


Sensitising gender responses to faith in conflict settings in Ethiopia

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Agenda

- What is the importance of applying a religio-culturally sensitive lens to DV/GBV in conflict settings?
- How can we start to sensitise gender programming to religious beliefs and faith?
- What are best practices for engaging communities and religious stakeholders?



The importance of applying a
religio-culturally sensitive lens
to GBV in conflict settings

Why is it necessary to engage religious parameters in promoting gender equality and responding to DV/GBV?

- Religious beliefs and faith were historically neglected in much gender-sensitive theory and practice (full critique in Istratii, 2020)
- Within emergency or conflict contexts, studies and reports exist that religious beliefs and spiritual activity can serve as coping mechanisms, but this resourcefulness has not systematically been leveraged on.
- 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.
- It is important to identify honestly and critically how religious beliefs/teachings might be differentiated from culture-specific gender practices in order to identify how to promote normative, attitudinal or behavioural change where it is needed.

Understanding the relationship between GBV and religious beliefs (case of DV)


- The relationship between faith/spirituality and domestic violence is not a simple one.
- Religious standards can lead victimised parties to stay within a harmful relationship. On the other hand, faith and spiritual living can serve as a coping mechanism and a source of healing for survivors.
- Religious language can be used in distorted ways to justify or continue harmful attitudes and behaviour in society and among perpetrators. However, a religious conscience can also potentially deter abusiveness among some prospective perpetrators.
- Clergy and religious teachers usually have an important role in family life and are well-positioned to respond to domestic violence in religious communities, but may lack an understanding of how their own discourses and responses can unwittingly reinforce negative norms, attitudes or situations, and how to respond to victims and perpetrators with awareness of safeguarding risks.

Understanding the relationship between DV/GBV and religion in conflict/post-conflict settings

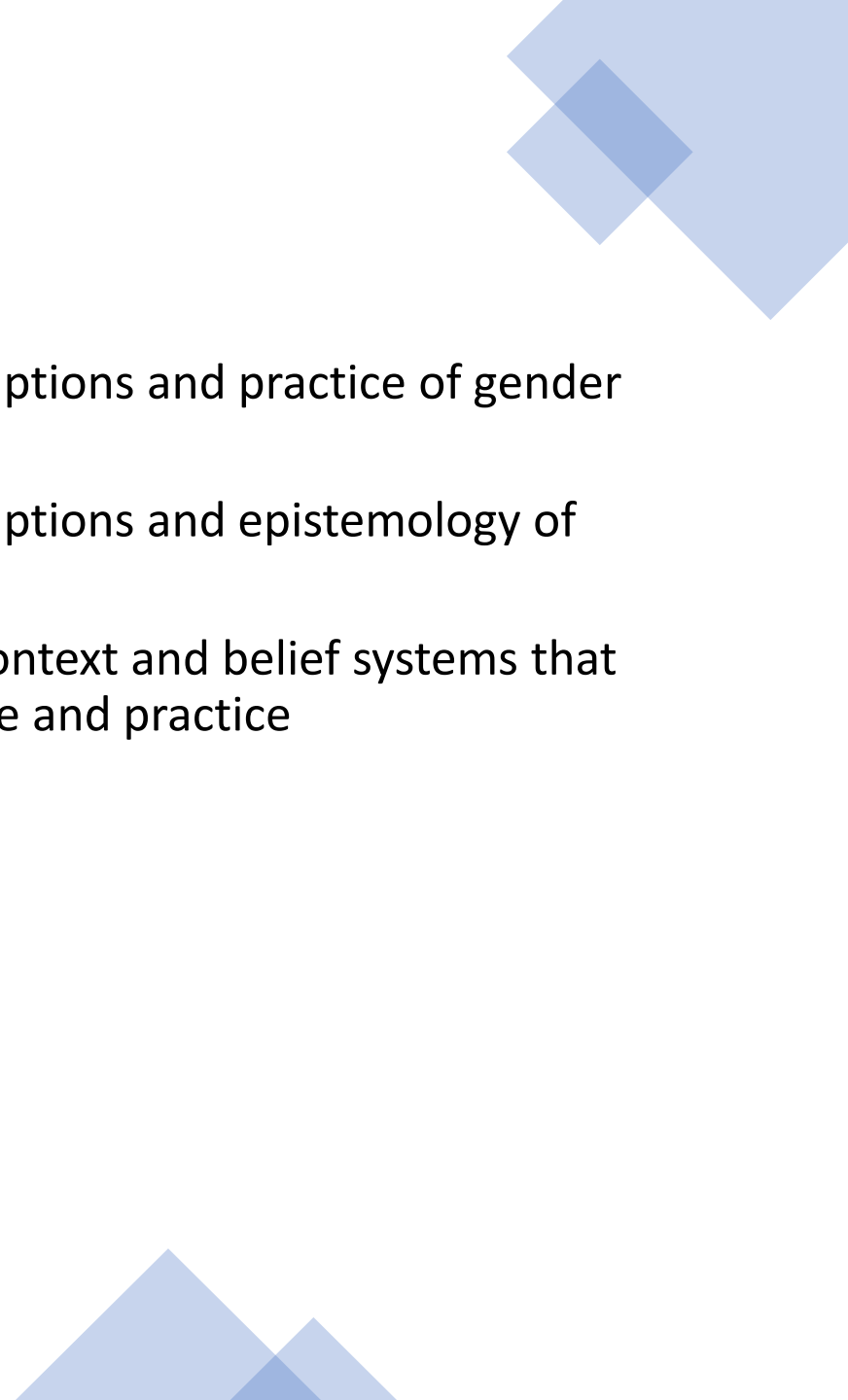
- A study from Syria found that IPV female victims used coping strategies that included keeping silent, reading the Quran, fasting, and offering prayers of forgiveness to avoid conflict (Al-Natour, Al-Ostaz and Morris, 2019).
- A study from Northern Uganda found that women involved in war atrocities 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 (Annan and Brier, 2010).
- 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).

