

# 1 Introduction

## The metaphysics of gender and development

The concept of 'gender' found its way in the field of development studies through Marxist discourse at a time when development practitioners started to preoccupy themselves with the exclusion of women from economic advancement.<sup>1</sup> Steadily, attention was transferred from capitalism and colonialism as forces of human oppression to women's disadvantaged status in society, biased ideas of femininity and masculinity and women's inferior social valuation under 'patriarchal' systems.<sup>2</sup> The incorporation of gender concerns within development studies evolved in different phases, with milestones being the well-known Women in Development (WID) and Women and Development (WAD) paradigms.<sup>3</sup> These were later criticised for instrumentalising women for the purposes of development and failing to challenge more structural gender inequalities. They were also critiqued by non-western writers for presenting all women as 'oppressed' and 'patriarchy' as the defining parameter of all women's social status, ignoring the historical and socio-cultural particularities of different women around the world.<sup>4</sup>

The more recent paradigm of Gender and Development (GAD) was mainstreamed globally following the Fourth World Conference on Women held in 1995 in Beijing, China.<sup>5</sup> This paradigm has continued to assume that female subordination is universally pertinent and has directly sought to redress unequal gender relations through interventions that aim to 'empower' women and other minority groups conceptualised as oppressed, placing more emphasis on masculinities, which were neglected in previous paradigms.<sup>6</sup> Because gender inequalities have been understood as intrinsic to structures, institutions and relations, advocates have emphasised the need for 'transformative' empowerment.<sup>7</sup> The notion of 'consciousness-raising' has been central in these discussions: women should be led to recognise deeply internalised pernicious beliefs and norms and their collective power to reverse them.<sup>8</sup> In other words, gender relations are assumed to be structurally unequal, established gender norms are viewed suspiciously, and women's experiences are used as a point of reference for "(re)-imagining" women under a feminist ideal, demonstrating the influence of a feminist standpoint epistemology.

## 2 Introduction: gender and development theory

The effectiveness of the gender and development paradigm has been highly debated since its mainstreaming in the 1990s. Many prominent writers have affirmed that ‘gender’ has been extensively depoliticised, misunderstood, or co-opted and have detailed illuminating genealogies on how ‘gender’, ‘gender mainstreaming’ and the associated concept of ‘empowerment’ have been deployed by bureaucrats, organisational staff, and practitioners over time to result in ‘development speak’ stripped of its original theoretical implications.<sup>9</sup> Two *Gender and Development* issues in 2005 and 2012 dedicated to gender mainstreaming confirmed these problematic patterns.<sup>10</sup> This extensive analysis on gender discourse at the institutional, organisational and methodological levels<sup>11</sup> is striking when compared to the limited discussion of the epistemological implications of transposing mainstream gender discourse to non-western contexts. In parallel to assuming the relevance of promoting gender equality internationally, no serious discussion emerged around how gender practitioners should account for local belief and knowledge systems in gender analysis, theorisation and sensitisation cross-culturally. The political urgency of the gender and development project seems to have overshadowed important ethical and practical questions around pursuing and achieving such an objective in diverse religio-cultural contexts. In most cases, gender inequalities have been assumed on the basis of generic theoretical frameworks, with local cultural or religious institutions being portrayed as *loci* of female subordination that must be subverted.<sup>12</sup>

Scrutinising gender and development paradigms and current approaches to gender mainstreaming in relation to diverse non-western contexts, but, especially, non-secular societies, is particularly urgent in our times. In the aforementioned *Gender and Development* issues a few authors suggested a degree of incommensurability between the gender ideals of the Beijing agenda and the gender realities, norms, expectations and constraints of men and women in non-western local societies, most of them religious.<sup>13</sup> While religious parameters have been increasingly integrated in gender and development studies in many nuanced ways, the relevant studies and their insights do not appear to have caused a shift in mainstream theory and practice.<sup>14</sup> The gender mainstreaming literature includes cases of local women and men who found ‘gender’ to be alien to their language and culture and threatening to their religious beliefs.<sup>15</sup> After assessing the reasons behind the hesitation of some non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in Africa to engage with gender equality discourse, Seniorina Wendoh and Tina Wallace noted that “[r]eligious faith and traditional cultural values are important in communities” but “these are not easily reconciled with the current concepts of gender equality imported from international agencies and donors”.<sup>16</sup> In their detailed study of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) domestication process in Nigeria, Oluwafunmilayo Para-Mallam and co-authors interviewed men and women who expressed objections to

the ideal of gender equality, citing religio-cultural alternatives.<sup>17</sup> Similar objections were recorded in relation to gender trainings in the Francophone world.<sup>18</sup> At a more recent series of conferences organised to examine the engagement of faith actors in the formulation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), at least a few participants noted tensions between the language of SDG 5 and local understandings of normative gender identity, sexuality and gender-related aspects of life.<sup>19</sup>

The case of the CEDAW domestication process in Nigeria, which was analysed extensively in a study by the Religions and Development (RaD) programme of the University of Birmingham, offers a closer examination.<sup>20</sup> The report makes evident that the language of gender equality in the CEDAW document was perceived to contradict religio-cultural gender norms, such as those related to marriage among Muslim believers, or normative values exemplified in the opposition to abortion among Christian believers. Considerable objections were also raised by women and men who valued theological understandings of gender and believed in the potential of their religious traditions to promote human dignity without resorting to imported concepts or the language of human rights. A participant named Ruth, for example, questioned the need for western ideals of equality on the premise of theology that grounded man-woman equality in the divine creation.<sup>21</sup> Objections to CEDAW motivated by androcentric or ideological interests to secure the continuation of girls' and women's oppression or abuse should never be justified and were rightly contested, but it is important that less hostile reservations citing religio-cultural worldviews be given careful consideration. This is because they may very well point to fundamental incompatibilities between local gender understandings and values and the gender metaphysics assumed in the field.

My use of metaphysics in this book is etymological and pertains to fundamental conceptualisations and aetiologies of gender, agency and other aspects of humanity that remain partially speculative to the human mind and cannot be conclusively known by mere observation. While much gender theory invokes sociological phenomena to justify its premises, there should be no doubt that the conceptualisation and aetiology of gender largely relies on feminist philosophical contemplations. Consequently, gender paradigms have been disproportionately grounded in western metaphysics of human individuality and gender, which evolved together with the secularisation of what were previously western Christian beliefs and knowledge systems dominant in these societies. It is this fundamental epistemological 'situatedness' of the concept of gender and its cognate terms that leads me to doubt the relevance of gender theory internationally and which, I believe, explains some of the defensive reactions by communities and individuals who have no historical reasons to espouse the same philosophical thinking. These connections begin to become more visible with a closer look at the genealogical progression of western feminist thinking in relation to the concept of gender.

### A brief genealogy of feminist thought around gender

Where an examination of western feminist literature should begin is a debated matter, not least because of a diversity of thought around how ‘feminism’ should be defined.<sup>22</sup> Historians have established that female writers in Italy, Spain, France and Britain addressed negative representations about women in scholarship as early as the fifteenth century,<sup>23</sup> long before the feminist movement became politically active in the nineteenth century. While feminist scholarship and praxis throughout the centuries is characterised by a common concern to address social and cultural sexism, the ways in which prominent advocates pursued this goal evolved over time. Hence, while religious beliefs were still potent in western society and human thinking, feminist writers tended to invoke religious idiom to counter what they saw as distorted ideas about women perpetuated in male discourses.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, conceptualisations of humanity and gender identity and relations were appraised in relation to theological knowledge, which was steadily opened to critique through intellectual reasoning. An illustrative example is Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), in which she was keen to demonstrate that reason was not reserved only for males, and that women could equally think and develop ‘virtues’ if allowed to be educated. However, she did so not by evading references to religious knowledge, but by questioning conventional biblical understandings as set out by male authors, such as Rousseau (e.g. in relation to God’s intentions for humanity, including the female sex).<sup>25</sup>

