

The role of religious traditions in promoting gender equality and responding to domestic violence: What we can learn from project didi/ድልድል?

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Religious tradition often seen as the origin of the problem. Is this a fair representation/generalisation?

- ‘Religion’ emerged as a universal concept in the 19th century. Different thinkers engaged with ‘religion’ in ways that resonated with the stage of western development, such as analysing ‘religion’ as a natural phenomenon, as a transcendental thing-in-itself (*sui generis*), or as a symbolic system, with non-western religions being analysed in reference to what was perceived to be a superior western Christianity.
- Gender-sensitive critiques of religion, albeit making an important contribution to revisiting socially embedded religious discourses hostile to women, have also contributed to some unhelpful essentialising trends: employing a west-centric feminist ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’, prominent western feminist scholars have displayed essentialising tendencies that present all ‘theology’ (especially Christian traditions) as ‘patriarchal’, ‘sexist’ or complicit in women’s abuse.

There is no ‘religion’ *per se* but context-specific religio-cultural belief systems

- One must differentiate between theological, dogmatic or exegetical tenets and the lived religious life of the clergy and laity, without however isolating the two levels of experience.
- For most non-western societies that eschewed the specific experience of western secularism, religious parameters intermesh with culture-specific normative systems and folklore life. One may speak of religio-cultural belief systems and frameworks that need to be understood in historical and context-specific ways.
- Often clergy and laity will differentiate between ‘faith’ and ‘culture’, and the way in which they conceptualise the relationship will determine their responses to social norms that prevail and their openness to deviating from or changing accepted gender standards and practices.

Research in Ethiopia

- The study showed both a prevalence of religious language in how the clergy and the laity experienced and responded to conjugal abuse.
- Faith for women translated mostly as a coping mechanism, although many women stayed in the abusive situation because they tried to forgive, loved the husbands or believed he could be reformed or to avoid divorce.
- 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.'
- While 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 in ways that seemed to reverse rigid or pernicious attitudes associated with some forms of conjugal abuse.
- The study evidenced the resourcefulness of Orthodox theology, which could be leveraged to address gender asymmetries and harmful behaviours or norms that indirectly contributed to women's abuse or its tolerance.

Why is it necessary to engage religious parameters in promoting gender equality and responding to gender-related issues?

- It is important to understand that religious traditions are part of many communities' cultural fabric and can determine or shape individual and collective identities, attitudes and behaviours. Thus, religious parameters cannot be neglected or dismissed, especially if one commits to taking a culture-sensitive approach.
- Since religious discourse is interwoven with culture and tradition in complex ways, it is important to investigate the specific configurations between religio-cultural parameters and gender norms and relations for each individual context.
- It is important to identify honestly and critically how religious beliefs/teachings might be differentiated from culture-specific gender practices to promote normative, attitudinal or behavioural change where it is needed.

What is project dldl/ደልደል?

Project dldl/ደልደል is 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. The project seeks to promote a decolonial approach to addressing domestic violence in religious communities by engaging substantively with the religio-cultural belief systems of the victims/survivors and the perpetrators, and by understanding how these belief systems interface with gender, material and psychological parameters to facilitate or deter domestic violence. Working with Ethiopian and Eritrean collaborators, and rural and urban communities, the project seeks to generate new research and intervention approaches, and to apply this knowledge to inform strategies for integrating in domestic violence services and better-supporting affected ethnic minority and migrant populations in the UK.

Strategies

1. Working dialogically with partners & employing people-centred methodologies
2. Building on context-specific knowledge & new evidence
3. Connecting with existing DV infrastructure & initiatives
4. Brokering cross-sectoral learning & partnerships through knowledge exchange activities

Impact

1. Preparedness among clergy & seminarians to respond to DV victims & perpetrators
2. Religio-cultural sensitivity in NGO/state-led DV sectors
3. Integrated DV systems and better served affected populations
4. Reciprocal research partnerships & mutual professional development

Outcomes

1. New practice bridging religious studies, development & public health to address DV
2. Bespoke curricula for seminarians & multilingual training platform for clergy & DV providers
3. New multi-stakeholder knowledge exchange platform
4. Pilot programme leveraging religious & spiritual language for perpetrator & victim support

Who is involved in the project?