DV/GBV in peace- and war-time: A continuum?

- A multi-dimensional mechanism connecting political violence and domestic violence, such as through mental health trauma affecting victims/survivors, direct effects on the behaviour of soldiers, veterans and civilian ex-combatants, socio-cultural influences and normative frameworks contributing to the further abuse of war survivors, or the breakdown of structures, support systems and community solidarity that would otherwise be available to victims of domestic or other forms of violence in peace time.
- Feminist perspectives on the relationship distinguish themselves by seeing violence as a continuum, with war-related SGBV thought to be exacerbated by pre-existing socio-cultural ideals of sexuality and honour, the breakdown of law and order fostering impunity, and the militarisation of the private sphere in post-conflict contexts (Olujic, 1998; Davies and True, 2015; Ahmad and Anctil Avoine, 2018). Moreover, conflict-related violence is seen as interlinked with SGBV during flight from a conflict zone and in post displacement contexts, justifying an understanding of violence as a continuous threat (Krause, 2015).



Sensitising gender mainstreaming to religious belief and knowledge systems

- Problematise the assumptions and practice of gender mainstreaming
 - Problematise the assumptions and epistemology of religion
 - Recognising diversity in context and belief systems that require adapting discourse and practice
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The paradigm and language of Gender Mainstreaming

WID

WAD

GAD

Context

- Gender analytical and gender planning frameworks typically employed in the field in the 1980s and 1990s (for overview see UNDP 2001).
- Gender roles, gender-disaggregated analyses of labour, access to power/resources
- Gender trainings, 'consciousness-raising' interventions – empowerment, subversion of the status quo ('theory of change')

Criticisms/limitations of gender planning and gender mainstreaming

- Evaluating gender relations on divisions/differences between female and male persons continues the 'biological foundationalism' trend (Linda Nicholson 1994)
- Checklist approach, co-optation, bureaucratisation, neglect of men/masculinities
- Vehicle for promoting neo-liberal agenda, politicised 'development'
- Lack of reflexivity to cross-cultural differences in how gender relations are structured within and informed by local normative systems, requiring locally embedded approaches