Over time, invocations of religious idiom in feminist writings became more critical and in some cases blatantly hostile. Whereas earlier female writers spoke respectfully and invoked religious knowledge authoritatively not to offend the sentiments of the wider society, with the gradual secularisation of philosophical thinking many became more outspoken in their critique of religious and political ‘patriarchy’ (see Chapter 2). This is evident in the works of feminist writers who were preoccupied with the critique of representations and the treatment of women in biblical traditions, such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815–1902), Mary Daly (1928–2010) and Rosemary Radford Ruether (1936–). Examining the writings of Mary Daly, for example, evidences that she (like other feminists in this and subsequent eras) was concerned about pronouncing women’s positive attributes and characteristics to reverse a historical devaluation of female traits in men’s writings, including theological texts.<sup>26</sup> As Linda Alcoff has noted, the problem for such early writers was not so much female essence (which was to be problematised later), but masculinity itself and even “male biology”.<sup>27</sup>

Increasingly, however, social sexism was intertwined with ideas of natural sex, which shifted feminist writers’ attention to ‘denaturalising’ sex difference.<sup>28</sup> The second-wave feminist movement introduced ‘gender’ in its lexicon precisely to shift attention to socially constructed understandings and valuations of women under what had been unequal power relations



between men and women.<sup>29</sup> Since the 1920s, the term gender – beyond its grammatical designation in French – had been employed by western psychoanalysts specialising in trans-sexuality to denote what was at the time perceived as the “psychological sex”, or one’s internal gender identification.<sup>30</sup> By appropriating the concept of ‘gender’, feminists reversed the implicit understanding that internal gender identification was more important than biology, causing a departure from the early conceptualisation of gender as immutable psychological feeling to mutable social aspects.<sup>31</sup> On the other hand, ‘sex’ was relegated to the biological or ‘natural’ immutable realm, with the implication that gender was ‘founded’ on sex. This seminal reversal of meaning resulted in a widely affirmed dichotomisation of human existence into natural and social realms.

For example, in 1975, Gayle Rubin referred to the ‘gender/sex system’ which she conceived as “a set of arrangements by which a society transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity, and in which these transformed sexual needs are satisfied”.<sup>32</sup> This summarised her perception that female oppression is a product of a pre-existing normative framework, perpetuated in kinship systems, which gendered people by their sexed bodies. By recourse to psychology, Rubin was also the one to integrate more explicitly sexuality into gender, linking heteronormativity to a pre-existing patriarchal status quo. She called for ‘a genderless (but not sexless) society’ in which individuals would continue to be seen as anatomically different, but this anatomy would not determine their sexuality, identities, positions, and behaviours in society.

In 1983, Moira Gatens undertook the critical exercise to evaluate the sex/gender dichotomy and to ascertain whether it was a valid distinction.<sup>33</sup> Gatens responded to liberal feminist positions that favoured re-education, arguing that these presented the body and the psyche as *tabula rasa* that could be re-socialised in ways desirable for social transformation. She reasoned that under this paradigm, gender was made an issue of the mind and the effect of internalising social ‘lessons’, while the body was seen to serve only as the passive recipient of these ‘inscriptions’. Gatens’ proposition was that the body should not be seen as a neutral surface and that the connection between femininity and masculinity with regard to the female and male body should not be considered arbitrary. Since male and female bodies were given different social values, subjective consciousness was anticipated to form according to these different significances.

In 1994, Linda Nicholson also criticised second-wave theories on the premise that they assumed biology-founded conceptualisations of women, what she referred to as “biological foundationalism”.<sup>34</sup> Nicholson’s argument was that such persistent conceptualisations of gender hindered efforts to understand differences among men and women and the cause of this distinction cross-culturally. In order to deem the analytical construct of gender relevant to all societies, she proposed to appraise

social variations in the male/female distinction as related to differences that go “all the way down”, that is, as tied not just to the limited phenomena associated typically with gender (i.e. cultural stereotypes of personality and behaviour), but also to culturally variable understandings of the body and more fundamental meanings of womanhood/manhood.<sup>35</sup>

In other words, it would be necessary to conduct a more in-depth analysis that considered how sex difference was understood within the societal framework overall.

Also in the 1990s, Judith Butler took a step further in denaturalising conceptualisations of gender by problematising the very category of sex.<sup>36</sup> Butler advanced a conceptualisation of gender that was different from previous theories, locating it neither within the body nor outside of it, but identified it with the very *locus* of the subject’s coming into being and its becoming socially intelligible.<sup>37</sup> She reasoned that even though sex had always been considered dimorphic, if gender was the cultural meaning of the sexed body (following Gatens’ thinking), it was not necessary for gender to manifest exclusively in a binary form. If the immutability of sex was questioned and understood as culturally constructed, then perhaps it could be suggested that sex had been gender all along. Butler’s subversion of the western humanist ‘metaphysics of substance’ that had historically assumed some innate quality to sex and gender was enforced by other theorists who were preoccupied with how classifications and language determined body intelligibility and the metaphysical edifice that had traditionally sustained binary sex. For example, Anne Fausto-Sterling observed in 1993 that while multiple sexes and intersexuality existed in nature, in medical and social classifications the sexes had been conventionally limited to two.<sup>38</sup> She, thus, stressed the power of classification in determining ‘nature’, shaking irrevocably the understanding of sex as biologically dyadic.

Contradicting post-structuralist definitions of gender that radically relegated its replication to discursive-psychical processes, Linda Alcoff proposed an alternative understanding of gender invoking the concept of ‘positionality’.<sup>39</sup> She advanced what she believed to be a non-essentialist conceptualisation, but one that could still enable women to be treated as a uniform category, facilitating feminist politics. According to her reasoning, a woman’s identity was shaped multi-dimensionally by various elements in her surroundings, which she summarised in the concept of positionality. She argued that this theorisation “should not imply that the concept of ‘woman’ is determined solely by external elements and that the woman herself is merely a passive recipient of an identity created by these forces” but that the woman “actively contributes to the context within which her position can be delineated”.<sup>40</sup> Hence, positionality was not to be studied to discover meaning, but rather to uncover how women used “their positional perspective as a place from which values are interpreted and constructed”.<sup>41</sup>

More recently, Raia Prokhnovik,<sup>42</sup> engaging critically with post-structuralist theorists, set to bridge the cognitive with the corporeal and to overcome the implicit mind/body and reason/emotion bifurcations implied in the gender/sex dichotomy.<sup>43</sup>

It is important to note that feminist debates and theorisations evolved under the heightened recognition of ethnocentric representations of women in the world talking privileged white women's conditions as their point of reference.<sup>44</sup> Black feminist thinkers and activists in North America drew important attention to the fact that white women's theorisations could not capture black women's multiple oppressions, that is to say, the implications of race in the construction of gender subjectivities and relations.<sup>45</sup> In her deconstruction of 'gender' in the Igbo society on Nigeria, Ifi Amadiume seminally criticised the rigid gender binary in western feminist theory by drawing on the social categories of 'male daughters' and 'female husbands' in Igbo society.<sup>46</sup> Although her use of the concept of gender to advance her argument has been subsequently problematised by Nkiru Uwechia Nzegwu,<sup>47</sup> Amadiume effectively demonstrated that women were not subordinated in the Igbo society by default of their sex identity, weakening western feminist assumptions.

In 1997, Nigerian anthropologist Oyèrónkéé Oyèwùmí insightfully traced the problematic 'bio-logic' in gender theory to western epistemology, arguing that this inherently assumed a body-mind bifurcation and prioritised visual indicators over holistic 'world-sense'.<sup>48</sup> She argued that if gender were to be defined as socially constructed, as prominent western theorists proposed, gender would need to be dissociated from anatomy and be granted diversity across time, space and cultural context.<sup>49</sup> By this she meant to say that gender should not be essentialised on the basis of a bodily or biological division, since the division alone does not communicate anything substantive about gender relations if alienated from the local matrix of meanings and embodied practices. In 2006, Nzegwu addressed full force the fact that western feminist understandings have stubbornly assumed within the concept of gender an inherent hierarchical relationship between female and male, reflecting a fundamental inculcation of sex difference in western thought (the 'mono-sex system').<sup>50</sup> She laboriously juxtaposed this to the Onitsa dual-sex system to demonstrate an alternative system that openly admitted and embraced sexual difference but ensured that women and men had their respective powers and responsibilities to shape society and life.

