



# POLICY BRIEF

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## Leveraging the potential of religious teachings and grassroots religious teachers and clerics to combat intimate partner violence in international development contexts

### Executive Summary

The current policy brief highlights the significant potential that religious teachings and religious teachers and clerics can have in combating intimate partner violence (IPV) and how this could be leveraged by means of a case study and select published literature. It draws from findings from long-term anthropological research with communities in Ethiopia and evidence collected from a recent programme implemented by project d/d/ድልድል that engaged Christian clergy to build their preparedness to respond to domestic violence in Ethiopia. The findings from the case study suggest that theology-informed IPV trainings could enable religious teachers to become more active in IPV responses, provided that a) theological responses are embedded in the religious tradition that faith communities consider authoritative, and b) trainers are fully versed in the cultural context, theological tradition and IPV realities that the religious teachers they train are faced with in their everyday life.

### Background

Religious teachings and grassroots religious teachers and clerics are important in the everyday life of faith communities, yet they largely remain an untapped resource in efforts to address intimate partner violence (IPV) in international development contexts and among migrant and refugee religious minorities. Victims and survivors of IPV often rationalise and interpret their experiences with partner abuse through their religious lens, and perpetrators often understand their behaviour towards intimate partners and spouses in relation to religious standards.<sup>1</sup> This can both reinforce and deter IPV depending on the complex interplay of individual faith, culturally accepted gender and marriage norms, the teachings of clerics at the community level, and other psychological and material factors.<sup>2</sup>

Religious teachers often have close links to communities and are often seen as

authoritative figures on issues of marriage and life matters.<sup>3</sup> They often mediate marital conflict and problems and are approached for advice when such situations arise. However, they may not be prepared to discern the signs of IPV, they may hesitate to teach against it in public or to openly oppose norms, practices and attitudes that can contribute to the continuation of IPV and are often inclined to maintain the status quo in the realm of gender relations and marriage.<sup>4</sup>

Simultaneously, if they are equipped with sufficient theological knowledge, are reflexive about practices that are considered culturally accepted but do not emanate from religious teachings, and are aware of the psychological signs of violence and abuse and how to appropriately respond to victims, survivors and perpetrators they can become helpful in the battle against IPV.<sup>5</sup>



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### Gaps and shortfalls in international development IPV practices

Domestic violence is an international problem that sees no borders. IPV, as the most prevalent form of domestic violence, is estimated to affect about 1 in 3 women globally, who are the prevalent victim group.<sup>6</sup>

International development programmes responding to gender-based violence (GBV) and specifically IPV in low- and middle-income societies (LMICs) are not new, but it is only in the recent two decades that the sector saw a turn to 'religion', resulting in a systematic engagement with religious leaders.<sup>7</sup>

*Historically, very few international development programmes employed strategies to respond to IPV with communities' religious worldviews and culture-specific gender arrangements and conditions in mind.<sup>8</sup> Many of these interventions tended to take as their point of reference a progressive western, secularist, culturalist or other dominant paradigm to theorise and to respond to IPV.<sup>9</sup> Subsequently, GBV programmes and initiatives have at times been seen as disconnected from the complex realities of local communities and, in some cases, as imposing external ideals that threaten community value systems, provoking negative reactions.<sup>10</sup> These shortfalls are important, both in view of western colonial legacies in international development practice and the dominance of Anglo-American theory in domestic violence/IPV/GBV studies.<sup>11</sup>*

However, IPV is a problem that has a complex aetiology and requires a multidisciplinary and sufficiently contextualised analytical approach embedded in the religio-cultural worldviews, gender normative systems and material realities of specific communities and individuals.

*In order to be accepted by communities and to generate positive, transformative impact, interventions should be properly contextualised in communities' valued beliefs systems and be culturally appropriate. This does not mean uncritically or indiscriminately re-affirming culturally accepted notions and norms, but taking a sufficiently contextualised approach that juxtaposes religious traditions to cultural realities multi-dimensionally and identifies opportunities to respond to the problem in a manner that communities can more easily relate to.*

### Culturally appropriate approaches

Such approaches cannot be achieved if religious beliefs and experiences are ignored, relegated to the private sphere or are readily opposed. Nor can it be achieved if all religious traditions and their effects on the lived realities of different communities are simplistically generalised since it must be recognised that each religious tradition presents distinct teachings that have translated differently in the experiences of different cultural communities informing also different gender norms and attitudes.

