

PROBLEMATISING DECOLONISATION IN THE VAWG SECTOR

Dr Romina Istratii

AGENDA

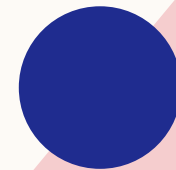
My positionality and work

An unequal world system with colonial legacies

The decolonisation movement and efforts to address racist tendencies in the VAWG sector

Reflecting on the meaning of decolonising in the VAWG sector

The approach of project dldl/ድልድል



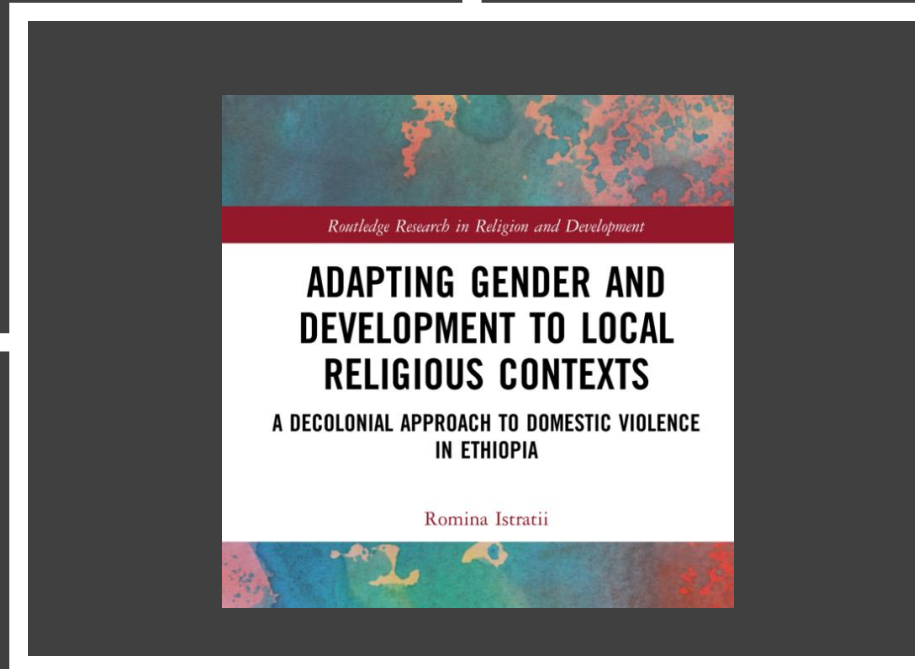


MY POSITIONALITY AND WORK

Decolonisation can be understood differently
depending on one's geography, history and
positionality



Decolonial Subversions



 **SOAS**
University of London

Applying a Decolonial Lens to Research Structures, Norms and Practices in Higher Education Institutions

Conversation Event Report
SOAS University of London,
18th September 2019



Decolonising Knowledge By Empowering The Margins

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MY BACKGROUND

- My understanding is informed by my Eastern European positionality and decade-long experience working to decolonise international development at the epistemological and structural level (in relation to processes of knowledge production and validation, funding and partnerships).
- I have worked as a practitioner, activist and researcher in sub-Saharan Africa at the intersection of gender, religious and development to address epistemological hierarchies and colonial legacies and to de-westernise responses to VAWG and SGBV.
- Previously, I co-founded *Decolonial Subversions* in an effort to de-westernise and diversify knowledge production and publishing, initialised the *SOAS Decolonising Research Initiative* to address inequalities in research development and funding, and worked to promote open access (free and accessible) science.

AN UNEQUAL WORLD SYSTEM



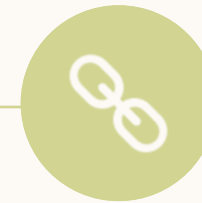
EPISTEMOLOGY

- Historically, western epistemology has dominated, and this has been embedded in colonial and post-Enlightenment legacies
- Northern countries have dictated theory and paradigms and what matters as valid knowledge



IDEOLOGY

- Ideological and political dominance of northern countries and organisations
- So-called global agendas dominate the fields of development, public health, humanitarian responses and the international VAWG and GBV response sector (Agenda 2030, SDGs, Gender Mainstreaming, etc.)



FUNDING

- Material inequalities with most funding being based in the so-called global north or 'norths' within the global south
- Western funders and donors dictating their own standards of practice & performance (logframe, theory of change, results-based, etc.)

EPISTEMOLOGICAL SITUATEDNESS

- As Gloria Ladson-Billings has noted, “[e]pistemology is ultimately linked to worldview. (2005, 258). Individuals are always “epistemologically situated,” which means that our worldviews influence our conceptual, theoretical and analytical frameworks.
- Historically, the Western European colonisers projected their worldviews, interests and understandings of humanity onto the “other” (Fanon 1961; Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o 1986) and these projections and assumptions still underpin scientific research and practice in most disciplines and sectors (Quijano 2000; Tuhiwai-Smith 1999; Mignolo and Walsh 2018).
- In contemporary times, this continues because we fail to recognise the epistemological situatedness of theories, paradigms and tools we use in our practices and often assume and transpose western or other dominant assumptions when we work with non-western and diverse communities and clients.

