

Madinah House

More than just a shelter

Madinah House in Trinidad operated as a shelter from domestic abuse for 20 years. Upon its closure, former board members Dr Amina Ibrahim-Ali from the University of West Indies and Nura Amina Ali, formerly of the Children’s Authority of Trinidad and Tobago, undertook a systematic investigation, documenting the day-to-day running of this Caribbean safehouse, as well as revealing more about the challenges faced in establishing a shelter for women. The research offers guidance on policy development for domestic violence and serves as a blueprint for the establishment of shelters for victims of gender-based violence.

Madinah House in Trinidad was opened in 1999 to provide much-needed care and protection for women and children who had experienced gender-based violence and abuse. This Caribbean safehouse, run as a not-for-profit company by a group of Muslim women, was first established by the organisation, MusServ (Muslims in Service). The initiative came from Guidance Officer at the Ministry of Education of Trinidad and Tobago, Gayaz Rajab, also a member of MusServ. In the interest of safety, the shelter’s location was kept hidden from members of the public. The shelter remained open for 20 years, during which time it housed more than 1,200 women and their children. During its years of operation, Madinah House was recognised through many awards, from the Network of NGOs of Trinidad and Tobago for the Advancement of Women

and by the State for community service. In 2019 Madinah House closed due to insufficient funding. Government grants ceased after 2014, and private donations and fundraising activities could not sustain the income required to both run and maintain the shelter.

Authors Dr Amina Ibrahim-Ali and Nura Amina Ali collated rich data by examining information from letters, journals, files, and interviews. They undertook a detailed review to provide much-needed research relating to safe homes and gender-based violence in the Caribbean. There is a lack of safehouses in the Caribbean and those that exist are often underresourced. One of the main issues is lack of government funding, and many shelters engage in fundraising activities and seek support from the private sector. The researchers hope their review will occasion a greater understanding of the circumstances of women who have endured violence and abuse, and showcase the key interventions which are needed to keep women and their children safe.

NARRATIVE REVIEW

Ibrahim-Ali and Ali have taken a narrative approach to their review of Madinah House. Having both served as executive board members at the shelter, they were already familiar with many of the issues and needs of a safehouse. Their research addresses four key questions relating to the shelter’s structure, occupants, individual circumstances, and services that were offered. The researchers were granted access to client files containing detailed personal information, including finances and medical information relating to the abuse they, the clients, endured. Clients also provided supplementary life story and biographic information which

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medical needs. Following registration clients were offered refreshments, pain medication, and given space to make themselves comfortable. After a three-day rest period, clients were expected to undertake light chores

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revealed issues that were specific to the cohort of women who stayed at the shelter. Interviews were also undertaken with three former shelter managers, one of whom had been a former occupant of the shelter some years prior.

STRUCTURE AND OPERATIONS

Madinah House used all three of its floors which could house seventeen clients, but which had the capacity to accommodate up to twenty women when needed. In the first storey of the shelter there was a sitting area, dining room, kitchen, washroom, and office. Upon their arrival, clients were welcomed by the matron who would run a quick background check and establish any

such as childcare, cleaning, laundry, and helping to cook meals.

The second storey of the building contained three bedrooms, a bathroom, and a sitting area. There was a small hallway that could be converted into temporary accommodation if needed. The basement was an area where clients and their children could undertake recreational activities. It contained a playroom and library, where school tutoring took place. In this section of the building there was also a room for counselling, as well as storage for the shelter’s supplies. At the back of the safehouse was a garden where clients could relax and their children could play.

SERVICES OFFERED

A variety of services were offered by staff at Madinah House. Board members and managers regularly participated in training and they were equipped to educate the public about domestic violence. One of the main services offered at the shelter was counselling. An external family counsellor provided individual sessions to clients and their children. The counsellor also helped to train board members who undertook phone counselling. As stays were relatively short, clients were not

always able to complete their personal counselling plan. However, they could continue to receive therapy after leaving the shelter through local charities.

During their stay, staff tried to encourage the empowerment of female clients through support groups. Matrons asked clients to host groups sessions around hobbies or skills that they could share, such as arts, beauty, cooking, and exercise. Clients actively looked forward to these sessions, which served as a distraction from the trauma they had experienced.

While mothers stayed at the shelter, it was important for their children to be able to continue their education.





Run as a not-for-profit company by a group of Muslim women, *Madinah House* operated as a shelter from domestic abuse for 20 years.

The shelter supported their transfer to local schools and even provided transportation and uniforms. For children who were at the shelter on a more temporary basis, tutors were provided.

