

# Decolonising Religions and Development Theory and Practice: Why is it Needed and How Can it be Achieved?

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Principal Investigator of Project dldl/ድልድል: “Bridging religious studies, gender & development and public health to address domestic violence: A novel approach for Ethiopia, Eritrea and the UK”

*Presented at Academic Encounters Series, Abdelmalek Essaadi University in  
Tetouan, Morocco on 21 July 2022*

# Agenda

- ❖ My background
- ❖ Understanding epistemological colonialism and the system that maintains it
- ❖ The colonial underpinnings of international development and its historical engagements with religion
- ❖ Decolonising religions and development theory and practice: some directions
- ❖ Current initiatives that work to decolonise international development
- ❖ The approach of project dldl/**ይልድል**



*Routledge Research in Religion and Development*

# ADAPTING GENDER AND DEVELOPMENT TO LOCAL RELIGIOUS CONTEXTS

## A DECOLONIAL APPROACH TO DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN ETHIOPIA

Romina Istratii

### Decolonising Gender and Development & Public Health

- ❖ Critical international development researcher and practitioner with decade-long experience in sub-Saharan Africa working to:
  - ❖ Address the disconnect between gender & development theory and communities' lived experiences
  - ❖ Emphasise the importance of 'linguistic and cosmological' translation in understanding local experiences and issues
  - ❖ Enrich understanding of non-western religious worldviews in western epistemology
- ❖ In order to improve the effectiveness of gender-sensitive interventions in religious societies

1st Joint PhD Symposium of the SOAS Research Students' Association (RSA) & The SOAS Journal of Postgraduate Research (SJPR)

## Decolonisation in Praxis

Thursday 07 June 2018, 10am-2pm  
SOAS, Wolfson Lecture Theatre (SWLT)  
Senate House, First Floor (S108)

Decolonising the academic curriculum is a salient discourse in our days in British universities. The School of Oriental and African Studies, an institution that started as a colonial project in 1916, has been steadily moving in this direction, with students increasingly requesting a re-evaluation of curricula that have favoured a single knowledge centre and portrayed a certain (western) epistemology or viewpoint of the world as normative. All this converges to an effort to open up knowledge-making to different epistemologies, normative standards and representations, which fit better an institution.



The video player displays the title "Open Conversations" in white on an orange background. Below it, the name "Romina Istratii" is shown in green, followed by her title: "PhD Student, Department of Religions & Philosophies" and "Co-Editor of The SOAS Journal of Postgraduate Research". A small video thumbnail of Romina Istratii is visible. The bottom of the screen shows standard video player controls: back, forward, volume, and a progress bar indicating 0:00 / 5:31.

# Decolonising knowledge production & publishing

- ❖ Served as co-Editor of The SOAS Journal of Postgraduate Research, an open access journal for SOAS students and affiliates
- ❖ Acted as Open Access Champion to raise awareness about material barriers in producing and accessing knowledge led by a Northern-dominated publishing industry
- ❖ Concerned with so-called Open Access publishing models and their implications for global publishing inequalities

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



## Decolonising research, funding & research development processes

- ❖ Served as Research Funding Officer and then GCRF Officer in the SOAS Research and Enterprise Directorate
- ❖ Concerned about the changing funding landscape and the role of research offices in research development practices, especially in relation to emerging schemes that fund research related to UK Official Development Assistance (ODA)
- ❖ Conversation event that included 13 presentations by researchers, academics, practitioners, funders and research office directors from the health and social sciences with speakers from the UK and Namibia, Ethiopia and Nepal (Istratii and Lewis 2019), resulting in the Decolonising Research Initiative subsequently

# What do we mean by epistemological dominance?

- ❖ All individuals are “epistemologically situated” (Istratii 2017, 4). Epistemology may be defined as a system of criteria and standards for validating what counts as knowledge, “which is ultimately linked to worldview” (Ladson-Billings 2005, 258).
- ❖ Historically, western epistemology has dominated and this has been embedded in colonial and post-Enlightenment legacies (Fanon 1961; Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o 1986; Quijano 2000; Tuhiwai-Smith 1999; Mignolo and Walsh 2018).
- ❖ Western epistemology is underlined by an implicit, but pervasive, western ‘logic’ dictating the production of universal definitions and theories. Theory seen as uninterrogated assumption or *telos* in itself as opposed to as a means to an end informed by context-specific and practical needs (Istratii 2020).
- ❖ In contemporary times, lack of recognition about the epistemological situatedness of historical paradigms and limited self-reflexivity about personal positionality in research, knowledge production and development practice means that western assumptions continue to be transposed cross-culturally and to dictate standards and paradigms.