“ ...ITS MOST IMPORTANT AREA OF DOMINATION WAS THE MENTAL UNIVERSE OF THE COLONIZED, THE CONTROL, THROUGH CULTURE, OF HOW PEOPLE PERCEIVED THEMSELVES AND THEIR RELATIONSHIP TO THE WORLD. ”

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, 1986, p. 16

EFFORTS TO ADDRESS COLONIAL LEGACIES AND RACIST TENDENCIES IN THE VAWG SECTOR

CRITIQUES OF VAWG SECTOR

- Critical and decolonial discussions have emerged around the concept and theory of VAWG and related terms such as gender violence or Gender-Based Violence in recognition of different understandings of violence and different rationalisations of its causes across communities (Jakobsen, 2014; 2015; Istratii, 2020)
- Given the diversity in the world, concerns have been raised about how VAWG should be addressed in respect to diverse cultural and religious contexts with sensitivity to the belief and normative systems of different communities and in ways that can effectively engage the community in such efforts (the SASA! GBV approach and the project dldl/ድልድል to domestic violence could be said to emanate from such a perspective)
- Problematizations have been expressed around whether VAWG providers are sensitive and can engage with the religio-cultural backgrounds of their clients with open-mindedness, and about how personal identities might influence the provision of services in a sector that does not eschew western cultural influences and colonial legacies that bias perceptions about 'other' cultural or religious systems (McKenzie, 2021)
- Funding restrictions and inequalities and the dominance of northern funders have been problematised in the sector of international development and research partnerships (Istratii and Lewis, 2019) and are becoming increasingly salient in discussions about funding restrictions in the VAWG sector (e.g. VAWG Anti-Racism Charter)

Racism in the VAWG sector, reflected in disregarding or patronising attitudes towards Black and minority-led organisations, appropriation of marginalised knowledge by mainstream organisations and lack of proper attribution and crediting are key issues raised in the VAWG Anti-Racism Charter.

QUESTIONS TO REFLECT ON

What theoretical frameworks and whose knowledge do we use to understand violence, culture, religion or other realms of life that are salient in the experience of VAWG?

Do we privilege experience-based knowledge or a western or other dominant theory? Do we evidence the relevance of the theory with research, or do we just assume it as relevant?

Are we considerate of differences in how people understand and experience violence and do we recognise that our own understanding is also limited and epistemologically situated?

Are we reflexive of our own identities and how these determine our relationship with clients or organisations of different backgrounds (e.g. non-religious counsellor towards religious domestic violence survivor; northern towards southern organisation, white-dominated towards Black and minority-led organisation, etc.)?

Are we self-reflexive and aware of our own culture-informed limitations in the work we do, even work that we consider highly 'technocratic' or 'professional'?

Are we actively and practically seeking to apply an intersectional analytical lens in how we operate? How would we understand that?

What does racism, racialising or discriminating mean to us and others? How do the processes we implement respond to such problematic behaviour (the clients we support, the knowledge we choose to privilege, the way we secure and disburse funding, the ways in which we seek and formulate partnerships with other organisations, etc.)?

How do we work with communities, organisations and other stakeholders? Is our approach considerate of power inequalities within different groups and communities? How do we understand inclusivity?

QUESTIONS TO REFLECT ON (2)

What is the composition of the organisation we are part of? How are staff recruited and selected? Is there representation of diverse groups, stakeholders and backgrounds in our team?

What does diversity mean to us and do we apply this concept of diversity to all our processes, including how we communicate and engage with different team members, organisational staff, partners or community stakeholders?

How are work responsibilities, rewards and opportunities distributed within the team and organisation? Are certain individuals consistently favoured over others?

