

The role of religious teachings and grassroots religious teachers and clerics in combating intimate partner violence internationally

Study overview

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.

The current study derives from findings of long-term anthropological research with communities in Ethiopia and evidence collected from a programme implemented by project dIdI/ድልድል that engaged Christian clergy to build their preparedness to respond to domestic violence in Ethiopia.

It draws from the case study, which suggests 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.

The study was conducted and published by Project dIdI/ድልድል and is re-mixed for the purposes of the current Evidence Bits in accordance with the Commons License Agreement specified under Project dIdI/ድልድል: <https://projectdIdI.org/>

The original publication in which the study was presented is as follows: Istratii, R. and Kalkum, B. (2023) Policy Brief: Leveraging the potential of religious teachings and grassroots religious teachers and clerics to combat intimate partner violence in international development contexts. Project dIdI/ድልድል, SOAS University of London.

Gaps and shortfalls in international development IPV practices

While IPV interventions engaging religious leaders and clergy have increased significantly in recent years, many engage religious actors without substantively engaging **the religious worldviews communities value**.

As a result, interventions fail to understand and leverage fully on the influence on the religious beliefs on culturally normative attitudes and practices affecting gender relations, marriage and ultimately IPV experiences and responses in the community.



Case Study: A Theology-Informed Training for Ethiopian Orthodox Clergy on Gender Relations, Marriage, and Domestic Violence in Ethiopia

Summary

The training was designed and delivered by Project dIdI/ድልድል in collaboration with the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church Development and Inter-Church Aid Commission (EOTC DICAC), the development wing of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, between 2021 and 2022. The programme trained 155 clergy of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC) through the delivery of half-day trainings over two days, and follow-up refresher trainings six to eight months later.

The programme 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 was comprised of three components, combining ethnographic, theological, legal and psychological evidence and training resources.

Qualitative evaluation of the training series revealed:

- 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.
- 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.

Participant testimonials

"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)."

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



Lessons and Recommendations

IPV interventions that aim to bring about normative or attitudinal changes need to be **attuned to the local context** and be grounded in communities' belief systems and worldviews to avoid imposing ethnocentric standards and causing negative responses.

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 and the experience of IPV and how religious teachings and clerics can be leveraged to reverse pernicious understandings, norms and attitudes where these exist.

Employing religious resources and working with clerics to combat IPV is not a panacea, and requires the **accord of religious institutions** to respond to IPV, but when such engagement is appropriately contextualised and grounded in community-based research and understanding, it can be highly effective, efficient and sustainable.

Cooperation with religious teachers should build on a **relationship of genuine trust and respect**. Religious teachers should **not be approached as 'instruments' of delivery and donor organisations** but should be seen as influential actors providing the community with important spiritual services and support, which can be particularly valuable to victims and survivors of IPV.

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.

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If you are interested in exploring new research collaborations or seek advisory services, contact our Director, Dr Romina Istratii, at ri5@soas.ac.uk.

If you'd like to join our network of partners, contact us at soasflf@soas.ac.uk.