Taking a culturally appropriate approach in religious societies and faith communities requires a deep understanding and appreciation of the foundational values and beliefs upheld by each community, especially in the realm of gender relations and marriage as these realms are usually directly connected to IPV. Recognising the importance and centrality of people's religious worldviews can help to understand better the positive, negative or neutral effects that religious beliefs and values have on IPV attitudes and realities, instead of assuming them. It can shed light on the relationship of religious teachings to culturally normative norms, attitudes and practices and can help



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practitioners to identify how negative effects can be counteracted and positive effects reinforced.

In summary, there is a need for interventions that confidently engage with foundational beliefs, norms and attitudes that are contributing to the continuation or tolerance of IPV. This requires practitioners to be deeply embedded in the context of specific communities and be attuned to

community and individual worldviews and normative systems.

It also requires recognising the importance of religious teachings and the need to collaborate with religious scholars where appropriate and feasible to explore what theologically-informed responses might already be in place or may have to be developed.

### Why engaging religious teachers in responding to IPV can be appropriate and beneficial

In recent years, IPV interventions engaging religious leaders and clergy have increased significantly, spanning disciplines such as social work, spiritual psychotherapy, religion and IPV studies and international development. However, this interdisciplinary evidence has yet to be streamlined in international development practice, with programmes often engaging religious actors but not the religious worldviews communities value, missing the opportunity to understand and leverage on the influence of religious beliefs in culturally normative attitudes and practices affecting gender relations, marriage and ultimately IPV experiences and responses in the community.

Here are some key arguments:

- **INFLUENCE** Religious teachers are often authoritative and respected figures in their communities. Through their teachings they can influence societal norms and attitudes around gender relations and marriage and subvert negative ideals, norms and practices that are often framed in or are presented as indistinguishable from religious discourse.
- **TRUST** Although religious teachers should not be conflated with professional counsellors they often do counsel couples either through pre-marital counselling or in their roles as spiritual

advisors and inevitably mediate when issues such as marital conflict, problems of communication, or IPV emerges in the married life. They are part of an informal response system that cannot be ignored, and at times their responses are inappropriate and need to be improved.

- **OUTREACH** Religious teachers often serve remote or marginalised communities that are not reached by international development actors, and are generally well-integrated in the realities of the faith communities they serve, and even those who may not identify as religious.
- **CREDIBILITY** In some cases, such as conflict-affected contexts, communities are distrustful of state institutions and may respond suspiciously to IPV programmes led by state parties or organisations supported by international agencies. In contrast, religious leaders tend to hold an influential position in society, especially in rural areas.
- **SUSTAINABILITY** Working with religious teachers and clerics can be more sustainable as religious institutions are rarely dependent on donor money, although some of their activities may be funded by international donors. Furthermore, they are going to continue to exist in the local community even when an externally funded project is completed.



### Further evidence that shows the effectiveness of working with religious teachers to combat IPV

A growing body of interdisciplinary evidence confirms the important relationship between religious beliefs and practices and interpersonal relationships, including IPV, and the positive outcomes that interventions engaging religious teachers can have in community-based responses to IPV.

Find select recent studies below:

- Istratii (2020) in an anthropological study from rural Ethiopia found that Ethiopian Orthodox clergy and religious teachers were trusted by men and women alike as first point of reference when they faced marital issues, and that some married men deterred themselves from violence by invoking the fear of sin and the desire to be righteous as taught by the local clergy. [Read more](#)
- Kassas et al. (2022) in a study in Lebanon that included in-depth interviews with 13 male religious leaders from various religious denominations found that the religious leaders were very much involved in addressing family related problems in the community, suggesting that providing the clergy with proper counselling training and information on referral options could strengthen responses to domestic violence. [Read more](#)
- Petersen (2016) in a study that presented the work of the South African Faith and Family Institute (SAFFI), which implemented an anti-VAWG programme employing theology-informed discourse to counter “patriarchal traditions” and using scripture to encourage mutually supportive and fulfilling models of marriage, found overall positive results on the attitudes and behaviour of the clergy involved in the training. [Read more](#)
- Le Roux et al. (2020) using data from randomised household surveys in DRC showed that engaging the community’s clergy significantly improved equitable gender attitudes and lowered tolerance for VAWG at the endline, a result that was not limited to those actively engaged within faith communities (spillover effects). [Read more](#)
- Boyer et al. (2022) in a large randomised controlled trial study from western Uganda demonstrated that religious leaders could motivate men to share power and thereby reduce violence through premarital counselling courses, achieving much better outcomes than comparable secular programmes. [Read more](#)

