small entrepreneurs reflect the biggest rise in suicide cases. This social phenomenon has been seen as fact and account of stress in these affected stratas of population. 'Youth' especially students committing suicide is an issue, that can be redressed to a large extent in the structural framework of social and educational institutions, specially the higher education institutions.
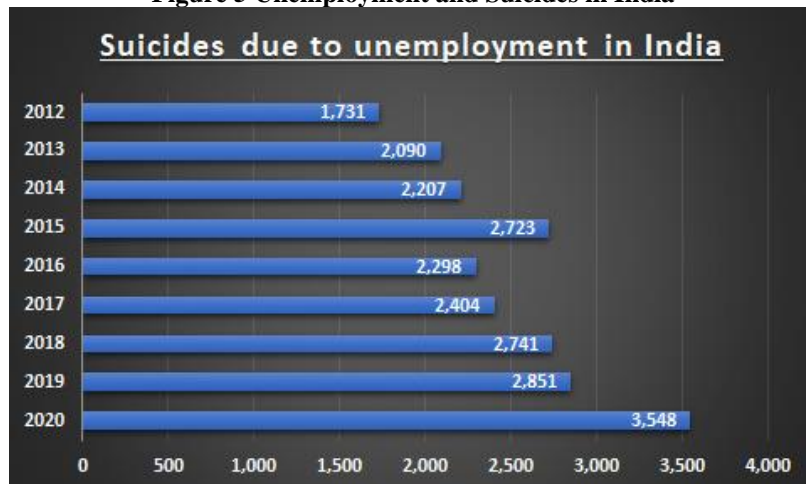
Figure 4 Suicides in Students in India

Source: *https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/suicides-increase-10-to-highest-since-1967-accidental-deaths-down-11-national-data-101635455348072.html, visited on 16th September, 2022 at 12: 07 pm.*

Further, Figure 5 shows that the number of suicides due to 'unemployment' in India has almost doubled from the year 2012 to 2020. 'Unemployment' and financial insecurity' lead to multiple form of 'livelihood threats' leading the susceptible youth to end life. This particular sense of insecurity increased in the COVID19 phase and post lockdowns also. 'Downsizing' and 'decrease in salaries' of the employees from private as well as public organizations and departments due to curfews, lockdowns and break in international market flow threatened the youth seeking settlement in career. The already existing jobs had been in flux and creation of new jobs and opportunities seemingly has been seen as a dim possibility. Youth actually got scared and as a result of this socio-economic panic oriented condition, uncountable suicides and attempt to suicides have been reported and observed. However, there is still a dearth of exact figures on the same; but this 'gap of knowledge and information' needs to be bridged.

Figure 5 Unemployment and Suicides in India

Source: *https://www.news18.com/news/india/suicides-due-to-unemployment-more-than-doubled-between-2012-and-2020-govt-data-4761845.html, visited on 23rd September, 2022 at 7: 30 pm.*

The Exclusion Report (2018-2019) also states that the youth from different social groups are facing the issue of unemployment. With higher focus in education, the public higher education institutions in India experienced a rise in the number of youth enrolled therein. On the other side, the shock for the youth has been the shrinking opportunities of jobs; which worked absolutely against the expectation of youth from the scenario of growth and development. Rather, women faced the largest decline in the labour force participation (Economic Political Weekly, 2019). On the whole, lack of jobs and employment has been a surfacing concern for decades in India, affecting the Indian youth to a large extent.

Young age is tender in its multiple fronts; young minds are sensitive and susceptible since they are introduces to experiences like choosing career and developing known as well as unknown skills; forming and breaking of relationships relationship; admissions and entrance exams pressures; competition for job placement; separation from families an parents due to joining residential campuses for pursuing higher education; failures in entrance and being part of the institutions which were never part of their wish list; financial burden on parents for paying their heavy admission and course fee by taking loans from banks and other sources; and the like. This has been seen a phase when their personal liberty to move freely and to dwell in their peer group has been affected. Their relationships have also experienced turmoil during this period along with their career being on 'no explanation' state, where institutions were even bound to slow down the process of admissions and intake on one hand; and the conducting examination for those who were in their final years of degrees or diplomas. Reverse migration happening on national as well as international levels also had an influence on their insecurities in case of those who were planning to go abroad for their higher education or had even paid for their intake by foreign universities. Accessibility to the online and digital mode of learning in schools, colleges and universities has been another prominent cause behind youth stress. The sudden and unplanned shift from real identities to virtual identities to connect to online world of education including Google meet, Cisco and other such platforms has been very challenging for Indian youth. In some cases it was tough to afford smart gadgets and in some cases technical expertise to operate on them for learning and teaching was tough. Many students could not connect to the online learning mode of learning for months and even a year; leading to rising levels of stress and anxiety s they were lagging behind their age mates and class mates. This phenomenon of digital divide leading to sort of an educational divide within the youth also cultivated suicidal tendencies in them. Further, the social conflicts within the generations in a household, surfaced more being in direct contact and situation of interaction for almost a year. However, the research gap on these contexts is yet to be explored by social scientists. But it is evident that the rate of suicide in young girls and boys increased during and after the lockdowns.

