



CONFERENCE BRIEF

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A Roadmap for Integrating Cultural and Religious Diversity in UK Domestic Violence and Abuse Services

Aims of this Brief

This brief is based on the outcomes that emerged from the Project dIdI/د.ا.د.ا. Annual Conference 2024 on the theme of 'Domestic Violence, Religion and Migration' that took place at SOAS University of London, UK.

The purpose of the brief is to offer some helpful directions for action that could be taken by domestic violence and abuse (DVA) service providers, policy makers, religious institutions and community advocates in the UK to promote a better integration of religious and cultural diversity in DVA services. A second aim is to promote a better bridging between research, practice and policy in DVA responses in the UK and internationally.



Key Themes and Insights

Religious beliefs and faith as a double-edged sword: Religious beliefs and faith can both enable and hinder responses to DVA. Religious discourse can be instrumentalised by patriarchal institutions and perpetrators to justify or rationalise abuse or its tolerance, but faith can also be a source of coping, support and resilience for victims and survivors.

The prominence of the culture-religion binary in domestic violence experiences: There is a need to disentangle the relationship between what is perceived as 'culture' and what is perceived as 'religion', which are oftentimes understood as overlapping or interconnected in faith communities, contributing negatively to domestic violence experiences and attitudes.

The potential of theological interpretation as a resource against DVA: Religious texts and theological hermeneutics can help reverse or respond to harmful misconceptions and interpretations, and can support and empower victims to exit harmful situations and hold perpetrators accountable.



Conference Background

The Project dIdI/ደልደል Annual Conference, held on 19-20 June 2024 at SOAS University of London, brought together researchers, DVA service providers, counsellors, religious institutions, and religious scholars to address the complex intersections of faith, migration, and domestic violence in UK and internationally. The aim of the conference was to build bridges between researchers, secular service providers, religious institutions, and 'by and for' organisations catering to specific religio-cultural communities to move the conversation around faith-sensitive and culturally appropriate (or 'culturally competent' as often described in the sector) responses in the UK forward and to delineate a concrete roadmap of priority areas to be addressed collectively by the sector. Informed by a decolonial ethos, the conference also sought to expand knowledge and good practices in the UK and promote two-way knowledge exchange and innovation by channelling evidence and experience from the project's activities in Africa and other countries responding to DVA in faith communities, such as Ethiopia and South Africa.

Participating Organisations

The conference was attended by about 80 participants from at least 15 different organisations, the majority working in DVA services provision in the UK, and catering to diverse faith communities. In addition, the event was attended by Nicole Jacobs, the Domestic Abuse Commissioner of England and Wales, and Archbishop Angaelos of the Coptic Orthodox Church in London.

Organisations and initiatives represented at the conference included the Faith and VAWG (Violence Against Women and Girls) Coalition, Respect, Restored, Safe in Faith, Imams Against Domestic Violence, AMINA, FORWARD, Black Churches Domestic Abuse Forum, Sikh Women's Aid, Coaction Hub (a partnership between Standing Together & Asian Women's Resource Centre), the Dahlia Project (delivered by Peterborough Women's Aid and evaluated by Dr Mirna Guha at Anglia Ruskin University), EMIRTA Research, Training and Development Institute in Ethiopia, Fnot Psychosocial Counselling Charitable Organization in Ethiopia, and others. Numerous universities from the UK, Ethiopia and South Africa were also represented in the room, including SOAS University of London, University of Bristol, University of Sheffield, Anglia Ruskin University, Sheffield Hallam University, University of Kent, Queen Mary University of London, Addis Ababa University, Stellenbosch University, and others.



Conference Outcomes

The conference sessions and the roundtable discussion were captured through a live illustration. The illustration evidences the richness and depth of issues explored on the day, including the relationship between religious beliefs, faith, and domestic violence experiences, the mediation of cultural socialisation and gender norms in such experiences, the issue of 'cultural competence' and 'religious literacy' in DVA

services increasingly raised in DVA services provision, and the role of theological interpretation in DVA responses, as well as interconnections with issues of epistemological colonisation, racialisation, trauma and mental health, and wellbeing, all of which were consistently raised by speakers and discussants at the conference. An attempt is made to summarise these below.