Epistemological, practical and ethical critiques

- Gender equality is a **political objective** – whose gender equality, for what purposes, and where are the boundaries with research?
- The issue of **western Euro-centrism** in the definition of gender and conceptualisation of gender relations, by predicating gender on biology and visual indicators (Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí, 1997; Ifi Amadiume, 1987; Arnfred, 2011)
- Mainstream gender theory underpinned by the assumption of **hierarchical gender** – ignores plurality in gender relations and status of women across the world (Nkiru Uwechia Nzenkwu, 2006)
- Definitions of gender, gender equality and empowerment can be **incommensurable with local belief and knowledge systems**, especially those embedded in religious metaphysics (Istratii, 2017)
- **Intersectionality** does not eschew epistemological issues – identity vectors usually defined as inequalities “essentialising the oppressed subject” (Cramer, 2015), while non-discursive or spiritual planes are often neglected (Istratii, 2017)
- Interventions that pursue gender equality in ways not attuned to local belief and value systems can appear **neo-colonial, causing backlash** (Oluwafunmilayo Para-Mallam et al., 2011; Mannell, 2012)

Problematizing understandings of religion in the mainstream

- The mainstream epistemology of 'religion' is the product of western societies' distinct experience with western Christianity, capitalism and secularism. Historically, 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.
- Despite recent critiques, this epistemology 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, which need not be the case in societies whose faith is intertwined with collective values, histories and identities as in this one.
- Employing a west-centric gender theory and a feminist 'hermeneutics of suspicion', prominent feminist scholars in gender and theology/religion(s) studies 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.

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


- 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.



Two major questions to ask ourselves:

How to conduct gender-sensitive research without assuming hierarchies by the sole criterion of sex-marked/anatomically different bodies (Oyěwùmí, 1997) and without predicating the concept of gender to an inherently hierarchical relationship (Nzengwu, 2006)

How to achieve gender-sensitive research in a way that recognises diversity of thought and worldviews around gender normativity, diverse gender realities and modes of gender subjectivity and that engages with this diversity throughout the process of research and practical interventions (Istratii, 2020)



What is best practice for
engaging communities and
religious stakeholders?

Faith-sensitive interventions internationally: What works

- The international literature that evaluates and assesses faith-based interventions stresses the importance of cultural sensitivity to ensure that the programmes are relevant and impactful with those they aim to support (Istratii and Ali, 2021). Cultural sensitivity could mean different things depending on the context. One programme that took a culture-sensitive approach worked to promote women's protection without undermining the traditional position of the father and husband in the community, which required developing a biblically-informed approach that held men accountable of the abuse and encouraged behavioural change on men's part (Hancock, Ames and Behnke, 2014).
- Clergy-centred interventions could be more effective if: a) clergy are better equipped with theological/exegetical knowledge to respond to distorted deployments of religious language in the community, b) are willing to address the topic of domestic violence in public sermons, c) understand how to respond to domestic violence victims and perpetrators with consideration of their psychological states and the likely safeguarding risks involved, and d) are integrated more substantively with organised referral systems responding to domestic violence.

Responding to SGBV in Tigray (case study): Understanding the context first

- According to statistical evidence, about one in three women in Ethiopia have experienced some form of spousal abuse in their lifetimes, and this includes women in Tigray (CSAE and ICF, 2017, p. 305).
- Tigray is a deeply religious society with the indigenous Ethiopian Orthodox Tāwahədo Christianity having been formally embraced in the ancient capital of Aksum, to which the majority of Tigray's population adheres (FDRE, 2008, p. 111).
- Whilst an eclectic and complex tradition, the faith values peace, reciprocity and mutual help as is typically taught by clergy in the countryside (Istratii, 2020; 2021).
- On the other hand, deeply embedded cultural standards, not disconnected from the prevailing religious tradition as lived and understood vernacularly by the people, have included a historical emphasis on women's and girls' virginity and may have fostered attitudes in society that make it difficult to speak about sexual violence and its consequences publicly, which could contribute to victims silencing their experiences and not seeking proper support.
- These pre-existing issues should not be assessed in isolation from 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)

