



# Findings from a Theology-Informed Training for Ethiopian Orthodox Clergy

## *Policy and Practice Note*

*Romina Istratii* | ORCID: 0000-0001-8083-634X

History, Religions and Philosophies, SOAS University of London,  
London, United Kingdom

*ri5@soas.ac.uk*

corresponding author

*Benjamin Kalkum*

Institute of Domestic Violence, Religion and Migration, London,  
United Kingdom

*bkalkum@gmail.com*

*Henok Hailu*

Department of Psychiatry, College of Health Sciences, Addis Ababa  
University, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

*henapsych@gmail.com*

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## Abstract

Domestic violence interventions that engage religious leaders and clergy have increased significantly in recent years, spanning social work, psychology, public health, and international development. The international evidence indicates the need for culturally appropriate and theologically informed interventions that may combine religious and secular knowledge and approaches. The current paper presents such an intervention that was implemented with Ethiopian Orthodox clergy employing ethnographic, theological, safeguarding, and legal training content. Qualitative evaluation of the pilot showed that the theological component gave the training credibility from the perspective of the participants and helped them to become more confident in teaching against domestic violence in their communities. The paper proposes the need for

developing robust evaluation strategies to better quantify the impact of theologically informed training materials and the influence of the trainers' approach and identity as a way of designing more appropriate and effective domestic violence interventions in diverse cultural and religious contexts.

### Keywords

domestic violence – clergy training – culturally appropriate responses – Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church – trainer identity

## 1 Introduction

In recent years, domestic violence interventions that engage religious leaders and clergy have proliferated, spanning disciplines such as religious psychology, public health, international development, and social work (Petersen 2009; UNDP 2014; Tomkins et al. 2015; Le Roux et al. 2020; Le Roux and Palm 2021; Le Roux and Pertek 2023; Kassas, Abdelnour, and Makhoul 2020; Istratii 2020; Istratii and Ali 2023). The increased engagement with clergy in addressing domestic violence seems to respond to two sets of evidence. On the one hand, there is an important association between religious beliefs and interpersonal relationships, including experiences of domestic violence (e.g., Cooper, May, and Fincham 2019; Aman et al. 2019; Roberts 2018; Fincham and May 2017; Stafford 2016; Hatch et al. 2016; Lambert et al. 2010). On the other hand, clergy often have an influential role in mediating marital conflict and domestic violence situations in faith communities, which can have both positive and negative implications (Istratii 2020; Nason-Clark et al. 2018).

A recent cross-sectoral literature review demonstrated a well-established practice of integrating clergy in culture-sensitive interventions in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) and, increasingly, in international diaspora communities (Istratii and Ali 2023). In many LMICs, the pervasive nature of religious idiom in social life has meant that religious experience has often been indistinguishable from cultural practice, thus contributing to rigid or unhelpful understandings and attitudes around gender relations and marriage that may underline experiences of domestic violence in complex ways (Magezi and Manzanga 2019; Shaikh 2007; Istratii 2020). On the other hand, the influence of the clergy in collective and individual life has meant that they have occupied an influential role in informing collective and individual attitudes in community life, and married life specifically (Hamid and Jayakar 2015; Nason-Clark 2018;

Istratii 2020). The international evidence that has been summarized by the first author and other collaborators in previous publications points to the need for culturally appropriate, theologically accurate training for clergy and better integration of religious and secular knowledge and approaches in domestic violence responses and services (Brade and Bent-Goodley 2009; Moon and Shim 2010; Le Roux et al. 2016; Gezinski, Gonzalez-Pons, and Rogers 2019; Istratii and Ali 2023; Istratii, Ali, and Feder 2024).

However, the influence of religio-cultural parameters and faith in gendered experiences of domestic violence and help-seeking attitudes continues to be simplistically conceptualized in mainstream gender-based violence (GBV) practice as implemented in LMICs. Historically, GBV interventions have relied heavily on ethnocentric theories and understandings of gender relations and domestic violence informed by Western cultural experiences, which were explicitly or implicitly assumed to have universal relevance, and these often portrayed religious and cultural traditions and norms as being mostly complicit in women's abuse (Volpp 2005; Istratii 2020). Although the sector has become more reflexive about this epistemological bias, ongoing structural inequalities between providers funded in the West and their LMIC collaborators often contribute to the perpetuation of such biases. For example, in a qualitative multi-stakeholder study that included faith-based organizations exploring how the "faith versus secular binary" had influenced the delivery of GBV interventions, Le Roux and Loots (2017) found a secularist bias hindering a productive engagement with faith and religious actors. A more effective approach would be one that carefully considers context-specific intersections between gender, faith, and domestic violence without assuming their relationship in a reductionist, or essentializing manner. Such an approach would need to be reflexive of the situatedness of Western theoretical frameworks and the practitioners' own epistemological and cultural bias. It would need to proceed in culturally appropriate ways that genuinely engage communities' religious beliefs and theological teachings (Olivier 2016; Ager and Ager 2016).

