

## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

## Study of Perceptions toward Humanitarian Forensic: a novel - Humanly Approach

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### Abstract :

Humanitarian Forensic Action, is a concept which has been brought by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), it refers to the applicability of forensic science and technology to address the needs of the victims of catastrophes for humanitarian, rather than criminal, purposes. Most of time Forensic Medicine and science is viewed in relation to crime, offence and justice involving victims or offenders. The concept of humanitarian forensic is predominantly focussed on dignified management of victims and grieved society. Forensic and forensic approaches are not much appreciated by community. There is a widely prevailing myth in the society that forensic is about investigation, crime, postmortem etc. People avoid taking help of forensic investigations unless it is absolutely essential. We started this project with the hypothesis that there are prevailing myths in community about forensic and lack of awareness about humanitarian forensics. We have collected 100 responses randomly in hospital settings. Out of which 62 respondents were male and 28 were female. Out of 100 respondents, 55 were from age group 20-30 years and with reasonably good education status. Validated 15 statements were asked for participant to respond on the Likert scale of 1-3 (agree, partially agree to disagree).

**Keywords:** Humanitarian; Forensics; Perceptions.

### Introduction :

Humanitarian forensic action is the applicability of forensic science to humanitarian action.<sup>1</sup> During conflict, disasters, other conditions of violence, and consequences of migration there are sufferers of violence including deceased or missing individuals. In the arena of humanitarian relief, forensic science places great emphasis on the respectful handling of deceased individuals and the solving of unsolved cases. Individual identification should be given first attention since both relatives and the deceased have a right to have their identities restored after death and to know the situation of their departed loved ones.

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) outlines humanitarian action which is performed in a impartial, autonomous, fair and unrestricted manner with the aim of reducing suffering and preserving human dignity. In addition, it is bordered by International Humanitarian Law (IHL), a division of public international law that is relevant during armed conflicts.<sup>1</sup> According to the International Court of Justice, humanitarian action is described as actions taken by groups and individuals "to ensure respect for the human being" and "to prevent and alleviate human suffering wherever it may be found". The same guidelines also apply when dealing with humanitarian crises that are unrelated to armed conflicts, including natural disasters, and migration.<sup>2</sup>

Humanitarian forensics has always been a priority for the ICRC.

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The organization's forensic team has been promoting the phrase "humanitarian forensic action" in recent years to characterize its unique uses of forensic science. It places a strong emphasis on following the Geneva Conventions and other humanitarian law norms, as well as on "the dignified management of dead bodies".<sup>3</sup> In addition, the ICRC has provided investigator training in other nations and even helped establish a brand-new International Humanitarian Forensic Center in Gujarat., India.<sup>4</sup>

By and large, the recent initiatives to confirm the appropriate managing and identification of deaths due to COVID-19 globally, and the process initiated before five years to safeguard the dignity of the deceased in disasters, were observed. The humanitarian forensic actions involved an extensive forensic operation for the exploration and identification of warriors buried in an uninhabited isle on the South Atlantic. They are all related to a new field called humanitarian forensic action, which uses forensic science to aid humanitarian causes.

Forensic science has proven to be beneficial, even indispensable in the past few decades when it comes to performing some humanitarian duties.<sup>5,6</sup> Its innovative usage in this field first centered on preventing and ending the global problem of missing persons resulting from significant catastrophes, armed conflicts, and migration. However, recently, it has broadened the range of its activities to include supporting the appropriate and dignified handling of the dead, recording instances of torture and maltreatment, sexual offences and other exploitations during armed conflicts, and safeguarding susceptible populations, such as children and migrants.<sup>7</sup>

Academic centers are also interested in, research, and teaching the discipline. For instance, the International Center for Humanitarian Forensics was opened by the National Forensic Sciences University (NFSU) of India in June 2018, and the

University of Coimbra in Portugal opened its University Center for Human Rights and Humanitarian Forensic Research and Training in November 2019 - both institutions are committed to the advancement and development of this emerging field. This center, in which eminent academician from the Universities of Toronto, Milano, and Monash also participated, serving as a hub for global academic collaboration aimed at enhancing the significant role that forensic science plays in humanitarian efforts and the defense of human rights.<sup>8</sup>

Keeping this background in mind, we planned this study to obtain perception of general public of Gujarat State towards Humanitarian Forensic.

**Objectives:**

The project started with the hypothesis that there are prevailing myths in community about forensic and lack of awareness about humanitarian forensics. Therefore, we developed the research question - Is humanitarian forensics duly-recognized concept in the community?

The objectives of the research study are to collect perceptions of general public about varying aspects of humanitarian forensics with specific objectives to assess, analyze the perceptions and to prepare recommendations based upon the observations.