Responding to SGBV in Tigray (case study): Some suggestions

- Religious language, but especially the Orthodox message of not placing judgement on others and healing and achieving likeness with God can counter stigmatisation of survivors and self-guilt.
- Clergy can be integrated more fully in DV/SGBV response strategies to support survivors since they are influential in marriage and family affairs, but also in the public sphere and community life.
- A review of the SGBV literature emerging from the region evidences the urgency to leverage on specialised psychological training in order to address cumulative and complex trauma. While professionally trained psychologists are needed to counsel and support, clergy can be trained to understand the psychology of complex trauma so that they can respond with consideration to victims and encourage others to do the same.
- While clergy can become resourceful in addressing gender-related issues, they need bespoke training that considers their culture-specific socialisation and their relationship to the communities, theological/exegetical background and exposure to domestic violence safeguarding risks/trauma understanding. Such training could be undertaken by regional theological colleges working with women's organisations and social workers who have been at the forefront of responding to GBV even before the war.

Training clergy to respond to DV: The approach of project dldl/ድልድል

- One of our programmes included delivering a series of workshops with Ethiopian Orthodox Täwahədo clergy in Amhara region of Ethiopia to improve the clergy's ability to respond to victims and perpetrators with a sharpened theological acumen, increased awareness of safety risks for the victim and a refined understanding of victim/perpetrator psychological states, as well as to integrate the clergy in new referral systems currently being developed in the country.
- The workshops are designed and delivered in Amharic in a culture-sensitive way. The workshops employ dialogical and reflective approaches to help the clergy become more aware of the complexities of domestic violence in society, but also to create a platform for them to share experiences, complementing more top-down Church-led trainings.
- Each workshop was comprised of three units, a presentation on domestic violence definitions, realities and attitudes in the community, theological training employing Church teachings and Patristic responses to marriage-related issues, and safeguarding training and education on domestic violence laws in the country. This material was developed on the basis of a thorough study and understanding of the local Church tradition and how this has been received and experienced by clergy and laity historically.







Participants' feedback

- All the comments received were positive, and all the participants wanted to see the programme continue with 'refresher' session being delivered regularly.
- Participants noted that the project had understood well the importance of marriage and had identified the problems well, providing an appropriate approach to responding to these problems.
- Many trainees expressed the strong will and preparedness to teach the workshop contents to their own spouses, families and spiritual children and a renewed sense of duty to teach against domestic violence in fear of not meeting the expectations of their priesthood in the eyes of God.
- Certain members of the clergy spoke about personal changes in their own understanding and behaviour, expressing an increased empathy and understanding of oneself and others.
- The participants also recommended that the programme be extended to other groups, including to priest's wives, women in the community in general, influential elders, and young couples prior to marriage. One participant referred to the importance of training both men and women, and preferably couples together.

Resources for further study

For full references, please contact the presenter at ri5@soas.ac.uk. Some resources for further study are included below:

- Project dldl/~~SA&A~~ (2021) Content Summary : Workshops on Domestic Violence with Ethiopian Orthodox Täwahədo Church (EOTC) Clergy. https://projectdldl.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Booklet_final_English%E2%80%9494PDF.pdf
- Istratii, R. and Ali, P. (2021). A multi-sectoral evidence synthesis on religious beliefs, intimate partner violence and faith-based interventions. <https://www.researchsquare.com/article/rs-1305499/v1>
- Istratii, R. (2021). War and domestic violence: A rapid scoping of the literature to understand the relationship and to inform responses in the Tigray humanitarian crisis. https://projectdldl.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Working-paper-2_Project-dldl-1.pdf
- Istratii, R. (2022) Training Ethiopian Orthodox clergy to respond to domestic violence in Ethiopia: Programme summary and evaluation report: A Project dldl/~~SA&A~~ and EOTC DICAC collaborative programme. https://projectdldl.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/EOTC-Clergy-Training-Programme-and-Evaluation-Report_updated.pdf