

CARIBBEAN MOTHERS AND THEIR ROLE IN MOTHER AND DAUGHTER  
CONVERSATIONS ABOUT SEX: CHALLENGES IN COMMUNICATION STYLES

by

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A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

The Dorothy F. Schmidt College of Arts & Letters

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

Florida Atlantic University

Boca Raton, FL

May 2022

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This thesis was prepared under the direction of candidate's thesis advisor, Dr. Noemi Marin in the School of Communication and Multimedia Studies and has been approved by the members of the supervisory committee. It was submitted by the faculty of the Dorothy F. Schmidt College of Arts and Letters and was accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author would like to express her gratitude to firstly, her thesis advisor Dr. Noemi Marin, who helped her through every step of this journey as well as Dr. Jane Caputi for serving as a committee member and as a mentee. The author would also like to thank Lindsay Harroff who helped to shape her growth as a teaching assistant as well as in her research. In addition, special thanks to Dr. Charbonneau, Dr. Mills, and Dr. DeWalt.

## ABSTRACT

Author: Samantha Frost

Title: Caribbean Mothers and their Role in Mother and Daughter Conversations about Sex: Challenges in Communication Styles

Institution: Florida Atlantic University

Thesis Advisor: Noemi Marin

Degree: Master of Arts

Year: 2022

Taking into account: [a] the traditional mother; [b] cultural pressures/expectations; [c] religion; and [d] distinct communication differences in native vs. north American diaspora – the role of mothers when discussing sex with their daughters in Caribbean cultures has a multifaceted set of communication challenges that continue to face mothers and daughters today. When they do communicate, the conversation is predominantly about abstinence and in some cases, condom use completely excluding information about STDS and methods of birth control. The cultural and religious pressures that mothers adhere to may thwart the decision to give their daughters an informative safe sex talk. To truly have effective mother-daughter sexual communication, mothers need to craft educative safe sex messages and communicate that with their daughters. Failure to do so will only increase the likelihood of daughters engaging in risky sexual behavior.

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

“Mom, I have something I’m afraid to tell you.” As a young woman this phrase resonates with me all too well. This was usually the statement I used when I did something I thought my mother would not approve of. Many times, the mistake that was made is the result of engaging in risky sexual behaviors. “Samantha” You know better my mother would say. Did I? The only conversation I ever recall having with My Jamaican mother about sex is, “Wait until you’re married”, “Boys aren’t going anywhere”, “Don’t get pregnant”. Those remarks did not prepare me for anything to come. She did not tell me about the things that matter. I went out into the world thinking sex was unnatural, and if I did have sex, I was considered promiscuous. Little did I know that you can be poisoned against sex your whole life and still end up partaking in it. Growing up I thought I would ideally, wait until marriage to have sex. I was raised as a Christian girl, this was the right thing to do, the respectable thing to do, the thing a good woman who would someday become a good wife would do. However, my dream of losing my virginity on my wedding night and not having to deal with any negative repercussions was short lived. Somehow, I found myself in situations a ‘good girl’ would stay far away from. Somehow, I found myself wanting things good girls should not want. Somehow, I was now promiscuous, impure, unholy, and unworthy. My engagement in risky sexual activities was a direct result of not receiving the adequate information needed to have safe sexual encounters and lack of communication from my role model, my mother. I did not have anyone to tell me, Samantha you do not have to have sex with



a man for him to like you. Samantha, you do not have to rush your sexual experiences because you were trying so hard to be desirable. Samantha, even if you have sex there are many precautions you can take to avoid pregnancy. Samantha you cannot trust everyone with your body. I did not have someone to tell me Samantha, using a condom will protect you from many negative outcomes. I never had anyone to tell me about the pain, the discomfort, and the isolation of feeling like you are the only person going through it. I never had anyone to go to when a man forced himself on me. I never had anyone to cry to, I cried those tears holding my belly and covering my mouth hoping my mother would not hear. I never had anyone to tell me he was wrong. The only thoughts that went through my head was that I was wrong because I was being promiscuous. I failed. I should have never gone there if I did not want him to force himself on me. You see I kept this to myself, until now, it's not like I could talk to my mother about that. The only conversations I had with my very traditional mother was about my education and her expectations of me. When our conversations were not about school, they were centered around what I should be doing around the household, or what my grades were like this semester, or where I was coming up short as a 'good daughter'. As my young adult years progressed, the more depressed I became. Missed periods, swollen breasts, nausea, all things I wanted to tell my mother about. I wanted to talk to her about how I was feeling. In many ways this all could have been avoided. If not avoided, I could have taken more precautions. I could have spoken up when men tried to hurt me. I could have told her about all the pain I was feeling. I could have made her come with me to experience the most painful decision I ever had to make. I could have had her company while the doctor removed the foreign presence that was living inside me. I could have had her hand to

hold when the pain was so overwhelming, and I thought it would never end. I wanted to tell her so many times but telling her would risk appearing to her that I was no longer the ‘good’ daughter, that I was no longer the girl she raised me to be, and this was scary. Can you imagine being so afraid of disappointing your mother you could not even tell her about your most painful experiences? I was already falling short of the standard she set for me. How could I tell her I was failing every chance I got? How could I tell her that I brought a child into her house? Worse, how could I tell her I was not keeping it? How could I tell her what I was doing behind her back? I was too afraid to tell my mother out of the fear of her wrath, the fear that she would hate me forever.

Growing up in Montego Bay, the second largest city in Jamaica, I was taught by my primary methods of socialization that sex was a bad thing. My family rarely ever uttered the word sex around me or taught me anything about safe sex practices. I would hear slight comments from my extended family because in a Caribbean family, all your relatives feel the need to provide input on your life. “I hope you’re not out there having sex”, and “focus on your education” Why did my family not talk to me, really talk to me, about what mattered? Especially my mother? At school, an environment in which they are expected to teach you about sexually transmitted diseases and safe sex practices, the topic was barely touched. Why then did they have an integrated science book with these diseases given to us without them being brought to our attention? It was as if the diseases were not real. They were not transmittable if you were a good girl, it was just something promiscuous girls could get. Why would school, a place of learning not teach me the importance of safe sex practices? I only heard the word sex a few times in my high school experience. Students would get called out for doing promiscuous activities in their

school uniform, but they would never actually say the word sex. It was a bad word, not something that should be used in public, especially at our prestigious educational institution. When one of my classmates got pregnant, nobody ever talked about it openly, it was only a rumor. The teachers never spoke about it, but then you would hear a couple of my classmates making jokes about her. I used to laugh at this because they were all sexually active, they just did not get pregnant. I could never understand how you could judge someone for doing the same things that you do but they suffered a different consequence.

During my childhood and teenage life, I was an avid church goer. At first, it was for my grandmother until I began to go on my own, because if I chose not to that made me a sinner. In the Jamaican society being considered ‘ungodly’ or appearing as such was even worse than being ‘ungodly’ in your heart. How could you not go to church and pretend you believe in their principles? How could you not dress up every Saturday and Sunday to praise the Lord? However, if your dress is too tight or too short do not come because you will only be a distraction to the men who are trying to serve God. Only promiscuous and ungodly women wear tight and short dresses. It was always about the image of being godly, never about the reality. At church, sex was only referred to in the context of marriage. If pre-marital sex was spoken about it would be considered fornication, something I should not be a part of or I was a sinner and would be judged. The church knows that people are going to have sex anyway, but still “you should not do it unless you’re married” is their only tag line. I mean you could not really expect a church to pass out condoms, but what you would expect is that you could talk to a trusted church councilor about your experiences without them trying to cast out the sexual demons that

have attached themselves to you. All the places that were supposed to teach and protect me, ended up being the very institutions that failed to equip me with the right tools to have safe sexual encounters. The institutions that were supposed to be a source of open communication, where I could learn how to survive as a young woman only taught me fear which influenced risky sexual behaviors. The taboo nature of the topic caused me to keep the important things a secret out of the fear of being judged. I lived in a society subject to idiotic cultural and religious pressures that told my mother the word sex should be banned from our conversations, if we had conversations at all. My mother learnt from all those institutions too. Her mother as her first method of socialization, and then her educational institutions reinforced those same ideas about sex. Her occasional visits to church also worked to solidify the idea that sex is a bad word. How could she perform her role in teaching me about safe sex if her own mother was not taught how to perform that role?

I started to share these thoughts with peers, all Jamaican women ages 18-28 and we had similar experiences. A mother who didn't like to talk about sex or did not talk about it at all. A school who barely touched on safe sex topics and a church so afraid to utter the word sex in fear of burning up in flames. Too many of us agreed that our parents hated to hear the word sex or avoided saying the word completely around us. When the word was mentioned, it was always in the form of a command or warning, never anything that could help us, or prepare us for what was to come. This intrigued me because how did so many of my peers have a very similar experience to mine? We were all raised by different people and went to different schools and churches. I knew the topic was relevant because of how often I would hear the same stories about lack of mother-daughter sex

conversations. I wanted to know more. I wanted to understand if these experiences were shared by other young women across the Caribbean islands and if the lack of sex communication was unique to just my peers and me. I wanted to know the different dimensions that influenced mothers to refrain from discussing sex, or safe sex with their daughters and if there were Caribbean girls who are being prepared by their mothers to have safe sexual encounters. To understand the role that mothers play in conversations about sex in the Caribbean, we must look at the research that already exists.

