



General Studies-2; Topic: Issues relating to development and management of Social Sector/Services relating to Health, Education, Human Resources.

Tackling Student Mental Health in Indian Campuses

Introduction

- Prestigious campuses such as the Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs), once viewed as temples of excellence, are now grappling with rising student distress, suicides, and isolation.
- Against this backdrop, IIT-Kharagpur's **'Campus Mothers' initiative**—which seeks to appoint women faculty and residents as informal emotional mentors—has sparked a national conversation.
- While it appears well-intentioned, the initiative has also attracted critical scrutiny for perpetuating gender stereotypes and sidestepping systemic reforms.

The Rising Mental Health Crisis in Elite Institutions

- **Epidemic of Student Suicides**
 - In 2025, IIT-Kharagpur alone reported three student suicides, reflecting a broader mental health crisis.
 - A report by the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) indicates over **13,000 student suicides in India annually**, with a noticeable portion from top engineering and medical colleges.
- **Structural Pressures in Campus Culture**
 - Hyper-competitive academic culture.
 - Rigorous grading systems, high parental expectations, and limited emotional support.
 - Social isolation, caste-based discrimination, language barriers, and economic disparities compound psychological stress.
- **Institutional Response and Reforms**
 - IIT-Kharagpur has set up a **10-member committee for mental health reform**.

- Steps include **AI-based support tools**, relaxed **attendance policies**, and efforts to reduce academic burden.

Concerns and Critiques

- **Gender Stereotyping and Emotional Labour**
 - Delegating emotional support solely to women reinforces regressive ideas that caregiving is a female domain.
 - Women faculty and staff already face a dual burden of professional expectations and family responsibilities.
 - Risk of overburdening women emotionally and logistically, without institutional recognition or compensation.
- **Symbolism vs. Structural Reform**
 - Such initiatives, while noble in intent, may serve as **tokenistic gestures** that substitute for deeper, necessary changes.
 - Real reform requires **professional mental health infrastructure**, not informal or symbolic arrangements.
- **Lack of Training and Ethical Safeguards**
 - Mental health support requires **professional training**, confidentiality protocols, and ethical sensitivity.
 - Informal mentorship can unintentionally become paternalistic, moralising, or judgmental.
- **Intersectional Blind Spots**
 - Student mental health is shaped by intersecting identities—**caste, gender, class, sexuality, and language**.
 - A one-size-fits-all model fails to address the complexities of marginalisation and alienation experienced by many students.

Towards an Inclusive Mental Health Framework

- **Community Mentorship with Gender-Neutral Design**
 - A more inclusive model could engage faculty and residents **across all genders** as **trained campus mentors**.
 - Promotes shared responsibility, avoids gender biases, and reinforces the idea that empathy is universal.
- **Professional Counselling Infrastructure**
 - All campuses must ensure access to trained **clinical psychologists, counsellors, and psychiatrists**.
 - Confidentiality, regular sessions, emergency response mechanisms, and culturally sensitive counselling are essential.
- **Preventive Mental Health Education**
 - Orientation programmes for students on mental wellbeing.
 - Mental health sensitisation workshops for faculty and staff to detect early signs of distress.
- **Student-Led Peer Support Networks**
 - Peer-to-peer counselling and mental health clubs can encourage students to speak up.
 - Helps build **safe spaces** for dialogue, solidarity, and informal help.
- **Policy-Level Reforms**
 - UGC and AICTE must mandate mental health policies in higher education institutions.
 - Annual audits on student wellbeing, academic pressure levels, and grievance redressal systems.

Global Best Practices to Learn From

- **UK's Student Minds Programme**: Empowers students and staff through structured mental health training and peer support.

- **Australia's 'Be You' Framework:** A national approach to mental health in educational settings, with government funding and professional oversight.
- **U.S. Campus Wellbeing Initiatives:** Universities like Stanford and MIT have **multi-disciplinary wellness centres** and extensive student services.

Way Forward

- **Acknowledge Mental Health as a Core Responsibility**, not an add-on or charity.
- **Avoid Gendered Narratives:** Replace “campus mothers” with “campus mentors” or “wellbeing companions” of all genders and backgrounds.
- **Invest in Capacity Building:** Fund mental health training, therapy infrastructure, and sensitisation workshops.
- **Create a Student-First Culture:** Academic excellence should not come at the cost of emotional trauma.
- **Conduct Research and Monitor Trends:** Encourage data-driven mental health policy through regular surveys and open feedback systems.

Conclusion

- True progress lies in **institutionalising inclusive, professional, and gender-neutral systems of care.**
- The goal should be to create a campus culture where **every student feels heard, seen, and supported — without stigma or stereotype.**