# An unequal system of knowledge production

01

EPISTEMOLOGICAL DOMINANCE  
OF WESTERN EUROPE/NORTH  
AMERICA DICTATING THEORY  
AND PARADIGMS AND WHAT  
MATTERS AS VALID KNOWLEDGE

02

MATERIAL INEQUALITIES WITH  
MOST FUNDING BEING LOCATED  
IN THE SO-CALLED GLOBAL  
NORTH DICTATING ITS OWN  
STANDARDS OF PRACTICE &  
PERFORMANCE (THEORY OF  
CHANGE, RESULTS-BASED, VALUE  
FOR MONEY, IMPACT, CAPACITY  
BUILDING, ETC.)

03

IDEOLOGICAL AND POLITICAL  
ASYMMETRIES WITH SO-CALLED  
GLOBAL (A.K.A NORTHERN)  
AGENDAS DOMINATING THE  
FIELDS OF DEVELOPMENT,  
PUBLIC HEALTH AND  
HUMANITARIAN RESPONSES  
(AGENDA 2030, SDGS, ETC.)

# Inequalities reflected in publishing

- ❖ The share in world publications for the Global North cumulatively is 96–97 percent. The less wealthy or peripheral regions are extremely underrepresented in terms of ‘high-impact’ published research in all the analysed fields (Demeter, 2019).
- ❖ Geographic distribution of publishing houses, with international development and international politics publications and editorial boards being dominated by Northern researchers and academics (Cummings and Hoebink 2016; Briggs and Weathers 2016).



Source: Demeter and Istratii (2020)

# International development as the continuation of the ‘civilising mission’

- ❖ What is considered development was undoubtedly catalysed by western Christian values and could not be disassociated from the ‘civilising project’ of the western colonisers (Manji and O'Coill 2002; Rist 2014; Istratii 2020).
- ❖ Western Christian missions followed trade, not eschewing some convergence/collaboration with local rulers and promoting colonial interests (Etherington, 2004).
- ❖ Development in the post-World War II era was characterised by secularisation, economic growth theories and a general neglect of religion.
- ❖ Development in the 21st century engaged with religious engagements within the dictates of secularism (trends such as: Religious Freedom as a right, Faith-based actors as development agents, emergence of Liberation Theologies).
- ❖ Currently engagement still remains Eurocentric at some foundational levels (Western epistemological tendency of demarcating spheres of human existence, such as secular/religious, public/private and reason/faith persists, FBOs engaged largely in instrumentalist ways by the development sector, etc.).

## The role of religion in colonialism

Provided the moral narrative for ending slave trade by British abolitionists with evangelical affiliations  
(e.g. William Wilberforce 1759-1833, Thomas Fowell Buxton 1768-1845)



*"The hope, therefore, of effecting Africa's civilization, and of inducing her tribes to relinquish the trade in man, is, without this assistance, utterly vain. This mighty lever, when properly applied, can alone overturn the iniquitous systems which prevail throughout that continent. **Let missionaries and schoolmasters, the plough and the spade, go together, and agriculture will flourish; the avenues to legitimate commerce will be opened; confidence between man and man will be inspired; whilst civilization will advance as the natural effect, and Christianity operate as the proximate cause of this happy change.**"*

(Buxton 1840: 511)

\* \*With special thanks to Dr Joerg Haustein for exposing me to the intersections of colonialism and religion, as well as Buxton's works.