I went into my research with the following questions: How do mothers in the Caribbean talk to daughters about sex? Why is mother-daughter communication about sex a problem? What are the main dimensions that impact mother-daughter conversations about sex and sexual health in the Caribbean? Are there cultural or religious pressures that impact Caribbean mothers' communication styles? In my research process, I looked at multiple studies and recent scholarship, my discovery was that there are many studies about sex and sexuality related topics in the Caribbean region, however, very little studies speak extensively on sex and sexual health communication between mothers and their daughters. Research in the Caribbean on sexual health communication is severely lacking studies, and this is precisely what this thesis addresses. It does this namely by providing an overview of scholarly studies that have already addressed some parts of my research question in order to examine the current dimensions that affect sex communication between mother and daughter in the Caribbean. Another finding during my research on the topic shows that many studies lack samples and or definite examples from all Caribbean islands limiting the scope of research mainly on Haiti, Jamaica, and Grenada. Why are there so few studies that highlight this particular communication

practice? In the studies that exist, what do mothers discuss with their daughters? Are mother-daughter communication styles generational? If so, what kind of communication styles do current mothers use when talking to their daughters about sex? Do mother-daughter conversations about sex vary by culture?

Nevertheless, there are four main dimensions that I identify from the existing research. I call these dimensions, raising from four main areas addressed by the mentioned research that, in my view, have an impact on sexual health communication between mother and daughter. These dimensions can be used as a basis to understand the communication styles used by Caribbean mothers when talking to their daughters about sex, as well as to identify what is missing in this area of health communication. To examine the complexity of the role of Caribbean mothers in sex communication, the thesis provides an overview of several dimensions: namely, 1. The traditional mother role and its implications in the communication interactions between mothers and daughters in Caribbean cultures' 2. cultural pressures for the mothers; 3. religion; 4. comparative studies between Caribbean and North American social interactions. In the context of this thesis, the use of Caribbean is used to refer to islands such as Grenada, Jamaica, and Haiti. In addition, sex communication is described here as having constructive educational conversations about the risks associated with sexual behaviors as well as information about safe sex practices. Chapter 1 states the problem and serves as an introduction to the thesis. Chapter 2 focuses on the idea of the traditional mother and the role the traditional mother plays in sex communication with daughters. Chapter 3 moves from the idea of the traditional mother itself to discussing the cultural pressures and expectations that pressure Caribbean women and how they influence the traditional

mother's role in conversations about sex. Chapter 4 concentrates on the impact of religion on the Caribbean, and the role that religion plays in mothering as well as communication about sex between mothers and daughters. Chapter 5 compares mother-daughter communication about sex in the Caribbean to North American mothers and their communication styles.

As I dive into these chapters, my voice also serves as a source. I utilize the work of feminist scholar, bell hooks as inspiration who makes use of her personal and lived experience as theory. hooks states "I came to theory because I was hurting, the pain within me was so intense that I could not go on living, I came to theory desperate, wanting to comprehend, to grasp what was happening around and within me. Most importantly I wanted to make the hurt go away. I saw in theory then a location for healing (hooks, 59)". I quote this directly because I feel the power of her words. I also came to this thesis from my urgent need as a young Jamaican woman, to understand what was going on around me. I was searching to understand why my mother thought she had to raise me the way she did. I am using my analysis to serve as a form of healing from the trauma I experienced. In addition to examining the dimensions of this mother-daughter interaction in the Caribbean on basis of the studies presented, I also utilize a form of autoethnography where I use my own voice to work through my issues as a 25-year-old Jamaican woman coming from a low/middle income class single-parent family.

Autoethnography is defined by communication scholars, as an "approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience. This approach challenges canonical ways of doing research and representing others and treats research as a political, socially-just, and

socially conscious act. A researcher uses tenets of autobiography and ethnography to do and write autoethnography (Ellis et al.1)". In the 1990s, "autoethnography" became a method of choice for using personal experience and reflexivity to examine cultural experiences, especially within communication (Adams et al. 2)." One of the main purposes of using autoethnography in this thesis is highlighted by Adams et al. "to articulate insider knowledge of cultural experience. This assumption suggests that the writer can inform readers about aspects of cultural life that other researchers may not be able to know (3)." I operate under the basis that my unique cultural experience, with a traditional mother, pressured by Jamaican society's cultural and religious expectations gives me the opportunity to explain this topic in much depth because I have first-hand knowledge of this cultural phenomena. I am uniquely fit, to explain using the research, the way Caribbean mothers communicate about sex.

Here, I will be using autoethnography as personal narrative. This personal experience narrative is a term coined by Norman Denzin to describe the sort of representational practice where 'social scientists take on the dual identities of academic and personal selves to tell autobiographical stories about some aspect of their experience in daily life. Here, auto-ethnographers are scholars who focus intensely on their own life circumstances as a means to understand larger social or cultural phenomena. They use personal narrative writing as a representational strategy that incorporates affect and emotion into their analyses. This personal experience autoethnography represents the most radical move from agent to object of signification, in that it requires researchers' who are already embedded in cultural and social practices to subject themselves and their most intimate surroundings to the same forms of critical analysis as they would any other.



Researchers use themselves as their own primary research subjects, as they strive to understand some aspect of the world that involves but exceeds themselves (Butz and Besio, 1965-66). Highlighting these dimensions from the existing research on mother-daughter-communication about sex in the Caribbean, as well as incorporating the use of autoethnography which utilizes my own experience with my Caribbean mother, creates a study that not only overviews the dimensions that arise in mother-daughter sex communication, but it allows me to specifically portray a direct cultural experience of mother-daughter communication in the Jamaican-Caribbean context. This sheds light on what areas are missing in health communication on this practice.

As mentioned, the role of mothers when discussing sex with their daughters in Caribbean cultures has a multifaceted set of communication challenges that continue to face mothers and daughters today. When looking at this particular complex set of communication challenges, I create four dimensions that stem mainly from the research examined by taking into account: [a] the traditional mother; [b] cultural pressures/expectations; [c] religion; and [d] distinct communication differences in native vs. diaspora –When mothers do communicate, the conversation is predominantly about abstinence and in some cases, condom use completely excluding information about STI, STDS, methods of birth control or even conversations about sexuality. While Caribbean adolescents place an important value on family, this is sometimes negative. Mothers who have positive, and open communication with their daughters have the capability to influence them to have positive sexual experiences. The cultural and religious pressures that they adhere to may thwart the decision to give their daughters informative and unbiased information about safe sex. To truly have effective mother daughter sexual

communication, mothers need to craft informative safe sex messages and communicate that with their daughters. Adhering to cultural, and religious pressures will only increase the likelihood of daughters engaging in dangerous sexual behaviors.

Chapter one serves as my introduction where I explain the thesis topic. In addition to explaining the topic, I state how I came to it and why is important to me. The chapter includes my research questions and how I plan to examine the various dimensions that affect the communication styles of Caribbean mothers when having conversations about sex with their daughters. I also state my intentions for the thesis serving as an overview of existing studies to better understand the sexual communication patterns between mothers and daughters in the Caribbean as well as to identify what is missing from the research. I explain that by using autoethnography, I provide my unique cultural experience that aids in understanding the topic at hand. Chapter two introduces and focuses on the idea of the traditional mother. It explains what a traditional mother is and the rules she must abide by. This is done by explaining my experience with my Caribbean mother and by drawing from the studies that are examined. It outlines the role the traditional mother plays in sex communication with their daughters and how the need to maintain the traditional mother image impacts conversations about sex. Chapter three moves from the idea of the traditional mother itself to discussing the cultural pressures that influence Caribbean women and how they specifically pressure the traditional mother's role in conversations about sex. However, to do this I explain the colonial history that has greatly contributed to the formation of these cultural pressures. After, I move on to explaining the cultural pressures in the context of actual mother-daughter communication about sex. I do this by using examples that were drawn from the studies.

Chapter four concentrates on religion. It outlines why I separate religious pressures from cultural pressures by explaining the monumental impact that religion has on the Caribbean region. It highlights my experience, in addition to taking another look at colonial history. However, this time colonial history is described in the context of religion in order to understand why religious beliefs affect so many Caribbean women. Lastly, I use the research to highlight how religion pressures the role of mothers in conversations about sex. Chapter five is a cultural comparison. It compares mother-daughter communication about sex in the Caribbean to North American mothers and the communication styles they utilize to deduct whether communication styles vary based on culture.

## CHAPTER TWO: THE TRADITIONAL MOTHER

The first dimension arising from the research is what I refer to here as the traditional mother figure. Traditional, is defined by the Merriam-Webster online dictionary as “following or conforming to tradition: adhering to past principles or established conventions (“Traditional”).” In this context, the traditional mother is a figure or model that has been passed down for generations in the Caribbean culture. In this first chapter, I explain this type of mother that Caribbean women aspire to be and the problem this mother figure creates. The characteristics and attributes of this mother that I explain are not set in stone, they are no definite characteristics of what a traditional mother can look like but they do adhere to certain principles. The idea of the traditional mother is derived from my own experience with my mother as well as my deductions from the research found, that refer to lack of sex communication as tradition. There are similarities in the way these types of mothers chose to parent their daughters and it is through this observation that I develop the traditional mother figure. Instead of looking at tradition as a factor, I instead look at the traditional mother figure and how being traditional goes hand in hand with the notion of being a ‘good’ Caribbean mother. Good is defined by the Merriam-Webster online dictionary as of a favorable character or tendency. Other definitions of the words are “Suitable, fit” and “not depreciated” (“Good”). A good mother, in this context is a mother who ensures to raise her daughter in a way that is line with the cultural and religious values of that society. Mothers who aspire to live up to the ‘traditional’ mother figure often fail to prepare their daughters for any sexual experience.

