The essay that follows was published on the project dldl/ድልድል blog and can be accessed directly at the link: https://projectdldl.org/news/blog-the-necessity-for-a-decolonial-approach-to-researching-and-addressing-domestic-violence-in-diverse-religio-cultural-contexts/

The necessity for a decolonial approach to researching and addressing domestic violence in diverse religio-cultural contexts

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Within international development practice most directly preoccupied with domestic violence in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), intimate partner violence (IPV) has been frequently under-theorised, or theorised on the basis of a single aetiology or in relation to western industrialised societies' experiences with gender inequality (Istratii, 2020). This situation largely reflects the dominance of Northern epistemology, theory and funding in the sector. In parallel, while domestic violence studies in industrialised societies have, in recent decades, diversified to affirm the psychological, intergenerational, situational and often mutual nature of intimate partner violence (e.g., family studies approaches), much research produced in tradition-oriented societies continues to be preoccupied with socio-cultural aetiologies and feminist theories of gender inequality (Bowman, 2003; Jakobsen, 2014; 2015). Such tendencies could indeed reflect specific problems within these societies; however, the systematic representation of gender inequality, and the stubborn emphasis on socio-cultural explanations, combined with the notable neglect of psychological and trauma-related aetiologies, tends to reinforce postcolonial and other critical arguments based on those historical beliefs about less 'civilised' or inherently violent non-western cultures that continue to underpin some Anglo-American thinking (Narayan, 1977; Vlopp, 2005).

The gender-based violence (GBV) paradigm – through which IPV has typically been analysed within international development practice, and largely also within public health – has the benefit of drawing attention to the gendered parameters of violence, but has been assumed to be internationally relevant by means of a sociological theory. This has happened because the existence of the category has provided writers and practitioners with an aetiology of violence, which eschews the need for demonstrating empirically the mechanisms through which gender beliefs, social norms and human behaviour relate causally to one another (see, e.g., Centre for Women's Global Leadership, 1994; Green, 1999; Heise, 2012; Le Roux et al., 2016; Terry & Hoare, 2007; UN, 2005; UNFPA, 2020 WHO, 2020). On the other hand, GBV proponents have, historically, tended to engage with women in isolation from their intimate partners, ignoring not only the intersubjective nature of IPV but also the serious mental health and psychological issues that often underlie perpetrator behaviour, and which require complex theoretical frameworks in order to be understood and reversed (Barker & Schulte, 2010; Esplen & Brody, 2007; Sen, Ostlin & George, 2007). While 'masculinities' have now become more integral in both gender and development, and public health analysis and practice, there is still a need to better-relate men's rationalisations and understandings of IPV to context-specific,

gendered socialisation, personal mental health histories and structural–environmental risk factors (Jewkes et al., 2015).

As a result of these theoretical tendencies, historically, very little research has explored alleviation strategies within religious worldviews and context-specific socio-cultural systems. While, over the past two decades, the international development sector has moved to integrate the contribution of faith leaders in the furthering of development agendas, in acknowledgment of their influential role in communities, these approaches have never overcome western assumptions about 'religion' as dictated by these societies' experience with western forms of Christianity and Enlightenment struggles (Herstad, 2009; Le Roux et al., 2016; Rakodi, 2012). Thus, much discourse has revolved around institutionalised 'religion' and religious leaders, and many faith-inclusive approaches have failed to consider not only the holistic and multi-dimensional ways in which religious traditions and belief systems have been experienced in many tradition-oriented societies, but also their complex intersections with the experience of IPV, and victim and perpetrator attitudes. Typically, countries targeted by the development sector are embedded within prevalent religio-cultural systems that underpin and inform in integral ways human socialisation, gender subjectivities, and rationalisations and behaviours (Bradley, 2011; Istratii, 2020; Mahmood, 2005; Tomalin, 2007). Studies conducted in diverse such contexts show that psychological, environmental, theological–exegetical and spiritual parameters are all important in the analysis of IPV (Counts, Brown & Campbell, 1992; Kalu, 1993; LeVine, 1959; Levinson, 1989; McClusky, 2001; Shaikh, 2007). These societies are also less likely to have the resources or infrastructure with which to respond to domestic violence through organised formal processes and referral systems (García-Moreno et al., 2015); this raises the need to explore IPV interventions that leverage on socio-cultural resources, including religious values, theological teachings and clergy mediation, as and when relevant.

