

# **Exploring the relationship between conjugal abuse, parenting and childhood trauma and the role of faith as a potential deterrent: Ethnographic insights from research in Ethiopia**

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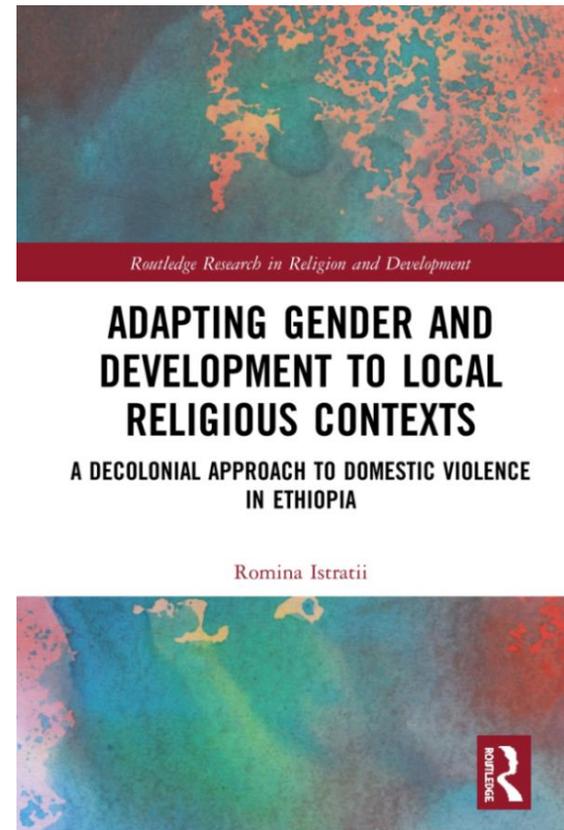
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## Background

Critical international development researcher and practitioner with decade-long experience in sub-Saharan Africa working to decolonise gender-sensitive research in domestic violence, stressing the need for grounding the analysis in the belief systems, conceptual repertoires and languages of local communities.

Current Principal Investigator of Project dldl/ድልድል, a 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 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 seeks 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 fostering Southern-Northern knowledge exchange and genuine collaboration.

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).

# **Current state of evidence on faithfulness, marriage and domestic violence**

# The role of religious beliefs and spirituality in domestic violence

- Some abusive men may have distorted understandings of religious teachings, not unrelated to the family environment they grew up in, which they could use to justify their abusiveness (Shaikh, 2007; Johnson, 2015; Nason-Clark et al., 2018, ch. 3).
- Religious women who experience husband abuse might tend to endure and to forgive it, often as a direct result of how they understand and embody religious teachings or vernacular religious traditions (Shaikh, 2007; Merry, 2009, 68; Mardsen, 2014; Nason-Clark et al., ch. 2).
- Some female victims may resort to religious beliefs to condemn the abuse and through their ordeals may acquire a more justice-oriented understanding of their faith, helping them to address the harmful situation (Shaikh, 2007; Johnson, 2015).
- In societies where dominant religious traditions were preceded by folklore belief systems, religious influences often co-exist with other beliefs about the spiritual world, which can deter or incite violent behaviour with one's intimate partner in intricate ways (e.g. McClusky, 2001; Istratii, 2020).

- These trends have been reported in works from Catholic, Protestant or Evangelical Christian communities and some Muslim societies, but with distinct variations (each tradition enables different kinds of discourses, providing weaker or stronger possibilities for using religious idiom to justify folklore norms and practices).
- Within Eastern or so-called ‘Oriental’ Orthodox Christian societies, albeit cross-cultural variations, theology has been generally understood as being co-substantial with praxis. However, due to historical and political developments, and the accommodating nature of this faith vis-à-vis pre-existing belief systems, the routine embodiments of the faithful should not be equated to theological teachings.
- Some pernicious attitudes could reflect a lack of theological literacy in the community of adherents, or emphasis on values that appear also to be prioritised within the faith (such as the family, marriage or female virginity).
- Need to understand religious traditions in reference to their distinct theological and exegetical premises as experienced historically.

- Victimised women in religious communities tend to share their ordeals with clergy, although they may minimize the seriousness of the situation because of shame, guilt or other reasons (Hamid and Jayakar, 2015; Nason-Clark et al., 2018, 36).
- Clergy responses may be inappropriate and could contribute to a perpetuation of the harmful situation (Shaikh, 2007; Nason-Clark et al., 2018, 39-40) due to clergy's limited exposure to IPV and how best to respond, insufficient seminary training, own attitudes that might lead to the minimisation of the problem, heightened sense of responsibility to preserve marriage, or inability to apply religious teachings to advise the victimised party or counsel the abuser (Johnson, 2015).
- On the other hand, it has been demonstrated that faith leaders and clergy can be positively influential and that the majority do try to support victimised parties, albeit often acting in ways that can be counterproductive (Nason-Clark et al., 2018).
- Theological support could help both victims and offenders of domestic abuse address emotional and psychological disturbances (Davies and Dryer, 2014) .