While the traditional mother is the focus of this thesis, I must acknowledge that the traditional mother is not the only mother that exists. Mars explains that many Caribbean societies are still operating within a class hierarchy, however in each class, there will be different kinds of mothers (Mars). According to a Jamaica Observer news article in 2019, the writer explains that the class hierarchy in Jamaica is still in full effect and this system's stratification is directly tied to economic power (Hope). This is not only unique to Jamaica, Haiti and Grenada also operate under similar class structures with economic power being one of the main determinants of class. In these islands, class is determined by several factors including educational level and economic status.

This class hierarchy can be divided into three tiers, while each level can have different variations, this is the basic division. Evidence from the research suggests that parental values and disciplinary responses vary by social class (Burke and Kuczynski 2). At the highest level, we have the elite mothers, also referred to as the 'uptown' mothers. These mothers usually adopt parenting styles akin to American cultures. When I refer to American culture, I refer to the individualistic nature of the society and the autonomy that these kinds of parents allow their children. While these 'uptown' mothers may still hold few traditional Caribbean values, these kinds of mothers typically adopt relationships where mothers serve as a friendly guide rather than a figure of authority. They often allow their children to make their own choices and their disciplinary practices involve more reasoning (Burke and Kuczynski 2). Their financial status allows them the opportunity to live as exceptions to the norms and expectations of society, because with financial power comes freedom in islands like Jamaica, Grenada, and Haiti. In the middle class, we have the 'traditional' mother who serves as the focus of this chapter. The

traditional mother may be married or single but must always conform to societies cultural and religious obligations to be classified as the ‘good’ mother. The good mother adopts the morals and values that society deems as good. Then we have the other mothers, the low-income mothers, the mothers who aren’t traditional, the mothers raised in struggling communities. These mothers are more concentrated on getting by and may strongly promote education. However, there are instances where these mothers use their children to survive. They do this by promoting early sexual onset to use their daughter’s sexuality to provide for their family (Hutchinson et al. 32). These kinds of mothers may have different approaches at how they parent their daughter, but they are less concerned with conforming to the norms and values of society. Survival at its very least is of higher importance than adhering to the expectations of the culture. While all these different mothers play a role in sex communication with daughters, I must narrow my focus down to the mother located in the second tier of the hierarchy. The mother who assumes that being a good mother means she must live up to the expectations of society. This thesis focuses on the traditional, middle-class mother who carries all of societies pressures on her back. To truly grasp the concept of the traditional mother this chapter focuses on [a] the concept of the traditional mother, [b] the role of the traditional mother, [c] the traditional mother parenting style, and finally [d] the role the traditional mother plays in actual mother-daughter conversations about sex. I now go into detail about the specific characteristics of the traditional mother.

## **2.1 The Traditional Mother Explained**

So, what is the traditional mother? She is a mother who conforms to cultural and religious expectations to fit society’s standard of a good mother. The traditional mother

appears to be rooted in the value complex of respectability. Bauer posits that “respectability as a social value is a middle-class phenomenon with its roots going back to eighteenth-century British society, it is specifically concerned with the establishment of ‘decent and correct manners and morals, as well as the proper attitude toward sexuality. The origins of this concept crystallized during the period of 1830s-1870s, in the period of international economic independence by Britain in the Caribbean (155)”

Bauer also notes that respectability was a prime form through which some contemporary Caribbean women conceive their citizenship, with the basic principle centered around legal marriage, attending church, and having legitimate children being the main ways respectability is affirmed. These are Victorian middle-class ideological values which derived from the perspectives of white European culture and defined as “appropriate between status equal” (Bauer 151). While this concept was rooted in white, Victorian values and the islands are no longer ruled by the Europeans, the ideology persists.

Mothers who wish to fit in, who wish to conform to society’s expectations adhere to the social rules in line with this concept. In addition, Bauer explains that the post-emancipation period evinced a change in the rise in the middle-class status for many colored and black women in the Caribbean. This rise resulted in a change in attitude towards Christian values, education, and marriage. These women became obsessed with marriage and legitimacy as they sought to gain respectability for their families (152). The scholar explains that respectability as a social value became an integral way in which the middle class legitimized and upheld their special status regarding the lower and upper classes. Essentially the middle classes viewed themselves as the ideal image of the family and society (155).

In addition, Deborah Thomas explains in her article on Modern Blackness,” Respectability is a value complex that emphasizes education, thrift, industry, self-sufficiency via land ownership, moderate Protestant living, community uplift, the constitution of family through legal marriage and leadership by the educated middle classes (31)”. Thomas noted, despite efforts to create an authentic Jamaican culture after the period of independence, the idea of respectability was still very much in effect. While marriage is not necessarily a must to meet the criteria for the respectability complex, it is most definitely promoted. Leo-Rhynie, a Jamaican scholar explains that the nuclear family remains the social and religious ideal for all social classes in Jamaica, however, it exists mainly in the upper and middle classes of the society. Among the lower classes, both legal and non-legal sexual unions are established (Leo-Rhynie). A middle-class citizen who is married and can provide for their family is very admirable and respected. However, in recent times single mothers who make an honest living seem to be respected just as much.

My experiences with my mother can be used to understand the traditional mother model in the Jamaican context. My mother was a single parent, with minimal teacher’s college education and just a few opportunities that gave her the ability to give her daughter a good education and always ensure she was properly fed and clothed. Her mother, my grandmother was the same. She taught her everything she knew about being a good mother. Adopting values aligned with the traditional mother complex tend to seem like a good thing, even admirable on the surface. However, being this kind of mother comes with a plethora of negative consequences. Traditions only become a problem if the custom is producing a negative outcome. If my mother was being a good mother, by



teaching me how to be a respectable daughter how could it have a negative outcome? The problem with being the traditional mother is the conformity to cultural and religious pressures. This is the mother who tries to maintain a respectable image. The problem with trying to maintain an image is that it is just an image. The traditional mother is never truly vulnerable with her daughter and without vulnerability relationships cannot thrive. Without vulnerability there is no environment to be open, there is no room to communicate about sensitive topics. Instead of being concerned with fostering closeness and a loving relationship with her daughter, the traditional mother tries so desperately to fit a mold. A traditional mother only teaches her daughter the respectable thing to do and because one of the main premises of respectability is the regulation of sexuality (Bauer 155), she teaches her daughter that sex is not something we speak about, you should just know, you should know this is something that happens in the confines of a marriage union. You should know that if sex occurs before the marriage union you should never under any circumstance make me aware or bring a child into my household. The traditional mother is controlled by societies cultural and religious pressures because if she does not, it means she has failed as a mother. Now that I have explained the concept of the traditional mother and how it is rooted in the value system of respectability, I move on to explaining the role the traditional mother plays in her household. The next sub-chapter goes into detail on how the traditional mother plays her role to remain the 'good' mother under the value system of respectability.

## **2.2 The Role of the 'Traditional' Mother**

Now that we have described the characteristics of the traditional mother, we must look at the role that she plays. In Caribbean culture, the mother's role in the family is

clear. Caribbean mothers have traditionally taken most responsibility for child rearing and their role in the family is to ensure their children are taken care of in all aspects (Leo-Rhynie). It is also noted that the Caribbean has a prevalence for the single parent family structure in which the mother is the sole parental figure (Leo-Rhynie; Renaud). In a publication by UNICEF titled “Situation Analysis of Jamaican Children,” they reported that over 45% of the households in the island of Jamaica are female-headed. Such family structures are generally accepted as the norm in the Caribbean and are often viewed as functional responses to the problems faced by people living in the region (Coomarsingh).” Despite the structure of the family unit, most Caribbean families tend to place the women’s role of motherhood as the foundation of familial relationships whether the father is present. This is often referred to as matrifocality. Smith in his work on working-class African-Caribbean families in British Guiana, defines matrifocality as ‘a property of the internal relations of male as well as female-headed households’ wherein women in their role as mothers come to be the focus of relationships, rather than head of household as such (Renaud). If there is a father present in the family, they tend to act as the breadwinner and remain out of the day-to day matters of the household. The mother being the main caregiver, becomes responsible for communicating with her children to prepare them to venture out into the world. In an ideal society, this preparation would consist of clear and open communication about sex and safe sex practices. However, this open and clear communication about sex is not always the case.

My mother was my caregiver who was supposed to prepare me to go out into the world. She got married to a man who would be considered as a good man. He could provide for his family and could serve as a decent breadwinner to the household. This

nuclear family structure was short-lived as she realized that while she once saw the capability of this man serving as a good father and husband, it was nothing more than a dream. After getting a divorce, my father relocated to the other end of the island. He became very absent throughout my childhood leaving my traditional mother to assume the role of mother and father. She was my sole provider for the rest of my life. My mother, following in her mother's footsteps became the traditional mother figure. If she was to raise me alone, she was going to do it in the confines of a culturally acceptable manner. She could not fail by falling short of society's expectations of her. My mother was middle class, and middle-class women have different expectations if they are to uphold their status, they must raise good daughters who are respectable. To raise her daughter in the best way, and prepare her for the world, she became more of a dictator than a mother. While Caribbean mothers have been known to take responsibility for familial relationships, to understand the role the traditional mother plays in greater depth I explain their parenting style in the next sub-chapter. Traditional mothers tend to adopt an authoritarian style of parenting which is a common practice for middle and lower-class mothers in the Caribbean.