# Colonial legacies in how ‘religion’ has been theorised cross-culturally

- ❖ ‘Religion’ emerged as a universal concept in the 19<sup>th</sup> 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 (Capps, 1995; Masuzawa, 2005).
- ❖ Western societies’ systematic efforts to liberate ‘reason’ from a political religious authority begot movements not only to ostracise ‘religion’ from public culture but also to develop secular philosophical and scientific approaches to the study of the world previously viewed through the prism of an all-encompassing theology. Saudi Arabian anthropologist Talal Asad has pertinently observed that it was the unique product of western modernity and secularism to perceive religious discourse in the public arena as a disguise for power, which needed to be banished from public culture (Asad, 1993).
- ❖ In contemporary times, the confessionalist impartialities in early paradigms of ‘religion’ have fostered a discernable suspicion of theology, with scholars placing emphasis on improving rigour and reflexivity by prioritising the study of embodied experiences and lived faith (McCutcheon, 2001).
- ❖ Although in recent years this epistemology of religion has diversified, motivating the infamous ‘world religions’ paradigm and more hermeneutical approaches, deeply western entrenched assumptions about what ‘religion’ is have yet to be overcome (binary logics persist, still limited engagement with theology and exegesis; religion remains deeply grounded in humanistic notions of religious conscience, assuming a division between conscience (as belief) and its embodiment (as practice), as well as attaches an attribute of individuality to conscience).

# ‘Religion’ in Gender & Religious Studies and Gender & Development Practice

- ❖ Dominance of western metaphysics of humanity and gender in the definition of gender and conceptualisation of gender relations, e.g. by predicated gender on biology and visual indicators (Oyérónké Oyěwùmí, 1997; Ifi Amadiume 1987, Arnfred 2011). Mainstream gender theory underpinned by the assumption of hierarchical gender, ignoring plurality in gender relations and status of women across the world (Nkiru Uwechia Nzengwu, 2006; Istratii 2020).
- ❖ A gender theory originating in a secular logic and social constructionist western feminist metaphysics has been presented as authoritative, while non-secular, non-materialist/religious worldviews espoused by many tradition-oriented communities has been deemed unintelligible. The ethical problem of transposing a western secular metaphysics as normative, while criticising normativity, has not been given due attention.
- ❖ Gender critiques of religion have also contributed to essentialising trends: employing a west-centric gender theory and a feminist ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’ responding to western biblical traditions, prominent feminist scholars have displayed essentialising tendencies that present all ‘theology’ (especially Christian traditions) as ‘patriarchal’ or ‘sexist’, showing limited reflexivity of historical and exegetical differences across traditions and geographies.
- ❖ Interventions that pursue gender equality in ways not attuned to local belief and value systems have appeared neo-colonial, causing backlash (Oluwafunmilayo Para-Mallam et al., 2011; Mannell, 2012). Very little research has explored alleviation strategies within religious worldviews and context-specific socio-cultural systems, leveraging on religio-cultural resources.

# ‘Religion’ and Public Health

- ❖ There are numerous programmes in public health that engage with religious stakeholders (e.g. in addressing SGBV, HIV/AIDS, harmful cultural practices that affect women and girls, etc).
- ❖ However, the sector has not eschewed conceptualisations of ‘religion’ and ‘faith’ that demarcate religious beliefs and conscience in humanistic ways and fail to embed them in wider normative frameworks and societal structures.
- ❖ Community-based organisations that work with religious stakeholders tend to take a more holistic, culture-sensitive approach that may be more effective and well-received in communities.

# ‘Religion’ and the Humanitarian Sector

- ❖ Religious parameters have received minimal attention in the humanitarian scholarship, and should be better integrated when appraising alleviation strategies in conflict , post-conflict contexts and displaced populations.
- ❖ The resourcefulness of faith, theology and religious stakeholders is not generally considered, fully leveraged or systematically assessed, although numerous studies exist evidencing that religious beliefs and spiritual activity serve as a coping and healing mechanisms for victims/survivors.