However, in order to achieve this more substantive engagement it is important to challenge simplistic thinking regarding theology and the role of religious parameters in domestic violence. Religious traditions are historical, and develop in specific environments, which means that the interface with gender-related, material or structural parameters must be explored empirically and ethnographically. In the context of Eastern Orthodox and what have been known historically as Oriental Orthodox traditions, lay believers tend to possess varying levels of knowledge about theology, but it can be anticipated that their general framework and logic is informed by basic dogmatic premises (Istratii, 2018). Any deviation from such dogma may be seen as heresy, enabling believers to deploy the discourse of immutability and authenticity in order to either deter or legitimise social change. In such contexts, interventions must appear to be consistent with what is perceived as 'authentic' theological tradition in order to be accepted and to achieve positive impact with local communities.

Concrete evidence emerges from my doctoral study (completed at SOAS University of London in 2018), which investigated conjugal abuse and the attitudes surrounding it in the Ethiopian Orthodox *Täwahədo* population in Northern Ethiopia, accounting for religious, theological and spiritual parameters within the ecological model of violence (Istratii, 2019). The year-long research established some of the more specific mechanisms through which clergy discourses and personal faith intertwined with folklore realities, social norms and gender ideals to maintain norms or practices that indirectly informed certain harmful situations and attitudes within marital relationships. However, the research also demonstrated the relevance and resourcefulness of religious beliefs and values in the deterrence of conjugal abuse in this

society. In the research sample many men invoked morality, righteousness and sin in order to rationalise against some forms of partner abuse (e.g., adultery and wife abandonment), while women invoked religious idiom to cope with such abuse, evidencing the more positive effects of religious traditions and beliefs. Moreover, clergy were at the frontline of mediating conjugal conflict. While many priests arguably lacked an understanding of the complex psychology of victims and perpetrators, and of how to respond in ways that minimised risks for victims, the majority made attempts to use theological and spiritual language in condemnation of the abuse, and even supported victims materially by offering shelter or financial support. Rather than the holding of unhelpful attitudes about the problem (which did exist among some), it was, in fact, many priests' lack of training in marriage theology that correlated positively with the presence of unhelpful or insufficient responses to conjugal abuse.

As has been mentioned, family studies and relational theories of human abusiveness have been extensively applied in industrialised societies (for an overview see Lawson, 2013). Some of the existing evidence has linked faith-based values and spirituality to behaviour in romantic relationships, drawing from attachment theory (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Bowlby, 1969; 1980). For example, evidence indicates that individual reliance upon and appraisal of God as an attachment figure may be related to the attachment models that individuals develop in human relationships (Birgegard & Granqvist, 2004; Hall et al., 2009), with one study reporting a correlation between weaker religious commitment and higher attachment avoidance (Pollard, Riggs & Hook, 2014). On the other hand, associations have been found between avoidant attachment and psychological and physical violence, and between anxious attachment and psychological violence (Mauricio, Tein & Lopez, 2007). This suggests that there may exist an indirect relationship between religious conscience and IPV, which needs to be understood better in order to inform the design of effective psychosocial support for victims and perpetrators in religious contexts.

