

TRENDS IN SUICIDE RATES IN PAKISTAN DURING COVID-19: THE UPFRONT ECONOMIC AND PSYCHOLOGICAL CHALLENGE AFFECTING EDUCATION SECTOR

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ABSTRACT

This paper is based on a third-party action research done on the subject of COVID-19 suicide rate in Pakistan during pandemic and then it correlates it with the poverty rate, a main driver of the phenomenon with the school drop out ratio. Suicide tendency before and after a pandemic is usually found, however, the study relates COVID-19 suicide trend with impasses in education system during a paradigm shift to hybrid mode of learning in Pakistan, which is first of its kind. It is found that most of the cases occurred due to lockdown-mandated recession or work stress or job loss, threatening livelihood and passively rotting away the education system. Xenophobia is the number two cause of suicide cases in the region. The data was extracted from national dailies for the year of 2019-2020 and sources of press reports of Pakistan were considered. Out of the total 29 reported suicide cases in Pakistan, 16 suicide cases have occurred due to COVID-19 economic repercussions. Out of these majority were the male victims. Rest of the cases were reported in Xenophobic cause of the death. It is hoped that the current findings will help protect the underprivileged class by grabbing the attention of the authorities, both national and international, towards governance issue. This, in order words, have hampered the education sector which faces direct threat from the economic crisis. School drop out ratio has increased. Pakistan ranks second highest showing 44 per cent of its population (approximately 22.8 million) aged between 5-16 not attending school (UNICEF Pakistan, 2024). It was observed that people had no resources to access technology when virtual classroom policy was adopted by each province during pandemic. Hence, access to technology was another factor that created collateral damage highlighting cracks in equity and inclusion in education and technology access. This increased technology dependency have created minds which are socially hampered and lack coping mechanisms whenever a crisis like this happens. Hence, this paper calls authorities to action based on rejuvenating education sector such that ICT is fully integrated with education and mentally sound young persons are produced at the same time.

Keywords: Xenophobia, COVID-19, recession, suicide rate, inclusion rate, equity, e-governance.

INTRODUCTION

Suicide tendencies before and after a pandemic is usually found. This study covers COVID-19 suicide trend in Pakistan and correlates it with the school drop out ratio and increased dependency of young children on social media during the lock-down which is first of its kind. It is found that most of the suicide cases occurred due to lock-down-mandated recession or work stress or unemployment which is threatening livelihood and is passively rotting away the education system. The hybrid mode of education was another challenge for the developing country. The

surge in unemployment and inflation has caused cost of living crisis in the country due to which parents now take education as a luxury as they lack material resources to connect to the hybrid mode of learning. Hence, values pertaining to inclusivity and diversity are under attack at the national level. They have also reported that their children are suffering from isolation and lack of empathy due to country-wide lock-down because of which there is a tendency that this psychological trauma would hamper their socialization and mental well-being. Hence,

education sector is under the direct threat from this burgeoning multi-lateral crisis. Xenophobia is number two reason of suicide cases in the region. Suicide tendency before and after a pandemic is common usually. The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has caused a soaring mental health dilemma around the world. It created a dozen more psychological pains and suffering in the form of panic attacks, depression, fear, adjustment disorder, trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) etc. These sufferings were reported in both general masses and among healthcare workers including professionals and staff. These factors are the main cause of a huge majority of the global occurrences of suicide incidents as reported by media and press releases. Hence it would not be surprising to say that when a pandemic like COVID-19 hits any generation, it usually produces some offshoots of crises at the backdrop of thousand increased suicide rate before and after a pandemic can be anticipated. However, the Xenophobic incidences related to contracting a pandemic disease or vaccine inoculation also led to suicide attempts completion. Neighboring countries like Bangladesh and India have also reported cases under such category. One of the studies claimed that the global pandemic of 2019 contributed to some of the risk factors that led to suicide attempts which included recession, social boycotts, racial biases, isolation etc. It was also observed that mental illnesses among healthcare professionals was also one of the risk factors that led to suicide attempts globally. Each risk factor is associated with its separate casualty so as to limit the overrating of the factors more than once that may have caused it during crisis time. These factors compelled us to find out the reason behind the actual COVID-19 suicide causalities in developing country like Pakistan by taking analytics from press releases of the cases reported in the country. It was found out that these cases reflect that the poverty induced out of the pandemic lockdown mandates and closure of businesses have impacted general masses more than a privileged group. Many small and medium scale businesses have suffered a financial backlash and many other employed were laid off as the SMEs (small-medium enterprises) companies sought to secure their financial debts by following the suit of other big companies by working on limited staff. Hence, many families in Pakistan turn to see education as a luxury, secondary to their basic needs. So school drop out ratio increased drastically all over

