Addressing domestic violence in religio-culturally sensitive ways: The approach of project dldl/ድልድል in Ethiopia and the UK

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## my positionality and work



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#### ADAPTING GENDER AND DEVELOPMENT TO LOCAL RELIGIOUS CONTEXTS A DECOLONIAL APPROACH TO DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN ETHIOPIA

Romine Istratil



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

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



### Decolonial Subversions



Decolonising Knowledge By Empowering The Margins

Dr. Romina Istrati

### An unequal world system

#### **EPISTEMOLOGY**

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- Historically, western epistemology has dominated, and this has been embedded in colonial legacies and post-Enlightenment concepts and theories
- Western 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.)

#### STRUCTURE

- 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 (theory of change, results-based, quantitative metrics, etc.)

### Epistemological inequalities

- 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 nonwestern 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

### Current issues in research

- Dominance of English language in teaching and published research, which favours Anglophone standards of knowledge production (language and epistemology are interlinked).
- Western Euro-centric standards of knowledge validation, research excellence and impact, as seen in citation politics, peer review norms and modes/forms of knowledge production & sharing.
- Research funding distribution, funding priorities, eligibility criteria, data management laws and due diligence expectations favouring Northern academics (especially those in elite institutions).
- Geographic distribution of publishing houses, with most high-impact journals being Northern, perpetuating western Euro-centric publication metrics (journal indexing and citations).
- Unreflexive research methodologies and practices (ethnocentric theorisation and interpretation of research concepts and findings, inequitable practices vis-à-vis research participants, research assistants or research practices, extractionist models of research).

# Research in Ethiopia – key insights

## The prevalence of religious discourse and faith in family life and marriage

- The project is informed by and builds upon previous year-long ethnographic research with Ethiopian Orthodox *Täwahado* communities in Northern Ethiopia.
- The research showed a prevalence of religious language in how the clergy and the laity understood and experienced domestic violence in rural and urban communities, and in particular, the interface of religious and cultural discourse in maintaining social norms and gender standards associated with some forms of conjugal abuse or the tolerance/continuation of the problem.
- Clergy were found to be central in family life and in mediating conjugal conflict. 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.
- The research showed that while gender,-related, socio-cultural, material and spiritual parameters influenced how domestic violence was understood and experienced locally, those could not fully capture the complex reasons behind domestic violence, raising the need to integrate better psychological parameters and trauma-informed theories in the analysis of the problem.

Spectrum representing local understandings of the religion/culture relationship and attitudes toward social norms



Source: Istratii, R. (2020) Adapting Gender and Development to Local Religious Contexts. Routledge (not to be reproduced without copyright permission)

The importance of integrating psychological parameters and their interface with religious conscience

- There was a visible tendency among people in the community to rationalise certain forms of abusiveness by invoking the individual (male) personality with reference to spiritual forces that suggested an inevitability, and thus an implicit kind of tolerance, of male abusiveness.
- These aetiologies of abusiveness reflected also more empirical observations that some men behaved in ways that socio-cultural, family or environmental parameters could not explain. These behavioural issues have been captured in psychological studies of abuse, drawing from attachment theory, intergenerational violence and trauma-informed theoretical approaches, pointing to the need for a psychologyinformed approach to addressing conjugal abuse in the community.

### Project dldl/ድልድል

A 1.2 million research and innovation project funded by UK Research and Innovation under the Future Leaders Fellowship scheme (2020-2024) to promote and develop theology-informed, culturally-appropriate responses to domestic violence in Ethiopia and the UK.

The project's approach is informed by a decolonial understanding of historical inequalities in the system governing research and development and of the marginalisation of religious knowledge in a highly secularised technoscientific paradigm.

The project aims to:

- Build evidence, develop research-informed interventions and strengthen local infrastructures in domestic violence prevention and response in collaboration with and through existing response mechanisms in Ethiopia.
- Feed this evidence and practical knowledge to the UK domestic violence sector so that the latter can cater effectively to migrant, ethnic minority communities in faith-sensitive and culturally-appropriate ways.







# Serving as a bridge across disciplines, sectors and stakeholders

*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



### Committed to a decolonial impact-oriented approach

- 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.
- We also depart from established epistemologies of 'religion' that have been informed by western societies' experience with Western Christianity, theological dogmatism and secularisation processes.
- We seek 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.
- We avoid rigidly predefining what impact should look like and aim to prioritise what stakeholders and communities understand as impactful interventions in their respective contexts.

### Project mechanisms to achieve this:

Purposefully and intentionally reverse the one-way knowledge transfer in domestic violence definitions, theorisations and practical responses

### Structured to achieve and sustain this over time.

E.g.: design of work packages proceeding from Ethiopia to UK, collaboratively formulated/co-produced sub-programmes, decolonised contracts, decentralised model of programme design and implementation

#### Two-way knowledge exchange

E.g.: international conference in Ethiopia and the UK, exchange of 'specialists'; webinars by East African and UK/international speakers and communities

### Equitable team development

E.g.: Fellow development, staff development & partners' development, trainings jointly decided, listening-focused mentoring, development that leverages on local resources and knowledge exchange

Using innovative, cross-sector, multilingual, locallyappropriate methodologies

- Employing multilingual, communitygrounded and participatory approaches that can allow us to understand the life of the communities and to build genuine trust and communication.
- Employing interactive, visual methods to adapt to the conditions and needs of the local population and to achieve more inclusivity.
- Working through a diverse team of researchers from different religio-cultural and ethnic backgrounds who are supported with training to be able to lead research activities and to participate actively in data analysis and the publishing process.