**Methodology:**

The present study of analyzing perception about Humanitarian Forensics was a questionnaire-based study. This questionnaire based cross sectional study was initiated after receiving the approval from the Institutional Ethical Committee, AIIMS, Rajkot. The study was carried out in hospital setting in which information was collected from those adults who were willing to participate and extended their consent. Consented participants were given a structured proforma which comprised of validated questionnaire in their language to ensure better understanding and minimize ambiguities. Study was commenced by developing a validated questionnaire with help from internal and external faculties working in the field of forensic medicine and forensic sciences. The questionnaire comprised of 10 close ended statements and two open ended questions. Data collected from the representative sample of general population who were visiting hospital, OPD setting of AIIMS, Rajkot and PDU Medical (Government) College. The data collection was carried out under following heads: 1. Demographic details and 2. Perception about forensic and humanitarian forensics. For the study we have included those patients and relatives above 18 years of age visiting the hospitals with their consent. Participants with lesser age (below 18 years) and who were unable to understand and comprehend were excluded. Statistical analysis was done by using descriptive and analytical statistical methods using Microsoft office. The qualitative data from open ended questions was analyzed by an inductive, semantic approach of thematic analysis by analyzing the explicit content of the qualitative data of the study.

**Results:**

Total 100 participants responded completely to the study.

**Demographic results:**

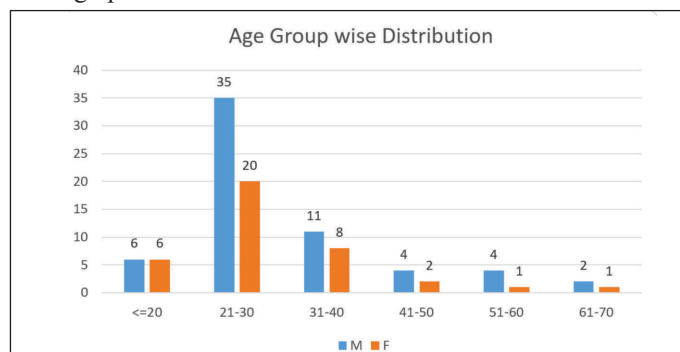


Figure 1. Age group wise distribution of participants.

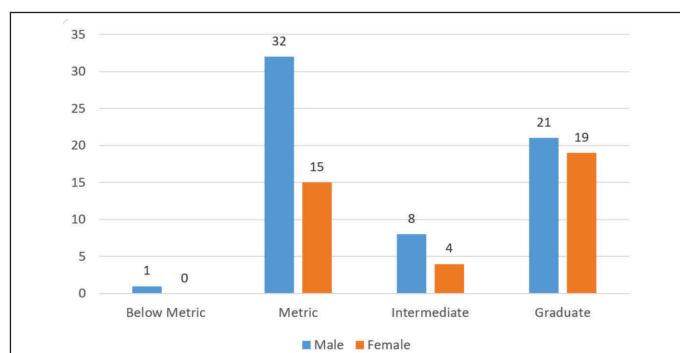


Figure 2. Education wise distribution of participants.

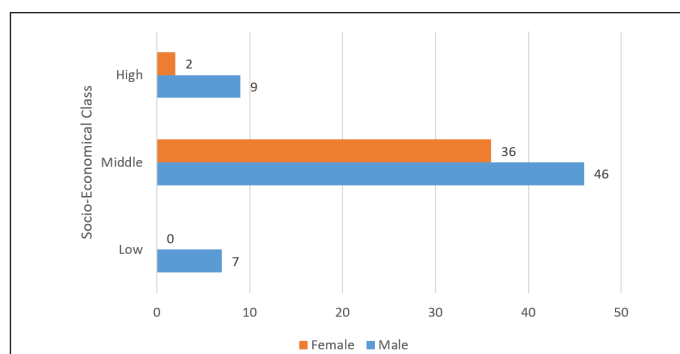


Figure 3. Socio-economic class distribution of participants.

**Discussion:**

In the humanitarian sector, uncertainty is more prevalent than ever. Anticipating and mitigating future crises is more important than trying to anticipate or stop them. Humanitarian actors' capacity to assist the victim of the following day will rely on their capacity to advance their tools of preparedness and quick response.<sup>9</sup> Climate change is continuously observed and has already resulted in an increased frequency and intensity of natural disasters<sup>10-12</sup>

In this context, the present study initiated to assess and evaluate perception of general population with regards to different aspects of Humanitarian forensics. We received response from 100 participants who were randomly selected, out of which 62 participants were male and 28 were female and 55% of the total were from age group 20-30 years of age. Most of them were educated to metric or intermediate level, even few were

Following results has been obtained from the participants:

Total Participants: 100				
Sr. No.	Statements	Agree	Partially Agree	Dis-agree
1.	I know humanitarian forensics.	0	8	92
2.	I feel uncomfortable whenever see a dead body.	23	21	56
3.	A visit to postmortem room would make me annoyed.	25	22	53
4.	I feel uncomfortable whenever I trespass from mortuary or similar place.	25	21	54
5.	Forensic means investigation in crime.	53	3	44
6.	Forensic means postmortem examination.	59	1	40
7.	Forensic means court matter/ police involvement etc.	55	2	43
8.	I don't know role of forensic in disaster situation.	77	8	15
9.	I know meaning of dignified disposal of a dead body.	95	1	4
10.	I am not sure how community engagement can be useful in disaster management.	81	2	17
11.	I feel that something to be done for dead persons to maintain their dignity.	99	1	0
12.	I feel that something to be done for grieving families of disaster victims.	99	1	0
13.	I feel that there should be a specialty to help public in such cases.	99	1	0
14.	I feel that public awareness is important about humanitarian forensic aspect.	100	0	0
15.	I feel satisfied to know about humanitarian forensics.	99	1	0

graduates. They were predominantly (82%) from middle socioeconomic class and some were even from higher social strata. Therefore, the sampling was representative of the general population at large. We could not find any other study with the similar objectives to compare with the results of this study.

We collected response to 15 validated statements on the Likert's scale of 1-3 (agree, partially agree to disagree). In response to the statement, "I know humanitarian forensics" 92% expressed their lack of knowledge while 8% had heard the concept. The terminology is quite unpopular in the general population despite of their exposure to it. To fill up the gap in knowledge and action, developed nations have come out with the launch of the American Academy of Forensic Sciences (AAFS) and Humanitarian and Human Rights Resource Center (HHRRC).<sup>13</sup>

In response to their apprehension of seeing dead bodies and image of postmortem room, about 48% expressed agreement, statements to understand literal meaning of word forensics in layman terms, we observed that 58% were having either wrong concept or misconceptions. The population's stigma to the remains and post-mortem procedures were evident in this regard. Community awareness is highly essential for the introduction of humanitarian forensics together with the reduction of stigma in the society.

Out of total, 77% agreed to the statement that they won't know the role forensic in disaster situations. Most of them wished to have dignified disposal of a dead bodies but 'how' part was remained unanswered. The humanitarian aspects of forensic are generally built up over the years to improve the involvement of forensic services to the humanity and population at large. Therefore, the

understanding of the humanitarian forensic field should necessarily reach the grass root level for its better utility.

In the opinion of 81% participants, role of community engagement is not certain in the practice of humanitarian forensic but at the same all were in agreement that something needs to be done to maintain dignity of a dead person and also were expecting some support system for the grieving families. Out of all, 99% expressed the need of a distinctive specialty for larger interest and public awareness for the same. After the questionnaire they were made aware about the concept of humanitarian forensics and 99% of them expressed their satisfaction and gratitude. Knowing perception of general population helps to understand their psychological aspects. Psychosocial action is not limited to providing emotional support; rather, it encompasses the concepts of the individual as a right-holder, promoting autonomy in decision-making, validating behavior, and creating individual and group histories. For the sake of families and communities, forensics and psychosocial sciences must collaborate in a complementary manner, according to this framework.<sup>14</sup> Additionally, psychosocial work can enhance the quality of the antemortem data by accounting for the impact that stress, traumatic experiences, and culture have on individuals' recollections.<sup>14</sup> Knowledge and awareness among the community is an important aspect for community engagement in mass disasters. A similar study by Julia Rosenberg et al highlighted opportunities for engagement and collaboration with health providers, including and beyond the Child Abuse Pediatrician work force.<sup>15</sup>

### Conclusion:

This research study will be a novel in itself. The project is highly relevant in forensic context. This will be adding a new dimension to prevailing myths in the society. Increasing awareness and knowing perceptions will also be helpful in preparing recommendations for future strategies. Recommendations were prepared based upon their perceptions and awareness regarding the humanitarian forensics as follows. General awareness regarding the humanly approach towards the forensic is required among the community which can be acquired by various measures i.e. community awareness programs. Government at state and central level, local public authorities, hospital administration, NGOs, etc. can participate for improvement in knowledge of stakeholders. Humanitarian aspects are and shall be in demand in near future where war like situations may happen or in cases of mass disaster or mass migrations.

The primary goals of forensic humanitarian action are to preserve human dignity and lessen suffering, with the victims and their families at the center. Contrarily, psychosocial action is founded on the notion that every person has rights, promotes autonomy in making decisions, affirms behavior, and involves the reconstruction and development of both individual and societal histories. It goes beyond providing emotional support alone. According to this paradigm, forensics and psychosocial sciences - both geared toward the same goal - must collaborate in a complementary manner to support relatives and societies. The ultimate humanitarian goal of forensic investigations can only be achieved under specific circumstances. The three basic pillars of

forensic action with a psychosocial perspective are coordination, information, and respect. Based on this, forensic investigations will be able to aid in the victims' healing process, and the psychological and psychosocial assistance to the victims can help to strengthen the investigations themselves.

#### Ethical approval:

The research project has been approved by the Institutional Ethics Committee, All India Institute of Medical Sciences, Rajkot, Gujarat vide letter no. AIIMS.Rajkot/ IEC/ 29/ 2022 dated 04.08.2022.

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