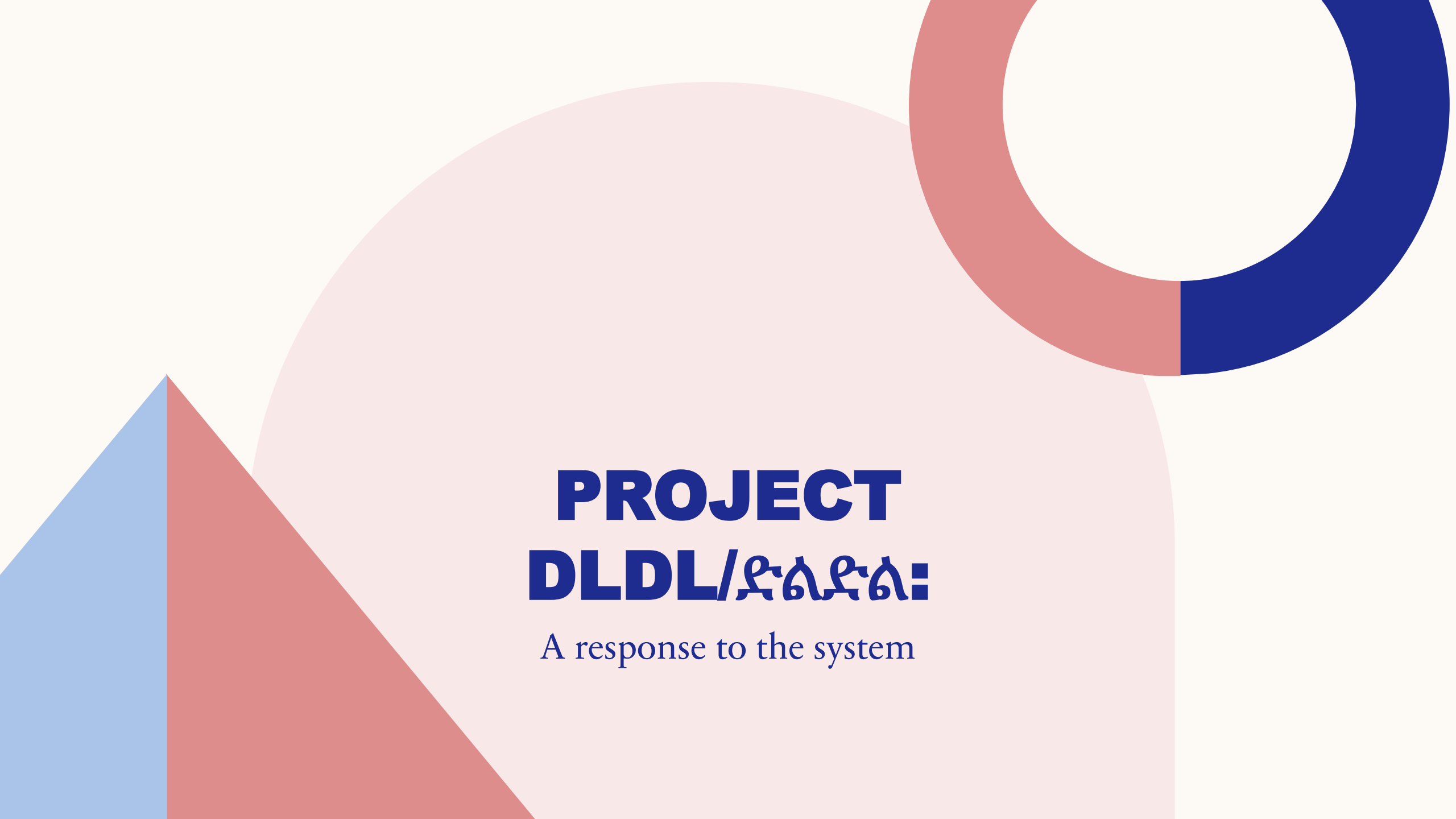
Do we properly attribute, credit and reward the work that our team members do? Who has ownership of the data we produce or use?

Do we credit the contributions of Black and minority staff members as much as we credit the work of members of staff from the white majority?

How do we understand collaborative work? Is such work based on principles of mutual respect, shared learning and equal contribution or does it tend to be more hierarchical with certain groups or interests dominating in the collaboration?

IS THE VAWG SECTOR 'A-CULTURAL'?

- Oftentimes, white-dominated, mainstream VAWG organisations perceive or present themselves as a-cultural, while Black and minority-led organisations are presented or perceived as too cultural or subjective or community-specific (McKenzie, 2021; Anti-Racism Charter).
- We are all epistemologically situated and we think in reference to how we have been socialised within our own cultural contexts and sociological realities. Thus, we are all cultural.
- Being 'professional' or 'technical' does not mean being 'a-cultural' and does not offer a remedy for the epistemological, racial and structural inequalities seen in the VAWG sector.
- Decolonising the field cannot be done in an 'objective' manner, but is a matter of recognising our subjectivity in our engagements with the world and reflecting on the limitations that this subjectivity brings to our understanding and practices.



PROJECT
DLDL/ድልድል።

A response to the system

A DECOLONIAL REFLEXIVITY

- 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 depart from established conceptualisations of religion that have been informed by western societies' experience with Western Christianity, theological dogmatism and secularisation processes and take a contextual approach to religious belief systems.
- We seek to reverse the historically unequal knowledge transfer in international development and public health interventions by aiming to learn from countries in East Africa to improve domestic violence services also in the UK by fostering 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.

A PRACTICAL APPROACH

- Co-producing research projects and intervention programmes together with project partners and stakeholder groups in the countries we work in
- Employing participatory, ethnographic and people-centred methodologies in research and intervention approaches to capture and prioritise experiential knowledge
- Creating opportunities for growth for all team members in the project countries to the best of our ability
- Creating opportunities and platforms for learning across sectors, disciplines and stakeholder groups through knowledge exchange activities (conferences in East Africa) and public engagement events that are accessible to all



THANK YOU

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