the country. The pandemic also exposed some of the flaws in our policies and governance, specially related to integrating ICT (information and communications technology) in education. Many schools were now operating on hybrid mode, conducting classes virtually. Many areas remained underprivileged as they lack the material sources to fulfill the emerging needs. Hence, the questions were raised against the policy makers in bringing equity and inclusion in technology access. This trend continued for more than two-years and children became technology-dependent. They wanted instant gratification through online sources and hence, this pose a threat to their mental well being as they are becoming more isolated from the real world and now lack social coping mechanisms. Any difficulty in the financial outlook of their family will appear in the ways the children will see life. Hence, it can be expected that if this trend continues, it can impose a far more vast influences on teaching-learning paradigm and can adversely affect the education system as whole. Since, it was found that the majority of the suicide victims were the adults and in early thirties, the 21st century requires that both material and physiological needs of a student must be fulfilled in order to make teaching-learning experience successful and more goal-oriented. Hence to understand all of this, Maslow's hierarchy of needs can be rationalized into our policy making process so that value-added services are provided to our citizens and children preventing them from harming themselves and to combat social nuances like suicides effectively. As a society it is our collective responsibility in the social contract to create a more inclusive and diverse system of education to address physiological needs of children from the very beginning.

2. Scope of the Study

The study is based on examining of the effects of the causes of the suicide attempts that led to completion during COVID-19 era in Pakistan and use the statistics to propose that the majority of the cases reported were caused by the recession, unemployment, poverty and disparity between the coping mechanisms during pandemic. These findings were then used to inform that the parity can be drawn between increased isolation or lack of socialization among children and the increase in school drop out ratio during the pandemic which has impacted our education system adversely. People suffered twice as

much psychologically. In order to propose a numerical data to back the research hypothesis, data was extracted from national dailies for the year of 2019-2020 and sources of press reports of Pakistan press media were considered for the same duration. The reasons that caused the segregation in the data are based on the factors that contributed to suicide provocation leading to suicide completion include fear of infection, COVID-19 work stress and the economic recession purported by COVID-19 globally. The reason that other contributing factors were included in the study is just to present a more holistic and inclusive scheme of data in the current context which in turns would be able to reflect the real-world scenarios leading towards a refined version of a comparative study and analysis. Since a lot of research matter already exists on how the COVID-19 in itself has caused suicides in other neighboring countries, yet the main focus is laid on the effect of poverty and pandemic-induced economic recession and its correlation with educational and psychological needs of the children.

3. Literature Review

Recession can be defined as the reduction in productivity (measured by gross domestic product (GDP) and unemployment rate) and economic activity due to the construction in a business cycle. Any perturbation in the business cycle that causes poor GDP and higher unemployment rates in a country creates recession and hence creates cost-of-living and the mental health crises (Butt, et al., 2024). Loss of job and unemployment increase the probability of sufferings such as depression, anxiety, PTSDs etc. These factors in turn behave as an aid to suicide attempt and its completion (Balouch et al., 2024). The COVID-19 crisis has created far more challenges for underdeveloped and developing countries than any other. It not only created a healthcare system crisis in the short run but has left its repercussions spanning for years creating social and economic crises. According to the United Nations Development Program developing countries were expected to bear around \$220 billion income losses due to pandemic (UNDP, 2020). Income loss is expected to decrease by 3.3% in 2019 to 2.6% by 2020 in a survey conducted by the Asian Development Bank for Pakistan and the inflation rate would be as high as 11.5% for 2020 (Mamun & Ullah, 2020; Fayaz et al., 2023). At present Pakistan is facing challenges at many fronts, it suffers from

extreme poverty and food insecurity crises and relentless climate-induced catastrophes in the wake of disastrous 2022 floods. According to Multidimensional Poverty Index about 24% of the population lives below the poverty threshold and some 38.8% of the strata are designated as poor. The picture of food security is already bleak in the wake of 2022 flash floods specially. The agriculture sector and the crops yield were completely washed away in the provinces of Sindh and Baluchistan. However, if we just go back during the period of 2015–2017, about 20.5% of the population was undernourished already (Relief Web, 2019). Thus, mandating the COVID-19 lockdown would mean for a country like Pakistan where a large number of population is poor, the people will be pushed towards starvation and extreme hunger.

