



**Building Bridges
of Faith Against
Domestic Violence**



SOAS
University of London

Fostering hope in diverse, inclusive and trauma-sensitive ways: The role of faith in a new epoch of uncertainty and crisis

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Agenda

- Introduction
- Ethiopian context and previous research
- Programme overview and participants' assessment
- Applying the approach to conflict-related sexual violence
- Final thoughts

Context in Ethiopia

- Historically, the Ethiopian Orthodox *Tāwahədo* Church (EOTC) was the dominant religious institution in the country with the Orthodox population constituting a majority, although religious demographics have steadily diversified in recent decades.
- Not unlike other countries, domestic violence is a prevalent problem in Ethiopia with one out of three ever married women aged 15-49 experiencing physical, emotional, or sexual violence from their husband or partner, with 68% agreeing that wife-beating can be justified (CSA & ICF, 2017).
- Women and girls also account for the majority of survivors seeking domestic violence services and those who experience domestic violence often do not seek help because they are ashamed, and they fear the risk of divorce.
- The women's spiritual father, usually a local deacon or priest, is often the first to be approached for advice, and it is normal for him to mediate and even confront the perpetrator on her behalf. However, support may be inadequate as they lack sufficient theological training on domestic violence.

Research on domestic violence in Tigray region, Ethiopia

- The study combined a close examination of the Ethiopian Orthodox *Tāwahado* tradition and theology of gender and marriage working with official texts and a decolonial anthropological study in two village communities of Ethiopia and the city of Aksum.
- The research revealed nuanced and complex relationships between conjugal abuse, culture-specific gender norms and religious beliefs. An attitude of tolerance appeared to be indirectly enforced by deeper beliefs about human nature and spiritual passions. Clergy often conflated culture-specific gender norms with religious teaching on gender creation.
- The research also documented the central role of the clergy in teaching about gender relations and marriage and in mediating situations of conflict and abuse between couples. However, many clergy were found to be undertrained both in theological exegesis and lacked the preparedness to respond with awareness of the complex psychology of victims, survivors and perpetrators.

Project dldl/ድልድል

- A research and innovation project dedicated to the development and strengthening of religio-culturally sensitive, domestic violence alleviation systems in East Africa and the UK.
- Seeks to integrate religious and psychological parameters in the analysis of domestic violence to develop more integrated and effective support systems for victims and perpetrators in religious societies, as well as their international migrant communities.
- The project works through partnerships with organisations that operate at community level or are directly linked to relevant stakeholder groups, including academic institutions, theological colleges, faith-based NGOs, feminist organisations and business training centres in Ethiopia, Eritrea and the UK.

What is project dldl/ደልደል?

Project dldl/ደልደል is 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. 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.

Strategies

1. Working dialogically with partners & employing people-centred methodologies
2. Building on context-specific knowledge & new evidence
3. Connecting with existing DV infrastructure & initiatives
4. Brokering cross-sectoral learning & partnerships through knowledge exchange activities

Impact

1. Preparedness among clergy & seminarians to respond to DV victims & perpetrators
2. Religio-cultural sensitivity in NGO/state-led DV sectors
3. Integrated DV systems and better served affected populations
4. Reciprocal research partnerships & mutual professional development

Outcomes

1. New practice bridging religious studies, development & public health to address DV
2. Bespoke curricula for seminarians & multilingual training platform for clergy & DV providers
3. New multi-stakeholder knowledge exchange platform
4. Pilot programme leveraging religious & spiritual language for perpetrator & victim support

Who is involved in the project?

The project works through partnerships with academic and non-governmental 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, UK).

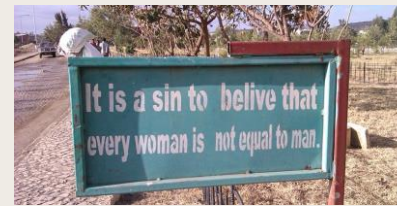
How Do We Work?

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



ENGAGEMENT & INTEGRATION

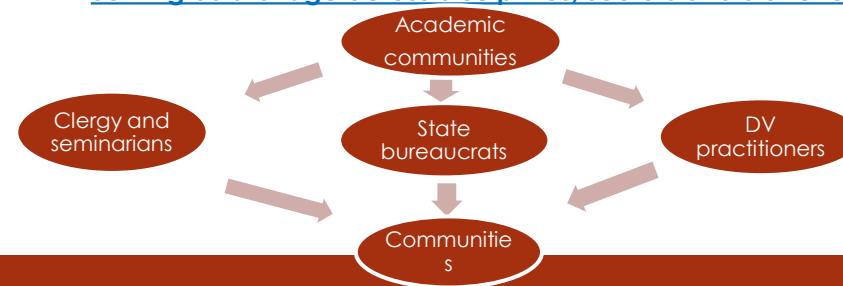


KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE



- ❖ 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.
- ❖ 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.
- ❖ 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.