Subsequently, building on the concept of 'intersectionality',<sup>51</sup> western feminist thinkers enlarged their analytical dimensions to consider other lines of difference and vectors of human identity, such as race and ethnicity.<sup>52</sup> In parallel, mainstream feminist thought has invariably adopted the position that gender is socially constructed, but "which social practices construct gender, what social construction is and what being of a certain gender amounts to are major feminist controversies".<sup>53</sup> This reflects a more profound inconclusiveness around human metaphysics and a divergence in

feminist thinking around how bodies intertwine with cognitive and emotional consciousness and how they may be conceptualised in relation to social categories and historical processes without either essentialising or nullifying the individual subject.

*Gender theory as a reflection of deeper metaphysics of humanity and gender*

The theoretical thinking reviewed here is not exhaustive, but offers a sufficient window into the evolution of feminist thinking around gender and sex for the purposes of this discussion. These theories have been informed by and have internalised a historical social sexism that women in western societies experienced, resulting in a genealogy of thinking that evolved and shifted multiple times but without ever eschewing the assumption of a fundamental hierarchy between men and women. This hierarchy has been predicated on a variety of different parameters favoured by different theorists in different eras, including: sexed traits, sexed ideals (social femininities/masculinities), sex-marked bodies (based on anatomical/biological 'sex'), and sexuality norms (socially reproduced heteronormative systems). More importantly, these conceptualisations of gender inequality have not been disconnected from more profound western understandings of humanity and the human personhood.

As Linda Nicholson hinted in her very insightful analysis of gender theory developments from the sixteenth to the twentieth century, when the Church and theology still held authority in western societies, the human person/nature and gender/sexual identity tended to be theologically explained.<sup>54</sup> Perhaps this is why it was easier to locate gender identity internally in early psychological theories or to speak in terms of 'essential' female or male traits in feminist critiques of biblical scholarship. With the Bible losing its authoritative grip on western society, human individuality was inevitably opened to scientific explorations. In the twentieth century, human personalities were increasingly conceptualised as reflective of social processes, but they did not eschew assumptions that "biology is the site of character formation".<sup>55</sup> Humanist tendencies to consider the human self as essential were reflected in gender theorisations that placed the aetiology of gender in the topography of the sexed body, resulting in a sort of 'biological foundationalism'. As anti-Enlightenment/anti-humanist critiques expanded, such positions started to be questioned and gender and sex were problematised and reconceptualised as socially constructed. Thenceforth, feminist theory of gender became preoccupied with liberating itself from 'biological foundationalism' and focused on understanding how men and women could be explained as socially constituted in view of anatomical differences, but not limited to those – hence the shift from speaking of human individuals to human subjects. The rise of post-modernist theorisations promoted a total replacement of biology-based ontologies with an



“ontology of social things, relations, and non-substantive (and often normative) kinds”.<sup>56</sup>

While western feminists could have worked to reverse pernicious attitudes about women in their societies by cultivating a more egalitarian value system, they opted to theorise sex difference as the foundation of gender inequality, subsequently appraising with suspicion any conceptualisations of gender that tended to reinforce historical ‘essentialist’ understandings of women, gender and more fundamentally, humanity. It is this reactionary type of thinking that I consider unhelpful in cross-cultural gender studies. These tactics seem to assume that western women’s experiences with religious authorities and theology have been shared by all women in the world, disregarding cross-cultural differences in how communities and individuals understand humanity and gender ontology, but also the different configurations between religious traditions and gender ideas and realities encountered in different local contexts. As the earlier analysis of CEDAW demonstrated, many non-western societies continue to uphold potent religious traditions that define and influence how people understand their gender identities and formulate gender standards, and these have not been perceived always or necessarily in pernicious ways. A feminist thinking that remains deeply western Euro-centric in its understanding of gender relations and religious beliefs cannot possibly accommodate this complex reality, a limitation that becomes crucial in gender and development theory and practice.

### **Western Euro-centrism in the paradigm of gender and development**

While no single discipline, theory or paradigm has shaped the variegated gender and development landscape, the latter has visibly borrowed theoretical constructs from feminist theory in North America and Western Europe, absorbing also its more implicit metaphysical assumptions. Parallels are seen in conventional gender analytical and gender planning frameworks typically employed in the field in the 1980s and 1990s, which sought to evaluate gender relations on the basis of division of labour, access to resources or distribution of decision-making authority between female and male persons.<sup>57</sup> Reflecting the tacitly accepted notions of ‘biological foundationalism’ in feminist theory, judgements about gender relations were almost automatically predicated on how sex-marked bodies shared labour, livelihoods, assets, decision-making, etc., while the lived subjectivities and beliefs, internal perceptions and attitudes that sex-marked individuals displayed toward each other were broadly ignored. This not only failed to consider that gender relations could not be studied on the basis of visible markers, but also evidenced fundamental premises in feminist theory that considered gender roles and responsibilities predicated on ‘natural’ sex difference as fundamentally pernicious.

The related terms of ‘gender equality’ and ‘empowerment’ display similar limitations for having remained embedded in western Euro-centric assumptions and ideals. The gender and development sector conventionally tended toward “universalist and non-discriminatory”<sup>58</sup> definitions of gender equality predicated on ideals of sameness: same opportunities and valuations for all genders, as exemplified in the CEDAW document.<sup>59</sup> However, in some societies these ideals can create tensions where the realities of men and women are materially different, requiring rather complex processes and considerable time to motivate shifts in attitudes or norms. More recently, gender equality in some GAD discourse has been equated to ideals of gender fluidity invoking Butlerian theory.<sup>60</sup> These advocates have not reflected, however, on the fact that gender ideals sought in western contexts can be ethically problematic and counterproductive where gender difference is explained on the basis of gender ontologies informed by potent religious traditions or other indigenous worldviews.

Moreover, despite Butler’s quest to criticise and to subvert universalisms about ‘women’ and gender identity by raising awareness about the exclusionary implications of such discourse, her very rigid theoretical stance appears to exclude propositions or interpretations on gender ontology and social constructiveness that prescribe any sort of gender/sexual normativity.<sup>61</sup> Butler is very explicit that “as a transcendental claim, sexual difference should be rigorously opposed” because she argues that such claims result inevitably in the impermissibility of some gender identities and sexual arrangements.<sup>62</sup> Her affirmed sympathy for religious beliefs and faith notwithstanding,<sup>63</sup> this intransigent position on normative gender/sexuality cannot be expected to resonate or be accommodating to communities that adhere to more prescriptive understandings of sexual difference, including many members of religious communities.

Paralleling feminist theory progressions, the concept of intersectionality has been increasingly mainstreamed in gender and development, but this has tended to simplification, pertaining to *multiple* “inequalities”, “lines of discrimination”, or “identities” that intersect “to produce disadvantage”.<sup>64</sup> Paul Cramer has eloquently observed that in gender and development discourse intersectionality usually “forms knowledge around ‘authentic victimhoods’”, essentialising the oppressed subject.<sup>65</sup> As has been noted before by feminist writers, not all divisions need be axes of discrimination – some can be cultural differences.<sup>66</sup> The gender and development scholarship has generally neglected to consider and to demonstrate in practice how differences that result from exclusionary practices can be distinguished from differences that reflect individual preferences grounded in culture-specific worldviews. More importantly, within the analytic, social divisions have been generally preconceived (gender, race and class being the most potent examples), and these have been theorised in accordance with the dominant epistemology. Will these social divisions be equally relevant in non-western religious systems? Will social divisions be theorised on the

basis of social/material processes alone, or will beliefs about the spiritual realm be equally or more salient?

Reflecting the unresolved feminist debates around social constructionism, some crucial questions around gender analysis were never satisfactorily addressed in this field. For example, how should a GAD practitioner investigate a socially constructed gender where they have no previous understanding of gender subjectivities and relations in a given local society (as is usually the case)? Prior to deciding whether gender is an important parameter for understanding human relations locally, should not practitioners investigate how different individuals exist and relate to each other and conceptualise gender and judge its importance for local relations on the basis of these understandings? Given diverse systems and understandings, is it ethical or accurate to presume that local ideas of 'natural' gender or gender norms are automatically pernicious and should be subverted? Such tendencies do not only result from what Oyěwùmí described as a bio-logic in feminist theory and the western sciences, but reflects a more profound western metaphysics of humanity and gender as elaborated earlier – a humanity historically viewed through a social/biological binary lens whereby sexual difference (no matter how defined) has been integral to conceptualisations of gender inequality. On the basis of these observations, can GAD theory and praxis accommodate understandings that lie outside of western epistemology and that are based on some essence-based or other ontological but not necessarily hierarchical conceptualisations of humanity and gender?

