

Working with religious communities to address domestic violence in peace and war-time: Insights from project dIdI/ድልድል in Ethiopia



**Building Bridges
of Faith Against
Domestic Violence**

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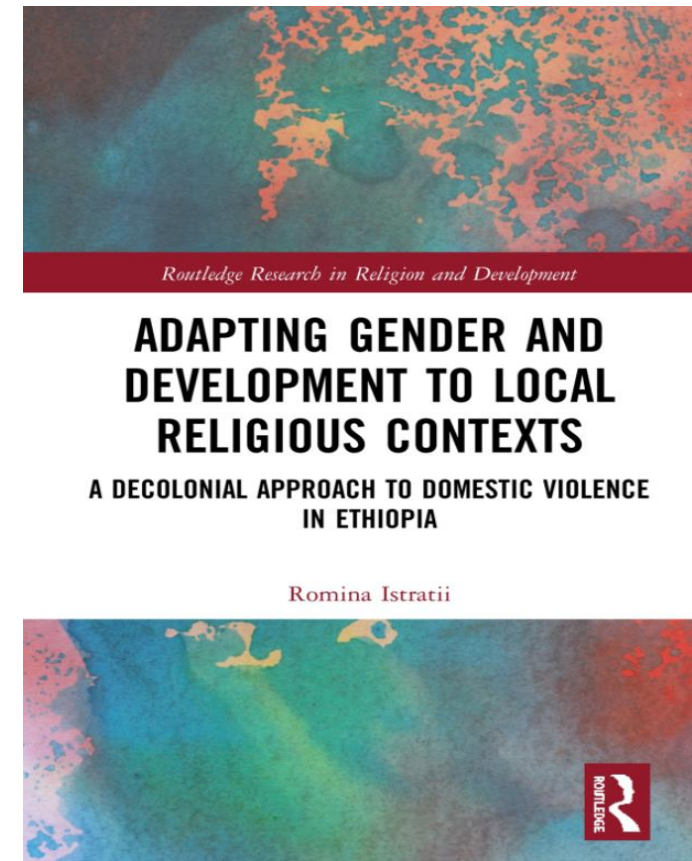
Previous practice-oriented research to decolonise gender and development

Project dIdI/ድልድል is the organic product of decade-long work to address colonial legacies in international development theory and practice.

It is specifically informed by a year-long anthropological study that sought to:

- Address the disconnect between gender and development theory of gender and communities' understandings and lived experiences;
- Emphasise the importance of 'linguistic and cosmological translation' in analysing local experiences and issues;
- Increase understanding of non-western religious worldviews through deep engagement with theology and exegesis.

With the ultimate aim to improve the effectiveness of gender-sensitive interventions in religious tradition-oriented societies.