Method and Procedure

The suicide database at the national level was unavailable before this study as the previous research which were conducted in the South Asian countries lacked the holistic findings. The data for the study was extracted from different news sources such as Pakistan Today, The Express Tribune, The News, BBC Urdu and Geo News are among the mainstream media outlets whereas some cases were reported by other local dailies such as The Waqt, Jasarat, Daily Yausuf etc. The cases were then studied on one-on-one basis and are listed down on behalf of date of suicide commitment, gender, reporting hospital and the reason for the suicide. Total 29 suicide cases were reported by the press in Pakistan since January 2020. Out of these cases, 16 suicide cases were caused by the COVID-19 related issues, and now they became part of this study as listed down below. From this figure, 4 cases led to completion in suicide attempts whereas four were reported as attempts only. Analyzing the data on gender basis and age group basis, out of the total victims there were 12 males who have suffered from economic recession whereas four other suspects committed suicide because of infection and vaccine Xenophobia. All of the victims belong to the adult age group lying in early thirties, showing that adults are more susceptible towards the mentality seeking death as a panacea to cure all their problems who sought taking refuge in harming themselves, the Harm Principle. This study clearly aims to cater such problems by recommending solutions in the later section, taking education system as the main driving force in training young minds

towards expanding mental elasticity and changing the dynamics of this psychological dilemma. Only two cases belong to the elderly age group, aged above 60. This shows that some adults from this age group still think suicide as the only remedy to their

social sufferings which might have occurred due to social isolation, lock-down conditions or lack of coping mechanisms in vaccine inoculation or infection xenophobia. The systematic data is reproduced in Table 1.

Table 1

Pakistan's COVID-19 Suicide Cases Reporting

Cases	Suicide Date	Victims Reporting	Gender	Age	Reason	News source
1	March 18	Mayo Hospital, Lahore, Punjab	Female	*NR	Xenophobia	Daily Yausuf
2	March 28	Mehmoodabad, Sindh	Male	35	Recession & anxiety	Asia News
3	April 9 (attempt)	Bharchoond village, Sindh	Female	35	Recession & anxiety	Pakistan Today
4	April 9	Mubarak Shar, Khairpur, Sindh	Male	NR	Recession & anxiety	The News
5	April 9	Peer Muhalla, Gambat, Sindh	Male	NR	Recession & anxiety	The News
6	April 9	Khairpur, Sindh	Male	NR	Recession & anxiety	The News
7	April 10 (attempt)	Orangi town, Karachi, Sindh	Male	NR	Recession & anxiety	Geo News
8	April 17	Lahore, Punjab	Male	68	Xenophobia	Deccan Herald
9	April 19 (attempt)	Sarhgodha, Lahore, Punjab	Male	60	Recession & anxiety	BBC Urdu
10	April 20 (attempt)	Jamshoro, Sindh	Male	NR	Xenophobia & work anxiety	The Express Tribune
11	April 21	Korangi, Karachi, Sindh	Male	24	Recession & anxiety	Waqt News
12	April 27	Karachi, Sindh	Male	37	Xenophobia	The Express Tribune
Miscellaneous	March 24- April 10	It is doubted that another 4 suspects (two males and two females) might have committed suicide due to lockdown-related issues like job loss in different districts of Karachi, Sindh.				Jasarat

Note. Adapted from Mamun and Ullah, 2020.

*NR - Not Reported.

5. Discussion

Looking at the above data from Table 1, it can be easily inferred that most of the suicide cases in Pakistan have occurred due to the economic crisis generated because of the lock-down mandate during pandemic. As discussed, out of the total 29 suicide cases that were reported during the period of pandemic in Pakistan, about 16 of them occurred due to economics-driven social crisis created at the backdrop of lock-down and businesses shutdown mandate. From this figure, around 75% of suicide cases (viz 12 cases) led to completion and only 4 were reported as mere unsuccessful attempts. It is these cases which became part of this study upon which we have drawn our conclusions and made recommendations to the highest authorities. Now looking at a gender-wise segregation of the data, around 12 reported cases of suicide were purported by men who had suffered recessionary loss or a job loss during pandemic. Hence, social isolation and economic distress were the main driving factors of the casualties. Only 4 of them have died because of the infectious-disease or vaccine-inoculation - related xenophobia. This shows that males are more susceptible to suicidal thoughts than females, for in an Asian society males bear the whole responsibility to feed their families and bear the cost of education for their children. Hence, the majority of the parents saw education expenses as luxuries during and so they dropped their wards out of schools during pandemic. For them even the internet expenses (to shift from conventional physical classrooms to virtual classrooms during lock-down) was a non-essential form of spending which they thought they should cut it out to save some chunk of money to pay their bills and other expenses. Whereas, as for those families who were able to manage the cost of this paradigm shift, have complained that their children have disengaged from socialization and became addicted to the instant gratification that they receive in those virtual realities. The dopamine dose that they get from their technological interactions have made them mentally sick and isolated from the real world. Their virtual contexts are superceding their real contexts in its significance and so any failure in the former will lead to failure in the later. They spend more time in other things on social media than educating themselves through technology. This is the forthcoming challenge of integrating ICT in education which exposes threats to e-governance and inclusion and equity. The same context can be used

to justify that since not all of the areas in Pakistan were able to cope with the new needs of Hybrid learning and so they lacked in providing educational services to their residents during lock-down. Hence, this calls for action to the authorities to make the infrastructure accessible so that technology transfer and its access is made inclusive and equitable to all the diverse groups of society. All the provinces must share parity in access to technology and learning opportunities.