This analysis can be found in my recent monograph. Four open access chapters can be freely accessed on SDGO, including the introductory theoretical argument:

[https://www.taylorfrancis.com/search?  
key=istratii&context=sdgo](https://www.taylorfrancis.com/search?key=istratii&context=sdgo)

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# **ADAPTING GENDER AND DEVELOPMENT TO LOCAL RELIGIOUS CONTEXTS**

## **A DECOLONIAL APPROACH TO DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN ETHIOPIA**

**Romina Istratii**

# Changing the system

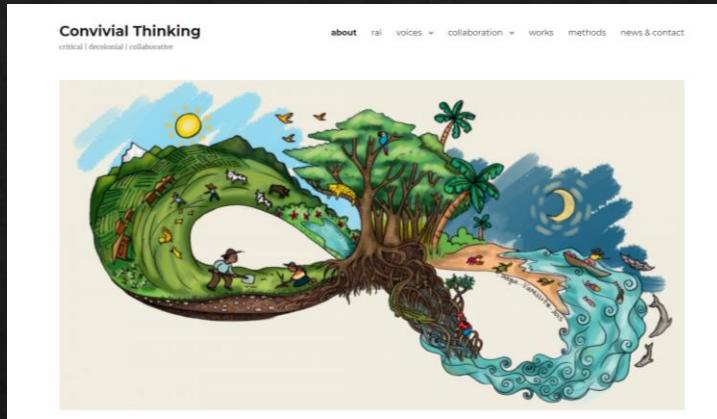
- ❖ Recognising the metaphysics underlying international development paradigms and how these emerged in genealogies of western philosophical thinking.
- ❖ Placing central attention to the process of ‘cosmological and linguistic’ translation and the need for:
  - ❖ Language acquisition and linguistic analysis and interpretation alongside ‘data analysis’
  - ❖ Reflexivity about one’s own worldview and how this informs conceptual frameworks; avoiding concepts not emerging from the ground up and justifying their relevance before applying them
- ❖ Thinking more in terms of community relevance and meaningful impact than donor results and ‘value for money’, which requires:
  - ❖ Researchers and practitioners understanding communities’ own realities, priorities and ways of living to identify interventions that are feasible, sensible and can result in desirable outcomes (contra theories of ‘change’ – theory should not dictate practice; theory and research/practice as co-substantial)
  - ❖ Local organisations funded by Northern donors recognising the normative impositions of funding, even when these are not directly visible or intentional, and seeking a diversification of funding sources (regional and in-country)

# Changing the system

- ❖ Creating direct pathways to reach and engage with communities and stakeholder groups using their spoken languages and accessible formats of knowledge production.
  - ❖ Amharic OODE website – አድራሻና ትምህር ደንብ መደረሰ, which uses religious and theological language to address gender-related issues, including domestic violence, in Ethiopian and Eritrean Orthodox communities.
  - ❖ *Decolonial Subversions*, a multi-lingual platform publishing in written, visual and acoustic format to facilitate knowledge production from the ‘margins’ and to subvert Anglophone epistemology
- ❖ Communicating research, evidence and practical lessons directly to communities and stakeholders to circumvent the exclusionary nature of academic and international development technoscientific knowledge.
  - ❖ 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, using open access publishing, cross-cultural knowledge exchange and South-North knowledge transfer as a main strategy.

# Decolonising understandings of ‘religion’

- ❖ 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.
- ❖ Still, 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/changing accepted standards and practices.



# Some initiatives working to decolonise international development



GLOBAL TAPESTRY of ALTERNATIVES

The Global Tapestry of Alternatives seeks to build bridges between networks of Alternatives around the globe and promote the creation of new processes of confluence. [More information »](#)

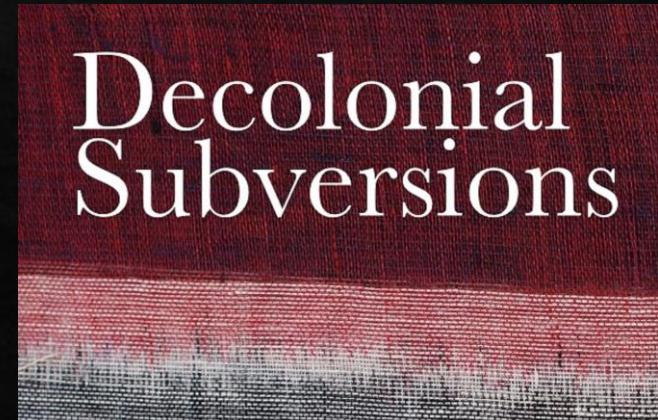
  

**vveavers**      **endorsements**      **roadmap**

GTA is a "network of networks". Each of those networks acts in different parts of the planet by identifying and connecting Alternatives. They are the Weavers.