The current paper presents such an intervention that was implemented with Ethiopian Orthodox clergy in Ethiopia in 2021–2022.<sup>1</sup> Not unlike other countries, domestic violence is a prevalent problem in Ethiopia, with one out of three ever-married women aged 15–49 (34%) reporting having experienced physical, emotional, or sexual violence from their husband or partner, and with 63% of Ethiopian women aged 15–49 agreeing that wife-beating can be

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1 Historically, the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC) was a dominant religious institution in the country with the Orthodox population constituting a majority, although religious demographics have steadily diversified in recent decades.

justified in at least in one of the specified five circumstances (Central Statistical Agency and ICF 2017). The first author's previous anthropological research in Ethiopian Orthodox rural and urban contexts found that Ethiopian Orthodox women who experienced domestic violence did not seek help for numerous reasons, including feeling shame and fearing the risk of divorce (Istratii 2019; 2020). In Orthodox communities, it is well known that everyone is expected to have a spiritual father, a priest who supports them spiritually throughout their life. The aforementioned study, which relied on interviews with priests and lay believers, found that priests were often called to mediate conflict in the marriage, and in this context, they sometimes even confronted perpetrators (Istratii 2019, 2020; Project dldl/ድልድል 2021). Clergy were often inadequately equipped to support victims and survivors safely as they lacked sufficient theological and safeguarding training on domestic violence (Project dldl/ድልድል 2021). This needs to be appraised with consideration of the fact that traditional clergy education historically focused on the memorization of liturgical prayers (Melaku 2010; Kalewold 1970) and does not appear to have incorporated family training, a gap that has started to be addressed in some of the urban, modern theological colleges (Istratii 2019, 2020; Project dldl/ድልድል 2021).

The first section of this paper provides a more detailed discussion of the international evidence on effective clergy-centered interventions on domestic violence. It also presents the research results from an anthropological study in Ethiopia that preceded and informed the design and delivery of the clergy training series. The next section presents the intervention, which comprised a two-day training and a one-day follow-up session about six months later with numerous batches of clergy participants. It also discusses the evaluation outcomes, key learnings, and assessment results. Limitations and future research directions for theology-informed clergy-centered interventions on domestic violence are discussed in the final sections of the paper.

## 2 Current Evidence on Clergy-Centered Interventions (International and Africa-Specific)

The evidence on clergy-centered interventions for domestic violence is international and cross-sectoral and can be found in research and social work in North America, in public health and international development interventions in LMICs, including many African countries, and in other community-based research within anthropological, sociological, GBV, and religious studies. According to a recent scoping review, intervention programs involving clergy present commonalities across geographies and cultural contexts, but also some

differential needs reflecting the context in which they operate (Istratii and Ali 2023). This evidence suggests that clergy in North America and other Western high-income societies with dominant secular cultures present an increased awareness of domestic violence, a lack of trauma-centered training, and the need for continuous training to respond to domestic violence in their communities (Brade and Bent-Goodley 2009; Choi 2015; Gezinski, Gonzalez-Pons, and Rogers 2019; Levitt and Ware 2006; Moon and Shim 2010; Shaw et al. 2022; Sisselman-Borgia and Bonanno 2017 as cited in Istratii and Ali 2023). On the other hand, studies from non-Western tradition-oriented societies and LMIC contexts, including African countries such as South Africa, DRC, and Ethiopia, stress the central role that clergy have in family life and the mediation of marital problems and strategies to leverage their influence positively in domestic violence responses (Petersen 2016; Le Roux and Bowers Du Toit 2017; Istratii 2020; Le Roux et al. 2020 as cited in Istratii and Ali 2023).

The cross-sectoral evidence suggests the need for more customized, theology-specific training for clergy and a better integration of religious and secular knowledge in domestic violence interventions through the facilitation of equitable collaborations across faith-based and secular providers (Le Roux et al. 2016; Gezinski, Gonzalez-Pons, and Rogers 2019). Several studies found that clergy and religious personnel acknowledged their own needs for further training (Brade and Bent-Goodley 2009; Petersen 2009; Moon and Shim 2010; Kassas, Abdelnour, and Makhoul 2020). Other studies found that clergy were receptive to the training content and planned to incorporate it into their work (Hancock, Ames, and Behnke 2014; De Roure and Capraro 2016). However, studies that evaluated specific clergy-centered programs found a tendency among participants to forget the training content, necessitating ongoing support and retraining (Drumm et al. 2018; Kim and Menzie 2015). Within international GBV responses, a synthesis of primary data from six African countries and Myanmar focusing on faith leadership also concluded that any support for clergy would need to be sustained over time to ensure personal and behavioral change (Le Roux et al. 2016).