Emile Durkheim's 'Theory on Suicide' (1951) is a very prominent theoretical lead at this point of the paper; which puts more light on interpreting the epidemiology of suicide in general. Durkheim, very emphatically refutes all 'extra-social' factors behind suicides. He says that the phenomenon of suicide is predominantly related to the 'social structure and its ramifying functions' (Abraham and Morgan, 2019). These functions of the social structure induce, perpetuate and aggravate the suicidal potential. According to Durkheim, a rate of self-homicide; collective inclination towards suicide is possessed by each society. There are factors in the social structures, which provide an impetus to social facts like suicide. His work on suicide is a result of field analysis in many societies and cultures. He interpreted Suicides into three types: (i) Egoist Suicide; (ii) Altruistic Suicide; and (iii) Anomic Suicide. There are varying degrees of integration of individuals with their communities, religion, groups, family and the like. In case individuals are lesser integrated,

they are thrown on their own resources and are in the state of isolation; resulting into a greater rate of 'Egoist suicides' in the society. Further, if this integration is in excess, the individual tends to sacrifice his or her life for his community, group, family, religion or the like; resulting into higher rate of 'Altruistic Suicides' in the society. However, anomic suicides are committed in situations of normlessness and sever transition. In these situations, the older normative patterns are in a flux and the newer ones are not yet established. These set ups are featured with cultural and psychological shocks which seem unmanageable on the surface resulting into giving an impetus to suicide-genic impulses in individuals. 'Unlimited aspirations' also have been added as a cause behind altruistic suicides by Durkheim. Some examples to understand anomie given by Durkheim are economic disasters and financial crisis; breakdown of the social relationships in case of divorce; domestic anomie resulting out of death of either of the spouse; religion losing its power; government being a tool in hands of some specific groups or individuals instead of governing the masses; and the like.

All abrupt transitions result into broadening of the chances of anomie in society and hence suicide also. Referring to Durkheim's Theory on Suicide, 'Anomic Suicide' and 'Egoist Suicide' have been more visible and observable in youth during the last few years; specifically in COVID19 phase. Being isolated and separated from their peer and being in locked conditions where they could not socialize with people of their own taste and choice lead to cases of egoist suicides. Youth has suffered from cultural, social, personal and financial shocks leading to anomie in their life situations; resulting into their being more submitting to suicidal impulses. They are in a state when they are not yet earning. They are in the phase of competition where the scarce resource likes 'jobs' and 'regular income' are not easily available to all. The data on suicide is ample but there is a paucity of analysis on reasons of suicides and resolution mechanism in context of the youth, which forms a very distinct community.

Exploring the Potential of Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs) in curbing Suicide in Youth