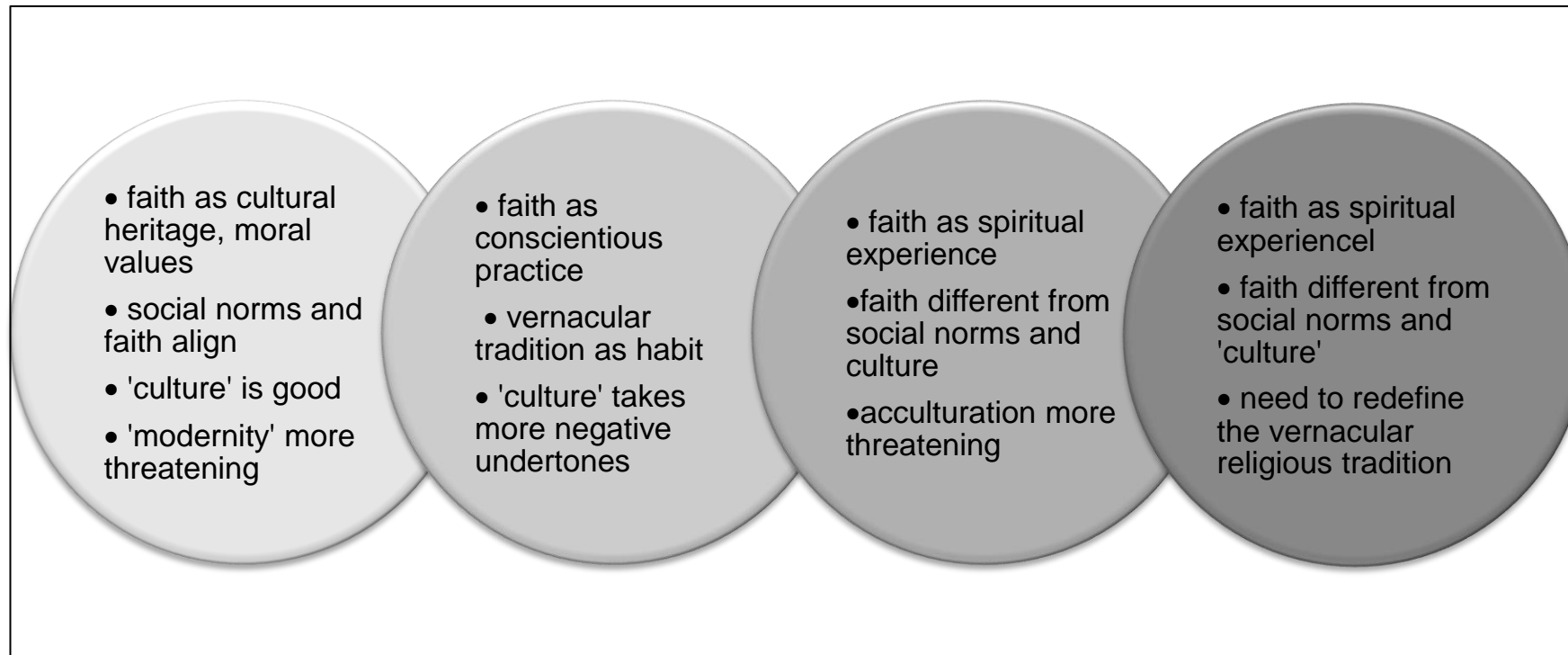


Research in
Ethiopia – key
insights

The prevalence of religious discourse and faith in family life and marriage

- The project is informed by and builds upon previous year-long ethnographic research with Ethiopian Orthodox *Tāwahādo* communities in Northern Ethiopia.
- The research showed a prevalence of religious language in how the clergy and the laity understood and experienced domestic violence in rural and urban communities, and in particular, the interface of religious and cultural discourse in maintaining social norms, gender standards and practices associated with some forms of conjugal abuse and the continuation of the problem.
- Clergy were found to be central in family life and in mediating conjugal conflict. While some clergy seemed to lack the preparedness to respond with awareness of the complex psychology of victims and perpetrators and the potential risks involved, others used theological language resourcefully and supported victims/survivors both spiritually and materially.
- Faith for women translated mostly as a coping mechanism and not as a source for justifying intimate partner abuse, which the faith explicitly teaches against. Some men's faith-based conscience could serve as a buffer against pernicious behaviour, such as committing adultery or abandoning their wives. Such men seemed to act under the influence of widely upheld standards of morality enforced through the clergy's public discourse condemning 'sin' and praising 'righteousness.'

Spectrum representing local understandings of the religion/culture relationship and attitudes toward changing social norms



Source: Istratii, R. (2020) *Adapting Gender and Development to Local Religious Contexts*. Routledge

The importance of integrating psychological parameters and their interface with religious conscience

- The research showed that while gender-related, socio-cultural, material and spiritual parameters influenced how domestic violence was understood and experienced locally, those could not fully capture the complex reasons behind all conjugal abuse, raising the need to integrate better psychological parameters.
- There was a visible tendency among local people to rationalise certain forms of abusiveness by invoking the individual personality (*bahri*). The human personality was strongly associated with an immutable nature and biology, which could suggest a more implicit kind of tolerance of some male (but not female) abusiveness. The individual personality was also perceived to be defined by personal conscience, attitudes and intentions, which were considered more mutable and affected by social, environmental and spiritual factors.
- These aetiologies of abusiveness reflected local metaphysics of humanity, but they also seemed to be informed by the empirical reality that abusive men behaved in ways that socio-cultural, family or environmental parameters alone could not explain. Many spoke about these men's inability to show empathy or attach emotionally to an intimate partner. Such behavioural issues have been captured in psychological studies of domestic violence drawing from attachment theory, intergenerational violence and trauma-informed theory, pointing to the need for a psychology-informed approach to analyse and respond sufficiently to conjugal abuse in the community.