Watch Dr Romina Istratii's presentation on 'Faith, human psychology and domestic violence: Some ethnographic insights' delivered for the Partner Violence & Mental Health Network:

[Video at the link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HHJ32YqcMic]

Relevance for religious communities in the UK

According to the Office for National Statistics (2020) an estimated 5.5 per cent of adults aged from 16 to 74 years (totalling 2.3 million people) experienced domestic abuse in the past year. The current understanding is that migrant populations (including refugees and asylum seekers), but more especially migrant women, will be affected more by domestic violence due to the added stresses and constraints that they encounter in the host society (Chantler, Gangoli & Hester, 2009). This is not exclusive to UK society. For example, it is reported that Eritrean women who flee to Israel due to mandatory conscription in the Eritrean military often face multiple risks and deprivations that make them more tolerant of husband abusiveness in the host society (Gebreyesus et al., 2018). On the other hand, lack of opportunity and marginalisation among men can lead to stress and mental issues that may foster abusiveness (ibid). My own research with Ethiopian and Eritrean communities in London as part of the PhD

study suggested that domestic violence is experienced by many women and is not, in general, communicated formally.

Lack of the support systems that would mediate in cases of conjugal conflict or abuse when it takes place in Ethiopia (e.g., priests, elders, women's associations, etc.), financial dependence on men, emotional reasons, and religious values (e.g., hesitation to take formal action against a spouse) are all factors that can impede women from taking formal action. Ongoing projects on domestic violence and migration in the UK (e.g., EMiNA project, University of Bristol), affirm these patterns: victims may fail to access and to utilise referral services due to linguistic barriers, culture-specific reasons, lack of awareness of UK laws, or due to their having ways of dealing with crisis that are informed by religious worldviews or culture-specific practices. While the effectiveness of perpetrator programmes in the UK has been more thoroughly investigated (e.g., Ali et al., 2017; Project Mirabal), less attention has been given to perpetrator treatment needs among migrant men, and the question of how to engage with the men's distinct religio-cultural backgrounds in the context of treatment programmes.

The language currently used in the UK domestic violence sector suggests that providers are keen to consider culture-specific forms of violence (e.g., honour crimes, etc.), but no sustained effort appears to have been made to build religio-cultural sensitivity and literacy within the prevailing sector; this contrasts with the practices of community-based organisations that try to work with ethnic minority or migrant communities in ways that acknowledge their religio-cultural conditions, influences and pressures. Numerous faith-based or faith-oriented initiatives exist in the UK, such as RESTORED, an organisation working to build churches' capacity to address domestic violence in their own communities (Aune & Barnes, 2018). While these initiatives are vital and contribute invaluable work, the opportunity to integrate them into the mainstream domestic violence sector, in order to transform current approaches, has not been taken (Mandy Marshall, pers. com.). Moreover, it is important to acknowledge that any faith-oriented initiative is disproportionately informed by the religious tradition it is primarily grounded in, even if it caters to diverse groups, and this can make it appear irrelevant to, or be perceived with suspicion by, communities of different religious, theological or exegetical traditions.

Project dldl/ድልድል envisions increasing the understanding around the influence of religious beliefs, theology and the clergy in the experience of domestic violence in order to inform the development of more integrated and effective support systems for victims and perpetrators in tradition-oriented religious societies, as well as their international migrant communities. It aims to do so through a decolonial approach that prioritises the communities' own understandings and experiences of domestic violence, embeds these in wider socio-cultural normative frameworks and context-specific religious and exegetical traditions, and leverages on religio-cultural resources in order to address the problem in the most sensible and practical ways. Through appraisal of new evidence and understanding emanating from Ethiopia and Eritrea, the project seeks to inform debates and approaches in the UK domestic violence sector, which is increasingly called to cater to diverse communities, including Ethiopians and Eritreans living in the UK. It is hoped that through such an approach the project can start to substantively redress historical asymmetries in development-oriented research and practice, and to rectify the existing unhelpful and hierarchical patterns of knowledge transfer from western industrialised societies to non-western countries, especially those categorised as LMICs.

This blog essay is largely based on Dr Romina Istratii's monograph Adapting Gender and Development to Local Religious Contexts: A Decolonial Approach to Domestic Violence in Ethiopia (2020). *The full analysis and demonstration of the argument can be found in the introductory chapter of the book available through the publisher's page.*

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