### **2.3 The Traditional Mother Parenting Style**

Caribbean parents have been criticized as authoritarian (Smith and Mosby 370). While there are many different techniques that mothers use to discipline their daughters, a vast majority of Caribbean mothers choose to adopt an authoritarian parenting style (Coomarsingh). My mother, a middle-class traditional woman implemented an authoritarian style relationship with me. The main premise of this relationship was that whatever she says, goes. There were many times there would be weeks of silence in my

house because my mother refused to speak to me. Usually this was for any little disagreement we had and instead of us talking openly she would use the silent treatment as a way for me to know it is not acceptable to ever challenge her authority. This silence persisted to the point where she would not ask me basic questions, like what I wanted to eat, because showing me that she was the boss was more important than trivial day to day matters. I grew up thinking she hated me. I thought she hated me to the point, that she secretly wished God gifted her with a better daughter, one who would be everything she wanted me to be. Until one day those words finally left my mouth because I was so tired of the pain. She was so hurt, so in pain from the words I uttered that she was in tears. I still remember the pain and the hurt I felt when she looked at me with such disappointment. I could only think what must have been going through her head. I remember I screamed out, "You make me want to die" I know that one hit a nerve. I can imagine her thoughts were, "where did I go wrong? I thought I raised a good girl." I do not blame her; how could I ever say that to my mother who struggled so hard with me my whole life? I do not think my mother ever meant for me to feel unloved. I do not think her intention was to ever hurt me. It is not until I began this research, that I realized, she just needed to show me that she is my boss and in doing that it caused me pain that I would carry into my adult life. I realized that she thought, to remain a good traditional mother she must be authoritarian, she must show force and not reason with me. However, the sad reality is that many Caribbean parents are just like my mother. Yes, I got an occasional spanking here and there, but it was never the physical discipline that bothered me with my mother. It was what she used to do to me emotionally that stayed with me. On the

other hand, some Caribbean girls are significantly affected both physically and emotionally.

The authoritarian style has been attributed to historical influences including slavery, colonialism, and conservative Christian religion (Burke and Kuckzynski 1). The whole idea that they adopt an authoritarian parenting style is derived from the types of discipline and communication patterns that the parents implement. As I mentioned previously, if I appeared to even talk back to my mother, I would get slapped. While this parenting style may not be adopted by all parents, their general child-rearing methods have been described as highly repressive, severe, and abusive (Smith and Mosby 370-72). As Smith and Mosby highlighted, physical punishment is culturally sanctioned and generally viewed as the norm, supported by parents, relatives, teachers, and some religious leaders. Being slapped by mother was a normal thing, children would receive all kinds of punishment at school because punishment makes children disciplined (371). However, what our traditional mothers failed to realize is that harsh discipline only made the fear of speaking to them about anything at all even worse. Still, it is popular dialogue in Caribbean islands that 'children should be disciplined'.

Another characteristic of authoritarian parenting is poor communication between parent and child (Smith and Moore 178). Researchers have argued that Jamaican parents are not usually willing to engage in long conversations with their children or have any desire to reason with them (Smith and Mosby 372-373). In an authoritarian parenting style, there is no open and reasoned communication, instead communication with parent and child is mostly in the form of commands. Research on studies in Jamaica has shown that parents tend to talk at children rather than having a conversation with them. This

usually does not foster a warm and trusting parent-child relationship and often it riddles the child with fear, hurt and lack of emotional support which sometimes results in negative consequences (Smith and Moore 178). Similarly, with my mother, reasoning was not something that could be done, and in a relationship where both parties cannot have constructive two-way dialogue there is no room for the relationship to thrive. How could I ever talk to her about sex if simple dialogue is considered talking back or having an attitude? How could I even approach her about such forbidden topics when my opinion was not valued? Consequently, many Caribbean girls do not maintain relationships with their mother that consist of open two-way communication sometimes leading to girls participating in risky behaviors.

The traditional mother is rooted in the value complex of respectability, that is specifically concerned with the establishment of decent and correct manners and morals, as well as the regulation of sexuality (Bauer 155). In performing their roles as mothers' society also pressures traditional mothers to act more as dictators than mothers as this is the traditional norm in the Caribbean (Coomarsingh). Now that we know how the traditional mother plays her role, we look at how this role affects actual conversations with her daughter about sex. It is important to understand not only the role of the traditional mother, but how exactly that affects sex communication between mother and daughter. I now move on to explaining how exactly the traditional mother role, that has been explained thus far, affects communication styles.

## **2.4 What is the Role of the Traditional Mother? In terms of Applied Communication for Sex Discussion Between Mothers and Daughters?**

Now that we have covered the role that the traditional mother plays, we look at the effect that this role has on mother-daughter communication about sex. The traditional mother aims to limit all sexual conversations in line with the value complex of respectability (Bauer 155). When entertained, she aims to keep those conversations to discussing sex within the confines of marriage. If not spoken about in the confines of marriage, the conversations usually involve abstinence until school completion or promoting condom use. While these are just a few topics that are entertained, many times adhering to the traditional mother role tends to thwart mothers from having any deep and meaningful conversations with their daughters about sex. When my mother talked to me about sex, the main reason she did was to ensure my virginity was still intact and that I knew that getting pregnant is not an option for me.

Upon my initial research, it was brought to my attention that the study of sex and sexuality were not common topics for scholarly research up until recent times. Scholars have attributed the avoidance of the sex and sexuality topic as largely having to do with the fear of reproducing negative stereotyping of black hyper-sexuality that arose from the Caribbean's rich history of slavery and colonialism (Sharpe and Pinto 247). While I will talk extensively about the Caribbean's history of slavery and colonialism in chapters three and four, it is important to give a little background as to why sex and sexuality was avoided for such a long period. According to Gosine, European colonizers feared that the sexual desires of these 'others', as well as their desires for the others, would result in interracial sex and reproduction and ultimately threaten notions of white racial purity. As

a result, they ensured regulation of sexual desires and practices as a key component of processes of colonization, and forcefully institutionalized through laws governing family structure, partnerships, prostitution, and sex. Even after the retreat of the Europeans, this regulation or disciplining of sex and sexual desires did not end. Instead, post-independence reforms often further restricted sexual diversity and liberty, and the regulation of sexuality proliferated as new national and regional forms of governmentally developed across the Caribbean (1-2). The modern belief system of respectability was maintained from these colonial influences and Caribbean women who aspire to maintain a more traditional, poised version of motherhood would rather to avoid conversations about sex to avoid the risk of being categorized as promiscuous or impure. Adhering to the principles of respectability inevitably affects the communication styles of many Caribbean mothers when talking to their daughters about sex which is shown in the following studies.

To understand how the traditional, good mother complex manifests we must look at the evidence that exists. Frederick et al. has studied the communication between mothers and daughters in Grenada. The researchers argue that a key communication pattern with mothers in the Caribbean are general messages about abstinence, asserting sexual limits, use of protection, abstinence until marriage, and abstinence due to school completion. As many adolescent girls in this study reported having romantic interests, some adolescents in their study reported that their mothers stressed sexual limits. The study also noted that in Grenada, there is limited opportunity for education after pregnancy, so it is understandable why the emphasis is placed on limits and concern for adolescents' futures. While some participants reported that their mothers had encouraged them to use



protection if they were to engage in sexual activity, not all mothers communicated this practice (4-8).

What is interesting about this study is the sample used and the insights that it provides. If we look at the sample chosen, this study consisted of a total of 12 young women from different villages and four different high schools. It included four 15-year-olds, three 16-year-olds, two 17-year-olds, and three 18-year-olds. Only three of the participants were in a household with two biological parents. The others lived with their mothers and grandmothers or with their mothers and a visiting/live-in significant other. It can be deduced that 75% of the participants receive majority of their sexual health communication from their mothers. Here, mothers served as the primary message source for adolescent girls. The study also mentioned that the participants were from lower or working-class families. With most of the girls coming from working class female headed families, the evidence can point toward the traditional role that these mothers feel the need to perform as the sole communicator to their daughters. While some of these mothers did stress the importance of sexual limits, majority of the mother's messages promoted abstinence. The mothers who maintain this message, tend to be low/middle working-class women who may feel the need to stick to the script of the traditional mother who does not deviate from conversations in line with respectability. This is an ineffective method of communication because by only narrowing sexual communication down to abstinence or abstinence until school communication does not prepare your daughter effectively for sexual experiences. The few mothers that mentioned protection use made no specific remarks about how they would educate their daughters to use protection and what methods of protection. There are still a wide variety of topics to be

discussed which she will either be unaware about or seek information from unreliable sources (Frederick et al. 3-4).

It was also revealed from the study that daughters were aware of their mother's discomfort about having any sex related conversations with them. If mothers maintain an attitude of discomfort and avoidance towards talking to their daughters about sex, then daughters will avoid bringing up any sex related conversations with their mothers which can reap many negative consequences (Fredrick et al. 6). This not only hints to an authoritarian style of mothering with low levels of open communication, but it also highlights a traditional form of mothering. Despite the daughters' awareness of their mothers' discomfort around sex conversations, the girls explained in their interviews that they want to and need to know more, and they wanted to learn it from their mothers. Some of the study participants explained that they knew if they really wanted to get information on sex, they could use the internet or consult with peers. In addition, some girls also mentioned they could ask older siblings for help. However, it would have been more beneficial for their mothers to have those talks with them. The study explained that due to their upbringing, some adolescents may be more comfortable discussing sexual issues with other close kin (Frederick et al. 6). An upbringing that will most likely cause discomfort, is growing up with a mother who allows societal pressures to affect the kinds of conversations she has with her daughter. I knew that my mother did not want to talk about sex with me too, as a result I avoided ever talking to her about the topic. Just like the girls in the study I would look to peers, or the internet for information on sex. Most of the time I would not have conversations with anyone. I would make my mistakes and

learn the hard way. I could never ask extended family, I did not have older siblings, so all I knew was what google told me because my friends were just as clueless.