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).

How Do We Work?

A decolonial impact-oriented approach: Our main premise is that meaningful and impactful interventions emerge when they are designed from the ground up informed by empirical evidence and real-life experiences

RESEARCH



ENGAGEMENT & INTEGRATION



KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE

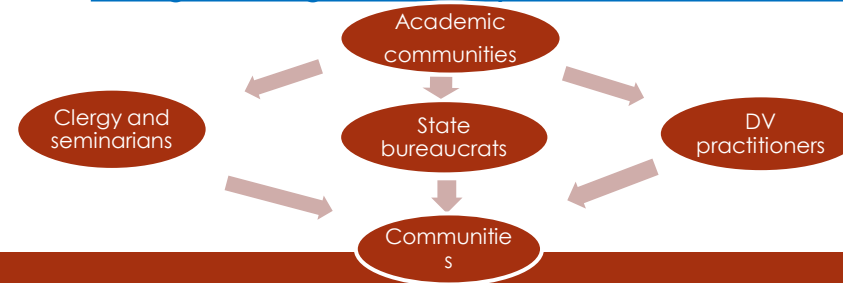


- ❖ Research to understand better how attitudes of domestic violence are informed by religious beliefs and to explore associations with psychological factors (intergenerational violence, trauma, personality disorders, etc.).
- ❖ Research to identify how religious beliefs can serve as a deterrent to becoming 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.

- ❖ 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.

- ❖ 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.

Serving as a bridge across disciplines, sectors and stakeholders



Milestones achieved so far

- 2** literature reviews completed (1 academic paper under review)
- 4** language translations on the website published
- 5** working papers published
- 6** international webinars organized in 2020-2021
- 7** workshops on domestic violence with clergy delivered in Ethiopia in 2021
- 132** members subscribed on the project's multistakeholder platform
- 155** clergy trained on domestic violence in 2021
- 29,874** web page views since April 2021



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The objectives of project dldl/ድልድል

- To develop and to implement religion-sensitive domestic violence interventions for victims and perpetrators in Ethiopia;
- To explore the importance of religio-cultural parameters in domestic violence attitudes and responses in Eritrea and to build local capacity for more integrated approaches;
- To investigate attitudes and responses to domestic violence among Ethiopian, Eritrean and other migrant communities in the UK, and to build the preparedness of community organisations and religious personnel to respond more effectively;
- To establish the extent to which religio-cultural parameters are considered in current domestic violence services provision in the UK, and to produce a roadmap for improving religio-cultural literacy and sensitivity.

Creating a bridge between secular and faith-based actors, multiple sectors and different theoretical paradigms

- Working in silos not effective as responding to gender inequalities and domestic violence requires multi-sectoral approaches
- Preconceptions, generalisations and ideological agendas create barriers to understanding and collaboration across sectors, and especially between secular and religious institutions (the divide itself is blurred)
- Aim to serve as a bridge across different theoretical approaches, but especially integrate psychological theories of violence in sociological analyses that can foster interdisciplinary understandings of the problem and integrated responses to it

The effects of gender-sensitive, theology-informed training on domestic violence for EOTC clergy

"I found it to be useful in opening doors for teaching, in the future, to advance knowledge, create awareness. It has highly achieved it." (C22, W2)

"I gained enough awareness regarding the psychological and physical abuse against women in marriage." (C17, W2)

"Training for priests on (how to consult) married couples is very much needed because spiritual children are very close to the priest. It is good if the training continues in the future." (C16, W1)

"We have learned valuable lessons on how to deal with domestic violence, child marriage, family interference in marriage, and conflict resolution." (C15, W6)

"I will present this workshop well at home as well as in church. I will teach it at every edir, traditional associations as well as funeral services." (C18, W5)

"Starting from myself, it made me an example and a person who respects my wife as well as other women in society." (C10, W1)

"Yes, because most of the time when there is physical abuse, we used to try to solve the situation (via direct interference). But now I understood that time should be given (to assess the situation)." (C23, W4)

Thank you

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For questions contact ri5@soas.ac.uk

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