Despite this general agreement that clergy need to be integrated into interventions, many of the studies cited spoke simultaneously about the concern of clergy complicity in perpetuating patriarchal norms and harmful interpretations of religious teachings hindering productive collaboration with secular organizations. Numerous studies based on research or interventions implemented in LMICs evidence the difficulty for faith leaders to separate religious teachings from culture-specific gender and behavior standards (Magezi and Manzanga 2019; Istratii 2019; Le Roux et al. 2016; Nason-Clark et al. 2018). In their paper focusing on Zimbabwe, Magezi and Manzanga (2019) problematized

the patriarchal cultural context in which the Church in Zimbabwe operated and found limited pastoral leadership in promoting women's emancipation in society, including responding to GBV. Le Roux and Bowers Du Toit (2017) drew on data collected during a scoping study on the role of faith communities and organizations in the prevention and response to sexual and gender-based violence. Their study found disbelief or lack of awareness among religious leaders of the extent of GBV in their communities, a double role of religious factors in serving both as a coping system for victims and making them vulnerable as a result of misplaced beliefs about how a "good" religious person should respond to abuse, and that faith leaders were conducive to the continuation of patriarchal traditions. The blurring between theological teaching and culture-specific norms and practices within the lived experience of a community can foster tendencies among religious personnel to interpret sacred texts in a rigid manner that can contribute to the problem and its continuation (Istratii 2019; Le Roux and Pertek 2023; Nason-Clark et al. 2018).

This points to a need for both theologically versed and ethnographically grounded approaches that understand the interplay between religious and cultural factors and how these impact domestic violence experiences. A study that demonstrates this well was published in South Africa by Petersen (2017). This juxtaposed feminist approaches to responding to violence against women that had not paid the necessary attention to faith with the more effective work of the South African Faith and Family Institute. The latter was described as a multi-faith nonprofit organization that employed theologically informed and culture-sensitive discourses to counter "patriarchal traditions" using scripture, encourage mutually supportive and fulfilling models of marriage, and hold perpetrators accountable. As Petersen writes, the program's respectful engagement with clergy brought many to reflect on their own practices and discourses and to open up about challenges in their own family lives (*ibid.*). Several other programs proved effective by being culturally sensitive and spiritually based (Davis et al. 2020; Stennis et al. 2015; Hancock, Ames, and Behnke 2014).

Overall, the available literature identifies several key gaps in clergy-centered interventions for addressing domestic violence in the context of LMIC faith communities. Their effectiveness seems to be primarily hampered by the clergy's difficulty in separating religious teachings from culturally ascribed norms and accepted knowledge, despite a general openness among most clergy to the problem of domestic violence. To these authors' awareness, the existing literature has yet to systematically examine the ability of religious teachers to engage theologically with the problem of domestic violence and to

reflect critically on their own role in maintaining rigid or harmful understandings, practices, or norms, despite this shortfall being stated recurrently.

The evidence review also reveals significant gaps in measuring the effectiveness of clergy-centered programs, and specifically whether such interventions are more effective when they *integrate theological teachings*, as opposed to when they do not. Addressing this question could reveal the more specific mechanisms that make a theologically informed training approach effective and desirable with clergy, which could improve the design of future interventions. To date, the literature has also not shown sufficient interest in assessing the quality or the relevance of theological material in clergy-centered interventions of this sort. Usually, programs that are theologically informed employ materials that are considered relevant by the respective delivery teams, but the effectiveness of the specific choice of materials is not directly evaluated. Additionally, very little attention has been given to the identity of the trainer and delivery teams and their relationship to the clergy participants and their communities, although it is implied in some studies that trainers must be culturally sensitive and aware.

We designed and delivered the training series presented in this paper with these questions and gaps in mind, although we could not explore all of them in this pilot series. The aim of the current paper is to channel the program's key lessons into the current state-of-the-art evidence, especially around the effectiveness of theological content and trainer identity, and to propose directions for future research and interventions involving clergy.

### 3 Description of the Program

#### 3.1 *An Evidence-Based and Theologically Informed Intervention Design*

In contrast to programs designed on the basis of a secular sociological GBV theory, the current intervention was informed by long-term anthropological research completed with Ethiopian Orthodox communities in the region of Tigray that had explored multi-dimensionally the overlap between religious beliefs and domestic violence (Istratii 2019; 2020).<sup>2</sup> The research revealed

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<sup>2</sup> The research took place in Tigray regional state and sought to embed an analysis of conjugal abuse and attitudes toward it in the local religio-cultural and gender worldview and the participants' vernacular realities. A close study of Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo theology working with official texts and relying on interviews with theologians and Church historians in Ethiopia was followed by approximately 10 months of ethnographic fieldwork.

nanced and complex relationships between conjugal abuse, culture-specific gender norms, and religious beliefs, evidencing the need and prospect of leveraging theological teachings to counteract harmful understandings, attitudes, and norms contributing to the problem and its tolerance. The study found a community-wide implicit tolerance of domestic violence, which could be underpinned by religious connotations. These religious discourses, in which social norms were often embedded, did not appear to emanate from the official teachings of the indigenous Church, with the faithful having generally known their faith from often under-trained clergy and generation-to-generation learning, and having a skewed or limited understanding of theological teachings on marriage.

The research also documented the centrality of the clergy in teaching about gender relations and marriage and in mediating situations of conflict and domestic violence (Istratii 2019; 2020). Most rural priests opposed harmful culture-specific practices and usually mediated conjugal abuse situations favoring the victimized party, although many, often unwittingly, enforced sociocultural gendered norms that fostered situations which could turn abusive. While many clergy lacked the preparedness to respond with awareness of the complex psychology of victims, survivors, and perpetrators considering safety-related risks for the victims, others used theological language resourcefully and in ways that seemed to respond directly to rigid and pernicious attitudes in the community.