Serving as a bridge across disciplines, sectors and stakeholders



Milestones achieved so far

- 2** literature reviews completed (1 academic paper under review)
- 4** language translations on the website published
- 5** working papers published
- 6** international webinars organized in 2020-2021
- 7** workshops on domestic violence with clergy delivered in Ethiopia in 2021
- 132** members subscribed on the project's multistakeholder platform
- 155** clergy trained on domestic violence in 2021
- 29,874** web page views since April 2021



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A research and innovation project dedicated to the development and strengthening of religio-culturally sensitive domestic violence alleviation systems in East Africa and the UK

dIdI 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 religious societies and their international migrant and diaspora communities.

[Read more about project dIdI/ድልድል](#)

Programme overview

- The intervention was implemented between February 2021 and April 2022 in Amhara regional state of Ethiopia in collaboration with the Ethiopian Orthodox Täwahədo Church Development and Inter-Church Aid Commission (EOTC DICAC) and the Ethiopian Women Lawyers' Association (EWLA).
- Seven workshops took place between May and October 2021 in Amhara regional state and trained 155 clergy. Each workshop was delivered over two half-days and was assessed by means of a questionnaire.
- The delivery of the pilot series was followed by the delivery of a series of 'refresher' trainings around 10 months after the original training (March-April 2022), which were also used as a platform to obtain the participants' feedback many months after their original participation in the training.
- The majority of participants were priests and deacons with a large number of spiritual children (0-200).



Workshop structure/components

Each workshop included presentations 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.

The three units were intercut by dialogical and reflective approaches to create a platform for participants to share experiences and apply their acquired knowledge to real-life situations

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 *Tāwahedo* 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 marriage
- 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 headship 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 Ethiopia
- 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

Training materials

- The current intervention employed the theological teaching of the indigenous Church on gender and marriage, enriched with the teachings of St John Chrysostom about the same, a highly venerated 4th century saint known locally as *Yohannəs 'Afäwäraq* (ዮሐንስ አፈወርቅ).
- Some of the work of St John Chrysostom, a 3rd/4th century saint, has been accessible in Ethiopia: *Dərsan* (ድርሳን) and *Tägsaś* (ተግሳፅ), some excerpts mentioned in *Haymanotä 'Abbäw* (ሃይማኖተ 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.
- Over three years, I worked with two theology graduates in Ethiopia to translate selected homilies from ancient Greek and Ge'ez into contemporary Tigrigna and Amharic to make particular excerpts on marriage and domestic violence more accessible to Ethiopian publics.

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.
- Regarding the method, numerous participants appreciated what they described as a bridging of a 'modern' or 'scientific' training method with Church theology and spiritual work.
- 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.

Lessons learned

- The assessment results reinforce the international evidence that trainings tend to be more effective when they are repeated and when clergy are provided with continuous support over a longer period of time.
- They also confirm the need to engage clergy in difficult conversations in a culturally appropriate manner in their own languages and terminologies.
- The assessment results indicate that especially due to the theological content provided in the training many participants became more confident to teach against domestic violence in the communities and, some reconsidered their own behaviour in their own married lives and community engagements.





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Extending the training to respond to conflict-related sexual violence in Tigray, Ethiopia

- Ethically-motivated and genocidal sexual violence has been extensively documented in Tigray region, with victims and survivors estimated in hundreds of thousands and documented to range from the age of eight to 69, including mostly females but also some males.
- For the next phase of this project, we are planning to adapt the training approach and content presented to train clergy in supporting survivors of conflict-related sexual violence in a trauma-sensitive way that can overcome also societal stigma and survivors' faith-informed guilt.
- The need for psychosocial support cannot be overstated. Medical records show that the victims face serious physical and psychological consequences of conflict-related sexual violence, both short- and long-term, including mental health issues such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (13%) and depression (17%), unintended pregnancy self-reported by the survivor (8%), and reproductive organ injuries and disorders (11%), with numerous contracting HIV.