Many progressive, post-developmental and anticapitalist organizations around the world endorse this initiative. Also many academics, activists and referents do so.

Our mission is complex and ambitious. Our journey is long-winded. Learn how we are achieving it, step by step, in our open and dynamic roadmap.





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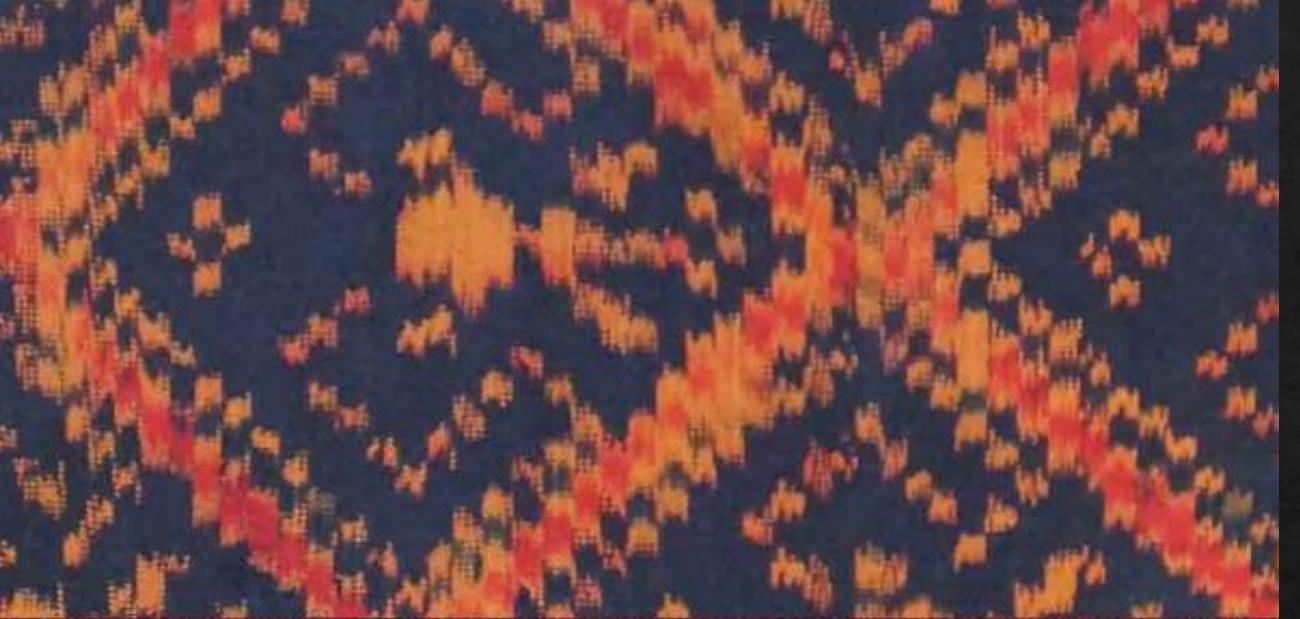
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**\*\*ENGLISH TEXTS\*\***

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# Decolonial Subversions

## Principles (as per Manifesto)

- ❖ Free accessibility worldwide in an ever-increasing number of languages, styles and modes of expression (visual, acoustic, written)
- ❖ Encourages contributors to submit their contributions in their native languages, where an English version can also be provided, or to translate contributions in English to languages pertinent to the communities of research or contributed content.
- ❖ Collaborative – consultative
- ❖ Mutually fulfilling and beneficial
- ❖ Aspired rotational editorialship model
- ❖ Bridging academia, activism and practice
- ❖ Decentred and guided by reflexivity
- ❖ Continuously revisiting and, where necessary, amending, the concept of ‘decolonisation’
- ❖ Bottom-up approach



# Building Bridges of Faith Against Domestic Violence

Project dldl/လေလာ

# Project dldl/ደልደል

UKRI Future Leaders Fellowship (£1,287,659) to bring to fruition a challenging and novel project titled “Bridging religious studies, gender & development and public health to address domestic violence: A novel approach for Ethiopia, Eritrea and the UK.”