Many GAD writers label religious beliefs as 'ideologies' or fundamentalist expressions if they are invoked to oppose gender equality agendas and initiatives.<sup>67</sup> It is rarely considered, however, that in some instances such oppositions can arise as a reaction to a perceived imposition of gender metaphysics that are alien to local beliefs and value systems, a reaction that can be amplified by colonial histories and legacies. It must be entertained that when religious communities or individuals fail to resonate with a programme that aims to promote 'gender equality', as expressed for example in the language of the Sustainable Development Goal 5, they may not be opposing the idea of more egalitarian gender relations per se, but the metaphysical connotations that the concept has within western epistemology and experience and the neo-colonial act of transposing this onto their societies as if they should be considered normative.<sup>68</sup> As the case of CEWAD domestication indicated, these connotations do not go unnoticed by communities and can offend them, which raises urgent ethical and practical questions about gender and development approaches in these contexts.

### *Religion in gender and development discourse*

What is considered development was undoubtedly catalysed by western Christian values and could not be disassociated from the 'civilising project' of western Christian administrators and missionaries in colonial times.<sup>69</sup>

In western societies, secularisation gradually led to a marginalisation of religion to the private sphere, which then infiltrated also paradigms of development and conceptualisations of 'religion'.<sup>70</sup> 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.<sup>71</sup>

This same experience of secularisation fuelled the emergence of the concept of religion in the nineteenth century. The idea of 'religion' was explored in a series of philosophical, ethnological, philological and sociological propositions by (predominantly male) elite scholars concomitantly with the development of civilisations as western societies interacted with other peoples in a quest for self-understanding and imperialist interests.<sup>72</sup> While Christian theology still held sway, it was used as a prism to analyse other religious systems in reference to a superior western Christianity. Different thinkers engaged with 'religion' in ways that resonated with the stage of the secularisation, fostering also different epistemologies for the study of 'religion', such as analysing 'religion' as a natural phenomenon, as a transcendental thing-in-itself (*sui generis*), or as a symbolic system.<sup>73</sup> In contemporary times, the confessionalist impartialities in early paradigms of 'religion' have fostered a discernible suspicion of theology, with scholars placing emphasis on improving rigour and reflexivity by prioritising the study of embodied experiences and lived faith.<sup>74</sup>

Reflecting these and other historical and political processes, for the second half of the twentieth century the development scholarship paid very little attention to religious beliefs and knowledge in the world. For the most part, international development regarded religious belief either as a hindrance or as irrelevant to development practice.<sup>75</sup> Gender and development was not immune to these trends. With the exception of a rare volume that appeared in 1983 on the nexus gender, development and religion that made an attempt to explore how different religious traditions spoke about women,<sup>76</sup> gender and development was equally secularised, neglecting the religious sphere almost entirely. A volume titled *Gender, Religion and Spirituality* was published by Oxfam in 1998 to note and address this historical marginalisation. In addition to neglecting religion, GAD writers typically dismissed it as a *locus* of female subordination for reasons that will be discussed in Chapter 2.<sup>77</sup>

Recent decades have been defined by a 'turn to religion', a shift within the development sector toward closer engagement with religious actors for the sake of promoting development interests and objectives.<sup>78</sup> In parallel, gender studies that engage with religious beliefs have multiplied within



international development scholarship, adding important nuances to the intersection of religious and gender parameters.<sup>79</sup> Still, this increased attention does not appear to have altered the theoretical premises within much GAD scholarship.<sup>80</sup> The premise that gender identity is hierarchical and that religion is a contributing factor persists, although the need for engagement with religious actors is more often acknowledged now.<sup>81</sup> Moreover, conceptualisations of religion continue to be influenced by a western epistemology of religion, evident in persistent demarcations between secular and religious, belief and reason, or private and public,<sup>82</sup> and in the rarity of GAD studies that integrate theology-informed perspectives engaging substantively and openly with local exegetical traditions.<sup>83</sup>

In recent years, religion and development scholars have pronounced the importance for interpretative approaches centring on the perceptions and discourses of the believers themselves.<sup>84</sup> However, the field still lacks a conceptualisation of 'religion' at an epistemological level. I generally share Gloria Ladson-Billings' understanding that epistemology is linked to a specific worldview, which enables specific modes of reasoning.<sup>85</sup> An epistemological system determines the criteria that individuals employ to define and to generate valid knowledge and to reason out their realities, not least being their gender subjectivities and gender relations. Saba Mahmood has implied this in her discussion of self-reflexivity, which she traced to the discursive matrix that enables and defines the possibilities, modes and forms of subject formation.<sup>86</sup> While an epistemology need not be static or exist in isolation and individuals can be exposed to multiple epistemological systems, it should be clear that all individuals are 'epistemologically situated', which means that they are closely linked to some belief and knowledge system that they have reasons to value the most and which influences their thinking.

Some of these modes of reasoning can very well be embedded within religious or other indigenous belief systems that may conceptualise the human personhood, gender and other aspects of human existence in reference to transcendental or non-discursive dimensions.<sup>87</sup> Numerous African scholars, for example, have referred to gender conceptualisations and ideals in their societies by invoking non-secular beliefs systems, premised on indigenous metaphysics of humanity, the human psyche, or agentival capacity.<sup>88</sup> For example, in a discussion of gender relations within a local indigenous African system, Obioma Nnaemeka invoked local metaphysics of the psyche as god-man and as essentially genderless to demonstrate fundamental equality between all human individuals.<sup>89</sup> In previous gender-sensitive research with a Sufi community of Fulani descent in Senegal, I found that men and women generally rationalised gender relations in reference to an authoritative Islamic worldview, which seemed to perpetuate a gendered organisation of life whereby women were expected to care for the house and men for livelihoods outside.<sup>90</sup> Similarly, Eastern Orthodox believers would generally appraise human ontology and gender through a theology-informed prism

that stipulates a normative male-female order and equality in oneness, without denying however the possibility of a non-normative gender or sexuality.<sup>91</sup>

There is a need for theoretical frameworks that explain gender realities within local worldviews as inseparable from religious traditions to achieve a better understanding of gender relations and embodiments in societies located outside of western experience. Northern Ethiopia, for example, where the present study was conducted, largely adheres to an ancient civilisation and a pre-Chalcedon Christian faith formally adopted by the rulers of the flourishing Kingdom of Aksum in the fourth century. Western European influences from the sixteenth century onwards did not leave the religious tradition unaffected, but Ethiopian responses have shown a wariness to preserve the indigenous religio-cultural heritage, as evidenced in the expulsion of the Jesuits in the seventeenth century.<sup>92</sup> Moreover, Ethiopia was never colonised by western European powers, with the exception of a short occupation it experienced following the second Ethio-Italian war (1935–1937). This ancient Christian faith that developed intimately with the socio-cultural surroundings and political history of wider Ethiopia reflected in how Tigrayan people in Aksum and the surrounding areas lived their lives, processed their social experiences and understood humanity and the human personhood.

In contrast, GAD theorists and practitioners have been epistemologically situated in a predominantly secular epistemology. This observation needs to be appraised concomitantly with the fact that much production of knowledge in higher education still lacks reflexivity around the epistemological situatedness of the theorist. Theory taught in Gender and Development courses, as seen in the case of IDS, is rarely based on an intimate engagement with local contexts and local conceptual frameworks of gender. Western Euro-centric theories produced in academic or research institutes are then popularised through the work of intermediary epistemic communities that establish paradigms of development, such as think tanks, policy institutes and the international techno-scientific non-governmental (INGO) sector. Non-western theorists in higher education do not eschew the problems generated by this system because western epistemology is not limited to western universities but extends to many non-western counterparts.<sup>93</sup> On the other hand, local gender practitioners may hesitate to raise objections in order to be hired by NGOs and development agencies espousing the mainstream paradigms of the donors funding them.<sup>94</sup>

As an alternative and on the basis of my overall experience and this specific study from Ethiopia, I propose that gender-sensitive research and practice must be based on theoretical constructs emanating from local discourses, which should then guide practical interventions on the ground. Adopting such an approach requires epistemological reflexivity on behalf of theorists and practitioners and a suspension or reflexive questioning of assumptions that do not emanate from local experience. It also raises the

need for more training (linguistic, historical, theological, etc.) to achieve a more substantive engagement with local communities. This approach is anticipated to reveal more complex relationships and realities that can deem conventional GAD approaches and language inappropriate and impractical in some contexts, while pointing to locally resourceful strategies for addressing gender-related issues.