Project dldl/ድልድል

A research and innovation project dedicated to the development and strengthening of religio-culturally sensitive, domestic violence alleviation systems in Ethiopia, Eritrea and the UK.

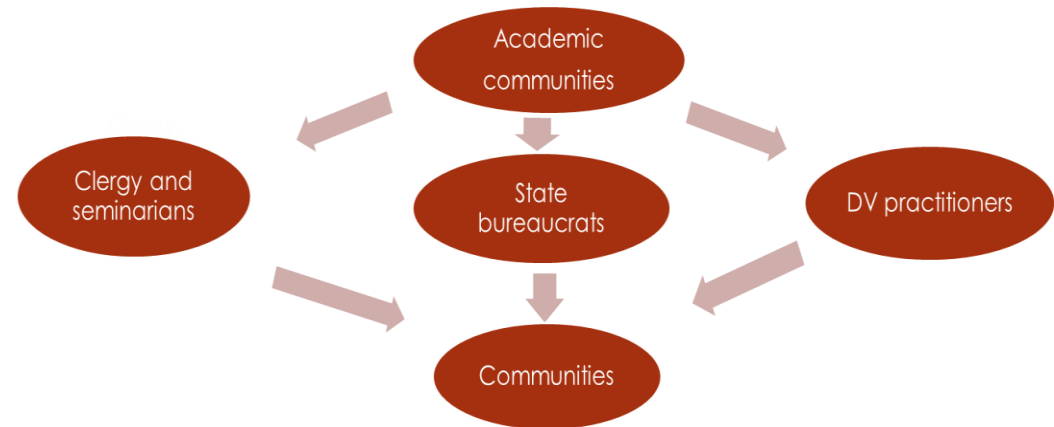
Project dldl/ድልድል envisions increasing the understanding around the influence of religious parameters and their interface with gender, psychological and material parameters in the experience of domestic violence and to employ theological teaching in order to inform the development of more integrated and effective support systems for victims and perpetrators in tradition-oriented religious societies, as well as their international migrant communities.

The project works through partnerships with academic and non-governmental organisations in the project countries, including Aksum University (Aksum, Ethiopia), the St Frumentius Abba Selama Kessate Berhan Theological College (Mekelle, Ethiopia), the Ethiopian Women Lawyers Association (Addis Ababa, Ethiopia), the Ethiopian Orthodox Church Development and Inter-Church Aid Commission (Addis Ababa, Ethiopia), Diversity Resource International (Brighton, UK) and its sister-branch Waniney (Asmara, Eritrea), EMIRTA Research, Training and Development Centre (Ethiopia), the University of Bristol (Bristol, UK) and the University of Sheffield (Sheffield, UK).



Serving as a bridge across disciplines, sectors and stakeholders

dldl means 'bridge' in Tigrigna, a term that reflects the project's aim of bridging different disciplines, sectors and stakeholders in order to achieve a more reflexive, decolonial and integrated approach to addressing domestic violence in faith communities