#### Further Reading on our Case Study

- Project d/d/ድልድል & EOTC DICAC (2022) Training Ethiopian Orthodox clergy to respond to domestic violence in Ethiopia: Programme summary and evaluation report (A Project d/d/ድልድል and EOTC DICAC collaborative programme). London: SOAS University of London, [URL](#).
- Istratii, R. (2021) Discourses and Practices of Ethiopian Orthodox Täwahedo Clergy Regarding Faith, Marriage and Spousal Abuse: The Case of Aksum in Tigray Region (prior the war). London: Working Paper 3 (English). Project d/d/ድልድል. SOAS University of London, [URL](#).



### Case Study: The approach of Project d/d/ድልድል in training Ethiopian Orthodox clergy to respond to conjugal abuse

The project trained 155 clergy of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC) – historically the largest denomination in the country – through the delivery of half-day trainings over two days, and follow-up refresher trainings six to eight months later.

The project built on extensive ethnographic research on conjugal abuse and faith in rural Ethiopia, and long-term collaboration with theological colleges to develop appropriate theological materials responding to unhelpful ideas and norms about gender relations, marriage and abusiveness accepted in the community.

The training had three components:

1. A presentation on conjugal abuse realities and attitudes in the community and the role of religious teachings by grassroots clergy in these realities.
2. An overview of EOTC teachings and patristic responses to gender-related inequalities and marital abuse.
3. A training on safeguarding principles, laws on domestic violence in Ethiopia and pastoral counselling strategies.

The qualitative evaluation of the training series revealed i.a. the following results:

- the *theological content* achieved the highest level of engagement and granted credibility to the training in the eyes of the clergy.
- the training appropriately employed the *clergy's own language* to enable them to teach more confidently in the community on gender relations, marriage and conjugal abuse.
- the *theological specialisation of the trainers* and their own Orthodox Christian backgrounds made the participants open to listening and to revisiting understandings that they may have thought to be in accordance with their religious tradition, fostering their motivation to teach more vigorously in the community and bringing about personal behaviour changes within their own marriages.
- the very *participatory and hands-on approach* of the training that combined presentation units with pair and group exercises to learn in real time, the repetition of the training a few months later and providing the clergy with a physical manual to use during and after the training were positively assessed.

#### Participants' Testimonials

*"Yes, it is useful to explain my knowledge to believers in a modern way. Also teaching in a scientific way by aligning/relating it to the spiritual (realm)."*  
(C1, W2)

*"I will teach/share the lesson I gained from the training to my wife and children. I will also teach my spiritual children."*  
(C16, W1)

*"Starting from myself, it made me an example and a person who respects my wife as well as other women in society."*  
(C10, W1)

*"Previously, there was fear to speak on the church pulpit in front of an audience. But now the workshop has given us capacity (skills) and the morale (to do so)."*  
(C3, W2)

The full dataset can be downloaded from the [UK Data Archive](#).





## Lessons learned and recommendations

1. IPV interventions that aim to bring about normative or attitudinal changes need to be **attuned to local context** and be grounded in communities' belief systems and worldviews to avoid imposing ethnocentric standards and causing negative responses.
2. A **research-based and locally-grounded approach** is necessary for understanding how religious beliefs might interact with culturally normative gender and marriage ideals, norms and practices, contributing to the continuation or deterrence of IPV, and how religious teachings and clerics can be leveraged to reverse pernicious understandings, norms and attitudes where these exist.
3. Employing religious resources and working with clerics to combat IPV is not a panacea, and requires the **accord of religious institutions** to oppose IPV, but when such engagement is appropriately contextualised and grounded in community-based research and understanding, it can be highly effective, efficient and sustainable.
4. Cooperation with religious teachers should build on a **relationship of genuine trust and respect**. Religious teachers should not be approached as 'instruments' of development organisations but should be seen as influential actors who provide the community with important spiritual services and support, which can be particularly valuable to victims and survivors of IPV.
5. **Engaging substantively with religious teachings** offers more pathways to equipping clerics with knowledge and preparedness to respond confidently to IPV in their communities and increases the likelihood that such interventions will have wider community acceptance.

### About project dIdI/ድልድል

A research and innovation project dedicated to the development and strengthening of religion-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](http://www.projectdIdI.org)



**Building Bridges  
of Faith Against  
Domestic Violence**



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