This evidence resulted in the development of Project dldl/ጵልጵል, a four-year project funded by UK Research and Innovation hosted at SOAS University of London and led by Dr. Romina Istratii. Project activities included the design and implementation of a culturally appropriate and theologically informed intervention to build the preparedness of Ethiopian Orthodox clergy. The intervention centered on juxtaposing theological teachings upheld in the indigenous Church with community beliefs and understandings that often confounded the people's "religion" with their "culture" (a separation that members of the community themselves made in the original research). Extensive time and resources went into developing and translating relevant theological content by Dr. Romina Istratii with the expert support of theology graduates in Addis Ababa that directly responded to the research results, which were

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The study engaged 244 informants, who included domestic violence and GBV experts, scholars and theologians at traditional Church schools and in the modern theological colleges, monks and nuns at nearby monasteries, clergy, members of the Sunday School Department of the Church, and lay men and women in rural and urban settings, including numerous self-identified victims and survivors of conjugal abuse.

eventually used to develop the current intervention with further input from the main collaborating organization.

### 3.2 *Program Overview and Ethical Process*

The program was delivered in collaboration with the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church Development and Inter-Church Aid Commission (EOTC DICAC),<sup>3</sup> the development wing of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. The collaboration with EOTC DICAC was sought in order to avoid duplicating the work of other Church-led programs with clergy and to ensure that the Church remained involved during all stages of the intervention, providing access to theological expertise and facilitating trust-building with the clergy. It would also ensure that Church-related institutions would directly benefit by having real-time access to the learnings and outputs of the intervention. The program lead within EOTC DICAC was the Head of Health and Social Affairs, Mr Bentamlak Gelaw, who worked under the egis of the Commissioner, Mr Yilikal Shiferaw. The program focal point and coordinator working directly with Dr. Romina Istratii was Church Teacher Mr Aklil Damtew. The program had the blessing of Abune Samuel, Archbishop of EOTC DICAC. The development of the intervention was also supported with expertise by the Ethiopian Women Lawyers' Association (EWLA), an organization that has been at the forefront of advocating for domestic-violence-related legislation in the country.

In total, seven workshops took place between May and October 2021 in the city of Debre Birhan in Amhara regional state. Participants were recruited with the support of the local EOTC DICAC office in Debre Birhan from surrounding rural areas with easy access to the city premises. The program design and implementation team, comprised of Dr. Romina Istratii, Church Teacher Mr Aklil Damtew, and numerous other team members at EOTC DICAC, in the Addis Ababa and the Debre Birhan offices, prepared an expression of interest form that clergy could fill in when they visited the local diocese office in town (e.g., for their monthly salary). Each workshop was delivered over two half-days to avoid tiring and overwhelming the participants and to ensure that they would still have time to serve their communities. The workshops

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3 The intervention was initially planned to take place in the Tigray region, the same area where the research had taken place. This was not possible due to the war that broke out in Tigray in November 2020. After a thorough assessment of the situation, it was decided to move the intervention to the Amhara region, home to a large Ethiopian Orthodox population, anticipating that despite a distinct cultural context, the importance and influence of religious parameters and clergy in marriage and the experience of domestic violence would be similar. Consideration was given to adapting the content to the local cultural context, incorporating mechanisms in the workshop design and delivery to achieve this adaptation over time.

were held in Amharic and were delivered by Dr. Romina Istratii and two independent Ethiopian trainers, Mr. Henok Hailu, a trained psychologist with an Ethiopian Orthodox theological background, and Ms. Bezawet Birhanu, a legal expert affiliated with EWLA. The delivery of the pilot series was followed by a series of “refresher” training sessions around 6–10 months after the original training (March–April 2022), which were also used as a platform to obtain the participants’ feedback many months after their original participation in the training. The series concluded with an interfaith meeting in August 2022 that brought together local government bodies and religious leaders to explore the relevance of the program to other faith communities in the vicinity and to assess pathways to sustainability.

A full ethics assessment was completed at SOAS University of London prior to the start of the project (approval code: 292-P193160/REP1022) and follow-up on ethical and risk mitigation consultations were held with EOTC DICAC to ensure the safe and effective implementation of the workshop series. Regarding participation in the workshop series, emphasis was placed on designing the program in such a manner that clergy were voluntarily recruited. Additionally, participants’ consent was obtained in local languages, using a culturally adapted template provided by SOAS University of London. Participants were presented with the terms of the consent form by the trainers in Amharic before the start of each workshop and were then handed the consent form in written Amharic to review and sign. Sufficient time was given to explain any terms in the consent form that participants didn’t know or were unsure about.