The project seeks to promote a decolonial approach to addressing domestic violence by engaging substantively with the religio-cultural belief systems of domestic violence victims/survivors and perpetrators and understanding how these interface with gender, material and psychological parameters to facilitate or deter domestic violence.

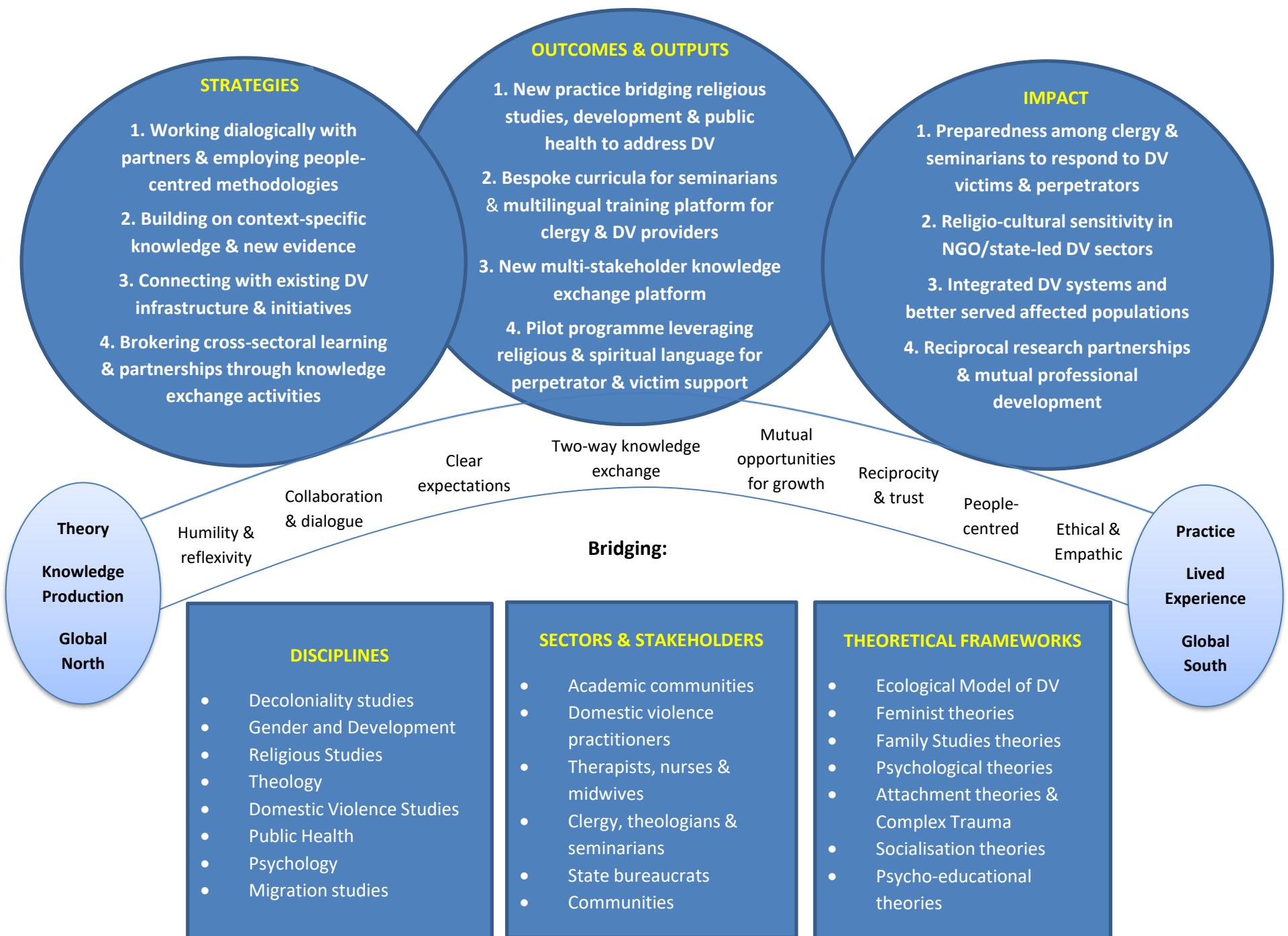
It will generate new research and intervention approaches working with Ethiopian and Eritrean collaborators and rural and urban communities and will apply knowledge from the respective countries to inform approaches for integrating and supporting better ethnic minority and migrant populations affected by domestic violence in the UK.