Committed to a decolonial impact-oriented approach

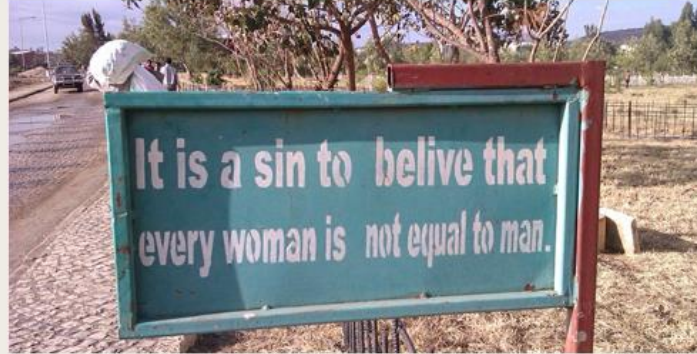
- We depart from historical approaches in gender-sensitive and domestic violence research that have defined or theorised gender relations or domestic violence in western European or other ethnocentric ways (e.g. vis-à-vis 'culture' or 'religion').
- We also depart from established epistemologies of 'religion' that have been informed by western societies' experience with Western Christianity, theological dogmatism and secularisation processes.
- We seek to reverse the knowledge transfer in international development and public health interventions, whereby knowledge, paradigms and standards have been defined in the West and imposed to the rest, by aiming to foster Southern-Northern knowledge exchange and genuinely equitable collaboration.
- We avoid rigidly predefining what impact should look like and aim to prioritise what diverse stakeholders and communities understand as impactful interventions in their respective contexts.

RESEARCH



- ❖ Research to understand better how attitudes of domestic violence are informed by religious beliefs and to explore associations with psychological factors (intergenerational violence, trauma, personality disorders, etc.).
- ❖ Research to identify how religious beliefs can serve as a deterrent to becoming abusive or as a coping and healing mechanism for perpetrators and victims/survivors respectively.
- ❖ Research to explore the effectiveness of faith-based interventions internationally and to develop a faith-based perpetrator treatment programme.
- ❖ Research to understand the level of integration of religio-cultural parameters in secular domestic violence sectors and to identify ways to improve integration.

ENGAGEMENT & INTEGRATION



- ❖ Workshops with clergy to provide them with theological, ethnographic and safeguarding training to respond to domestic violence better.
- ❖ Workshops with secular providers (government and non-governmental organisations, social workers, psychologists, etc.) to raise awareness about the complex role of religio-cultural parameters in domestic violence and how to integrate those constructively in their own work.
- ❖ Curriculum development with university and theology instructors to integrate gender issues and domestic violence in education and clergy training and preparation for service.
- ❖ Partnerships with constituent organisations, including religious bodies, government and domestic violence providers to strengthen existing infrastructure

KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE



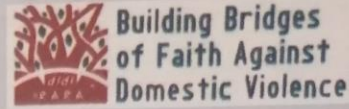
- ❖ Communication of research results to relevant stakeholders through meetings and personal outreach.
- ❖ Publication of working papers and a blog to achieve knowledge exchange and to promote cross-sectoral collaboration.
- ❖ Delivery of regular webinars and international conferences on specialised topics that are targeted at multiple stakeholders to promote more integrated approaches to domestic violence.
- ❖ Production of films to create awareness and improve multi-stakeholder and public understanding of domestic violence and the complex intersections with religious, socio-cultural, psychological and migration-related parameters.

Building clergy preparedness to respond to domestic violence in Ethiopia: The approach of project dld1/ድልድል



Building the preparedness of clergy in locally-relevant ways

- Understanding on the basis of ethnographic research the needs, challenges and lived experiences of rural and urban clergy and developing material that responds directly to these and can be of immediate relevance to them.
- Developing theological/Patristic content that is based on a thorough study and understanding of the local Church tradition and how this has been received and perceived by clergy and laity to help the clergy better differentiate between theological teaching and culturally accepted practice.
- Integrating psychology-informed, safeguarding and legal training that can improve the clergy's understanding of victim and perpetrator psychological states, safety risks and available resources to refer victims/perpetrators to.
- Employing dialogical and reflective approaches that can help the clergy become more aware of the complexities of domestic violence in their societies, but also to create 'safe spaces' for sharing experiences and lessons openly, complementing existing Church-led trainings.
- The workshops have been designed to allow for real-time learning and evaluation through rigorous data collection and analysis, which is also important for improving the relevance of the workshops as the project engages with more diverse communities.



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Organising and delivering clergy trainings effectively

- Importance of working in equitable partnerships to avoid duplication and achieve mutual learning

The workshops are co-organised 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.

We are also 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.

- Need to communicate in local languages and to understand the nuances of terminological choices

The workshops are delivered in Amharic and are facilitated by Dr Romina Istratii, who is supported by two co-trainers: deacon and psychology counsellor Mr Henok Hailu, and attorney and consultant in law Ms Beza Birhanu.