### 3.3 *Training Content and Delivery*

The workshops were comprised of three units, which were organized thematically to develop the participants’ awareness, skills, and knowledge for better responding to domestic violence in their communities. The first unit presented important findings from the ethnographic research that had been conducted by Dr. Romina Istratii to help the participants understand the interplay of religious and cultural discourses and their own role in the community and responses to domestic violence. The second unit presented the teachings of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church on gender relations, marriage, and domestic violence to enable the clergy to differentiate between theological teaching and folklore norms perceived as religious and to foster their confidence to distance themselves from norms and practices without feeling that they were deviating from the religious tradition, a major concern among Ethiopian Orthodox clergy. The training integrated relevant homilies by St. John Chrysostom, a highly venerated fourth-century saint locally known as *Qidus Yohannes Afework*, which were translated directly from ancient Greek,

the language spoken by the saint, and through the medium of Ge'ez, the ecclesiastical language of the EOTC, into contemporary Tigrigna and Amharic. This endeavor not only provided useful theological resources but strengthened the credibility of the project in the eyes of the clergy by demonstrating a commitment to their authentic faith. The third unit provided information on the legal framework of domestic violence in the country, available resources for domestic violence victims and survivors, and safeguarding advice centered on consent and confidentiality.

TABLE 1 Training content

Unit	Content summary
Unit 1: Understanding the lived experiences of domestic violence in the countryside and the role of the clergy in the continuation and deterrence of the problem	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Understandings of domestic violence</li> <li>Conjugal abuse explanations and causes</li> <li>The role of faith in marriage</li> <li>Local beliefs about <i>bahri</i> (human personality)</li> <li>The role of the clergy in the local society</li> <li>The clergy's mediation practices in marriage</li> </ul>
Unit 2.1: Theological training on Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church teachings on marriage, divorce, and domestic violence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The historical development of the Orthodox faith</li> <li>The meaning of the Orthodox faith</li> <li>EOTC teachings on man–woman relations</li> <li>EOTC baptismal differences and their theological justification</li> <li>EOTC teachings on Holy Matrimony, including the aims of marriage, age of marriage, “being one” in marriage, gender roles and divisions of labor, male headship, domestic violence, and sexual relations</li> </ul>
Unit 2.2: The Teachings of St. John Chrysostom on Gender Relations, Marriage, and Domestic Violence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>On man and woman being created alike</li> <li>On the aim of marriage</li> <li>On marriage as another way to salvation</li> <li>Against family interference</li> <li>What “to submit” really means</li> <li>What male headship really means</li> <li>On spousal abuse</li> <li>When separation is advised</li> </ul>

TABLE 1 Training content (*cont.*)

Unit	Content summary
Unit 2.3: What Makes a Good Teacher: Learning from St. John Chrysostom	Orthodox marriage and how to teach about it Listening attentively and responding sensitively Being a good example in their own married lives Understanding their limitations and working with others
Unit 3: Legal and safeguarding training to support domestic violence victims and perpetrators appropriately	Legal framework on domestic violence in Ethiopia Domestic violence referral services to be aware of How to support domestic violence victims Safety risks for victims and safeguarding protocols Understanding the psychology of perpetrators and victims and survivors How to mediate conjugal abuse situations Concrete steps to take when a victim reports intimate partner violence Concrete steps to approach a perpetrator

In terms of format, the presentations were intercut by group discussions and pair and group activities for the participants to learn in real time and to share experiences. The workshops also served further research purposes by collecting feedback from the participants to enhance the workshop delivery during the pilot phase.

The refresher training sessions were an abbreviated version of the pilot workshops and focused on the main points from all three units, prioritizing the theological component and the Church's teachings on gender relations, marriage, and domestic violence, and appropriate pastoral approaches for supporting domestic violence victims. These stressed the importance of asking appropriate and nonjudgmental questions to understand the conditions of women who approached clergy for advice, respecting confidentiality, and asking for consent before taking any action. The refresher training sessions were followed by a focus group discussion with the participants on the program's outcomes and its future.

During the workshops, the trainers always proceeded with humility and understanding and avoided criticizing the clergy for any lack of knowledge or complicity in blurring religious teachings and cultural norms. The trainers, rather, carefully demonstrated these shortfalls through case studies and testimonials from the ground, as well as scenario exercises. Still, the trainers were very outspoken and confident in communicating the Orthodox theology on gender relations and marriage based on the concepts of oneness and sacrificial love, unequivocally addressing incorrect or incomplete understandings such as around male “headship” and wife “submission” that emerged in community research and during workshop discussions.

**3.4 Participants**

In total, 155 participants took part in the training, and were selected based on the expressions of interest that they had completed voluntarily. Inter alia, the forms asked interested clergy to identify their years of training, experience, previous exposure to GBV training, and number of spiritual children they advised. Among the participants, the majority were priests and deacons, and a few were theology graduates and Church teachers. It was decided by the program team to intentionally recruit clergy with many spiritual children to increase the prospective impact of the intervention.

In terms of previous training, most of the participants had training in liturgical songs and prayers, reporting limited exposure to theological and exegetical training. Only in two cases was training in theological commentary achieved in the higher levels of traditional Church education mentioned as part of the participants’ background. It is notable that many stated they had received other gender-related training through either the Church or secular providers.