### **Domestic violence in gender and development and public health theory**

The extensive discussion on Gender and Development and engagements with local belief and knowledge systems was given as a prelude to problematising domestic violence approaches in international development and public health practice followed in non-western societies. Within these fields, the fundamental thesis that violence affecting women and girls – including intimate partner violence (IPV) – has gendered motivations, has been widely assumed, as indicated in the popular terminologies of Violence against Women (VAW), Gender-based Violence (GBV), gender violence or gendered violence – used with different theoretical connotations that are rarely made explicit.<sup>95</sup> Sally Engle Merry, who has offered a closer conceptual analysis, has defined gender violence “as violence whose meaning depends on the gendered identities of the parties”<sup>96</sup> and “violence that is comprehensible because of the gender of the interaction”.<sup>97</sup>

Interestingly, these terminologies have been assumed and transposed even as most writers ascribe to an ecological model of violence,<sup>98</sup> which should offer a broader aetiology of abusive behaviour in reference to multiple analytical levels: individual, family, societal and systemic.<sup>99</sup> Favouring feminist, social or cultural aetiologies of violence,<sup>100</sup> the sector has historically neglected ontogenetic (related to biological growth), psychological (personality disorders, intergenerational trauma, etc.) and relational factors (situational violence, couple dynamics) that the IPV scholarship from North America and western Europe has more extensively drawn attention to.<sup>101</sup> These ideological inclinations have fostered a discernible double standard whereby in low- and middle-income and traditional societies emphasis has been placed on feminist sociological aetiologies, while studies in industrialised societies have paid equal attention to family studies and psychological theories. This stubborn emphasis on cultural or sociological explanations in IPV studies cannot possibly be disassociated from historical racist beliefs in Anglo-American thinking about less ‘civilised’ cultures.<sup>102</sup>

More contextualised studies from local societies have captured complex psychological, environmental, religious/spiritual and socio-cultural parameters underpinning the manifestation of the problem cross-culturally, with some supporting and others rejecting a gender-based aetiology of violence.<sup>103</sup> Yet, the field has assumed the GBV aetiology uncritically and has not generally



made the effort to demonstrate why this aetiology is relevant and analytically useful in reference to a specific ethnographic context. While the possible gendered dimensions of IPV are not denied, these need to be empirically demonstrated and not simply assumed. In addition, the field has historically prioritised women as the prevalent victims, marginalising or essentialising men as perpetrators.<sup>104</sup> While the discourse of ‘masculinities’ has made men more central in GBV discourse and alleviation strategies in recent years, the more individual/psychological and interpersonal parameters defining male abusiveness in relation to locally identified risks factors have yet to be substantively accounted for.<sup>105</sup>

Importantly, the GBV aetiology of violence has not eschewed the epistemological limitations that were raised about the underlying GAD paradigm. Reflecting western feminist thinking, these aetiologies have invoked ‘patriarchal’ relations to justify violence, without providing a comprehensive argument as to why a theory of hierarchical relations applies or is relevant locally, or without providing a rigorous theorisation of patriarchy, which has been one of the most problematised concepts in feminist theory.<sup>106</sup> Similarly to the wider GAD field, the influence of the epistemological *locus* of the theorist/researcher in the analysis and theorisation of IPV and the possible limitations have been rarely considered explicitly or transparently. Reflecting a western epistemology, these theoretical aetiologies have tended to be underpinned by a general suspicion toward what are perceived to be authoritative cultural or religious institutions. Hence, intervention strategies have tended toward liberal or laboratory feminist interventions, predicated the alleviation of gender violence to a subversion of the status quo, but especially of the religious systems that sustain the latter.

Since the alleviation of partner violence has been historically equated to a subversion of the status quo, very little research has been dedicated to exploring alleviation strategies within and leveraging on indigenous cosmologies, including religious idiom. Some faith-based initiatives for the alleviation of violence affecting women and girls have been taken by what could be called faith-based organisations (FBOs),<sup>107</sup> but these approaches have not eschewed assumptions about the gendered nature of violence tending toward reductionism. Moreover, the literature capturing such initiatives has focused repeatedly on faith leaders and their interactions with local communities,<sup>108</sup> considering less the influence of religious worldviews, beliefs and values on structures, norms, attitudes and human behaviour more holistically. I submit that such tendencies can impede understanding and leveraging on the contextual and nuanced mechanisms that determine IPV attitudes and realities in worldviews that lie outside of western epistemology, and especially those embedded in authoritative religious traditions that are less understood in western Europe and North America.

This is regrettable because many of the societies targeted by development and public health interventions are embedded in religious belief and knowledge systems that underpin human socialisation, rationalisations and



behaviour in multi-dimensional ways. These societies may have fewer public resources or the infrastructure in place to address IPV and other forms of violence through systems established in industrialised societies, such as the provision of organised psychosocial services to perpetrators or referral services to victims. This makes it especially urgent to investigate how to avert and to alleviate the problem through local resources, including by leveraging on religious institutions and idiom where this is appropriate and feasible.

#### *A closer look at the epistemological premises of gender-based violence research*

The limitations identified here extend beyond the recognised problem of under-theorised deployment of GBV language globally, as has been previously observed by other scholars. Hilde Jakobsen is one practitioner who has reflected carefully on the tendency of the international development sector to conceptualise violence as gendered without empirical demonstration, attempting to redress this in her own qualitative work with women and men in Tanzania.<sup>109</sup> While her study is exceptionally reflexive, it does not eschew the deeper epistemological limitations that I discern in most GBV research in low- and middle-income countries, meriting a closer look.

Contrary to the much under-theorised GBV scholarship, Jakobsen made the effort to demonstrate why she believed that wife-beating in her study context was gendered and why western theoretical frameworks could prove relevant or useful in analysing the situation locally. She provided a long discussion to show how she cautioned using both imperialist and relativist theoretical approaches to sociological theory in the African context. She also paid considerable attention to her use and choice of methodology in order to overcome inevitable power imbalances between a white privileged researcher and the local research participants. According to Jakobsen's rationale, her 'outsider' identity excluded any likelihood that she could obtain from focus groups participants their genuine or private thoughts about IPV. She thus explored local "discursive resources for justifying wife-beating",<sup>110</sup> or how wife-beating was justified and discussed *among* the participants, opting to pose evocative questions to local focus groups and leaving the room until the discussion had ended. The collected empirical data was analysed with inductive use of gender theory with the aim to discover "the respondents' own logic around wife-beating"<sup>111</sup> and to explore associations with social norms.

Having conducted her investigations, Jakobsen found that local people spoke both of a "good" and a "bad" beating, with the good beating being justified and the bad being undeserved, such as a beating out of drunkenness, a beating that exceeded offence or one that caused damage that needed medical attention. In the focus groups, most men expressed belief in male

headship and that women were expected to be under male rule. Hence, Jakobsen employed the concept of 'hegemonic masculinity' to suggest that wife-beating sustained male headship and that violence correlated to a threatened masculine identity that could potentially alter the social order. Her interpretation was reinforced by that fact that women were expected to appear feminine and not to behave in ways that were considered inappropriate, a norm that women themselves appeared to approve of and to enforce. This, in turn, led Jakobsen to draw from the concept of 'emphasised femininity', which she proposed was directly associated with the female sex. She argued that the gender beliefs that she identified were not limited to the symbolic realm, but affected the home, food distribution, marriage wealth, and farm production. She thus concluded that gender norms supported violence, which in the local discursive framework gender was related to sex, and that wife-beating was gendered because by doing violence men 'did' gender.