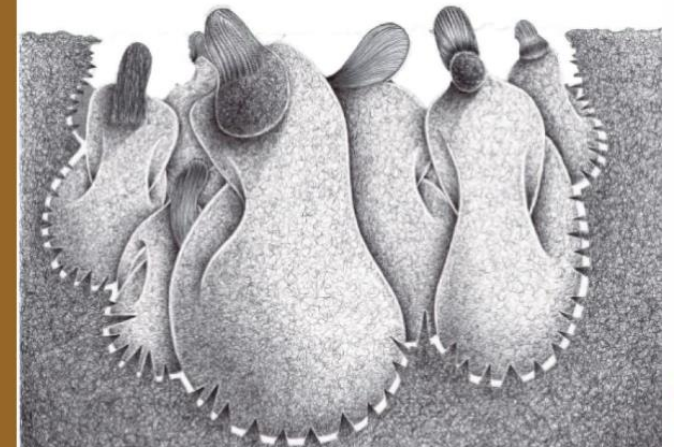
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Spiritual damage

- But the spiritual damage was equally noticeable. A book written by a nurse and a nun (which I edited) that presented 18 survivor stories through their own descriptions and thoroughly narrated life stories evidenced that women and girls faced complex trauma, affecting how they viewed themselves and their lives after the sexual abuses.
- Women and girls often invoked God when questioning why things happened to them, felt guilty and unable to live a full spiritual life after being raped, or re-discovered the extent of God's love for them in the aftermath of their ordeal.
- This speaks to the importance of a faith-informed analytical lens and intervention approach that engages the people's religious worldview holistically and sees the clergy as a potential partner in fostering hope and healing for the survivors, overcoming stigma and facilitating their reintegration in society.

TEARING THE BODY, BREAKING THE SPIRIT

Women and Girls' Rape Stories From The Tigray War



Translated By Hidat Tikue

Translated from "Meqanit"

Authored by Birhan Gebrekirstos and Mulu Mesfin

Trauma-sensitive training

- While clergy are not and should not be psychological counsellors in their pastoral role, they have the duty to understand the complexities of physical, psychological and other abuses faced by women, and often men, and should be able to respond with care not to retraumatise, stigmatise or alienate survivors.
- Many principles that govern psychological counselling, such as empathy, non-judgemental approach, acceptance of client/positive regard, active listening, as well as ethical standards such as confidentiality and obtaining informed consent align with the approach of the Orthodox Church to the body of believers.
- We may consider that priests and spiritual fathers already have these skills, but our research in Ethiopia shows that developing such skills is not part of the curriculum in the typical seminary educational programme and that many members of the rural clergy have not received any training or guidance on how to provide pastoral support. This is especially true for issues that are highly sensitive, such as domestic violence, sexual relations between spouses and sexual abuses by either intimate partners, other family members or strangers.

Final thoughts

- It is imperative that clergy foster a hopeful and dignified way of living for the most vulnerable and the most abused in their faith communities.
- To do so, they need to continue to learn and be provided with specialised training as and when needs arise (life-long learning that is topical and problem-oriented)
- Seminary education must need to be reconsidered to equip clergy with the understanding and skills to respond to new and on-going crises (e.g. by integrating fieldwork and direct engagement with communities, trauma-sensitive training, advising and counselling on sensitive topics, etc.)
- Educating clergy can take many forms: not only in the classroom or through desk-based study, but through engagement with practice-oriented projects, digital libraries and visual tools.

A film to educate clergy:

<https://vimeo.com/861384260?share=copy>

- Tidar (English title: Marriage, Tigrigna title: Hadar, Afaan Oromo title: Bultii) tells the story of Genet, an Ethiopian Orthodox believer who is experiencing domestic violence in her marriage. It narrates her search for a moral and practical solution within the Ethiopian rural context and her valued religious worldview.
- Genet's story is a collation of stories and testimonies of real people that were collected in long-term anthropological research in Northern Ethiopia and community engagements in south-central Ethiopia, synthesised into a single film script. These were re-enacted by Amharic-speaking actors in Ethiopia, with subtitles being produced in Tigrigna, Afaan Oromo and English by first language speakers.
- The film hopes to educate on the complex role that religious rationalisations and the clergy's mediation can play in the experience of domestic violence in Ethiopia, influencing victimised women's responses and help-seeking attitudes positively or negatively, and to evidence how faith and religious leaders could become more resourceful and effective in responding to the problem.

Thank you

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For questions contact ri5@soas.ac.uk

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