After schooling, young boys and girls are sent to undertake various academic programs in the Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). These institutions of provide vocational training and education; in order to create human resource and professionals for various fields of knowledge and its application. HEIs ought to be those places where problems like suicide are controlled and checked. But, there have been many cases, where suicides take place due to administrative or faculty induced discrimination. Young boys and girls in majority of the cases, for the first time come in an open contact with the world, where the process of redefining the concepts like modernism, liberalism, youth, sexual rights and the like takes place. The tender minds conveniently interpret the concepts like 'freedom' and 'rights' with no limitation resulting into sowing the seeds of self-destruction that is 'suicides'. Planning a suicide or being succumbing to any such pressures is highly secretive in an individual's life; but yet signs are there and those can be noticed. Often, warnings and risk cab ne identified through behavioral assessment and analysis. HEIs have a great potential to check such and other behavioral flaws occurring in the young age. This responsibility of HEIs even grows more in case of residential universities and colleges; were students in their later teen-age come and join. This also implies to educational enrolments in the realms of migration, where students choose to move to other places than their state/ nation to another one for doing an educational degree or course. In the following part of the paper, the paper focuses on the areas, HEIs can emphasize on, to check suicidal tendencies in the students.
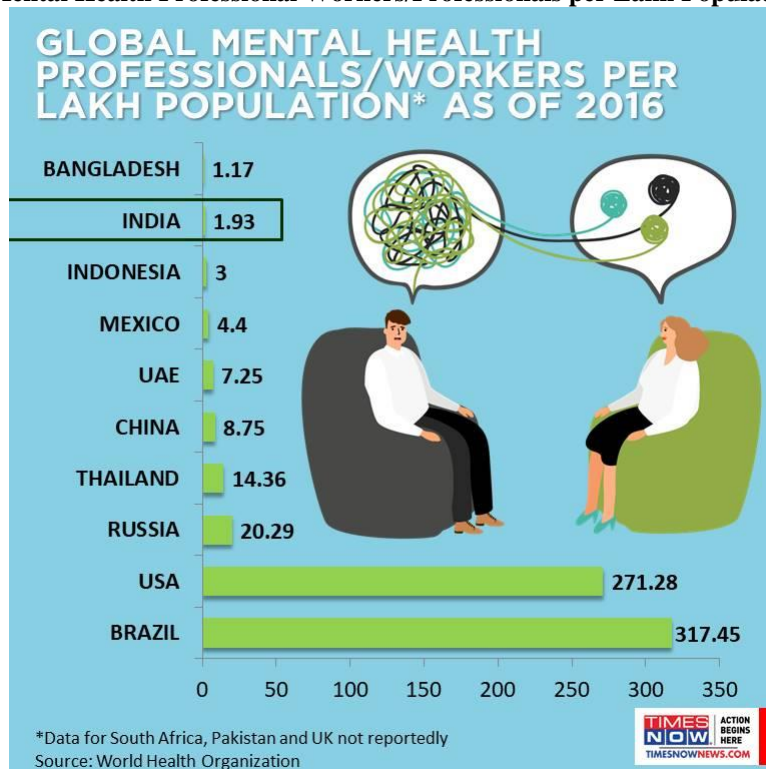
Social Discrimination

It is challenging to find data on the number of students committing suicides in colleges and universities, due to discrimination. But, the fact is that cases of suicides due to discrimination in higher educational institutions have been reported. Laxminarayana (2020) says that there is need to check caste-based discrimination on educational institutions. Discriminatory behavior on any basis like gender, caste, religion, IQ level, and the like, also forms a strong cause of depression among students in universities and colleges. Suicides have been committed by students due to being subjected to discriminatory behaviors by teachers and students as well. There have been many cases of suicides by Dalit students in the recent years in India. Caste is a deeply integral part of India social structure and the process of socialization. Hence, it becomes challenging to remove its reflections completely from the mind of the youth, who have been nurtured in caste oriented value systems. Pandey (2017) in her paper talks at length about the cases of suicide by the students from the lower castes and distress among the lower caste students due to discrimination done against them in the institutional routines by the students, administration and faculty also. There is a long history of such cases, which cannot be explored in this paper due to paucity of the space; but this is evident that caste based discrimination has been one factor behind anxiety and suicidal tendencies in HEIs of India. Nautiyal (2016) has also endorsed that the students from marginalized backgrounds experience 'alienation and disaffection; within the university set up. Other than caste and class based treatment, there are other factors also which lead to increase in rate of suicides in students in the HEIs. Their academic performance is a major concern to be addressed from both the sides; their parents and educational institutions.