In another study that focused on mother-daughter communication among Haitians, Castor says that young Haitian women did not receive adequate sex education from their mothers. Similarly, to Jamaica, Haitian women attempt to uphold this traditional mother figure. Castor found that discussions about sexual and reproductive health in Haiti are uncommon and sex education is limited, making transmission of knowledge from one generation to the next difficult (4). The researcher also draws from Archibald, where it is explained that due to the tradition of women keeping silent about matters of a sexual nature, women do not discuss sex at home, despite their responsibility to educate their young daughters about sexual health. The traditional roles set for women may place them at risk for HIV because there is a lack of knowledge of minimal discussion about, and limited understanding of the epidemic (Castor 2). From these findings, it can be deduced that the traditional role thwarts Haitian mothers from educating their daughters about safe sex, and they often have no conversations at all on the topic.

On the other hand, when Haitian mothers do choose to communicate about sex the topics are also limited to those aligned with a traditional motherly role. The researcher identifies that previous reports indicate that young Haitian women who received sexual information from their mothers, reported that to be limited to abstinence prior to marriage and reinforcement of the need to remain a virgin until marriage. However, one finding that emerged from this study is that mothers who sat down and discussed sex with their daughters received positive responses according to the girls. It was also revealed that

mothers who received sex education on sexual and reproductive health themselves were able to inform their daughters of safer sex (Castor 4). This emphasizes the effect that mothers could have if they chose to discuss sex with their daughters in a manner that is beneficial to them. Another common problem is that the mothers who chose to differ from the traditional role and want to teach their daughters about safe sex barely have any idea themselves. Promoting abstinence seems to be the tagline of mothers who adopt a traditional role in the Caribbean region, and when the message does not involve abstaining, sex is not talked about. Very few mothers speak about safe sex practices and even if they do, they don't tend to speak about STDs.

Scholars, Gabbidon and Shaw-Ridley took a different approach by examining mother's childhood and teenage experiences with sex conversations and families' perceptions of current parent-child sex conversations within two underserved Afro-Caribbean communities in the U.S. The study included fourteen dyads comprised of Haitian and Jamaican mothers and teens. The results of the study found that Mothers characterized the nature of their childhood experiences with parent-teen sex conversation as: no experiences or messages characterized by verbal warnings and punitive discipline (1449). Parents messages reinforced traditional Caribbean constructions of sexuality by emphasizing abstinence for girls (1455). In this study, we hear from women who are now mothers, talking about their experiences with their mothers. They often had no experience or only had conversations that involved harsh discipline or warnings. The mothers of the mothers in the study display authoritarian values based on the harsh command type of communication styles they used to communicate with their daughters. Mothers who act as dictators don't have open educational conversations with their daughters. They did not

talk to their daughters about sex so, where would our mothers learn how to educate us about sex? I can use the example here of my grandmother. She never talked to my mother about sex and when she did it was in the form of warnings. This created a domino effect, that caused future generations of women to remain silent about sex and sex education resulting in an uneducated set of women in the area of sexual health. At times, many of these women will not learn what they need to until they have a firsthand experience like I did. Most mothers in the study reported seldom engaging in sex conversations in their youth. In addition, some mothers in this study reported that limited childhood discussions and high conflict interactions with their parents led to unsafe sexual behaviors sometimes resulting in pregnancy (Gabbidon and Shaw-Ridley 1449-1451). This sounded almost too familiar for me because the lack of sex conversations in my teenage years led to me becoming pregnant and having a very risky abortion. I put myself in an unsafe situation out of fear of talking to my mother. The feeling of the doctor touching me in places I know he did not need to. The way he looked at me while he was doing the procedure made me shiver. There was so much tension and awkwardness while he was explaining what this was going to do to my body. I still remember the way I broke down crying as I walked out of his office that day. I felt so ashamed as I left the sketchy building. I still remember wanting my mother, wanting to feel her and love and reassurance that everything was going to be okay. The worst part of it all is that the pain I endured could have all been avoided if I could talk to my mother.

To decrease the rate of unsafe and risky sexual behaviors, mothers must become a new type of mother, with no need to fit a description or conform to cultural and religious pressures. Mothers should have open and informative communication with their

daughters. However, now that we have looked at the kinds of sex conversations traditional mothers have with their daughters, I move on to the specific cultural pressures that traditional mothers adhere to. While the traditional mother figure is centered around the concept of respectability and these types of mothers are authoritarian at their very core, we need to understand further why they choose to mainly communicate messages about abstinence when having conversations about sex with their daughters. The various cultural pressures that traditional mothers adhere to is outlined in Chapter 3.

### CHAPTER THREE: CULTURAL PRESSURES FOR MOTHERS

In this Chapter, as I mentioned, the study addresses the research on cultural pressures for mothers in the Caribbean countries, impacting the effectiveness of the communication process between mothers and daughters on the sex education topic. As I announced previously, an important dimension that affects the conversations about sex between mother and daughter focuses on, how do cultural pressures on the mothers impact the outcome of such conversations. As studies highlight, the traditional mother is influenced by different cultural pressures that influence the way they communicate with their daughters about sex (Castor 2-5; Gabbidon and Shaw-Ridley 1449; Stephens and Thomas 9-10). For this thesis, culture is defined as the customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group (“Culture”). So, what is challenging when talking about culture of the Caribbean region is that such ‘culture’ is actually an amalgamation of many different cultures. To fully comprehend the cultural pressures that the traditional mothers face we must understand how the colonial influences have shaped the Caribbean and how it affected Caribbean culture. While I have mentioned the concept of *respectability* and how it influences the traditional mother figure (Bauer 151- 155; Thomas 31), it is necessary to investigate deeper into the colonial past that influenced the concept of respectability (Bauer 151-155; Thomas 31). After looking at the colonial influences on culture I will explain the different culturally unique pressures that traditional mothers conform to. I say that only traditional mothers are affected by this because they are the mothers that choose to allow these backwards

cultural expectations to dictate how and what they communicate with their daughters. Thus, the chapter will investigate [a] colonial influences; and [b] what kind of cultural pressures might impact mothers when discussing sex with their daughters in Caribbean cultures.

### **3.1 Colonial Influences on Culture**

Many Caribbean islands were at one point colonized by either the British, the Spaniards, the Dutch, or the French which has significantly impacted their culture. Not only were they colonized but slaves were brought from various tribes along the coast of West Africa to work on the plantations that they set up in the different Caribbean islands (Clarke and Brereton). While slavery and colonialism ended many years ago, Jamaicans as well as other Caribbean people have been grappling with the legacies of colonialism (Thomas 30). Ferguson et al. explains that Jamaican culture is a product of the interaction between Europe and Africa. Terms such as “Afro-centred” and “Euro-centred,” however, are often used to denote the perceived duality in Jamaican cultural traditions and values. They explain that these European influences persist in various public institutions, medicine, Christian worship, and the also arts while, African continuities are present in religious life, Jamaican Creole language, cuisine, proverbs, drumming, the rhythms of Jamaican music and dance.

According to Thomas, Jamaicans, sought to create a culture of their own that would not only embody the country’s creole history that is exemplified in the national motto “Out of Many, One People”, but also provide inspiration for participating in a global political economy identifying not as British subjects but as independent citizens. The history of Jamaican colonialism began with the Spaniards. However, Britain wrested



control of Jamaica from Spain in 1655, and was soon after established as a new colony and a plantation economy. More than 100 years later, by the late eighteenth century, and particularly after the onset of the Haitian Revolution in 1791, Jamaican sugar exports generated the bulk of Europe's wealth. Unique to Jamaica, there was also a thriving peasant economy and internal marketing system which did not exist in most other islands. Jamaican slaves were the primary means of production for all the foodstuff for the entire island. These slaves also developed and maintained their own forms of cultural expressions including jonkunno and other various forms of worship despite the harsh restrictions on mobility, family formation and community life imposed by slavery. Despite this, colonial subjects were socialized to accept the moral and cultural superiority of Englishness and by default, whiteness because not only was British imperialism a system of economic exploitation and political domination but also one of cultural control (30-31).

Like Jamaica, Haiti was also colonized by the Spaniards. Spain initially claimed the island however they later released control of the western third of the island to France. Prior to gaining its independence in 1804, Haiti was the French colony of Saint-Domingue. Haiti grew to be the richest colony in the French empire and, perhaps, the richest colony in the world under the French rule. Shortly before the Haitian Revolution, Saint-Domingue produced roughly 40 percent of the sugar and 60 percent of the coffee imported to Europe ("Haiti"). However, it all ended in the 1790s when Haiti and other West Indian Creole societies were shaken by the successful slave rebellion, which led to a growing independence movement whose leaders included Toussaint Louverture, Henry Christophe, and Jean-Jacques Dessalines. The movement resulted in Haiti's

independence in 1804, thus creating the first republic founded by people of primarily African descent in the Americas (Clarke and Brereton). However, while Haiti was one of the first independent colonies this did not change the fact that the country still maintained many of the colonial influences from the Europeans combined with African culture. You would think that because Haiti gained independence so many years ago that they would completely eradicate all European influences from their culture, however this is not the case. Until present Haiti continues to have French as an official language and many Haitians speak a form of French Creole. Haiti has also adopted many Christian religions such as Roman Catholicism, in combination with African forms of worship such as Voodoo (“Haitians”).