Jakobsen argued that post-colonial critiques should not exclude the possibility of employing theoretical concepts developed within a western epistemological framework to promote understanding in non-western contexts as long as this is done on the basis of empirical findings. The sensibility of this rationale notwithstanding, I have my reservations for two reasons: first because the relevance of theoretical constructs is usually assessed on the basis of selective or limited discourses and observations regarding the local society and do not entirely 'shed' western metaphysics of gender and the human self. Secondly, because existing theoretical constructs may not capture parameters that emanate from the local belief and knowledge system and embodied experiences previously unsuspected by the theorist, especially non-discursive realms. Despite its unusual reflexivity and cautionary approach, Jakobsen's research did not provide a comprehensive analysis of how her interlocutors' pronouncements of wife-hitting could be located in the local cosmological framework. Moreover, this cosmological system was clearly intertwined with local religious traditions and value systems, but these intertwinements were not properly explored.

More specifically, in her study Jakobsen did not reveal the mechanisms by which the local system sustained the norms she described and whether these aligned with the interlocutors' publicly stated understandings and attitudes. Early in her work she reported being drawn to Tanzania because of the general understanding that this was a non-violent country where social harmony was valued and preserved.<sup>112</sup> Yet, she did not provide a discussion on how this ideal of social harmony related to the favourable attitudes to wife-beating that were expressed. Moreover, while she mentioned that many of her participants adhered to the Christian or Muslim faith, citing religious affiliation next to research participant testimonies, she did not elaborate on the implications of this connection for her interlocutors' attitudes about wife-beating. Why is it that some men did not participate in the performative replication of social norms, for example the "good" beating, since they existed within the same context with their male peers who did?

Were they not ‘men’ enough? How might have gender been embodied and performed by this group who did not condone or enact violence, if violence was so deeply intertwined with ‘doing’ gender? More insights could be granted through a comprehensive study of how local people conceptualised a “good man” and a “good woman” in general and not only within discourses of domestic violence in the public setting.

It is also notable that Jakobsen continued the western liberal tradition of conceptualising agency through the dual typology of ‘coercion’ or ‘complicity’, relying on Antonio Gramsci’s notions of hegemony to suggest “how the dominated become complicit in their own domination by sharing the ideas legitimating it”.<sup>113</sup> Such conceptualisations of agency have fostered tendencies in international development literature to associate agency with the subversion of gender norms and institutions that are perceived to sustain them, resulting in a preoccupation with ‘changing’ norms. As Saba Mahmood convincingly demonstrated (see below), these conceptualisations are deeply embedded in western philosophies and understandings and can misguide research in religious societies espousing different understandings of human personhood and agency.<sup>114</sup> Jakobsen cited testimonies by women who thought of wife-beating under certain conditions permitted and justifiable, but these rationalisations need not be assessed necessarily through the lenses of coercion and domination. They could result from a combination of Christian, Muslim or other beliefs co-acting with psychological, cognitive-affective and other pragmatic reasons in complex ways requiring closer study.

### *Social norms and public health approaches*

In more recent paradigms, public health scholarship on IPV has transferred attention to trans-disciplinary social norms theories in an attempt to develop more nuanced theorisations of the intersections between gender ‘ideologies’, social norms and personal attitudes conducive to IPV.<sup>115</sup> While these have considered empirical data from local societies and have engaged more directly with men, they have not eschewed problematic epistemological underpinnings that limit their application in non-western religious contexts.

In their theorisation of social norms and human behaviour, for example, Garry Mackie and co-authors differentiated between social, moral and legal norms. Social norms were predicated on what the reference group approved, moral norms were traced to the individual’s “inner sense” of what was right or wrong, and legal norms were associated with the state. Religious norms were distinguished from other norms on the basis that these invoked the divine as the source of command, although religious norms could interweave with or manifest as social, moral or legal norms.<sup>116</sup> While well-reasoned, the authors’ decision to distinguish religious norms from other norms and to associate moral norms with an “inner” sense of right and wrong suggests the strong influence of a western epistemology of religion. As I observed earlier, within paradigmatic thought, the social/public and

religious/private were dichotomised, with religion being relegated to private experience. Moreover, for much of its history religion was treated as *sui generis*, which echoes also in the authors' presumption of an "inner" moral sense. Elsewhere, Cristina Bicchieri and colleagues distinguished moral preferences from social expectations, considering the former to be non-social or personal.<sup>117</sup> This again suggests a conceptualisation of morality that is privatised. As was argued earlier, such conceptual boundaries or dichotomies may be irrelevant to communities where religious idiom underpins wider cosmologies and social ideals.

Some recent attempts have been made to refine social norms theories by evaluating their ability to shed light on the empirical realities sustaining IPV, especially in relation to discriminatory gender norms, such as Karima Manji's research in urban Tanzania.<sup>118</sup> Contrary to other theorists, Manji recognised the intertwining of religious parameters with the gender norms she studied and captured the importance of religious idiom in sustaining normative frameworks, captured in what she suggested to be faith-based gender 'schemas' or gender ideals. She provided a nuanced analysis grounded in local people's beliefs and discourses, evidencing that religious idiom mediated both social norms and private behaviour and that a separation between religious and social norms made little sense.<sup>119</sup> However, while she mentioned instances where her research participants invoked Christian or Muslim texts and traditions to justify their rationalisations and personal judgements, she did not study closely the relationships between religious discourses and lived experience.<sup>120</sup> Moreover, while a few participants invoked their faith in order to condemn gender asymmetries, such as against the expectation that a woman should do all the chores,<sup>121</sup> in her conclusion Manji focused more on the role of religious parameters in the preservation of rigid or pernicious gender norms.<sup>122</sup>

It is not unlikely that deeply entrenched assumptions about the role of 'religion' in IPV has hindered GAD and public health researchers from capturing the multiple effects of religious experience, including the more positive aspects of religious beliefs, values and embodiments on either victims or perpetrators. A more specialised literature focusing on religious communities indicates, rather, that relationships between religious world-views, gender norms and attitudes about IPV vary and depend on the specific religious tradition and how theologies develop and are articulated and embodied historically in different contexts and geographies. In general, in societies where religious systems are prominent, IPV experience cannot be appraised outside the boundaries of religious idiom.

#### *Accounting better for religious systems and the interface with human behaviour*

Available studies from religious communities around the world demonstrate linkages between individual rationalisations and positive attitudes



about IPV and religious systems of socialisation, as well as the potential of religious values and spiritual living to deter or to alleviate abuse. For example, some abusive men may have distorted understandings of religious teachings, not unrelated to the family environment they grew up in, which could make it easier for them to justify their abusiveness.<sup>123</sup> On the other hand, religious women who experience husband abuse might tend to endure and to forgive it, often as a direct result of how they understand and embody their vernacular religious traditions.<sup>124</sup> These trends have been reported in works from Catholic, Protestant and Evangelical Christian communities, but also from Muslim societies.<sup>125</sup>

In Eastern Orthodox societies, historical and political reasons may have limited the exposure of the laity to dogmatic theology. For example, referring to Russian Orthodox populations, Elisabeth Gassin has observed that

[a]lthough these cultures may be considered traditionally Orthodox, given the modern history of these lands – which includes domination by Islamic and Communist forces that often did not allow the Church to educate its children fully – one may question how deeply an Orthodox ethos has penetrated such societies.<sup>126</sup>

Moreover, Eastern Orthodox societies place equal importance on lived ecclesiastical experience, which has been preserved invoking authenticity of belief, even if the Orthodox traditions they follow might have mingled with non-Christian elements over time. In such contexts, rationalisations and attitudes around IPV and responses to it may be less attuned to Orthodox faith and more influenced by socio-cultural standards (couched or not in religious idiom), such as the urgency to preserve the honour of the family or to meet standards of proper female behaviour.<sup>127</sup> Local attitudes about IPV could reflect thus a lack of theological literacy in the community of adherents, or place emphasis on values that appear also to be prioritised within the faith (such as the family, marriage or female virginity).