TABLE 2 Participant profiles

Workshop no.	Age (average)	Age (range)	Years in service (average)	Years in service (range)	No. of spiritual children (average)	No. of spiritual children (range)
2	44.3	35–65	25.5	13–40	67	3–200
3	46.8	23–66	28.5	7–50	103.8	8–250
4	43.3	28–65	21	3–42	14.6	0–84
5	47.7	32–67	27.2	9–45	41.7	12–200
6	45.5	35–65	23.8	3–45	125.8	5–250
7	44.75	30–55	23.7	5–40	144.5	6–300

### 3.5 *Program Recruitment and Assessment Methodology*

The workshops integrated a pre-workshop information sheet and a post-workshop assessment questionnaire that participants were asked to complete before and after the workshop. Additionally, direct verbal feedback was collected in group discussions after the refresher training sessions. Several limitations could be noted in the intervention's recruitment and assessment method.

The recruitment forms that participants filled in were developed in an effort to depart from the standard practice of recruiting participants through local administrators, which has often been forced and top-down. We instead sought to attract clergy who understood the aims of the workshops and had an interest in the topic of domestic violence, anticipating that they would benefit more from its content. Hence, it is not unlikely that clergy with very conservative or unhelpful views about gender relations, marriage, or the religious tradition – who should be prioritized in such interventions – did not come forward. Still, the rather large sample and diversity of age, education, and theological views represented in the pilot suggests that if such a bias existed, it was rather small. Additionally, the first author's anthropological research engaging clergy and additional discussions with the delivery partner, EOTC DICAC, suggested that most clergy were generally open to responding to domestic violence, even if some may have lacked awareness about the extent of the problem in the community.

Moreover, as was noted, within the traditional Church education system, significant portions of the clergy's training have been based on oral learning and memorization. The implication here is that a written evaluation format might not be the most appropriate with rural clergy. Akin to this challenge, a few participants chose not to answer all the questions asked in the form, and some gave ambiguous, incomplete, or unclear responses. Reasons could have been: a lack of time to respond to all the questions, not understanding the question well, or not having an answer at the time of the workshop's completion and choosing to wait until later to assess the workshop's effectiveness. This recognition informed our subsequent decision to conduct oral discussions following the refresher training sessions. While the open format of these discussions may have hindered some from speaking their minds openly, this was probably minimal as the perspectives shared were diverse and even at odds with each other.

## 4 Results of the Program Assessment

### 4.1 *Team Observations*

The first unit of the training that discussed the complex relationship between religious tradition and people's cultural norms was especially welcomed by the participants, evidencing that many of the clergy in the room needed instruction in theological commentary. Such discussions succeeded in communicating to the participants the problem and, by the end of this unit, participants were eager to move to the theological component of the training. This was undoubtedly the most substantive part of the two-day training session and each time captivated the participants, who vigorously nodded when the trainers clarified theological teaching on misunderstood notions. Its effect became evident almost immediately in the group exercises, where participants started to apply the teaching material and repeated many of the explanations offered by the trainers in their own presentations. The third unit of the workshop that covered the legal framework on domestic violence in the country included 30–45 minutes of Q&A with a female legal expert recruited with EWLA's help that often achieved the highest interactivity on the part of the clergy participants, evidencing that many of the marriage-related problems they were called to mediate raised legal questions.

The exercises and group activities were effective in eliciting participants' thoughts and experiences, encouraging communication and real-time learning. Such exercises were intended to help the participants realize that they often faced similar issues and that they might identify better responses if they took the time to consult with each other. It is important to note that clergy generally felt reserved to share their thoughts or questions with their peers, which likely reflects religious and cultural standards of behavior and their own theological training. We noticed this reserve especially with clergy participants who were very young and new in their post, were less theologically educated, and not as confident as those with a Church education or modern theological education background, as well as older clergy who had been socialized and trained to be extremely reticent and humble, as is the norm in traditional Church education. Bringing together different generations of clergy seemed to have a positive effect, as younger participants proved more confident in speaking up and engaging the trainers in discussions, pushing the trainers to elaborate on crucial points, which likely proved beneficial also for the more reticent participants.

#### 4.2 *Participants' Assessment of the Training Content*

In their feedback, participants mentioned that domestic abuse and marital problems were extensive in their communities and that they often felt that they needed to know more in order to respond effectively. They, thus, welcomed this type of training, as they felt that it was tailored to their needs and realities. Numerous comments suggested that unit 1, which provided an ethnographic perspective into the lived experiences of the community, echoed their own realities and experiences, confirming the accuracy of the research findings. Many participants spoke about the centrality and foundational role of marriage in society and noted that the project had understood this, providing an appropriate approach to responding to related problems. Hence, the homilies of St. John Chrysostom on marriage were arguably the most popular with the clergy. Time and again, participants stated that this Patristic knowledge prepared them to respond better to marital issues in their communities.

For others, the explanation of the meaning and the aims of marriage in the Orthodox faith were found especially useful, including the faith's comparison of the conjugal expectations to Christ's relationship to the Church. Many participants spoke about the worldly and non-spiritual way marriage was increasingly experienced and a lack of understanding in the community about the spiritual aims and benefits of marriage. They spoke about the tendency among believers to erroneously identify marriage with procreation, leading to many divorce cases where children were not born. They thought that the training they were given could help them to instill in the faith community a newly found commitment to address the challenges of married life in unity and spousal love.