Grenada was a bit different than Jamaica and Haiti. The European occupation of Grenada took a bit longer because of the strong resistance by the Grenadian indigenous people also known as the Caribs. The island actually remained uncolonized for almost 200 years even though Britain and France did fight with the Caribs for control. After this long war between the natives and the Europeans, in 1672 the French finally captured the island and successfully maintained control for almost a century, until the British invaded the island in 1762. This invasion took place during the Seven Years’ War, and they managed to acquire Grenada by the Treaty of Paris in 1763. Shortly after, the French regained control in 1770, this occupation did not last long though, because the British moved right back in under the treaty of Versailles in 1783. Similarly, to what they did in Jamaica, the British established sugar plantations and slave labor was brought in from Africa to work on the estates in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. However, after the abolition of slavery in 1834, National political consciousness took shape through the labor movement. When

that was dissolved in 1962, Grenada evolved first into an Associated State with internal self-government. Shortly after that, independence was achieved in 1974; and Grenada became a constitutional monarchy, with a Prime Minister and Queen Elizabeth II as Head of State, represented by the governor general (“About Grenada”). While Grenada gained independence, like Haiti and Jamaica they still maintained many of the European influences. Grenadian culture is a mixture of British, African, West Indian and French influences which has left an indomitable influence in the folklore, dialect, music, and general way of life (“About Grenada”).

Jamaica, Haiti, and Grenada while colonized at different periods by different Europeans, all retained aspects of the European cultures. The combination of cultures created a region that was heavily motivated by European and African influences. However, the colonizers did succeed in forcing their beliefs onto the Africans. Now the Europeans had used the claim that civilized people are not openly sexual. While this was just an excuse to keep the Africans enslaved, this belief was forced onto to the Africans during slavery to ‘civilize’ them. These conservative beliefs about sex were so deeply engrained into the Caribbean that sex conversations became forbidden. The slave owners of that time claimed that they had to impose strict codes of morality on their slaves to manage the sexual promiscuity of the Africans (Sharpe and Pinto 247). If for hundreds of years, as a people you are criticized for being overly sexual, promiscuous, and uncivilized then naturally the need to overcompensate to maintain an image of purity would be an expected way of coping even many years after slavery. As mentioned before, while these plantation owners labelled the Africans as promiscuous, they simultaneously, frowned upon the slaves getting married because they were more concerned about their property

ownership and feared permanent unions would allow the slaves too much opportunity to mess with the sale and leasing of their property (Sharpe and Pinto 247). While slavery has been abolished, these ideas that were engrained into the minds of the Africans, it still haunts Caribbean culture as we still adopt many of the colonial beliefs and mindsets (Thomas 30).

The taboo nature of sex, an ideology created by these colonial influences is also portrayed in institutions outside the family such as the school. In learning environments where teenage girls should be able to have open communication with counselors, sex is only talked about in the context of biology. For example, in various high schools across Jamaica, sexually transmitted diseases are not taught, even though they are present in the textbook. This is in effort to avoid all conversations about sex. In guidance class, women are taught about their period and how to create an emergency kit but not taught about the risk of unprotected sex or how to use birth control methods. Schools do not even entertain conversations about sex in biology class. I remember being 16 years old and still unsure how exactly I became pregnant. I know the egg had to be fertilized but I was not sure how the male was supposed to do that. The fact that I could have been 16 years old and still completely unaware of how I could get pregnant said enough about the lack of sexual education in my teenage years. I was completely sure the first time I had sex I was going to be pregnant, come to find out it was not that simple. This may not sound realistic, but I believed that once sex occurred that meant pregnancy. A Jamaican Observer news article highlights this very issue by stating “Students aren't being taught how to relate healthily to sex and when they reach the age, they 'should' be having sex they can't unlearn all the

shame they were taught. We can only hope that sex ed becomes more objective in the future, since it's literally detrimental to us if it isn't (Hamilton).”

The Caribbean region has tried to irradiate all talks of sex or sexuality from its culture, especially in formal institutions in attempt to move far away from the stereotypes that Europeans created for them. However, this cultural taboo is causing women to keep quiet about topics that should be spoken about (Castor 2, Gabbidon and Shaw-Ridley 1449). To traditional mother, the mother rooted in the concept of respectability, talking about sex is ‘inappropriate’ and not a topic that you should be discussing with your children. This leaves many young women in the dark about important facts pertaining to their health. No communication runs the risk of the daughter seeking sexual health information elsewhere, and often from peers who may or may not give them accurate knowledge. Cultural beliefs about sex play an enormous role in why Caribbean mothers do not feel comfortable having conversations about sex with their daughters. While Caribbean countries have similar beliefs, some cultural groups have pressures unique to their country. The role cultural pressures play in actual mother-daughter communication about sex can be analyzed by looking at the evidence that exists.

### **3.2 What kind of Cultural Pressures Impact the Role of Mothers When Discussing Sex with their Daughters?**

Colonialism played a huge role in creating negative beliefs surrounding anything sex related. (Sharpe and Pinto 247). Many traditional mothers have adopted these ideas when determining how they will communicate with their daughter about sex. To understand how these cultural pressures affect the traditional mother and how it manifests in mother-daughter communication we examine the research that describes sex talk between mother

and daughter. Traditional mothers have a reputation to uphold and to do that they must conform to the beliefs of the society in which they exist. If cultural beliefs state that good mothers should not speak about sex with their daughters, these mothers choose to listen to what society says instead of being more concerned with the sexual health of their daughter.

Castor reinforces this claim and explains in her study by explaining that many Haitian mothers refused to talk about sex because of their conservative and traditional values (4). The study revealed that Haitian mothers did not discuss sex for the following reasons listed under the themes arising from the research: The first reason was that mothers did not discuss sex because they more than likely knew nothing about sexual health and the second reason was that Haitian culture has the tendency to ‘beat around the bush’ by not having any explicit conversations about sex (3). A qualitative method was employed using focus groups and a sample consisting of 7 Haitian women followed by interviews with 17 Haitian women ages ranging from 18-24. Comments from these women are as follows: “Most mothers don’t really talk about sex with their daughters, or if they do, they’re not explicit enough. Haitian mothers love to go around the bush. I think it’s a cultural thing. They may feel embarrassed to talk about it because their parents never did (Haitian 1)” Another comment from a woman in the study:” Haitian parents don’t really sit down and have an educated conversation with their child because they can be very strict and just get to the point and just say don’t do it without stating why and the outcomes of it besides, you’ll get pregnant and that finishing college comes first and wait till your married (Haitian2).” These comments demonstrate that in Haitian culture, mothers who adhere to the traditional mother role feel the need to adopt the strict

principles of the authoritarian parenting style by never having clear sexual health communication with their daughters because of how culturally ‘taboo’ the topic is labeled. Haitian culture dictates that sex should not be spoken about, instead mothers ‘beat around the bush’. Another comment went further to say: “For the older generation of Haitian parents meaning around born 1920-1950’s, they do not know how to talk to their children about sex, relationships. Better yet, most don’t even understand the concept of dating until you explain it to them. I think that generation; look at the child as a child. They don’t care to be friends with their children or have an open dialogue about things that the child is facing in society. They just lay down a set of rules that you must abide by. Some Haitian parents even try to use threats as a way for the child not to have sex. Telling them that if they have sex before they are married, they will get AIDS. So, lack of education, explanation and dialogue is very common between parent and child. That usually results to the child going to his/her peers or watching TV to get the answers (Haitian3).” This lack of communication demonstrated by these comments only increases the likelihood of young Haitian women contracting HIV/AIDS and other STIS (Castor 2-3). In a conservative culture such as Haiti’s where females are discouraged from discussing sex, their cultural beliefs inevitably hinder women from learning about protective behaviors.

Other researchers such as, Joseph et. al. recognized that black women have higher rates of cervical cancer and lower rates of HPV vaccination than other White women in the United States. While this was not a Caribbean based study, it focused largely on minority groups of Black women such as Haitians and Jamaicans. To reduce these disparities, the researchers intended understanding differences among these

subgroups of Black women. They found that many Haitians were uncomfortable discussing sex, and by extension HPV vaccination, with their daughters. In the absence of mother–daughter communication, they acknowledge that physicians can play a pivotal role in educating and opening discussions around sexual issues with Haitian families (576-577). However, while physicians can help, having the mother-daughter communication would increase the likelihood of the daughter practicing safe sexual practices. It was also noted that in this study, Haitian parents believed that consenting to HPV vaccination would be a permissive signal to their daughters to engage in sexual activity. One Haitian participant said: “Giving them the vaccine is telling them to go ahead and have sex; you are protected.” From these findings it can be deduced that [a] mothers from African and Caribbean countries believe that this type of conversation is improper, creating feelings of discomfort and shame, before even attempting to talk openly to their daughters in a factual way about their bodies and sex; [b] promoting HPV vaccination would influence sexual onset that Haitian mothers reject from being a part of their culture (576-577).

Stephens and Thomas also focused on the cultural beliefs of Haitians and how it affects mother-daughter conversations about sex. Similarly, to Joseph et al. this study focuses on the HPV vaccine, and it can be used to understand the attitudes that Haitian mothers have against educating their daughters about their sexual health. The study revealed that Haitian mothers had very little awareness or knowledge about the HPV vaccine, which may explain why none had discussed the vaccine with their daughters. Haitian mothers were also concerned that by encouraging vaccination they appear to be sanctioning their daughters’ sexual onset. The mothers in the present study viewed



acceptance of adolescent sexual onset as an “American” value and denounced it as a negative part of the culture in the United States. Early adolescent sexual onset is not accepted by those embracing Haitian cultural values regarding women’s sexuality, which include the celebration of female virginity. This demonstrates that culture specific beliefs such as the rejection of early sexual onset, as well as lack of information about sexual health will discourage Haitian women from engaging in conversations about sexual health with their daughter (164).