Madinah House also focused on the relocation of clients, helping with the transition from shelter to private accommodation. Clients were given two months of rent payments and helped with the cost of food and medicine. A transition home was based next to the shelter to ease the process of moving into independent accommodation. Pro bono legal advice was given to clients who wanted to go through the process of divorcing their partner and the shelter would even help with transportation to court. Passage to hospital and medical facilities was also supported and staff would stay with sick patients to ensure their safety.

being the most prominent, followed by Mixed and African. The majority identified their religion as Christian. A substantial proportion of clients were unemployed, but those with jobs worked in a range of professions, from beauty to soldier training. Medical records gave further information about the clients' injuries and hospital stays. Upon arriving at the shelter some women had visible signs of abuse such as bruises, burns, cuts, and missing teeth.

All the clients who sought refuge at *Madinah House* have endured and witnessed acts of domestic abuse. Often, alcohol and drug abuse was present in their home environment. Some of the younger women were victims of incest or abuse from family members. Predominantly the violence was inflicted by males but occasionally it was due to female family members. There were many differing stories of

CHALLENGES ENCOUNTERED

The researchers highlighted many challenges and barriers to providing support to women during the running of the shelter. One of the main barriers was lack of cooperation from the police. Without their support, clients were unable to have safe transit to court hearings. In some instances, police were liable for breaking their trust and confidentiality by revealing the shelters' location to partners. Location of the shelter was another challenge in itself. Being close to the street meant that locals were aware of the shelter and due to being lit up late at night there was little privacy surrounding the shelter's operations. Another major challenge, which led to the eventual closure of the shelter, was a lack of funding. The shelter was responsible for the cost of staffing, counselling, utilities, groceries, toiletries, medication, transportation, and repairs.

At times, there was also known to be a disconnect between the board members and the staff at *Madinah House*. This was due to board members lacking first-hand experience in the daily running of the shelter. There were also conflicts between the clients and the staff. Clients were often not prepared for the strict rules during their stay such as no smoking, alcohol, nor mobile phone use. Enforcing these rules often led to strained relationships between staff and clients.

Ibrahim-Ali and Ali's review of *Madinah House* gives a deeper understanding of the undertaking required to run a safehouse for domestic abuse victims. By recounting the experiences and challenges faced to keep women

in Trinidad and Tobago safe, the researchers are helping to address the lack of research in relation to gender-based violence in the Caribbean. Ultimately, their work offers a guide for policy development in domestic violence and serves as a blueprint for the establishment of shelters for battered women and their children.

DEMOGRAPHICS AND CIRCUMSTANCES

Records from 422 clients helped establish the demographics of the shelters' occupants. The most common age range of clients was 23 to 30 years old, the numbers decreased with each successive age range. There was a variety of ethnic backgrounds with East Indian

abuse. One woman had witnessed her common-law husband kill her own sister. Another said that her husband and father-in-law hit and cursed her. There was often controlling and possessive behaviour which led to the violence. It was common for abusers to have multiple relationships and clients often spoke of their partners' infidelity.

The researchers hope their review will bring to light a greater understanding of the circumstances of women who have endured violence and abuse, while helping to support key interventions to keep them safe.



Behind the Research



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Research Objectives

Dr Amina Ibrahim-Ali and Nura Amina Ali undertook a systematic investigation of the operations of *Madinah House*, providing much-needed data about the nature of violence against women, the relationship between them and their abusers, and the consequences of their victimisation.

Detail

Bio

Amina Ibrahim-Ali (Spanish, TESOL, PhD Linguistics) coordinated ESL at the University of the West Indies St Augustine campus for seventeen years. She was instrumental in establishing, then managing the IELTS test centre on the university campus. She currently teaches the Academic Literacies Programme Foundation courses.

Nura Amina Ali (LLB, LEC) was admitted to the Trinidad and Tobago bar in 2015. She has worked as a legal associate at the Children's Authority of Trinidad and Tobago and has since migrated to Canada where she is currently sitting exams to become certified as an Attorney in Ontario.

Funding

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References

Ibrahim-Ali, A, Ali, NA, (2022) Escape to safety: Seeking shelter from domestic violence—The case of *Madinah House* (1999–2019). In: Bissessar, AM, Huggins, C, (eds) *Domestic Violence in the Anglophone Caribbean*. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham. doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-88476-5_10

Personal Response

How can your research be used to help improve the provision of services for women who have endured gender-based violence in the Caribbean?

“ This research project taps into confidential data to reveal histories of woman of differing races and religions who experienced some sort of family violence in Trinidad and Tobago. Documenting how *Madinah House* functioned over the period of twenty years to successfully protect these women and their children during a most crucial juncture of their lives and to reintroduce them into society serves as a blueprint for other such establishments. Understanding these histories and success stories creates a knowledge base for governments and like-minded organisations to not only address the issue of domestic violence but to implement preventative mechanisms to counter it. ”