The content is summarised in booklets printed in Amharic, which are handed to the clergy to use as a permanent resource in their future pastoral practice. (English PDF available on our website)





Responding to domestic violence in war-time in faith-sensitive ways



Applying the project dldl/ድልድል approach to war-time domestic violence

- The project was largely based on research in northern Ethiopia in peace-time. In November 2020, a new conflict erupted in Tigray region, where the initial research sites of project dldl/ድልድል were planned to be. This raised the urgent need to pay attention to violence experienced in political conflict and to war trauma and to understand the implications for domestic life and family relations in the conflict-affected communities, as well as identify appropriate approaches considerate of Tigray's religio-cultural fabric.
- Tigray is a deeply religious society with the indigenous Ethiopian Orthodox *Tāwahādo* Christianity having been formally embraced in the ancient capital of Aksum, to which the majority of Tigray's population adheres (based on most recent population census). Yet in the early months of humanitarian response, no acknowledgement was made of the local religious tradition and clergy in the mediation of marriage and community issues and their potential to support victims/survivors of war-time sexual violence.

Effort to help towards integrating clergy and faith parameters in humanitarian responses

- Project dIdI/ድልድል responded by conducting a rapid scoping literature review on the relationship between war violence and domestic violence, with a particular interest in identifying intersections with religio-cultural parameters to inform the international humanitarian response in Ethiopia.
- The review showed that religious parameters have received minimal attention in the existing scholarship, despite the fact that faith is documented to serve as coping mechanism for victims and survivors of both war-related SGBV and domestic violence, and recommended that faith parameters should be better integrated.
- The review also evidenced that responses to conflict-related violence in humanitarian settings must consider how war-related violence intersects with structural, normative and psychological parameters and seek to support affected groups in ways that can prevent further abuse in domestic and communal life in post-displacement settings.
- It recommended the importance of combining society-wide responses with more individual trauma-informed psychological support and counselling. Both society-wide and individual responses should be embedded in communities' religio-cultural beliefs systems and consider the role of personal faith in rationalising/understanding violence and traumatic experiences, as well as in coping and healing.

Active engagement with humanitarian stakeholders

- Project dldl/ድልድል promptly joined the GBV AoR mail list to share the output of the literature review and previous ethnographic evidence from Tigray.
- Project dldl/ድልድል was consulted on UK's response to the humanitarian crisis and extensive SGBV in Tigray region.
- Project dldl/ድልድል met with a local organisation to share evidence to inform the development of a trauma-centred project in Tigray in post-war time.
- Project dldl/ድልድል initiated an effort to develop and translate in Tigrigna SGBV and theological material informed by its current work with EOTC clergy, to be disseminated to international actors operating in the region. (in light of lack of communication with local Tigrigna-speaking actors)

Resources for further study (select bibliography)

- Istratii, R. (2020) *Adapting Gender and Development to Local Religious Contexts*. Routledge
- Istratii, R.(2021) *War and domestic violence: A rapid scoping of the literature to understand the relationship and to inform responses in the Tigray humanitarian crisis. Working Paper 2 (English)*. Project dldl/ድልድል: Bridging religious studies, gender & development and public health to address domestic violence in religious communities. SOAS University of London.
- Istratii, Romina and Papagianni, Estela and Ghebreweldi, Mebrak and Damtew, Aklil (2021) Starting a research project during a pandemic and a war: lessons from project dldl/ድልድል, SOAS University of London.
- Project dldl/ድልድል (2021) *Content Summary: Workshops on Domestic Violence with Ethiopian Orthodox Täwahädo Church (EOTC) Clergy*. Published by Project dldl/ድልድል: Bridging religious studies, gender & development and public health to address domestic violence in religious communities. SOAS University of London.
- Project dldl/ድልድል website in English, Amharic, Tigrigna and Afaan Oromo.
<https://projectdldl.org/>

Thank you for your attention

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- For questions contact ri5@soas.ac.uk
- Join the mail list **DV-Gender-Faith** on JISCMAIL for follow-up outputs