Arising out of the study was also the concern Haitians have been labeled as an STI high-risk group which further prevented open communication about sex. The mothers in the study expressed their fears about the stigma of being stereotyped as carriers of HPV. According to the researchers, this concern stems from the CDC’s assertion at the height of the HIV epidemic that Haitians who moved to the United States of America were one of the main groups who were transmitting AIDS. The labeling of the Haitians as a high-risk group certainly created a national and international controversy that led to many discriminatory practices against the group not only in the United States but in many other places around the world. Until present day, these stereotypes persist and greatly influence Haitians when making health care decisions especially having to do with STI related matters (165). The fear of being discriminated against is powerful enough to discourage Haitian mothers from educating themselves about the HPV vaccination. If it is enough to discourage them from getting educated, it is enough to prevent Haitian mothers from having any open communication with their daughters about HPV vaccination. Thus, the fears of being discriminated against due to potential HPV stigmas reflect a real socio-historical experience and are a legitimate

concern. These findings further demonstrate the continued effects of unique, culturally specific sexual health experiences and their influence on Haitian mothers' sexual attitudes. The stereotypes of Haitians being STD transmitters will often thwart the want to communicate openly about sex. For traditional Haitian mothers, the image of being promiscuous would possibly worsen these stereotypes and they would avoid them at all costs. This cultural stigma, while it may be Haitian specific is a real and legitimate reason that Haitian mothers refrain from communicating with their daughters about sex.

We now return to the research carried out on Haitian and Jamaican mother-daughter dyads, where Gabbidon and Shaw-Ridley identified Afro-Caribbean cultural norms have been cited as potential barriers to sex conversation. It was noted that mothers in the study had infrequent or no sexual discussions with their parents in their youth. Similarly, to the research conducted by Castor, it was also noted that Haitian mothers uniquely characterized parent-adolescent sex conversations as forbidden or taboo. For example, A Haitian mother in the study characterized mother-daughter sex communication as: "It's taboo almost. We just didn't talk about it, it's not until somebody, a teenager comes home pregnant (1449)." In many Caribbean cultures, sex is not talked about until the negative consequence occurs. The irony here is uncanny because while traditional mothers attempt to avoid conversations of a sexual nature to maintain an image and to feel like they are being a good mother, the same negative consequence they feared is what causes mothers to finally address sex with their daughters at all. In addition, Jamaican mothers also expressed avoidance of sex conversations as a common practice within their culture. For example, a Jamaican mother in the study said: "It's like they scorn, it's like don't touch that topic... that's something

we don't talk about". Similarly, when asked about their childhood experiences talking to parents about sex, most mothers described it as forbidden or no experience. Another Haitian mother also stated, "my parents had this thought process that you don't need to know none of this, or we don't need to talk about sex (1449)." However, mothers who did have parent-child sex communication with their mothers characterized them as: (a) warning messages without explanation or (b) warning messages accompanied by physical discipline. One Haitian mother recalled being told: "Don't talk to boys. They can't call you. They can't look at you... my parents never got to why not talk to boys". Some mothers experienced physical punishment if they were perceived to be dating or sexually active. A Jamaican mother recalled her experience with physical punishment as a consequence of sharing a kiss with a boy: "At the age of 16, I did kiss a boy and the reaction of my mother was not nice. She actually spanked me in front of all my friends... she punched my neck, and I was on the floor just crying because I couldn't believe the same person who had me did that to me and she couldn't take my word (1449-1451). These reactions to young girls having sexual experiences only further cause them to fear their mothers. This fear is what can put young girls in risky situations where they must partake in unsafe abortions or go months with untreated STIS causing more complications in their body. Haitian and Jamaican culture do not facilitate open communication about sex with their daughters because of cultural beliefs and daughters face harsh repercussions when the child is perceived as sexually active.

Another interesting finding is that some mothers believed younger generations were more open to sex conversations compared to previous generations. There were three mothers reported recognizing a generational shift in how their cultures viewed parent-

adolescent sex conversations with younger parents appearing more open. One Haitian mother said: “You should abstain until you’re married. But that’s the old culture, obviously, time has changed, and you have teenage pregnancy”. And a Jamaican mother, said: “My growing up, sex was a no, you never talk about it. The whole environment has changed nowadays, to me they are more open... and I think the main reason is because of the media... they are trying to be Americanized.” This provided implications that younger generations may be more responsive to interventions that would improve their sex communication with children and self-efficacy (1452). While this study revealed messages that reinforced Caribbean constructions of sexuality by emphasizing abstinence for girls, the study offers insights into the possibility of there being a cultural generational shift in the coming generations. A shift that can only occur if mothers refrain from conforming to old cultural values that view sex as a forbidden topic of conversation.

The various studies highlighted cultural pressures that hinder Caribbean mothers from discussing sex with their daughters. Many Caribbean women have a lack of awareness on sexual health topics because their mothers did not teach them. There also remains the cultural belief that sexual health conversations will promote early sexual onset which is considered an “American” value. The rejection of STD/STI prevention methods to reduce sexual onset cannot continue if we are to protect women. Cultural beliefs about specific groups being STI carriers must be overcome to limit the number of cultural pressures that block mother-daughter communication about sex. While we have looked at the different ways culture pressures traditional mothers, I acknowledge that religion plays a huge part in cultural beliefs.

## CHAPTER FOUR: RELIGION PLAYS A ROLE FOR MOTHERS

While we have discussed the ways culture pressures traditional mothers into having limited or no conversation about sex, it is important to understand the role religion plays in these cultural beliefs. Many of the communication styles about sex are adopted from religious principles that govern the Caribbean region. As mentioned previously, (see chapter 1), autoethnography is an important perspective for this overview, providing first-hand experience as demonstrative practices in the Caribbean that highlight the challenges mothers and daughters face, in order to create a safe and productive communication climate for effective sex talk so necessary for adolescent girls and their understanding of cultural and religious acceptable entries for their upcoming future as women in the Caribbean. Using autoethnography, I will explain the ways religion affected conversations about sex with my mother. Through my specific cultural experience, I will be able to highlight distinct ways religion pressures the traditional mother.

### **4.1 Religious Pressures and My Traditional Mother**

The experiences I had with my mother and my grandmother is a prime example of how traditional mothers conform to religious pressures. I grew up in a strongly religious household. While this was a common occurrence in Jamaica, I always felt like my house was a little different. In the earlier part of my childhood, I grew up with my grandmother. This was because my mother owned a bar at the time so she would work at nights and by the time she came home I was already asleep. I went to school with the next-door neighbors who were also very strong Christians. On the ride to school, we would sing

gospel songs and if you thought this ended there you are wrong. I went to a Christian preparatory school, an elite school, one that my mother could barely afford but worked tirelessly to give me the opportunity of going there. This made her feel like a better mother. Going to this school, I found out shortly after that every part of the curriculum was based around religious faith. We would have a monthly scripture that we would have to learn and recite as a part of our academic success. Now growing up this was never a problem for me because I was taught this is the right thing to do. I was taught as a little girl that in order to grow up and be a good woman I must be godly in everything I do. You see for me school was easy, reciting scriptures, singing songs, and occasionally praying before we go to lunch that was fine. It was not until my teenage years that that I started to feel differently about religion. Around age 9, I started attending the Seventh Day Adventist Christian church with my grandma. While I hated how long and boring it was, I had no other option. Now my mother did not like my grandmothers church, so she never came along. I had to go though, because in order for me to grow up in the right way, I had to be at church every Saturday. I remember being 13 years old and a visiting pastor came to give a sermon. He intentionally designed the sermon for young people in attempt to baptize us all that day. The sermon was so emotionally charged with warnings and description of what hell would be like if we did not get baptized it made children as young as 6 years old go running to the altar. I went up there too because this pastor was somehow so convincing that I did not even have the chance to call my mother and let her know I am getting baptized. My grandmother brought me up to the altar, as if I was a sacrifice and said she is ready. Now I was not exactly sure if I was ready but the thought of me burning up in flames did not sit right with me either. I knew God existed but

looking back, I was way too young to know what the weight of that decision even meant for me.

After getting baptized everything changed. I no longer felt like I could sit in the house on a Saturday and watch television if I wanted to. Whether it was my grandma telling me that I gave my life to the Lord, and he would be disappointed in me if I missed the day, or my own mind telling me I am a wicked sinner, somehow, I could no longer make decisions of myself. My mother would constantly remind me that I made a commitment to God, and it was my fault for committing to something so early in my life without even asking her permission. While I understood what she was saying, was it really her decision if I wanted to give my life to the Lord? Traditional mothers are hilarious.

As I got older, I started to stray away from the biblical teachings that were supposed to be my guide to life, like most teenage and young adult women do. However, I started to hate myself. I started to hate myself because from the moment I started to have sex, I was programmed by my mother and my grandmother to believe that God would hate me. While yes, God was a forgiving God, it made me feel even worse. The fact that I messed up so badly I had to habitually ask for forgiveness made me feel horrible and beyond repair. While specific experiences, specifically the pain that I was feeling in my vaginal area led me to disclose to my traditional mother I was having sex, I was immediately reprimanded that this is not something I should ever do again until I get married. You know this is where I stopped talking. I stopped talking because I know that she would look at me with disgust. I stopped talking because my mother would tell me that sex is a sin if I asked her about anything sexual related.