Further Readings

- Istratii, R., Ali, P., & Feder, G. (2024). Integration of religious beliefs and faith-based resources in domestic violence services to migrant and ethnic minority communities: A scoping review. *Violence: An International Journal*, 5(1), 94-122. <https://doi.org/10.1177/26330024241246810>
- Istratii, R., & Ali, P. (2023). A Scoping Review on the Role of Religion in the Experience of IPV and Faith-Based Responses in Community and Counseling Settings. *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, 51(2), 141-173. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00916471221143440>

Two more publications on DVA and faith with minority communities and service providers are forthcoming. Readers are advised to check www.projectdlda.org for updates.



Language Matters



The importance of not homogenising and stereotyping religious communities: DVA affects all communities, religious and non-religious, and can be experienced differently by individuals in the same religious group, reflecting diverse cultural and individual experiences, which stresses the importance of avoiding generalisations and stereotypes.

Demonising and essentialising those who perpetrate violence has proven unhelpful: Essentialising men as perpetrators of violence or identifying certain faith communities with certain forms of violence (e.g. honour violence) can be counterproductive as it can hinder their engagement in preventing and reducing DVA.

Community-Centred Approaches

Importance of community engagement: Engaging with communities holistically and fostering collective action against DVA is essential for achieving effective interventions.

Solutions must be ‘by and for’ the community: Responses and services should be co-created with the communities they are meant to serve, and should integrate religious institutions and leaders where possible, which is more likely to ensure that they are contextually relevant and accepted.





Cultural and Religious Sensitivity and Inclusion



Developing cultural and religious awareness and sensitivity: DVA service providers need to be trained to respond in a culturally appropriate manner and to account for their clients' religious beliefs and backgrounds with confidence.

Applying an intersectional lens: Adopting an intersectional approach that recognises multiple layers of human identity, abuse and vulnerability, is crucial for effective services provision and inclusive policy making.

"To be inclusive is to be specific"

Dr Romina Istratii's guiding principle underscored the importance of tailored and context-sensitive services and responses to DVA that do not isolate religious identity from cultural socialisation, gender norms and community dynamics.

Cross-Sectoral Collaboration and Networking

Strengthening cross-sectoral collaboration: Strengthening connections between policymakers, statutory services, religious institutions, and feminist and women's grassroots organisations was emphasised as key to creating integrated responses to DVA.

Creating appropriate networking platforms: Providing spaces for networking and fostering constructive collaboration across secular and religious stakeholders could help to amplify voices and stories, promoting a more unified approach to tackling the issue.





Holistic Prevention and Intervention Strategies

The necessity for holistic approaches: Approaches must be holistic and empathy-informed and consider the diverse needs and spiritual experiences of victims and survivors.

The cardinal role of education: Fostering critical thinking to distinguish between instrumentalised 'religion,' cultural practices, and theological interpretations, and educating communities about the spectrum of victim safety and prevention are important steps to preventing and overcoming DVA.

The urgency for integrated approaches between statutory services: To respond to DVA effectively, it is important to combine several types of expertise to ensure that DVA services are complementary to legal systems and that legal frameworks are informed by lived experiences of DVA.



Addressing Gender Norms and Inequalities

The need to challenge gender stereotypes and inequalities: There is an urgent need to disrupt or subvert gender norms, stereotypes, and inequalities that perpetuate or contribute to DVA, including asymmetries between men and women and toxic masculinities.

The potential of engaging men in prevention and responses: Recognising that men often influence the experiences of women and children, especially in highly patriarchal contexts, means that they should be effectively engaged in prevention and intervention efforts, such as through targeted faith-sensitive programmes that seek to cultivate positive masculinities.





Trauma-Informed Practices

CREATING SAFE, TRAUMA-INFORMED SPACES IS A SPIRITUAL PRACTICE



Creating and fostering safe spaces:

Creating safe, trauma-informed spaces can be perceived by victims as a spiritual practice and as essential for their healing process.

Understanding and addressing trauma and its impact:

Understanding and addressing trauma at the level of both the individual and the wider community is a necessary step to integrating mental health and wellbeing in support services.