Ensuring culturalbilingual awareness of Pl and team members

- Recognising the limitations of our detached or deeply involved positionalities in the project countries (some of us being foreigners or members of the diaspora community, while some being based in these societies and deeply emboldened in local socio-cultural and political realities) and working to secure the support an collaboration of partners and community organisations to build trust with religious and secular stakeholders.
- We place emphasis on diverse specialisations in the project countries and the cultural-bilingual awareness of team members, researchers and practitioners. As the PI of the project, I speak Amharic and Tigrigna, while all other team members and partners are Ethiopians based in Ethiopia or members of diaspora communities.
- As the PI of the project, I am committed to living and working in the project countries during the project's duration (half time in Ethiopia and half time in the UK) and to travelling regularly across project contexts to build an interconnected understanding across borders.



Project dldl/ድልድል: A research and innovation project dedicated to the development and strengthening of religio-culturally sensitive, domestic violence alleviation systems in Ethiopia and the UK

Dr Romina Istratii - SOAS, University of London

How Do We Work?

#### What is project dldl/ድልድል?

Project dldl/sasa is a research and innovation project dedicated to the development and strengthening of religio-culturally sensitive, domestic violence alleviation systems in Ethiopia and the UK. The project seeks to promote a decolonial approach to addressing domestic violence in religious communities by engaging substantively with the religio-cultural belief systems of the victims/survivors and the perpetrators, and by understanding how these belief systems interface with gender, material and psychological parameters to facilitate or deter domestic violence. Working with Ethiopian and Eritrean collaborators, and rural and urban communities, the project seeks to generate new research and intervention approaches, and to apply this knowledge to inform strategies for integrating in domestic violence services and better-supporting affected ethnic minority and migrant populations in the UK.



#### Who is involved in the project?

The project works through partnerships with academic and nongovernmental 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), EMIRTA Research, Training and Development Centre (Ethiopia), the University of Bristol (Bristol, UK) and the University of Sheffield (Sheffield,

#### A decolonial impact-oriented approach: 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



- Research to understand better how attitudes of domestic violence are informed by religious beliefs and to explore associations with psychological factors (intergenerational violence, trauma,
- Research to identify how reliaious beliefs can serve as a deterrent to becoming abusive or as a coping and healing mechanism for perpetrators and victims/survivors respectively.

personality disorders, etc.).

- Research to explore the effectiveness of faith-based interventions internationally and to develop a faithbased perpetrator treatment programme.
- Research to understand the level of integration of religio-cultural parameters in secular domestic violence sectors and to identify ways

seminarians



- 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 reliaio-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



- 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 crosssectoral 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 multistakeholder and public understanding of domestic violence and the complex intersections with religious, sociocultural, psychological and migration-related parameters.

practitioners

#### Milestones achieved so far

2 literature reviews completed (1 academic paper published)

- **4** language translations on the website published
- 5 working papers published

6 international webinars and 1 international conference organised in 2020-2022

7 workshops on domestic violence with clergy delivered in Ethiopia in 2021

133 members subscribed on the project's multistakeholder platform

155 clergy trained on domestic violence in 2021

**30,000+** web page views since April 2021



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Building clergy preparedness to respond to domestic violence in Ethiopia: The approach of project dldl/ድልድል

### Programme overview and evaluation approach

- A total of 155 clergy from Debre Berhan and the surrounding areas were organised and delivered.
- The delivery of the pilot series was followed by a series of four 'refresher' trainings involving the original 155 trained clergy, in response to emerging evidence that the clergy required continuous support and needed to be reminded of the material as well as receive support with new questions that emerged in their pastoral practice.
- Each workshop ended with the distribution of assessment questionnaires to the participants, who were asked to answer seven questions that reviewed the workshop format and content.
- The 'refresher' trainings were also used as a platform to obtain the participants' feedback many months after their participation in the pilot training and to collect their suggestions on how the programme could continue after the completion of the pilot phase to sustain its positive effects.



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### Collaborators

- The Ethiopian Orthodox *Täwahədo* Church Development and Inter-Church Aid Commission (EOTC DICAC) was ideally positioned to facilitate the delivery of these workshops, having established relations with clergy training centres and diocese offices across Ethiopia.
- The collaboration ensured that the Church remained involved in the development and implementation of this intervention, providing the research and delivery team with access to theological expertise and ecclesial support in the development of the intervention and communication with clergy and laity, as well as benefiting directly from the learnings and outputs of the intervention.
- The development and delivery 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.

### Workshop structure/components

- Each workshop included presentations on:
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- 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.

