

Exploring possibilities for an inter-faith training on domestic violence involving Christian and Muslim clergy in Ethiopia and Egypt

Study Overview

The role of religious leaders and clerics in mediating marital conflict and responding to domestic violence in religious communities is well-established. Many clergy engagement programmes target clergy from specific religious traditions and cultural communities. Some trainings take a more generalist approach (or a "world religions' perspective) that sees all faiths as similar, and subsequently also their relationship to domestic violence. A limitation with approaches that are faith-specific is that, by design, they cannot easily be generalised beyond the community they are created for. On the other hand, a generalist approach often homogenises religious traditions and the role of religious teachings in domestic violence. The evidence on effective inter-faith training approaches is limited to non-existent, although authors have proposed the potential of a scriptural approach in Christian and Muslim settings.

The question of whether an inter-faith approach should be favoured over a faith-specific approach has not been given sufficient attention. This was interrogated in a research study in Ethiopia and Egypt that involved qualitative interviews with directors and gender staff of Christian and Muslim faith-based organisations in Ethiopia (n=5) and directors, organisational staff and activists working with Muslim (and in some cases Christian) clerics in Egypt (n=4).

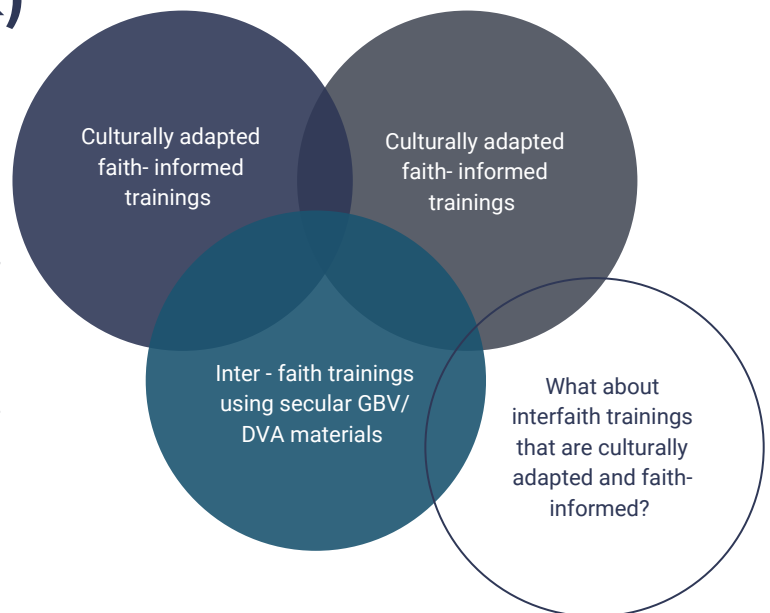
The study aimed to a) identify the distinct characteristics of faith-specific and inter-faith training approaches to domestic violence in each study context, and b) explore the extent to which an inter-faith training for Christian and Muslim clerics could be successful, and what such an approach would look like. The results and implications are presented in the current brief.

The study was conducted by Dr Romina Istratii and Dr Mahmoud Ali Gomaa Afifi with the funding support of an [Interfaith Collaboration Prize 2022](#) awarded to the authors by the [Ginkgo Library](#), a UK-based charity that works to improve mutual understanding between the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and the West. The results were presented at the SOAS University of London webinar '[Findings from a study on domestic violence training approaches involving clerics in Ethiopia and Egypt: Exploring an inter-faith training approach for Christian and Muslim clerics](#)' on 3 October 2024, which are reproduced for the purposes of this brief with permission from the authors.

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Types of training approaches (authors' conceptual framework)

- Culturally adapted faith-informed training approaches responding to the needs, standards and norms of specific communities (these may or may not employ theological teachings)
- Culturally adapted trainings using secular gender-based/domestic violence materials (where religious beliefs are usually subsumed into 'culture')
- Inter-faith trainings using secular gender-based/domestic violence materials (where these may or may not be culturally adapted)



Study participants' suggestions for achieving an effective inter-faith approach

Integration of a research-based approach attuned to lived realities of violence

In both countries, practitioners engaging in clergy trainings understood the importance of integrating a social scientific or research-based approach that paid attention to the lived realities of domestic violence on the ground.

Inter-faith and faith-specific aspects to training

Trainings that brought together Muslim and Christian clerics in both contexts generally avoided engaging participants in theological discussions or debates to minimise the risk of creating divisions.

Many participants advised that trainings could have both inter-faith and faith-specific aspects: they could include secular or generalist training for all groups (secular gender-based/domestic violence (GBV/DVA) language, counselling training, etc.) and faith-specific theological training that would be led by theological experts/trainers in each religious community.

Building trust in inter-faith trainings

Participants believed that an inter-faith training approach could benefit from starting with clerics sharing their lived experiences responding to issues of marriage and domestic violence in their respective communities. They believed that this could help to make each side see the other as more 'similar' than different (as often assumed), build trust and come closer to act together.

Inter-faith facilitation through faith-specific dialogue

Some argued that clerics from the same religious tradition would first need to arrive at a collective intra-faith understanding of domestic violence before seeking to facilitate inter-faith discussions with other religious communities and identifying an inter-faith response.

Towards an interfaith response to domestic violence:

Study implications

Developing the general and the particular in inter-faith resource

An appropriate inter-faith training approach might be to produce a roadmap or guidance sheet that trainers and practitioners working with clerics could use to be guided in their trainings but leave the development or identification of the precise contents of the training to each faith community to decide on and develop.

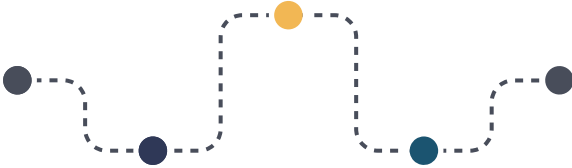
The roadmap could identify key principles, such as a commitment to anti-violence, human dignity and justice, providing the clerics in the training with space to discuss which of these are most important and agreeable.

Based on these internal conversations, trainers recruited from each faith community could, in collaboration with religious scholars and theology experts, do their own contextualisation as relevant and appropriate to their communities and identify resources and religious structures to engage each faith-community through.

Any inter-faith approach must pay attention to existing polarisations

Polarisations between different Christian Churches and/or Islamic religious traditions where one has historically been dominant, and polarisations between religious traditions on the one hand and feminism(s) and human rights language on the other.

To overcome such polarisations, intra-faith discussions are recommended to take place first to build internal consensus before moving to inter-faith dialogue.



Prerequisites to any inter-faith training approach for clerics on domestic violence

1.

Navigating the identity landscape

Understanding of the politico-religious context, divisions and polarisations along ethnoreligious lines, and perceptions about feminist movements (especially those associated with Western liberal societies).

2.

Understanding authoritative positions on domestic violence and doing necessary intra-faith work

Mapping available responses to domestic violence within each faith community and authoritative religious discourses. Holding internal discussions to identify agreed responses to domestic violence and the appropriate use of teachings.

3.

Creating spaces for inter-faith dialogue, peacebuilding and mutual understanding

Bridging Christian (of multiple traditions and denominations) and Muslim clerics together to build trust and mutual understanding, as a way of overcoming identity-based divisions but also misconceptions or biases that one may have of the other.

4.

Bridging clerics together for interfaith training on domestic violence

Trainings should be centred on lived experiences of domestic violence in the community, and clerics' own challenges and lessons from responding to the problem. They could combine generalist training components (safeguarding, counselling, legal) and faith-specific theological training as deemed appropriate. Suitable trainers should be selected for either of these components.

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