Providing trauma-sensitive training for religious mediators:

Clerics and religious mediators need to be trained in trauma-sensitive counselling to integrate best practices in their spiritual counselling.

„The conference was an important step in bringing people together to discuss these important issues. The conference has sparked a debate, which is a great step forward. Now, it is important to build on this momentum by creating a community of practice focused on addressing these issues.”

Participant, Post-conference Survey Response

Conclusion

The Project dIdI/دآدآ Annual Conference 2024 provided a platform for starting important conversations around the intersection of DVA, faith and migration, achieving knowledge exchange across an unprecedented plethora of disciplines, sectors, and countries. The insights and themes that emerged from the conference reinforce the need to respond to DVA in a

nanced and inclusive manner that is culturally appropriate and theologically robust, evidencing that only collaborative and integrated approaches that cross secular and religious boundaries can effectively respond to DVA in multicultural religious societies and contexts.



Barriers and Propositions

Current emphasis on ‘exit’ strategies by generalist DVA services is at tension with the needs and constraints of victims and survivors from minority faith communities: Survivors often feel conflicted between choosing their communities and seeking support at a generalist service, which may lead to social ostracism. There is a need for holistic prevention and a response mechanism at the level of the community.

Not enough engagement among white majority and generalist DVA service providers with religious and cultural diversity: Participants proposed that such organisations need to ‘get out of the pigeonhole’ to better engage with religious and cultural diversity, such as by seeking (remunerated) training from ‘by and for’ organisations and community-based specialists.

Lack of interfaith collaboration: Participants felt that interfaith coalitions previously set up in the UK around other topics were not sustained over time, raising the need for all involved stakeholders to assume responsibility for maintaining such joint efforts to collectively advocate and mobilise against DVA. .

Financial constraints and asymmetries affecting ‘by and for’ organisations: Especially participating ‘by and for’ organisations reported that collaboration is often impeded by financial competitiveness and limited funding. It was proposed that established and better funded organisations could extend support to or collaborate with ‘by and for’ organisations to co-create and co-deliver programmes.

Policy and Practice Implications

Promoting evidence-based policy: Applying evidence and documented practices to inform policy and intervention strategies is important for achieving a better practice-policy bridging.

Reconsidering accreditation standards: Accreditation of DVA services could stipulate requirements for organisations to identify in their referral networks religious mediators and faith-sensitive counsellors that clients could be referred to if they requested it.

Scaling up good practices: There is a need to systematise and scale up effective local practices to broader policy levels. An incubator could be established to pilot scalable successfully delivered programmes at community level.

Improving funding options for faith-based initiatives: Recognising that not enough has been invested in the faith and DVA/VAWG sector specific funds could be set up to support such initiatives.

Reconsidering legal frameworks: Ensuring that responses to DVA are complementary to existing legal frameworks, but also go beyond legal interventions as these often do not understand or meet the needs of victims and survivors.



Guiding Directions for the Future

- 1. Policy makers:** Consider how to systematise and scale up effective practices documented by local DVA organisations to inform practice and policy at the national level.
- 2. Accreditation bodies:** Explore appropriate frameworks for accrediting faith-sensitive or faith-based DVA services that stipulate integrating religious mediators and stakeholders in referral systems and services provision.
- 3. DVA service providers and counsellors:** Adopt holistic approaches to DVA responses by acknowledging victims' and perpetrators' religious and cultural backgrounds and by contextualising DVA experiences in wider family and community dynamics.
- 4. DVA generalist/white majority services:** Consider how better to include 'by and for' organisations and how to ensure that 'by and for' organisations are promoted and celebrated for what they do.
- 5. Religious leaders and institutions:** Adopt a humble and open approach to learning about DVA from organisations that support victims and survivors.
- 6. Researchers:** Consider how best to support DVA service providers through sharing and documenting evidence, supporting community-based research, and evaluating interventions.

About Project dIdI/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.

The project bridges multiple disciplines, sectors and stakeholder groups to develop more integrated response to domestic violence and develop effective response systems for victims and perpetrators in religious societies, as well as their international migrant communities. It follows a practical decolonial approach, based on community-based research, co-production with grassroots organisations and two-way knowledge and evidence exchange between East Africa and Europe.

More on www.projectdIdI.org

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