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Background
Component 1: Understanding the lived experiences of domestic violence in the countryside
and the role of the clergy in the continuation and deterrence of the problem
      Understandings of domestic violence
      Conjugal abuse explanations and causes
       A combination of positive and negative aspects and practices
      The role of faith in marriage
       Local beliefs about bahri (human personality) that contributed to the problem
      The role of the clergy in the local society
      The clergy's mediation practices in marriage
      Key messages
Component 2: Theological training on Ethiopian Orthodox Tawahedo Church teachings on
marriage, divorce and domestic violence and St John Chrysostom's homilies about the
same
       Understanding the historical development of the Orthodox faith
       The meaning of the Orthodox faith
       EOTC teachings on Man-Woman Relations
       EOTC baptismal differences and their theological justification
       EOTC teachings on the Holy Matrimony
      EOTC teaching on the age of marriage
       EOTC teachings on the aims of manlage
      EOTC teachings on 'Oneness' in marriage
       EOTC teachings on gender roles and division of labour
       EOTC teachings on male headship
       EOTC teachings on domestic violence
      EOTC teachings on sexual relations
The Teachings of St John Chrysostom on Gender Relations, Marriage and Domestic
Violence
      On man and woman being created alike
       On the aim of marriage
       On marriage as another way to salvation
       Against family interference
       What to submit' really means
       What male beadship really means
       On spousal abuse
       When separation is advised
What Makes a Good Teacher: Learning from St. John Chrysostom
       a) Understanding Orthodox marriage and how to teach about it

    b) Listening attentively and responding sensitively

      c) Being a good example in their own married lives
       d) Understanding their limitations and working with others
Component 3: Safeguarding training to support domestic violence victims and perpetrators
appropriately
       Legal framework on domestic violence in Ethopia
      Domestic violence referral services to be aware of
       How to support domestic violence victims and perpetrators with an understanding of safety
       risks for victims and safeguarding protocols
       Understanding the psychology of perpetrators
       understanding the psychology of victims and survivors
       How to mediate conjugal abuse situations
       Concrete steps to take when a victim reports intimate partner violence
       Concrete steps to approach a perpetrator
       Key take-away message
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### Developing the theological materials

- Some of the work of St John Chrysostom, a 3<sup>rd/4th</sup> century saint, has been accessible in Ethiopia: Dərsan (ድርሳን) and Tägsaś (ተጣሳል), some excerpts mentioned in Haymanotä 'Abbäw (ሃይጣኖተ አበው) and more recent translations from English. Not all homilies and in particular those referring to marriage were historically translated in full as emphasis was placed on the saint's works on asceticism.
- Dr Romina Istratii compiled related homilies on marriage and translated from the original ancient Greek into Amharic, checking with Ge'ez theological terminology, with the help of theologians Mr Elias Gebrselassie and Mr Fresenbet Adhanom in Ethiopia. The translated material was reviewed also by theologians Ms Selam Reta, and Mr Girma Batu.
- Lastly the material was reviewed by EOTC DICAC experts, including Memher Aklil Damtew, and obtained the approval of Bishop Samuel who oversees EOTC DICAC.

### Workshop format

- The workshops were designed to be culturally appropriate and were delivered in Amharic by Dr Romina Istratii and two trainers, a certified psychologist and EOTC deacon, Mr Henok Hailu, and a practising attorney affiliated with EWLA, Ms Bezaweet Birhanu.
- Each workshop was delivered over two half-days to avoid tiring and overwhelming the participants and to allow them the time to reflect on the content.
- The three unit presentations were intercut by 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.







A podcast series on domestic violence in Amharic and English

- 4 episodes were recorded
- Broadcast on Soundcloud
- Close to 300 listens achieved despite Soundcloud not being widely used in Ethiopia





### International conference in Ethiopia

Media coverage (in Amharic): <u>የቤት ውስጥ ጥቃትን ለምክልክል - YouTube</u>

Responding to domestic violence in war-time in faithsensitive ways

### Applying the project dldl/ድልድል approach to wartime domestic violence

- Tigray is a deeply religious society with the indigenous Ethiopian Orthodox *Täwahado* 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.
- In early months of humanitarian response, no acknowledgement was made of the local religious tradition and clergy in the mediation of marriage and community issues and their potential to support victims/survivors of war-time sexual violence.
- Project dldl/ድልድል responded by conducting a rapid scoping literature review to identify the international evidence on the relationship between political violence and domestic violence, with a particular interest in identifying intersections with religio-cultural parameters to inform topdown humanitarian responses.

#### **Convivial Thinking**

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# Decolonial Subversions

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### Other initiatives working to change the system



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### Decolonial Subversions



The work of Decolonial Subversions  In response to these asymmetries, Decolonial Subversions publishes free of charge and 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. Decolonial Subversions has also pioneered a new open review process that encourages transparency and a higher degree of dialogue between reviewer and author.

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### Aspired modus operandi



### Thank you for your attention! የቐንየለይ! አመሰግናለሁ!

- For questions or comments, please contact me at ri5@soas.ac.uk
- To read more about project dldl/ድልድል, visit projectdldl.org
- To receive project updates, join the JISC email list DV-Gender-Faith (public list)
- For updates, follow us on LinkedIn.