

A talk on the crisis in Tigray:  
Presenting the results of a literature review on war  
violence and domestic violence by project dldl/ድልድል  
to inform humanitarian responses in the region

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# Agenda

Organised the talk around 5 questions:

1. What is project dldl/ድልድል and what do we do?
2. What motivated the current working paper and how does this relate to the war in Tigray region?
3. What were the aims of the literature review and how do its findings apply to the Tigray context?
4. In what specific ways do we see the working paper contributing to the current humanitarian response in Tigray?
5. Given the theology-driven nature of project dldl/ድልድል, how would we say can Christian Orthodox believers internationally support our fellow Tigrayans in this time?



# 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 beliefs, theology and the clergy 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.
- It aims to do so through a decolonial approach that prioritises the communities' own understandings and experiences of domestic violence, embeds these in wider socio-cultural normative frameworks and context-specific religious and exegetical traditions, and leverages on religio-cultural resources in order to address the problem in the most sensible and practical ways.
- Through appraisal of new evidence and understanding emanating from Ethiopia and Eritrea, the project seeks to inform debates and approaches in the UK domestic violence sector, which is increasingly called to cater to diverse communities, including Ethiopians and Eritreans living in the UK.
- It is hoped that through such an approach the project can start to substantively redress historical asymmetries in development-oriented research and practice, and to rectify the existing unhelpful and hierarchical patterns of knowledge transfer from western industrialised societies to non-western countries, especially those categorised as LMICs.



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*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

- The project evolved from the PI's previous long-term PhD research in Aksum, Tigray region, Ethiopia, and reflects many years' consultations and discussions with friends and colleagues in Aksum, Mekelle and Addis Ababa.
- It builds upon old and new partnerships with academic and non-governmental organisations, 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), the University of Bristol (Bristol, UK) and the University of Sheffield (Sheffield, UK).



Photos from Tigray, 2012-2017





















# How project dldl/ድልድል works to achieve meaningful impact

- The project stems from the understanding that impact has been defined too many times in the past in euro-centric, programmatic or short-sighted ways, which this project aims to depart from.
- 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.
- The project aims to use sustainable and dialogical strategies in order to ensure continuity, such as by connecting with existing infrastructures and systems and avoiding duplication, brokering cross-sectoral learning, partnerships and awareness through knowledge exchange activities and public engagement, working dialogically with partners, stakeholders and communities and employing people-centred research methodologies and practices; and building on context-specific knowledge and developing new rigorous evidence.



# Ongoing and planned activities in Ethiopia

## RESEARCH

- Research with lay men to understand better how their attitudes of domestic violence are informed by religious beliefs and to explore associations with psychological factors (intergenerational violence, trauma, personality disorders, etc.), as well as build deterrence mechanisms among the male population (the primary perpetrator group, although not necessarily)
- Research with victims/survivors of domestic violence (recruited via EWLA) to explore the role of faith in help-seeking attitudes and to provide faith-informed psychosocial support
- Consultations and research to explore the possibility of a faith-based perpetrator treatment programme

## INTERVENTIONS & PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

- Workshops with clergy including theological, ethnographic and domestic violence safeguarding content (integrating with on-going EWLA work in building referral systems)
- Trainings with secular providers (government and NGOs) to raise awareness of the complex role of religio-cultural parameters in domestic violence continuation and deterrence
- Publication of working papers, delivery of webinars and public engagement events and production of films to create awareness and improve multi-stakeholder and public understanding of domestic violence and the complex intersections with religious, socio-cultural and psychological parameters



# The eruption of war in Tigray

- In November 2020, a new conflict erupted in Tigray region, where the initial research sites of project dldl/ድልድል were planned to be.
- At the outset of the war, all communications with the region were interrupted, which made it impossible to ascertain the wellbeing of our colleagues, as well as continue work with two of our main partner institutions in Ethiopia.
- From a research perspective, the eruption of the war raised an urgent need to pay attention to violence experienced in political conflict and war trauma in order to understand the implications for domestic life and family relations in the conflict-affected communities.
- We also hoped to produce some guidelines for humanitarian agencies that would help them to contextualise the response in the region's historical, religio-cultural and ethnographic realities to proactively minimise top-down approaches well-known in the humanitarian sector.