Other participants noted the importance and usefulness of unit 3, which discussed the country's legal framework on domestic violence, and yet others appreciated the guidance offered on counseling and domestic violence services available for the clergy to signpost victims and survivors.

Regarding the method, numerous participants appreciated what they described as a bridging of a "modern" or "scientific" training method with Church theology and pastoral work. Numerous participants proposed that the content and format of the workshop could become a model to advance knowledge on the topic within the Church, comparing it positively to more traditional types of training that they had been previously exposed to. Other participants spoke about the usefulness of the training booklets, which had been handed to them at the start of each workshop to use as a permanent resource with their spiritual children. Invariably, participants agreed that the training should continue to be delivered in the same manner and, if possible, every month for the same clergy. It was proposed that the training should cover

more topics and be extended to other stakeholder groups and be streamlined in Church-related work.

### 4.3 *Effects on Participants*

All the participants who responded stated that they felt more prepared to discuss issues of marriage, conjugal cohabitation, and domestic violence with spiritual children. They also consistently reported that the workshops had changed and improved their responses to domestic violence, including how to respond to victims and perpetrators better, how to teach about marriage in reference to the Holy Bible, how to leverage on both a legal/scientific and a theological perspective, and strategies to resolve conflict and marital issues. Many admitted that while they had awareness and knowledge before the training, the workshop helped them to become more confident in teaching others and to identify concrete strategies to respond to issues faced by couples, as illustrated below:

It has improved me. It has also given me a good knowledge and understanding. Violence that occurs between couples can be corrected and even prevented through counseling and the teachings of the Church. (P10, W5)

Many were subsequently more likely to acknowledge that the problem of domestic violence could not be resolved by them alone with spiritual mediation and to recognize the significant role of psychological parameters in marital issues and domestic violence as emphasized by the trainers during the workshops, as illustrated in the answer below:

In order to prevent violence between couples, a person should give advice, if that fails to work, then we must notify the concerned body. (P6, W4)

Furthermore, participants felt that the workshop helped them to change their perception about their own role in addressing societal problems and to recognize better the importance of being a “good” example in their personal marriages. Some reported that they were more cognizant of the need to advise spiritual children carefully, taking the necessary time to help them to address marital problems and not rushing them into quick decisions. Numerous participants articulated an increased empathy and understanding of themselves and others, as in the case of the participant below:

It has also helped me become a forgiving person. Before the training, I used to say, “someone said this [to] me ... I am mad at this person ... why would someone think like this?” and [I would] become sad. I have learned that every person has their own shortcomings, that we all need to put our trust in God and that we can always solve things through time. I do not only need to understand my own problems, but the problems that others are experiencing as well. I have learned to think that people may be under the influence of their environment, family, neighbors, and such. (P1, RT2)

The feedback collected during the refresher training suggested long-term effects, such as changes in some of the participants' personal understanding and behavior. A participant stated, for example, that the workshop enhanced their desire to be a better example in their own married life. Others expressed a renewed sense of duty to teach against domestic violence for fear of not meeting the expectations of their priesthood in the eyes of God.

The refresher workshops, more concretely, evidenced areas in which participants had integrated the theological training to respond to harmful norms and attitudes in the community. One example regarded the holiness of marriage without children, which the trainers had emphasized through the teachings of St. John Chrysostom and the Church. Participants appeared to have integrated these teachings into their own explanations to the faith community, suggesting that the training content had been effectively put to use in some cases.

Nonetheless, the assessment questionnaires and the discussion groups suggested that certain participants may have misunderstood important points made in the workshop, which reinforced the need to repeat the training and to ensure that such misunderstandings were properly addressed. Other comments showed that a few participants continued to think around certain issues in a more conservative or acculturated manner. For example, on the issue of separation (spouses living separately if abuse occurs, but without divorcing), some clergy were still unable to envision situations where a separation might be acceptable.

## 5 Discussion and Recommendations for Future Research

The assessment results reinforce previous study findings that clergy training tends to be more effective when it is repeated and when participants are provided with support over a longer period (Le Roux et al. 2016; Istratii and Ali 2023). They also confirm the need to engage clergy in difficult conversations

in a culturally appropriate manner. The assessment results from this intervention showed that the theological orientation of the training generated confidence in the participants to teach against domestic violence in the communities and even inspired several participants to reconsider their own behavior in their own married lives and spiritual mediation. This impact was not possible to measure as the evaluation approach was not designed to capture the training's effects on clergy's spouses and their spiritual children.

One of the few studies available that more robustly assessed the impact of a clergy-centered intervention in comparison to a control group was the evaluation of the Korean Clergy for Healthy Families program presented in Choi et al. (2019). The authors conducted a randomized controlled trial to assess the effects of a training module delivered to Korean American faith leaders in a southeastern state of the USA (with  $n=27$  being randomized to the intervention group and  $n=28$  to the control group), showing that the intervention group significantly improved their knowledge of resources and enhanced attitudes against intimate partner violence at the three-month follow-up.