# Relationship between religious and marital/family parameters

- A study with adults in the US found that regular religious attendance was inversely associated with the perpetration of domestic violence. Among men, this protective effect was evident only among weekly attenders, whereas among women, the protective effect also surfaced among monthly attenders (Ellison and Anderson, 2001).
- In another study, religious beliefs and practices among American Catholic and Orthodox Christian families (such as prayer and attending worship services) were related to seeking forgiveness and to resolving conflict in order to build and maintain unified and harmonious family relationships (White et al., 2018).
- A study that examined how Evangelical Christian women's marital satisfaction was related to religiosity (i.e., religious commitment and sanctification of marriage) found that greater levels of religious commitment and sanctification predicted marital satisfaction (Davis et al., 2018).
- Another study that explored correlations between marital sanctity, relationship maintenance, and marital quality found that one's own belief in the sanctity of one's marriage was associated with one's reported engagement in relational maintenance behaviours (Stafford, 2016).

- Attachment theory holds that early childhood relations with parents mediate how children create relationships with peers and with intimate partners later in life (Bowlby, 1969; 1980; Ainsworth et al., 1978).
- Adult attachment profiles are often classified as secure and insecure, with insecurity presenting both fearful/anxious and avoidant types. Individuals with anxious attachment types are generally insecure about losing the attachment figure, while individuals with avoidant attachment types consider attachment futile, downplay the importance of intimacy and prioritise their independence.
- Attachment insecurity has been increasingly related to the development of personality disorders characterised by borderline traits and/or anti-social behaviour, and a reduced sense of empathy, which refers to the capacity to understand emotions (such as distress or pain) felt by others and to adapt to those appropriately (Schaffer, Clark and Jeglic, 2009; Howe, 2013).

- Studies have suggested that individual reliance on and appraisal of God as an attachment figure is not unrelated to attachment models that individuals develop through relationships with other humans in their life (Birgegard and Granqvist, 2004; Hall et al., 2009).
- Moreover, studies have found associations between attachments insecurity, marital functioning and the likelihood of psychological and physical violence. For example, avoidant attachment, mediated by some personality disorder, has been associated with psychological and physical violence, and anxious attachment with psychological violence (Mauricio, Tein and Lopez, 2007). On the other hand, it has been reported that attachment avoidance can be less detrimental to marital functioning when the individual use more positive religious coping strategies (Pollard, Riggs and Hook, 2014).

# The ethnographic study in northern Ethiopia







- Between 2016-2017, I conducted a year-long theology-informed anthropological and participatory study of conjugal abuse realities and attitudes in the Ethiopian Orthodox *Tāwahādo* community of Aksum, in northern Ethiopia.
- Year-long desk-based research was followed by year-long fieldwork in Ethiopia, with six months spent residing in the countryside and a short period in the city of Aksum.
- Research participants included domestic violence experts, scholars and theologians at traditional Church schools and in the modern theological colleges, monks and nuns at nearby monasteries, clergy in the city of Aksum and the surrounding villages, and lay men and women in the rural and urban settings.
- In addition, six gender-segregated participatory workshops were held, four with rural male and female residents and two with members of the Sunday School Department of the Church in the city of Aksum. In total, the study engaged 244 informants.



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# Types of conjugal abuse and explanations given by the community

- Conjugal conflict, arguments or disagreement due to men getting drunk, going to other women, or refusing to provide as breadwinners. This could escalate in physical assault by husbands against wives. Women could be held partially responsible if they did not uphold a non-confrontational attitude.
- A few women described as ‘difficult’ women (e.g. overly controlling of husbands). Some women’s abusiveness towards husbands associated with ‘modernity.’
- Gender asymmetries, such as an unfair division of labour between wives and husbands and the persistence of early marriage for girls.
- Abandonment of wives by husbands, especially when this was accompanied by men’s failure to provide child support in the aftermath.
- Sexual coercion in marriage not generally talked about since the expectation was for the wife to sleep with her husband at all reasonable times (excepting when she was ill/after child birth/in her menses, fasting periods, etc.).
- Depending on the type of abuse, these were attributed to characterological defects, relationship issues, and a ‘past’/‘old’ unegalitarian mentality persisting among some.

# The role of the clergy in mediating conflict and responding to victims/perpetrators

- All the research participants affirmed the central role of the clergy, who typically served as mediators of conjugal problems and acted as the main point of reference for religious matters among the laity.
- Most rural priests opposed pernicious culture-condoned practices. Simultaneously, some could be enforcing socio-cultural gender norms unwittingly by stressing Judaic/Old Testament elements of the religious tradition (neglecting New Testament theology), because this was favoured in folklore culture.
- Many priests proactively asked the woman if she was experiencing abuse and tried to stop the pernicious behaviour and to correct the situation whenever they were called to mediate, but they did not insist if a perpetrator did not want to reform their behaviour due to a theology respecting human free will.
- While priests emphasised the preservation of life-long marriage, they also taught that marriage had to be a peaceful affair and did not generally oppose divorce when the situation was irreversible and harmful to the woman.