# Forms of violence reported on the ground which the literature review responded to

- The violence has led to extensive displacement and large numbers of people in the region fleeing to Sudan and other areas within Ethiopia. In January 2021, the UN reported that more than 56,000 Ethiopian refugees had fled into neighbouring Sudan since the outbreak of the war, with about 45% being children ('UN warns 2.3 million need aid', 2021), 30% being younger than 18 and 5% older than 60 ('Ethiopians Continue Streaming Into Sudan', 2021).
- Humanitarian organisations have warned that millions may be facing food insecurity and facing the risk of dying from hunger or of a lack of medical supplies, exacerbated by a limited access to most parts of Tigray hindering humanitarian assistance (Anna, 2021 February 5).
- Widespread violence has been reported against civilians in the current conflict, including systematic bombings of residential places, intentional and repeated sexual and physical violence against women and girls, executions of men and boys, as well as indirect violence such as in the form of children being maimed by landmines, bombs or stray bullets (Ethiopian Human Rights Commission, n.d.).



For a fuller account of the types of war violence reported on the ground, please see section 1 of Working Paper 2:

[https://projectdldl.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Working-paper-2\\_Project-dldl-1.pdf](https://projectdldl.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Working-paper-2_Project-dldl-1.pdf)



# Literature review conducted

- The reports coming from Tigray suggested multiple forms of violence with permanent and damaging effects and anticipated complex trauma among witnesses and victims/survivors of violence.
- We initialised a rapid scoping literature review to identify the state of evidence on the relationship between political violence and domestic violence in order to deepen the analysis of domestic violence in conflict-ridden Tigray as part of the ongoing work of project dldl/ድልድል, as well as to inform humanitarian responses proactively.
- We also aimed to explore the long-term consequences of political violence, such as in forced migration, proposing a continuum of vulnerabilities across the forced migrant journeys and discussing complex intersections with religious parameters in post-displacement.



# Review process

- Review team: Dr Romina Istratii and one Ethiopian colleague who chose to remain anonymous (detailed description of division of labour is provided within the working paper)
- Specific aims to identify: a) key conceptual issues around the relationship war – domestic violence, b) types of studies and existing evidence, c) main areas of agreements and/or disagreement, d) gaps or directions for future research. Both international and Ethiopia-specific context (the latter not presented today)
- The combination of keyword terms that were used included: war and domestic violence, war and family relations, war and spouse violence, war and intimate partner violence, political conflict and domestic violence, political conflict and family relations, political conflict and spouse violence, domestic violence in war zones, domestic violence in post-conflict areas, women and terrorism, post-conflict family relations, domestic violence in post-conflict communities, intimate partner violence during war, gender-based violence in war zones, the impact of war on family relations, violence against women in conflict areas, effects of war on women
- Searchers were conducted on EBSCO, Google, Google scholar, BMJ, APA PsychNet, the Lancet. The international search was limited to sources in English. The Ethiopia-specific search included both English and Amharic sources.



# Key findings/messages of literature review

- Individuals affected by conflict continue to face trauma-related consequences for many years following the conflict. Beyond the immediate physical damage, disability and mental health trauma experienced by victims of physical, sexual or other violence, fear, shame and other socio-cultural and environmental parameters can lead both survivors and ex-combatants to be isolated or be unable to reintegrate in society when peace is restored. Moreover, the detrimental and intergenerational effects of war-time violence can coexist with and amplify structural, communal and domestic forms of violence that pre-existed before the conflict.
- Responses to conflict-related violence in humanitarian settings must consider how political 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.
- While domestic violence intersects with conflict-related SGBV and should not be approached in isolation from the latter in humanitarian settings, there is value in differentiating domestic violence/IPV from conflict-related SGBV to consider their distinct aetiologies. Domestic violence/IPV is related to a set of individual and intersubjective factors (e.g. psychological trauma from childhood violence, personality disorders or attachment insecurity) that might require different types of responses than does conflict-related community-wide or stranger SGBV.
- The provision of so-called psychosocial services in humanitarian settings must consider these distinct aetiologies and the factor of accumulated trauma that require a combination of community-wide social-environmental measures with individual-specific psychological/clinical support (Miller et al., 2021). These strategies need to be delivered in parallel informed by expert diagnoses and data collected through rigorous research.
- Any intervention or response needs to understand and be contextualised in communities' religio-cultural normative systems and to consider how family and social structures and institutions broken or interrupted during conflict might be restored to prevent IPV or other forms of abuse in the family, as well as contribute to effective perpetrator treatment programmes in conflict and post-conflict times.