Mental Health and Psychological Wellbeing

Every person does not own equal Intelligence Quotient (IQ) level. Their receptivity to the knowledge and information being disseminated is differential in many ways. In today's competitive curriculums having combination of theoretical and practical evaluation system, every student does not perform equally or may say 'brilliantly'. The results are disappointing in many cases. The students who fail or fear to fail become prone to suicidal thoughts and finally commit suicide due to the fear of parental reaction and disappointment; failure in job placements; financial threat of non-settlement in life; social stigma and the like. Due to lack of self-strengthening mechanism in their hands and absence of moral support; young girls and boys develop weak mental health and non-functional self-defense strategies. In some instances, ragging by the students is said to be the cause; and in other, administration or faculty is on the surface of the discourse. These issues become even more threat oriented in case of residential campuses, where students are required to stay leaving their homes and families as per the institutional norms. Their mental health related needs take paramount importance in such stances. Working for the mental health provision in HEIs is the best mechanism to work on mental health of youth. There are poor provisions regarding mental health and the related counseling in India. Figure 6 shows number of the mental health workers/ professionals working per lakh population in different countries of the world. India has only 1.93 mental health workers working per lakh population; whereas in nations like Brazil has 317.45 workers and United States have 271.28 mental health professionals working per lakh population. Further, there are there are other steps which can be taken by the higher educational institutions for bringing about a functional change in lives of the young boys and girls studying therein. Amendments and additions in the existing curriculum can be of a greater help.

Figure 6 Mental Health Professional Workers/Professionals per Lakh Population in India

Source:https://www.timesnownews.com/india/article/amid-covid-19-outbreak-indias-suicide-epidemic-remains-unaddressed-these-graphs-show-how/652188, visited on 11th October, 2022 at 12:48 pm.

This data can drastically improve if all the higher education institutions appoint minimum one mental health worker for listening to problems of the youth and counseling them in case of need. This can on one hand, enhance the statistical evidence of social human development; and on the other hand can help youth by providing them experts to talk to and discuss the issues which stress them. Sharing and being counseled to a drastic level reduce the chances of suicides in all ages. Improving on the number of mental health workers in higher education institutions can curb the students' suicide. Mental health workers being appointed also need to be appointed on the condition of secrecy. The discussion done with the approaching student or in other words his or her personal issues troubling him mentally should not be disclosed to anyone in the institution. If this is not seen stringently, the vicious circle of stress and depression shall not end. Along

with this sensitization of the faculty also needs to be done. There is a lot of difference between teaching children and adults of teen agers. Children and their interests can be suppressed, but if the same is done with students of HEIs, the results can be social harsh. Unlike school going children, the students coming to attend HEIs are in need of moral, psychological and professional support also, along with academic guidance. The faculty comes in direct contact with the students in their academic routines. They can notice, identify and observe the signs of stress and anxiety and catch the warnings well in time. Afterwards, the case can be counseled or referred to an expert for help. Such little steps, if taken by the higher education institutions can contribute to curbing the data of student suicide in a nation.

Career Counseling and Timely Guidance

Another reason of high incidents of suicides by students is financial insecurity and negligible chances of settlements. Job placement is one major aim in all HEIs providing vocational training schemes and measures. Those who stand on the top in achievement hierarchy get placements much before the completion of their degree, but many are left with no clue for career settlement. This situation triggers the instincts of suicide in mentally weak students and also in those who come from financially backward families. They fear the loss of money spent on their education and also feel insecurity with regards to their earning, livelihood and their overall future. Referring to this situation, which is almost inevitable in all higher education institutions, 'Career counseling' becomes a crucial administrative and institutional tool. There should be space in the regular curriculum to arrange training programme for the students in the stage of placements/ training separately. The youth, during their learning years timely needs to be given guidance as to what all career options are available and how can they relatively move ahead for same. The role of the Alumni in such tasking can be very effective. This categorical role play by the Alumni of an institution does a two way task. On one hand, they share their experiences related to dealing with obstacles in settlements, on the other hand they also forward a message that crossing tedious stages in this age of life is a normal course and it happens to all. Hence, the disorder related to 'self-pity' and lack of self-actualization or under-estimation of self in youth can be checked; along with the suicidal tendencies in them. All the HEIs need to work on strengthening their alumni network, which can pave a way for over all development of the institution and also of the students as well. There is a need to emphasize on a value that 'youth understands youth better than any other age group'; for which there is need of making academic and professional investments in the students on all stages. Here itself, there is relevance of moving into the context of employability in youth. The University Grants Commission's Annual Reports reflect that the product of the higher education system are not functionally being invested; rather 'the present system of education is generating much waste and stagnation' (Ahuja, 2017). Hence there is a very dire need that the curriculum at the levels of higher education institutions is worked upon with futuristic and training focused orientations.