*ddl* 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 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).





# How project dndl/**ድንልድንል** works to achieve meaningful impact

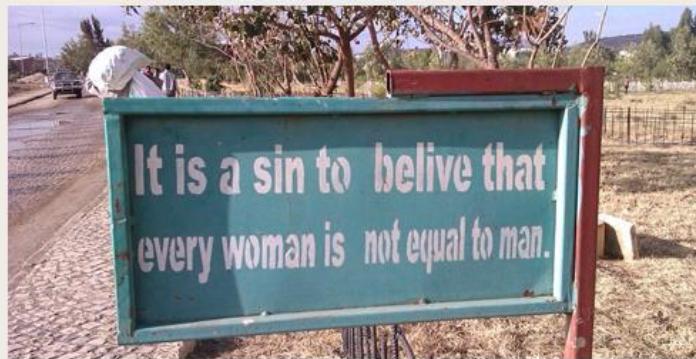
- ❖ Our main premise is that meaningful and impactful interventions emerge when they are designed from the ground up informed by empirical evidence and real-life experiences.
- ❖ The project aims to use sustainable and dialogical strategies in order to ensure continuity, such as by connecting with existing domestic violence 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 relying on context-specific evidence and developing new understanding.
- ❖ We work with the religious departments and bodies that are directly relevant to our work, ensuring that we are integrated within the existing institutional and referral framework to avoid duplication and to develop working relationships of trust and effective interventions.

## 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.

# Developing and implementing a clergy training programme on domestic violence working in Ethiopia



## Building the right partnerships for long-term impact

- The Church's development wing, EOC DICAC, was ideal to work with due to existing established work relations with Church training institutes/centres for clergy.
- The collaboration ensured that the EOTC was involved in all design and implementation stages and contributed theological expertise and ecclesial support to produce workshop materials and mediated trust-building with the clergy and the laity.
- The development and delivery of part of the workshop content was also reviewed and 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 and survivors in the country.

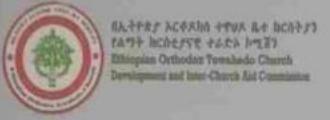






# Informed by long-term ethnographic research with Ethiopian Orthodox *Täwahedo* clergy

- ❖ The project is informed by and builds upon previous ethnographic research with Ethiopian Orthodox *Täwahedo* communities in Northern Ethiopia.
- ❖ It is guided by findings that showed both a prevalence of religious language in how the clergy and the laity understood and experienced domestic violence in rural and urban communities in the northern region of Tigray, and also the crucial role of the clergy in teaching about marriage and in mediating situations of conflict and abuse.
- ❖ While some clergy seemed to lack the preparedness to respond with awareness of the complex psychology of victims and perpetrators, the potential risks involved or the importance of confidentiality, others used theological language resourcefully and in ways that seemed to reverse rigid or pernicious attitudes associated with some forms of conjugal abuse or its implicit tolerance. They also supported victims/survivors materially when it was possible.