# Understanding the context of Tigray

- Efforts to assess the consequences of the ongoing war in the region should be based on a grounded understanding of regional history, Tigrayan society and the people's religio-cultural beliefs and values, as well as forms of structural, domestic or other violence experienced by its population prior to the war, especially affecting women and girls.
- On the other hand, one should not be oblivious to Tigrayan women's efforts to improve the status of women and to address violence and inequalities affecting women and girls, especially in the period since the liberation struggle against the Derg (Hammond, 1989; Tsehai Berhane-Selassie, 1991; Minale Adugna, 2001; Mjaaland, 2004; Aregawi Berhe, 2004; Burgess, 2013; Krzeczunowicz, 1967).
- About one in three women in Ethiopia have experienced some form of spousal abuse in their lifetimes, and this includes women in Tigray (CSAE & ICF, 2017, p. 305). While previous research by the author in Aksum found that people considered domestic violence inappropriate and wrong by the standards of their faith and culture, the existence of the problem was not denied.
- Moreover, Tigray is a deeply religious society with the indigenous Ethiopian Orthodox *Tāwahado* Christianity having been formally embraced in the ancient capital of Aksum, to which the majority of Tigray's population adheres (FDRE, 2008, p. 111). Thus, people's realities, attitudes and norms need to be contextualised in this religious tradition.







# Literature review linkages with religious parameters

- The review showed that religious parameters have received minimal attention in the existing scholarship, and should be better integrated when appraising alleviation strategies in conflict , post-conflict contexts and displaced populations. The resourcefulness of religious personnel not generally considered or assessed, although reports exist that religious beliefs and spiritual activity can serve coping mechanisms.
- A study from Syria found that IPV female victims used coping strategies that included keeping silent, reading the Quran, fasting, and offering prayers of forgiveness to avoid conflict (Al-Natour, Al-Ostaz, and Morris 2019).
- A study from Northern Uganda found that women involved in war atrocities who experienced flashbacks were often isolated by the rest of the society as a result of spiritual beliefs. Women's symptoms interpreted as possession by evil spirits, resulting in women's abuse, mistreatment and isolation by others.
- A longitudinal study from Northern Ireland that compared IPV victim's experience in 1992 and 2016 found that in 1992 IPV victims were more concerned about the reactions of the clergy and were deeply influenced by religious standards and expectations upheld by the wider society. Despite such attitudes weakening over time, the authors found that IPV victims in 2016 still experienced consequences that were underpinned by rigid religious standards, such as stigma or fear of being judged for being a single parent, divorcing their (abusive) spouses, or having children from different fathers. (Doyle and McWilliams, 2018; 2020).
- That faith serves as a coping mechanism has been reported also widely in the literature that examines domestic violence in religious communities. In such contexts, 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; Nason-Clark et al., 2018).