6. Findings

Around 31 global studies support that there exists a correlation between suicide rate and recession and hence this study supports the previous literature and notion that whenever economic activity is restricted, people commit suicide to seek redemption. Not only this, but another parallel trend was observed during lock-down which shed light on dwindling education sector that was struggling to cope the need of hybrid mode of learning. School drop outs were increased during the same period and education was treated as a non-affordable luxury during lock-down. As a result, children were isolated from major social contexts. Not only this, but the increasing trend in virtual reality presence posed a direct threat to their mental well-being. Children were seen heavily dependent on social media and this dopamine inrush crippled their real life. These young minds think suicide is the only remedy to their social grievances and failures. Unfulfilled relationships and social taboos have made them think of themselves as a liability to society. Hence, pandemic has exposed cracks in our social values and coping mechanisms which is a both economic and psychological challenge. This paper is a wakening call to authorities to make a more inclusive and equitable e-governance policy so that national resources are spent at the right place. Plus, economic relief packages should be announced to facilitate poor families and make access to technology free-of-cost so that education is provided to all unhindered under the article 25A of the constitution – basic education free for all. The study, however, can have limitations for not being able to document all the suicide cases in Pakistan for it relied heavily on data obtained from press releases only and the fact that since suicide is a crime under Pakistan Penal Code - section 325 and it is related to social issues like fear arising from harassment, bullying and social taboos and long complex judicial proceedings, many more cases might have foregone

just because they were not reported. Despite the limitations, this study presents in its all capacity a complete reporting of the suicide cases in Pakistan during COVID-19 pandemic. It is hoped that the findings will help find social security for under-privileged class of society by urging the national and international stakeholders and civil society for necessary action.

7. Conclusion

It can be concluded that the out of the twelve cases that were studied under the current context support our notion that the people of Pakistan under the pandemic period were more frustrated and distressed because of the mass lock-down mandate pulled up by their respective government in order to curb the spread of the infectious disease and they completed the suicide attempts as a way to seek relief from the devastating economic conditions. The data also suggests that the people did commit suicide out of the vaccine xenophobia (fear of vaccination) also but the ratio is meager as compared to the single original factor of economic recession. This in effect resulted in increased school drop outs ratio even though the schools were integrated digitally through virtual classrooms. They lacked access to technology and ends to justify means. This was in direct contrast to UN's global agenda to provide affordable education with equity and inclusion under SDG-4.

8. Recommendations

The current suicide trend is not only problematic for Pakistan for all least developed countries (LDCs) around the world as well. An estimate suggest that around 55 percent of the people existing globally have no appropriate means of social security. These discrepancies are reflected through the outcomes of human rights obligations, education system, and food security / malnutrition incentives. The world has experienced increased rate of unemployment, poverty and starvation and mental health hazards (that may have resulted in suicide completion during the pandemic . But at present we don't have authentic projections on questions like for how long will the pandemic persist and how many people will be starved and how this pandemic would end. We can suggest authorities abroad and here ,to consider the under-served class of society in their policy making process since they are large in number and affect the education sector indirectly. There have been many school drops out observed, both genders inclusive,

because of the economic challenge the people had to face due to lock-down policy affecting all major and small businesses simultaneously. Humanitarian aid packages should be announced by the government to alleviate poverty. Social coping mechanisms through counseling and functional groups should be adopted by the members of the society so that the minds of the victims would be diverted away from the harmful intentions. Parental and institutional control can be exercised to check on children having increased addition to the social media use as well as this is one the basic driving factor that may create disturbed and socially hampered minds. Besides, it is a shared responsibility of the international community and the big powers who must launch special financial development programs to support the dwindling economy of the LDCs and developing countries by providing interest-free loans and easy financial assistance. Measures to improve e-governance should be adopted to bring inclusivity and equity in access to education and technology simultaneously such as facility for free-WiFi, reduced-fee structure in virtual classes and giving provinces powers to implement soft-lock down to allow daily wagers and small businesses a margin to have free-market incentives and imposing restrictions on companies in laying off employees without offering financial support packages.

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