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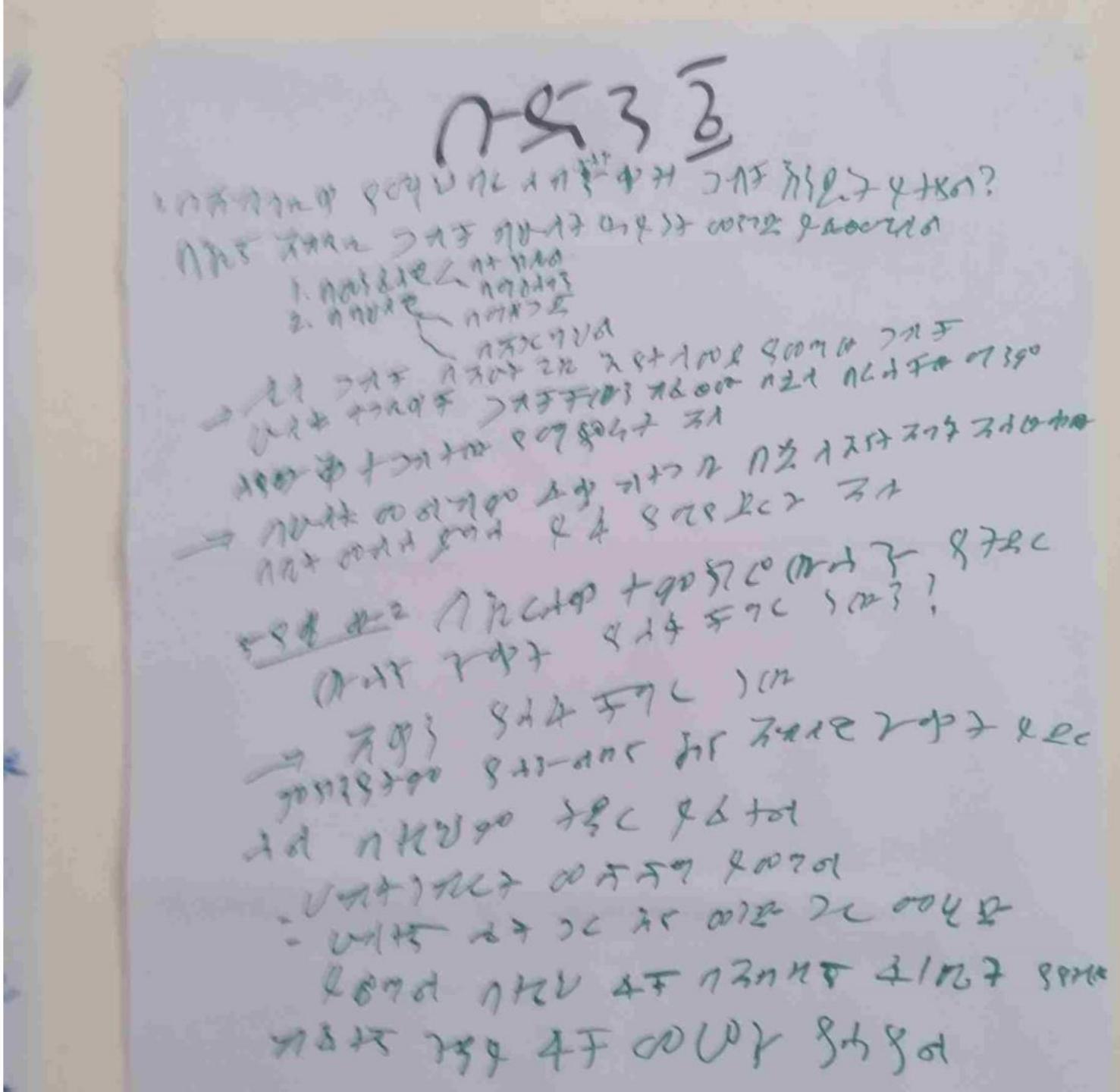
- ❖ Building awareness through dialogical and reflection-based workshops with clergy
- ❖ Workshops delivered in Amharic
- ❖ Booklets prepared for clergy participants using terminology they are used to and can easily access





Workshop serving two objectives:

- a) Creating space for discussion, reflection, sharing and mutual learning
- b) Promoting research purposes as they help us to collect first-hand experiences from the participants and to integrate those in future workshops to improve their relevance and effectiveness



# Project report and datasets published open access and all-Amharic inter-faith meeting held to disseminate the findings



Training Ethiopian Orthodox clergy to respond to domestic violence in Ethiopia: Programme summary and evaluation report

A Project didi/ዳዲ and EOTC DICAC collaborative programme

Authored by: Dr Romina Istrati

June 2022



2



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A photograph of a conference room. In the foreground, several people wearing white turbans are seated in rows of wooden chairs, facing towards the front of the room. In the middle ground, two individuals are standing near a white projector screen mounted on a wall. The room has a tiled floor and large windows on the right side.

Thank you

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For questions contact [ri5@soas.ac.uk](mailto:ri5@soas.ac.uk)

Join the mail list **DV-Gender-Faithon** JISCMAIL for follow-up outputs