# Current humanitarian responses and challenges

- Responses to SGBV and efforts to promote children's protection are currently being led by international humanitarian agencies in coordination with regional government ministries (e.g. BoLSA), as well as NGOs and INGOs working in the region with access and capacity to contribute to the wider humanitarian response.
- The humanitarian response has focused on providing immediate support to victims of SGBV arriving to refugee camps and other displaced contexts, such as through the provision of dignity kits, and psychosocial support and case management for GBV survivors and women and girls at risk (UNHCR Ethiopia, personal communication, January 21, 2021).
- Currently, humanitarian actors are hindered by lack of access to the region and high insecurity as fighting is on-going, which means that those who may need help the most are not reached (Situation Report shared by Ethiopia GBV AoR, 19 March 2021; Donor briefing on CP and GBV response in Tigray, 23 April 2021)
- Psychological specialisation and capacity to train social workers in supporting/counselling victims is limited, although new partners are being mobilised (Donor briefing on CP and GBV response in Tigray, 23 April 2021) – the current review evidences the urgency to leverage on specialised psychological training in order to address cumulative and complex trauma.
- The UNHCR, has been guided largely by Ethiopia's National Refugee Strategy to address SGBV, which offers helpful starting points, but needs to be adapted to the regional context and integrate the insights of this review.
- One of the objectives identified in the strategy is to strengthen SGBV referral pathways; this can be achieved through more integral collaborations with organisations such as the Ethiopian Women Lawyers Association (EWLA), which has been developing a community-based referral system across the country.
- Another objective of the strategy is to build the capacity of traditional justice and safety system inside the camps on formal legislative procedures, case records and case management, gender sensitivity and the needs of SGBV survivors; in Tigray region most village units (*tabiya* level) have their own social courts that adjudicate on family issues. The workers, if present in refugee camps and other displaced contexts, could become part of the task force setting up 'mobile courts' or training other community members in this work. Such measures would have to consider, however, socio-cultural and gender-related reasons that may restrict the effectiveness of court workers (who tend to be male and may not eschew gender-related biases) and should equip the latter with the awareness and tools to support SGBV survivors sensitively and appropriately.
- The strategy identifies the objective to partner with development actors and to establish some collaboration with religious leaders on children's issues – clergy should be integrated more fully in IPV/SGBV response strategies since they are influential in marriage and family affairs



# The resourcefulness of religious beliefs and the clergy in the Tigray humanitarian response

- Previous research in Tigray that analysed conjugal abuse in the countryside and the city of Aksum through the religio-cultural framework found that faith helped women to face and overcome difficult situations and painful marital experiences (e.g. separation, divorce or spousal unfaithfulness) and did not generally serve as a source for justifying intimate partner abuse, which the faith clearly taught against (Istratii, 2020).
- Moreover, the clergy were found to be directly involved in the mediation of conjugal problems and despite some lacking complete awareness of the extent of the problem of conjugal abuse in their societies or not being prepared to support victims and perpetrators with the utmost sensitivity to risks involved, the majority tried to prioritise the safety of the usually female victim and comprised an important resource when other institutions failed to have an impact (ibid). However, it should be considered that victims of violence would not always report to their spiritual fathers the true nature of their problems, but would often minimise it.
- However, any efforts to engage the clergy in awareness-raising and integrated community approaches should consider the clergy's culture-specific socialisation as men and their influence in society, their theological training and gaps in knowledge, and their level of exposure to domestic violence safeguarding risks and trauma understanding. An approach that integrates wisely the clergy would not only leverage on the work that the clergy are already doing on the ground (which still goes unrecognised), but could help to respond to the lack of access to humanitarian personnel. The timely training of clergy could help towards developing sensitive responses to victims/survivors, with the potential of preventing further re-traumatisation.

# Faith in public/political discourse about the conflict

- Religious language has been misused with even some Church-affiliated people blessing combatants and promoting the war as patriotic – as a result many Tigrayans disappointed and alienated by the Ethiopian Orthodox *Täwahədo* Church.
- Project dldl/ድልድል has aimed to clarify theological teachings against offensive war to ‘check’ those who use religious language to justify political aims currently.
- It is especially urgent for all of us to speak against vengeance in favour of peace and reconciliation. This needs to be considered carefully by Ethiopians and Eritreans in the diaspora community who have been conducive to the continuation of animosities and grudges through social media.



# Relevant articles published about the crisis

- Published through the OPC Pan-Orthodox Media one of the earliest articles on sexual violence in Tigray, suggesting its systematic use as a weapon of war:

<https://www.bing.com/search?q=tigray+conflict%3A+another+war+war+aged+on+women+and+girls&cvid=9e116379b9774c52a886d1d3f3d1b1da&aqs=edge..69i57.6862j0j1&pqlt=43&FORM=ANNAB1&PC=U531>

- Coordinated through the Orthodox Outlet for Dogmatic Enquires an article as response to these tendencies and to stress a Christian plea for love forgiveness and peace:

[https://www.oodegr.com/english/koinwnia/politika/Tigray\\_conflict.htm](https://www.oodegr.com/english/koinwnia/politika/Tigray_conflict.htm)