The impact on the wider communities served by clergy is more difficult to assess, which is generally a gap in the literature on faith-sensitive interventions. Moreover, in most studies, the focus is placed on what worked and less so on the challenges or limitations faced, which we have tried to incorporate in this paper. Additionally, much of the available evidence is qualitative, which makes it difficult to generalize the findings, although important exceptions do exist. Boyer et al. (2022) were able to demonstrate by implementing a large randomized controlled trial that religious leaders in western Uganda could motivate men to share power with their spouses and thereby reduce violence through pre-marital counseling courses. The results showed that the program shifted power from men to women and reduced intimate partner violence, comparable with more intensive secular programs. In another study, Le Roux et al. (2020) presented an evaluation of a three-year intervention that addressed violence against women and girls and sexual violence in DRC by means of engaging with communities of faith and their leaders. At both baseline and end line, data were collected from male and female members of randomly selected households in 15 villages. The study showed significantly more equitable gender attitudes and less tolerance for violence against women and girls at the end line, while the positive effects of engaging clergy in DRC were not limited to those actively engaged within faith communities. A third study evaluated a program implemented in Liberia that trained Christian and Muslim faith leaders to challenge harmful faith and customary beliefs and attitudes in the community by means of a GBV prevention and response toolkit that reportedly included a theological framework (Le Roux and Pertek 2023). The data

collected on the usage of the GBV toolkit suggested that the effectiveness could be improved, although the specific impact of integrating a theological framework was not directly assessed.

As discussed in the literature review section, relatively limited attention has been paid to the specific approaches and materials used to engage faith leaders, even though this seems crucial for achieving effective engagement with clergy, and by extension the faith communities they serve. Our argument, informed by the pilot presented in this paper, is that the more relevant the theological content is to the everyday conditions and needs of faith leaders, the more effective the training is likely to be. Moreover, our experience suggests that accurate theological teaching that is culturally appropriate can reduce the risk of resistance or mistrust among clergy. In the current project, we specifically placed an emphasis on the importance of religious beliefs, experiences, and mediation in domestic violence experiences and the theological gaps of the clergy that were identified in prior research. Not surprisingly, the participants identified the theological unit as the most helpful for them, granting them the theological and exegetical material and the needed confidence to teach their communities. It would be desirable in the future to replicate the approach in a controlled environment to establish the impact of each training unit and the theological component more robustly, and to compare the outcomes when a more secular approach is taken.

Another important factor that has received hardly any attention in the literature is the effect of the identity and positionality of the trainers in the delivery of clergy-centered programs in the cross-cultural context. In the current intervention, the trainers were practicing Orthodox Christians (albeit from different historical Churches), and they all had an understanding of local life either as indigenous members of the communities engaged, or as researchers with long-term research experience and deep bonds to the faith community. This seemed to make their acceptance easier among the clergy, while the knowledge of Orthodox theology by Dr. Romina Istratii and Mr Henok Hailu made the trainers credible in the eyes of the clergy, which earned them respect. During the workshops, the trainers always proceeded with humility and never presented themselves as “experts,” but rather as students of theology and as professional researchers whose motivation was to be of help to the clergy through research. Based on such observations, and our own experience building trust with the collaborating organization and the clergy, we propose that the identity and personal behavior of the facilitators may be an equally important factor for determining how an intervention with clergy will be received. In a postcolonial, decolonial or secular development context, faith communities and clergy may be especially cautious of trainers or groups that are seen as “external” to their community, cultural context, or religious traditions. Hence,

ensuring that the team included respected indigenous theologians and practitioners, including religious teachers in the collaborating organization, and that external team members were humble in their approach and grounded in local realities became essential. Future studies should develop evaluation mechanisms that can account for the trainers' identity and their interactions with the participants in such interventions.

At the larger scale, the project seemed to overcome actual and perceived secular and religious divides that are documented to create barriers for productive collaboration. Project dldl/ጵልጵል specifically set out to integrate secular and religious conceptual frameworks into the analysis of domestic abuse and to work with theology as understood and experienced in the local cultural and ecclesiastical context. As a research and innovation project it was able to take a flexible, multidisciplinary, theologically and culturally informed approach, which may not be easily transferable to the international development sector as a whole, which is known to be characterized by rigid donor environments, relatively short timelines for project implementation, and highly bureaucratic organizational cultures. More reflection must be given to the long-term nature of faith-sensitive interventions on domestic violence engaging clergy and communities, but especially to the need for sufficient contextualization and knowledge of local religious traditions to achieve trust-building. This should raise questions about who is most appropriate to deliver such interventions, and seems to point to the importance of collaboration and genuine co-creation between specialists in Western societies (who often have access to more funding for designing such programs and may have partial expertise) and indigenous organizations that have the established credibility, trust, contextual knowledge and religious expertise to review and refine such programs and to introduce and deliver the training to clergy in their own communities.

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### Research Ethics

A full ethics assessment was completed at SOAS University of London prior to the start of the project (approval code: 292-P193160/REP1022) and follow up ethical and risk mitigation consultations were held with EOTC DICAC to ensure the safe and effective implementation of the workshop series. Regarding participation in the workshop series, emphasis was placed on designing the program in such a manner so that clergy were voluntarily recruited. Additionally, participants' consent was obtained in local languages, using a culturally adapted template provided by SOAS University of London.

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