In parallel, some studies have found that female victims may, in fact, resort to religious beliefs to condemn the abuse and that through their ordeals victims may acquire a more justice-oriented understanding of their faith, helping them to address the harmful situation.<sup>128</sup> Moreover, in societies where religious traditions were preceded by local belief systems, biblical influences often co-exist with other beliefs about the spiritual world, which can deter or incite violent behaviour with one's intimate partner in intricate ways, as highlighted best in Laura McClusky's work with a Mayan community in Belize that adhered to Roman Catholic teachings.<sup>129</sup> As was suggested, such acculturation effects have been stronger in Eastern Orthodox communities due to the historically accommodating nature of the faith with local belief systems, which were subsequently often subsumed or redefined by religious teachings fully or partially.<sup>130</sup>

The scholarship on religion and IPV has also demonstrated the significant role of the clergy in conjugal abuse. In general, victimised women in religious communities will tend to share their family ordeals with clergy, although they might minimise the seriousness of the situation because of shame or guilt or for other reasons.<sup>131</sup> However, the clergy's responses may be inappropriate and could contribute to a perpetuation of the harmful situation.<sup>132</sup> This may arise from the clergy's limited exposure to IPV and how best to respond, reflecting their insufficient seminary training, their own attitudes that might lead to the minimisation of the problem, their heightened sense of responsibility to preserve marriage, or their inability to apply religious teachings to either advise the victimised party or counsel the abuser.<sup>133</sup> On the other hand, it has been demonstrated that faith leaders and clergy can be positively influential and that the majority do try to support victimised parties, albeit often acting in ways that can be counterproductive.<sup>134</sup>

There is also a rising scholarship in North America that focuses specifically on the role of faith-based values and spirituality in romantic relationships. This is primarily premised on attachment theory, which holds that early childhood relations with parents mediate how children create relationships with peers and intimate partners later in life.<sup>135</sup> Adult attachment profiles are often classified as secure and insecure, with insecurity presenting both fearful/anxious and avoidant types. Individuals with anxious attachment types are generally insecure about losing the attachment figure, while individuals with avoidant attachment types consider attachment futile, downplay the importance of intimacy and prioritise their independence.<sup>136</sup> Attachment insecurity has been increasingly related to the development of personality disorders characterised by borderline traits and/or anti-social behaviour.<sup>137</sup> Similarly, it has been related to a reduced sense of empathy, which refers to the capacity to understand emotions (such as distress or pain) felt by others and to adapt to those appropriately.<sup>138</sup> The evidence base includes a study that found an association, mediated by some personality disorder, between avoidant attachment and psychological and physical violence and a direct relationship between anxious attachment and psychological violence.<sup>139</sup>

Importantly, such attachment models may be influenced by faith, which means that the latter could relate to the manifestation or deterrence of aggression. Two studies have suggested that individual reliance on and appraisal of God as an attachment figure is probably not unrelated to attachment models that individuals develop through relationships with other humans in their life.<sup>140</sup> According to these studies, individuals who have developed secure internal working models (IWMs) through their relationships with caregivers will tend to display more secure relationships to God as well. Another study found correlation between a weaker religious commitment and higher attachment avoidance in romantic relationships.<sup>141</sup> If higher attachment insecurity is related to psychological and physical violence and the latter is not unrelated to religious commitment, a weaker faith in

God may mediate some manifestation of IPV. This could point to a potential faith-based deterrence mechanism with some groups of perpetrators.

Monolithic aetiologies of IPV favouring gender-based explanations exclusively or neglecting religious parameters would not capture the aforementioned complexities or suffice to explain the complexity of IPV in religious societies. Where religious idiom is prominent in vernacular realities and where clergy or other religious figures are authoritative, religious parameters are likely to undergird human thinking in non-uniform and multi-dimensional ways, being juxtaposed in variable ways to culture-specific widely upheld understandings and norms. I submit that these complexities can be captured better if IPV is theorised on the basis of local conceptual and experiential repertoires following a multi-dimensional ethnographic approach as undertaken in this study.

### **Conducting gender-sensitive research within local religious societies**

To avoid superimposing metaphysical assumptions, gender analysis could be predicated on a more comprehensive investigation of human and gender understandings by studying cosmological systems more comprehensively. This should provide the language and concepts to theorise gender identity in reference to the local conceptual repertoires – faith-based or not – and to achieve a better understanding both of gender subjectivities and local attitudes about gender-related matters.

This suggestion does not constitute a radical departure from feminist theoretical pronouncements that have suggested enlarging the analytical lens to look at more fundamental systems of valuation from the historical *locus* or positionality of the individual consciousness.<sup>142</sup> It also parallels anthropological approaches that have been proposed in gender-sensitive religion and development studies. For example, Tamsin Bradley, echoing Ruth Pearson and Emma Tomalin,<sup>143</sup> has proposed that:

A gendered perspective on religion and development simultaneously draws out the aspects of religion that are problematic for women while also pointing to its importance in many of their lives. Specifically, by revealing the patriarchal of many, if not all, religious traditions, a gendered perspective can highlight the ways in which women find themselves disadvantaged and marginalised. Also, observing religion from a gendered perspective allows us to see how women draw on aspects of their tradition to fight the injustices they experience.<sup>144</sup>

Importantly, Bradley departed from essentialist conceptualisations of ‘religion’ and proposed that the latter should be approached as a system of values and understandings that shape everyday life.<sup>145</sup> She recognised that religious beliefs, faith and faith-based understandings can affect individuals

in multiple ways and that these need to be explored through women's perspectives anthropologically. However, her remark also evidenced that the concept of gender continued to be premised on an assumption of a fundamental patriarchal system and as an analytic for disadvantage. In addition, religious effects seemed to be still broadly appraised through a binary: as either structurally pernicious or as personally important to women.

The approach that is proposed here shares Bradley's call for more anthropological sensitivity, but it avoids presupposing a monolithically non-egalitarian valuation of gendered individuals. It furthermore understands religious parameters as inextricable from broader belief and knowledge systems whose effects, expressions and embodiments are diverse and need to be explored through a people-centred investigation. It is worth returning to some of the seminal critical studies from Africa that were mentioned earlier. In her 1997 study Oyèwùmí approached the analysis of Oyo-Yorùbá gender relations by looking closely at the world-sense of the society she investigated and conducting a study of social relations at the level of language, lineage, the institution of marriage and the market. According to her investigations,

[t]he Yorùbá case ... shows that the human body need not be constituted as gendered or be seen as evidence for social classification at all times. In pre-colonial Yorùbá society body-type was not the basis of social hierarchy: males and females were not ranked according to anatomic distinction.<sup>146</sup>

Subsequently, Oyèwùmí argued for a cultural, context-dependent interpretation of social reality, "detailing and describing indigenous African cultures from the inside out, not from the outside in".<sup>147</sup> This should reveal the kinds of classification that might exist locally, the ideologies that might foster this organisation and how these might influence gender relations.

However, while Oyèwùmí provided her readers with some idea as to why Oyo-Yorùbá cultural and social systems did not align with western worldviews, she did not present a full reconstruction of local gender understandings premised on people's every-day experience. In this sense, Bibi Bakere-Yusuf was correct to point out that there is a difference between the normative framework and how this is embodied by living people.<sup>148</sup> This limitation appears to have been overcome in another study from the African region, Saba Mahmood's ethnographic account of a women's mosque movement in Egypt.<sup>149</sup> Mahmood also attempted to address limitations in mainstreamed gender theorisations, focusing on assumptions about human agency. While she condoned Judith Butler's decoupling of agency from humanist essentialisms in the post-structuralist paradigm, she suggested that limiting agency to "those operations that resist the dominating and subverting modes of power"<sup>150</sup> obscured many other states of being and activity that could imply 'agentival capacity' for reasons that emanated



from the specific cultural matrix. She further clarified that “[t]he kind of agency I am exploring here does not belong to the women themselves, but is a product of the historically contingent discursive traditions in which they are located.”<sup>151</sup>

Mahmood’s important departure from Oyěwùmí’s approach is that she located the cultivation of norms within the human consciousness, which was not isolated from its historical context. Her close interactions with women and observations of their religious experience showed that

the mosque participants did not regard authorised models of behaviour as an external social imposition that constrained the individual. Rather they viewed socially prescribed forms of conduct as the potentialities, the “scaffolding”, if you will, through which the self realized.<sup>152</sup>

She concluded that the “ritual worship for the women I worked with, was both enacted through, and productive of, intentionality, volitional behaviour, and sentiments”.<sup>153</sup> She found useful, instead, to employ an Aristotelian “analytical language of ethical formation to describe the process of moral cultivation”.<sup>154</sup> While Mahmood located the logic of ‘agentive capacity’ in powerful traditions, by centring her analysis on the women’s embodied piety she was able to see that the discursive perpetuation of tradition did not exclude deviations from or new imparting of meaning in embodied practice.