Parental Counseling on Institutional Level

Controlling suicide is a multi-staged and a multi-sectorial challenge. Governance and institutions cannot check suicide in youth, until there is a contribution made by the families and especially parents also. But the issue in this case if the social and cultural differences that exists in parents from different societal and cultural back grounds. Educated parents have different mindset as compared to those who are totally ignorant and illiterate. People coming from rural areas survive in differential social conditions than those surviving in urban areas. Similarly, region based stratification cannot be ignored too. All these differences influence parenting to a large extent. On the whole, the one generation of parents may entirely be different from other; and the differences can be there in case of strata within the same generation too. The reaction of all the parents on failure and success of their wards; and on their settlement, promotion and downfall, is different. Young boys and girls are aware and predictive about the parents' reactions and responses in al contexts; hence they fear punishment/s and judgmental behavior in case of any kind of failure. They anticipate poor and tormenting parental reaction in case of poor academic result; failure in placement; break up of some relationships; same sex love affairs; or any other issue; and tend to commit suicide. The idea of suicide emerges from the anticipatory inability of the youth to cope with the loss that has occurred or that 'might' occur. HEIs need to design some programme, where the parents of the young boys and girls are brought to a uniform platform and are guided about the problems and issues being faced by the youth. They need to be trained in context of the social change that has occurred, and they need to be guided to check any incidence of self-destruction by their ward. They can be trained to identify warnings like suicidal behavior and changes in behavior of their wards. Parents need to be suggested that they need to listen to their children in all the contexts they need to share or discuss without being judgmental or stigmatizing. When every HEI starts working on these lines, there can a big change in the data related to suicides in students, especially youth. Counselors can be made available by the institutions, not only for the students but also for parents to discuss the matter worrying them 'secretly'. This can help the parents to design their reaction, anger and responses for a balance. This particular suggestion is not aiming at encouraging the youth to perform low or exhibit downgrading skill or professional development; but in fact it is for curbing suicides in those who tried hard but could not succeed due to intense

competition. In addition, it shall also be helpful in curbing suicidal instincts in those who are facing some personal issues like relationship crisis or the like.

Conclusion

The paper is an attempt to understand and explain the potential the HIEs can showcase in case in managing suicide in youth. The sole responsibility is not of the institutions only; but still there are strong opportunities in the hands of the institutions. Al the suggestions can be brought to practicality only with a viable availability of financial resources allocated for this very aim. The government needs to manage budget and allocate some amount of money to higher educational institutions for undertaking their role in curbing suicide. This shall help the institutions to bring about the needed changes by organizing counseling programs for students and the parents as well. Alongside, this shall also make the HEIs answerable to the government in terms of the steps taken for the set aim. Controlling suicide in totality is not practical, but believing that this cannot be done is not at all justifiable. All the stake holders need to contribute their 'own little' to the realm to make the world a comfortable place to address, share and redress their issues without thinking to end their life.

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Notes

1. The World Health Organization in 2021 published data on f incidence suicide in the world. The details are available on https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/suicide, visited on 17th September, 2022 at 7: 48 pm. According to the report, the mortality data is not unique to suicide, since only 80 member nations have got a systemized registration of suicide cases, hence the global records are believed to be poor in terms of availability and maintenance.

2. Mueller, S. Anna. 2021. The Social Root of Suicide: Theorizing How the External Social World Matters to Suicide and Suicide Prevention. https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.621569/full, visited on 17th September 2022 at 8: 02 pm. Mueller and his collaborators have focused on theoretical as well legal framework to explain suicide. The paper lays emphasis on future directions for checking suicides in students.

3. The Exclusion Report, 2018-2019 *Three Essays Collective*, is published by the Centre for Equity Studies. The Report collects data from various organizations and prepare compilation on various themes being covered. The major task for preparation of the report has been done by Usman Jawed and Anirban Bhattacharya. Many social scientists, scholars and researchers have contributed their individual empirical as well as quasi-empirical research to this Report. The report reflects a detailed insight to the themes like basic rights of people; social and other forms of inequalities; exclusion in the realm of food and nutrition; unemployment and the like.

4. Economic Political Weekly, 2019 published, 'Declining female work force participation', which can be retrieved and referred to, from https://www.epw.in/journal/2019/16/editorials/declining-female-labour-force-particiaption.html. This piece of information shares the factors behing lower female work force and attricutes it to lack of opportunities to be employed and work; under- reporting of the women work; household incomes and the like. The article emphatically states that the mechanization of farm and non-farm activities has also resulted into reduced opportunities of work for women.