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DOMESTIC VIOLENCE, FAITH, AND THE ETHIOPIAN ORTHODOX TEWAHEDO CHURCH: 16 DAYS OF ACTIVISM AGAINST GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

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As the [16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence](#) campaign takes off, it is an opportune time to revisit the role of faith and theology in addressing domestic violence.

The relationship between faith/spirituality and domestic violence is not a simple one, but it is definitely one that should be understood with the nuances it deserves to be leveraged effectively in responding to the problem. While religious language can be used in distorted ways to justify or continue harmful attitudes and behaviour, faith and spiritual living can serve as a coping mechanism and a source of healing for victims and survivors, and can potentially deter abusiveness among some prospective perpetrators. Moreover, clergy have an important documented role in influencing religious communities on issues of marriage and family life.

A common reference for the scholarship that looks at faith-based interventions is the understanding that religious personnel, the discourses they use and their responses to communities can both contribute to the continuation of the problem of domestic violence and serve as a positive influence in efforts to address the problem (Istratii and Ali, under review).

While clergy are well-positioned to respond to domestic violence in religious communities, they often lack an understanding of how their own discourses and responses can unwittingly reinforce negative norms, attitudes or situations, and how to support victims and perpetrators with awareness of safeguarding risks and due processes.

[The international literature that evaluates and assesses faith-based interventions](#) stresses the importance of cultural sensitivity to ensure that the programmes are relevant and impactful with those they aim to support. Cultural sensitivity is noted to be equally relevant to programmes implemented in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) and those involving migrant populations in western industrialised societies, with the important insight that religious understandings among migrant communities may reflect newly acquired theological influences encountered in the host society and not solely or necessarily beliefs upheld in the home country, thus requiring a more transboundary approach to understanding and responding to domestic violence in faith-sensitive ways internationally.

While some differential conditions and needs are reported across geographies, the international evidence suggests that clergy-centred interventions could be more effective if: a) clergy are better equipped with theological/exegetical knowledge to respond to distorted deployments of religious language in the community, b) are willing to address the topic of domestic violence in public sermons, c) understand how to respond to domestic violence victims and perpetrators with consideration of their psychological states and the likely safeguarding risks involved, and d) are integrated more substantively with secular referral systems responding to domestic violence.

[Year-long anthropological research](#) that was conducted in Ethiopia reinforced this state of evidence. The study, based in the countryside of northern Ethiopia and involving over 244 participants, documented both a prevalence of religious language in how the clergy and the laity experienced and responded to domestic violence, as well as the crucial role of the clergy in teaching about marriage and in mediating situations of marital conflict and abuse. While some clergy seemed to lack the preparedness to respond with awareness of the complex psychology of victims and perpetrators and ignored the potential risks involved or the importance of confidentiality for the victim, others used theological language resourcefully and in ways that seemed to reverse rigid or pernicious attitudes associated with some forms of conjugal abuse or its implicit tolerance. They also supported victims/survivors materially, emotionally and spiritually in ways that state institutions failed to do.

Project dIdI/፩፩፩፩: Translating research into social impact working through equal partnerships

The study in northern Ethiopia supported by the international evidence informed the development of [project dIdI/፩፩፩፩](#), which works through research, direct interventions with religious and secular stakeholders and knowledge exchange to strengthen religio-culturally sensitive responses to domestic violence in Ethiopia, Eritrea and the UK.

The [project was envisioned to promote a more transboundary approach](#) to responding to domestic violence in religious societies and their international migrant and diaspora communities, one that recognises the prevalence of religious and cultural norms and understandings in the home societies and pays attention to how these combine with new effects encountered in the host societies to define the experience of domestic violence. The project's approach is informed by a decolonial commitment to reverse the historical transfer of knowledge from western industrialised societies to their LMIC counterparts and to create

platforms for the former to learn from the good practices of the latter and the culture-sensitive approaches employed in non-western religious societies often with significant effects.

The project started in November 2020 in Ethiopia by launching a pilot series of 10 workshops with Ethiopian Orthodox *Tāwahədo* clergy in Amhara region of Ethiopia to improve the clergy's ability to respond to victims and perpetrators with a sharpened theological acumen, increased awareness of safety risks for the victim and a refined understanding of victim/perpetrator psychological states, as well as to integrate the clergy in new referral systems currently being developed in the country.

In line with the project's commitments to avoid duplication and to strengthen local infrastructure and initiatives so as to achieve more integrated and transboundary approaches to domestic violence, the delivery of the workshops has been achieved in partnership with the [Ethiopian Orthodox Church Development and Inter-Church Aid Commission](#) (EOC DICAC), which works through the church structure extending from the Patriarch's office to local diocese level. The design and delivery of the workshop content has also been supported by the [Ethiopian Women Lawyers' Association](#) (EWLA), which have been at the forefront of pushing for domestic violence-related legislation and developing community-based referral systems to support domestic violence victims/survivors in the country.

Building awareness among clergy through dialogical and reflection-based workshops that also serve research purposes

The workshops are designed and delivered in Amharic in a culture-sensitive way, addressing gender norms and inequalities that contribute to the continuation of the problem and responding to the gaps, concerns and questions that rural and town clergy have regarding marriage, gender relations, family planning and other issues that are related to conflict in the conjugal relationship.

Each workshop is comprised of three units, a presentation on domestic violence definitions, realities and attitudes in the community, theological training employing Church teachings and Patristic responses to marriage-related issues, and safeguarding training and education on domestic violence laws in the country. The second unit presents the teachings of the Ethiopian Orthodox *Tāwahədo* Church on gender relations, marriage, conjugal cohabitation and domestic violence complemented by St John Chrysostom's homilies about the same. This material was developed on the basis of a thorough study and understanding of the local Church tradition and how this has been received and experienced by clergy and laity historically. The third unit provides information on the legal framework on domestic violence, available referral systems in the clergy's vicinity and safeguarding information and advice. The three units are summarized in booklets co-produced with partners and theology specialists (available in [Amharic](#) and [English](#)) that are handed to the participants for future reference and use.

The workshops employ dialogical and reflective approaches to help the clergy become more aware of the complexities of domestic violence in society, but also to create a platform for them to share experiences, complementing more top-down Church-led trainings. Moreover, the workshops serve research purposes by collecting first-hand accounts from the participants to enhance the workshop content and its relevance to diverse contexts.

What the impact has been so far

Despite implementing the project during [a pandemic and a war in Ethiopia](#), which has required continuous adaptation, the workshops have been fully accepted by the regional government and the Church stakeholders and have proved effective in engaging the interest of the clergy as relevant to their circumstances and the needs of their communities.

The pilot workshop series has so far trained 156 clergy and is currently under-going evaluation using [an approach co-developed](#) with the delivery partner EOC DICAC. Questionnaires collected from the participants suggest that the workshops have helped the participants to change their perception of their role in addressing societal problems, to realise the importance of being a good example in their personal marriages, and to recognise the need to take the necessary time to help spiritual children to address marital problems and not unwittingly rushing them into quick decisions. Many also stated their renewed commitment to teaching more extensively about marriage and to serving the communities as the apostles did, without fearing the unknown and the challenges brought with modernisation.

The exercises and group activities that were incorporated in each unit seemed to be particularly well-received as they created a 'safe space' for the participants to share with each other and to work together to identify answers to difficult family and marital situations. This is an important outcome as clergy rarely have an opportunity to consult with each other, often relying on their own limited training and subjective experience to respond to complex issues that may require collective theological deliberation.

More about the outcomes and milestones achieved by the project in its first year of existence can be found in this [poster](#).