In sum, Oyěwùmí’s work suggests that a better alternative might be to explore local cosmologies and systems holistically from within, paying attention to *whether* and *why* local beliefs have different implications for male and female individuals and understanding how this difference is perceived, justified and embodied by local communities. Mahmood’s study, on the other hand, demonstrates the need to focus on understanding modes of agency and human behaviour as these emanate from within people’s articulated worldviews and values. Evidently, such objectives cannot be met without a comprehensive anthropological study that centres on the embodied individual consciousness but is also reflexive to suspend assumptions alien to local conceptual repertoires and experiences that emanate from the epistemological situatedness of the researcher/theorist. These premises informed and confirmed the decolonial approach of this study, which is described next.

### *The study in Aksum and its approach*

According to statistical evidence, about one in three women in Ethiopia have experienced some form of spousal abuse in their lifetime.<sup>155</sup> In the last three Ethiopian Demographic and Health surveys significant numbers of men and women across the country were reported to ‘justify’ wife-hitting in certain situations, although percentages have declined over time.<sup>156</sup> While

conjugal abuse is pervasive and affects most societies in the world and Ethiopia,<sup>157</sup> the extent of wife-hitting and the asserted tolerant attitudes arouse curiosity for the region of Tigray for context-specific reasons. The indigenous Orthodox *Tāwahādo* Christianity of Ethiopia was formally embraced in the ancient capital Aksum, where the majority still adheres to this faith.<sup>158</sup> Whilst being a complex and eclectic tradition, it has, theologically speaking, upheld the dignity of men and women alike<sup>159</sup> and has aspired to the cultivation of loving relationships following divine commandments.<sup>160</sup> Additionally, Tigray served as the headquarters of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) in the civil war against the Derg regime,<sup>161</sup> in the context of which Tigrayan women were enabled to fight alongside men. It is generally agreed that this resulted in Ethiopian women's improved social status.<sup>162</sup> This religio-historical matrix would rather anticipate more disapproval of conjugal abuse in the region.

Domestic violence studies from Ethiopia offer important directions, but they have not attempted to contextualise IPV in the religio-cultural world-views and the material realities of the affected populations in ways that would help to make sense of the attitudes mentioned and to understand the mechanisms of their perpetuation in specific societies of Ethiopia. Paralleling the wider gender and development field, many of the existing studies invoke GBV explanations that consider culture or wider social norms responsible for deeming women vulnerable to men's abuse. However, they have not generally addressed the ethnographic evidence that suggests nuanced gender realities in different societies of Ethiopia, nor have they demonstrated why or how IPV is gendered (along the lines of Jakobsen's study). More importantly, many of these studies make assertive statements about the negative influence of 'religion' despite a-theological analyses that fail to be grounded sufficiently in human experience. In general, authors have not considered it necessary to reflect on how their own beliefs and biases might have informed their theoretical assumptions and to make these transparent in the research process.

In response to the attitudes and the *lacunae* in the mainstream scholarship (discussed in detail in Chapter 3), the current study employed a decolonial approach to chart the salience of gender parameters in conjugal violence in the Orthodox *Tāwahādo* community around Aksum in Northern Ethiopia, while approaching gender and conjugal abuse through the local religio-cultural framework. The specific aims of the study were to: (i) identify local people's understandings and aetiologies of conjugal abuse, (ii) explore their attitudes about conjugal abuse, and (iii) examine how these realities and attitudes related to the local material conditions and religio-cultural matrix, indicating possible linkages with Church theology, clergy discourses and embodied faith. In view of the epistemological issues that were raised, I combined reflexive and participatory ethnography with the study of theology from an insider's experiential perspective – a methodological approach that emerges from eight years of working with rural communities of Africa.

Insofar as I speak of a decolonial approach, I refer to a people-centred, multi-dimensional and context-specific analytical and theoretical approach that pays due attention to local conceptual repertoires, while making transparent to the greatest extent possible the subjectivity of the researcher in the research process. As I briefly discussed in the preface, the term decolonial signals to me the emphasis on dewesternising epistemology informed by lived praxis. However, I do not easily identify with what might be presented as decolonial discourses that assume a liberatory gender metaphysics as normative for the world.<sup>163</sup> Assuming unreflexively that critiques of heteronormativity necessarily agree with or materialise a decolonial project, assumes that gender binarism is a western construct *par excellence*, ignoring societies that uphold gender dimorphism due to their own indigenous belief systems not inherited from the West. More importantly, it ignores that any metaphysics of gender or humanity can continue colonial practices via their normativising deployment cross-culturally. As demonstrated best in Judith Butler's analysis of the use of homosexuality in western European naturalisation processes,<sup>164</sup> the language of non-normativity itself can become normativising (and thus exclusionary and colonial) through totalitarian deployment, as reproduced in gender and development practice described earlier. As long as mainstreamed gender metaphysics (such as via the paradigm of Gender and Development and the Sustainable Development Goals) deny the possibility of conceptualising gender equality without demonising a notion of gender ontology or essential humanness, which some cosmologies have historically espoused, it rather furthers the colonality that Anibal Quijano discerned within the discourse of modernity.<sup>165</sup>

Building on the critical works from Africa that were reviewed, the gender-sensitive ethnographic process employed in this study was rather premised on a concerted investigation of the local belief system to extrapolate how womanhood/manhood was accommodated within this metaphysical framework and to ascertain whether and how these perceptions became relevant to discourses of conjugal abuse. Attention was paid to how interlocutors spoke about, explained and described human individuality in their society, whether they conscientiously differentiated human individuals and on what grounds, how they perceived the relations between females and males, what normative understandings and ideals they associated with each, and where interlocutors drew their understandings and beliefs from. Prime importance was placed on individual experience and articulation to achieve an analysis of local realities emanating from the conceptual repertoire and experiential remit of the research participants.

Under similar epistemological motivations, the study suspended presuming a generic typology or definition of conjugal abuse and explored local conceptualisations, rationalisations and aetiologies engaging closely with both men and women as and where feasible. The study included intimate partner relationships that had a formal status in the local society (marriage unions regardless of the type of marriage) and those that were

publicly acknowledged but were not formalised. Furthermore, rather than approaching males as perpetrators and females as victims, the study acknowledged different forms of violence, including mutual violence arising from the relationship dynamics. In view of the existing statistical data indicating women to be the predominant victimised parties, however, extreme caution was given to designing the research methodology and conducting the research prioritising women's safety.

A cosmology-sensitive and people-centred approach was also followed to approximate the local Church tradition and faith. It was already suggested that religious traditions develop contextually and interweave with local belief systems and socio-cultural realities in complex ways. This raises the need for understanding what counts as theology locally and the conditions that have defined the repertoire of theological and exegetical possibilities within a given context through an informed insider's perspective. Within the Eastern Orthodox and the so-called Oriental Orthodox Churches, orally and vernacularly transmitted ecclesiastical practice has been valued and upheld alongside holy texts. Thus, the study of canonical texts and other materials from the Ethiopian Orthodox *Tāwahādo* Church was combined with consultations with local scholars and informed insiders and an ethnographic immersion in the vernacular religious life of the community to obtain a better understanding of its embodiments in and effects on social life.

### **Concluding thoughts**

The theoretical discussions of this chapter in combination with the methodological chapter that follows and the ethnographic experience presented in the rest of book aim to raise reflexivity about the epistemological limitations of cross-cultural knowledge production, but especially within gender and development which has had a deeply political character. By drawing attention to the influence of religious worldviews in partner violence experience and attitudes towards it, I do not aim to suggest that religious parameters are primary or always influential in human thinking and behaviour and relevant to understanding of IPV. Nor do I deny the existence of more secularised expressions and individual expressions in religious contexts (mentioned in parts of the book). My aim, rather, is to reverse the problematic ways in which the intersection of religious and gender parameters have been represented in much mainstream scholarship due to western Euro-centric assumptions and sentiments and to demonstrate what can be a more reflexive and appropriate approach to employ in societies where religious idiom is pervasive. Moreover, while I stress the epistemological situatedness of all theory, I am not against theoretical exchanges and borrowings. I rather seek to promote a context-specific approach to theory that proceeds from within local conceptual repertoires for the purpose of understanding and addressing local issues, in contrast to perpetuating universal or general theory-making for its own sake.



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