- Marriages in which both spouses were considered spiritual and were committed to religious commandments were considered healthier and more successful.
- Female research participants invariably affirmed that going to church and observing the sacraments made their husbands calmer and more considerate towards them.
- Faith for women translated mostly as a coping mechanism and not as a source for justifying intimate partner abuse, which the faith teaches against. However, many women stayed because they loved the husbands or believed he could be reformed or to avoid divorce (which could expose them to poverty and the village gossip of being a ‘bad’ wife).
- Men were considered generally less spiritual, but male testimonies suggested that 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.’



# The role of psychological parameters in relationship problems and conjugal abuse

- The proximity of the partners made them dependent on each other and particularly susceptible to each other's responses. When an imbalance emerged because one party did not deliver, this begot stress and frustration in the other party, whose complaints and accusations amplified in turn the former's dissatisfaction. This seemed to plunge the relationship in a cycle of dissatisfaction and argument ("negative reciprocity", Clements and Schumacher, 2010).
- The results could be worse in relationships lacking intimate communication and understanding, such as in some cases of arranged marriages or due to large age difference between spouses.
- Many of my female interlocutors complained that their boyfriends or husbands could not understand their feelings or their love. Others spoke about local men's lack of ability to externalise their emotions and a lack of interest or ability to develop intimate communication with their female partners. Such observations could be capturing more profound problems of attachment and empathy among a segment of the male population that was particularly problematic or abusive in intimate partnerships.

- The narratives of wife abandonment invariably described a husband's sudden change of heart and spoke of lack of intimacy and connection to his wife.
- Changes in people's feelings do happen in all romantic relationships and marriages but alienation generally develops over time, which the other partner senses (Overall and Lemay, 2015). My interlocutors repeatedly affirmed that they had not quarrelled with husbands, that the marriage had been quite good and balanced and that the husband **suddenly** changed.
- It is not unlikely that some men's impassionate abandonment of wives could be underpinned by some personality issue or attachment insecurity, which needs to be investigated further. Insecurely attached people of an avoidant type tend to keep an emotional distance from the intimate partners and consider that they can be self-sufficient without them (Li and Chan, 2012).
- Some men's subsequent failure to provide for child maintenance may reflect economic scarcity and bad relations between the partners, but it could suggest also lower levels of empathy, associated with anti-social personality disorder, which has been correlated with avoidant attachment (Mauricio, Tein and Lopez, 2012).

- A recurrent parenting style, mostly affecting female-led households (husband had been killed at war, had left or had temporarily moved to another place for seasonal work), that could be described as detached and which became at times abusive.
- Girls could be sometimes slapped if they misbehaved, but boys would be beaten harshly in most cases. The practice of corporal punishment was affirmed to be against the faith, but also to have amplified in recent years.
- It did not become clear how extensive child battering actually was, but one male interlocutor was convinced that, “[b]efore, this practice did not exist” and that “[a]ccording to the faith, it is good not to hit and to insult the children.” Most interlocutors agreed that the practice had amplified in ‘modern times.’
- Some interlocutors believed that due to children’s increasingly secular education, parents were feeling unprepared to deal with how their children thought and acted, which could manifest as frustration and abusiveness on their part.

- Some mothers' detached, judgemental and unstable parenting styles could become conducive to boys developing attachment insecurities of an avoidant type or a weaker empathic capacity in adult life. Such impacts could be compounded by a father's departure or a step-father's abusive behaviour with the child, which local women reported to be a frequent cause of second divorces.
- This generational aspect of violence may be through child physical or psychological abuse (Mills, 2006), but also through mother abuse by husbands (Holt, Buckley and Whelan, 2008). Some women's own anxiety and emotional agony in their married lives seemed to coincide with the use of battery with their boy children.

# What does the study tell us?

- Need for integrated approaches: developing counter-discourses from Orthodox theology to stress the possibility of character improvement and to condemn women's and children's physical abuse; employing psycho-social tools to help perpetrators address psychological factors of abusiveness; supporting couples in developing conflict resolution skills and communication; strengthening local state-led institutions (police, social courts, etc.).
- Local priests need to be equipped theologically to avoid enforcing folklore practice framed in religious idiom. They also need to be trained in the psychology of domestic violence and safeguarding to be able to mediate cases of conjugal abuse in more sensitive and effective ways in view of the risks identified for both the victims and their children.

- “Religion, conscience and abusive behaviour: Understanding the role of faith and spirituality in the deterrence of intimate partner violence in rural Ethiopia”

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