Shortly after having an abortion, I hit rock bottom. I started to internalize the things my mother and my grandmother said. I started to think that maybe all of this was happening to me because I am promiscuous, because I had sex and sex is sinful. I did not think, maybe if my mother and grandmother taught me how to protect myself then I would have been more prepared for my sexual experiences. No, I could only internalize self-hate. It was my fault. At this time my mother was attending a new church, remember she did not like my grandmother's church, so she found a popular non-denominational church to go to. While my grandmother disapproved, my mother forced me to come along with her, as if she had known deep down that I had just had an abortion and I needed Jesus more than ever. After we attended that church for a couple months, I felt even more ostracized. Majority of the sermons touched on purity; the pastor even called out people in church who were fornicating. This made me terrified of ever sharing my stories in a church like that because then they would obviously see me as modern-day jezebel. After confiding in a couple youth leaders, I instantly regretted it because soon after I started to receive messages about how much I was falling short of God's standard for my life. The sad part is my mother seemed to agree with them. When I moved away to do my bachelor's degree, every time she called me it was if it was a checkup to see if I am still putting God first and not having sex. This haunted our relationship for a long time. It was not until I moved to the United States to pursue my master's degree that these kinds of conversations ceased. For most of my life, I was told by my mother and my grandmother, that sex outside of marriage is a sin. They told me that I should not lose my virginity until I got married and while I really thought I would not, it turns out you



can have a mother who conforms to religious pressures, and you still end up having sex and getting pregnant.

I wanted to summarize my experience with a mother who succumbed to religious pressures because I know this story is like many other Caribbean women out there. While I have found my path for healing through the articulation of my story, and through understanding the various pressures my mother had to adhere to, many women are still in pain. Other women experience more severe consequences when their traditional mothers find out that they are having sex. Even though I do wish I had a better experience, I do understand why my mother thought she had to raise me in that way. She fell prey to the society she was immersed in. While I had an abortion, many women do not want to make that kind of a decision and end up having to raise a child by themselves because they get kicked out by their mothers. Many women only end up in these situations because their mothers refuse to encourage safe sex practices because of religious pressures. While I understand the obligations to religious beliefs, we are human beings, and it is important to prepare daughters with the right information needed to have safe sexual encounters. If history has taught us anything, young women will have sex anyway and it is better they know how to protect themselves than going out into the world with not a clue and end up in situations that could have been avoided. While my experience with my mother can be used as an example in understanding how religion affects the traditional mother, the next sub-chapter explains the use of the concept of religious pressure in this thesis.

#### **4.2 Religious Pressure Explained**

Not only do mothers avoid conversations about sex because of cultural beliefs, but also because of religious beliefs. While religion is a subset of cultural beliefs it is

necessary to specifically outline the effect of religious beliefs on the communication style of mothers because of the monumental impact that religion has on the Caribbean region and by extension Caribbean sexual communication. It is also important to separate them because it is entirely possible to conform to cultural pressures without conforming to religious ideologies. Some Caribbean mothers may refuse to talk about sex because their culture does not permit open sexual communication because of its impropriety or promiscuous nature, or STI/STD stigmas (Stephens and Thomas 165). They may decide that to remain a good traditional mother, they should just avoid sex conversations, or they should only communicate messages that consist of warnings about abstinence (Gabbidon and Shaw-Ridley 1449). However, conforming to both cultural and religious beliefs significantly affect the nature of sexual conversations. Mothers who have been taught by their own mothers that sex before marriage is a sin have a hard time communicating anything else with their daughters. They are less likely to have any conversation that does not involve the message of abstinence and the fear of the Lord. Women who were brought up in the church or by strong Christian mothers and/or grandmothers tend to believe that talking about sex may result in them being condemned to hell. In their mind, there is no need for sexual communication because God does not permit that, and the fear of God is held at a higher esteem than the fear of being culturally outcasted or ridiculed. To understand the effect of religious beliefs on mothers' communication styles when talking about sex with their daughters, we must take another look at our Caribbean history. The Caribbean region is highly religious, and this is heavily influenced by its history of colonization which is overviewed in detail.

### 4.3 Colonial History and Religion

Outlining the colonial history of the Caribbean is critical in understanding the impact of religious beliefs and principles on the islands and how these beliefs affect the traditional mother. Religion was forced upon the slaves by the different colonizers of the region. The entire transatlantic trade in Africans was founded on Christianity. Religion was key in motivating Prince Henry of Portugal, later called Henry, "the Navigator" to put in motion Europe's aggressive and ruthless expeditions to Africa (Cannon 127). The colonizers made claims of using religion to civilize the Africans as justification for slavery. As Padgett explains, with the harsh treatment of the slaves on the plantation this created anger and hatred towards the European plantation owners and feelings that the slaves could only release in the form of resistance. However, resistance could not be achieved without sharing common values and the slaves who submitted to the Europeans conversion to Christianity were able to bond through religion. This bond that was created through converting to Christianity was able to unify the slaves and serve to resist the severe treatment they had to endure from the Europeans. Consequently, Christianity began to serve as a means for resistance through the period of the slave trade. Before the conversion, slaves drew from their own system of beliefs brought from their African tribal communities. These African religions believe in the existence of one supreme god, and this is the main belief they shared with Christianity. This made it easier for Africans to understand and relate to the Christian religion. African religions had differing beliefs though, that saw man himself as spirit and considered spirits of ancestors a natural occurrence. However, their religious beliefs did not promote the idea of heaven which was a major determining factor on why many African slaves converted to Christianity.

For many of the enslaved Africans, the promise of there being a heaven was a promise for enduring the harsh physical and mental punishment of slavery. While many slaves adopted Christianity there were some who rejected the religion but still adopted a few of its elements (Padgett).

While the adoption of Christianity by the slaves helped them to cope, it was the Christianization of these African slaves that played the integral role for abolishing the slave trade. There was no other event that can even remotely have the same effect or can measure up to the massive contribution that introducing Christianity to the Africans played in the justification for emancipating the slaves. Consequently, this resulted in an "Africanization" of Christianity that is still prevalent in Caribbean culture. Religion in the Caribbean was an integral part of both the white and black societies during periods of emancipation and afterwards. Several European missionary groups like the Baptists, Moravians, Quakers, and the Catholics all brought Christianity to the islands on request of the Europeans to civilize the slaves. While the slaves were not very welcoming of these missionary groups, after a time they began to conform, and their teachings passed through the islands. The missionaries' interest in the conversion of the slaves to Christianity did lead to the combining of Catholicism and other African religions. These resulted in many 'creolized' religions that contributed to the culture in islands like Cuba and Haiti and helped to move from a period of slavery to emancipation ("Religion").

During this period, missionary groups traveled throughout the Caribbean islands, preaching, and converting the slaves. The missionaries paid paramount attention to the islands that were ruled by the British with the main intention to convert their slaves. Jamaica, one of the main British islands is a prime example of the missionary work. The

missionaries that came to Jamaica built churches, schools, and meetinghouses but were met with a great deal of resistance from the white plantation owners. This is because they did not want their slaves to know how to read and write, they also did not want to give them time off from working in the fields to do activities like learning and going to church. The reason for this is mainly because they feared that educating the slaves would make them smarter, give them a mind of their own and eventually bring about a rebellion. The church and religion played a huge role in abolishing the Atlantic slave trade in the Caribbean. The continuation of African religious forms in the islands after the Atlantic slave trade helped many slaves to carry on some resemblance of their previous cultures to the islands, while the introduction of Christianity to the slaves enhanced their possibilities for emancipation (“Religion”).

After the occupation of the different Europeans in the Caribbean, the islands were left with societies heavily influenced by a ‘creolized’ version of European religion. This involves the retention of the Roman Catholic and Anglican Churches in islands like Jamaica, as well as the continuation of various African religions such as Voodoo, in addition to the many protestant churches that can be found across the island (Ferguson et al). This heavy reliance on religion created societies whose laws, norms and social mores were derived from doctrines consistent with religious beliefs. After looking at the colonial history and its effect on religion, we now move to looking at the way that these beliefs influence the traditional mother in their conversations about sex with their daughters. Caribbean mothers who engage in conversations about sex, have reported messages with religious undertones encouraging abstinence and viewing pre-marital sex as sinful (Castor 4). While young women will have sex regardless, solely communicating

abstinence is the main premise of all sexual communication in religious based societies (Kang Dufour et al. 226). The way that these beliefs influence the traditional mother in their conversations about sex with their daughters is presented in the following studies.

#### **4.4 How Does Religion Impact the Role of Mothers when Discussing Sex with Their Daughters in Caribbean cultures?**

Religiosity plays a significant role in the lives of Caribbean families and has an even greater impact on the role of the traditional mother. Inevitably, religious based societies tend to promote messages solely about abstinence forcing mothers to stick to the command “Don’t have sex until you’re married.” While young women will participate in sex regardless, solely communicating abstinence is the main premise of all sexual communication in religious-based societies. Religious beliefs at times, hold maximum weight to a person. This may be attributed to either the promise of eternal hell fire or the promise of going to heaven. Religion also plays a huge role in character judgement and biblical teachings tend to hold much weight in islands that drew on Christianity in such heavy times of peril (Padgett). The influence of religion on communication between mothers and daughters is presented in the following studies.

A study by Kang Dufour et al. has examined the role of faith-based organizations in Eastern Caribbean HIV prevention programs. The researchers found that, despite these faith-based organizations being a part of the process, the prevention messages that are taught must be consistent with religious doctrines. Kang Dufour and colleagues posits that the main prevention messages around sexual health and HIV and STD prevention were obviously rooted in doctrinal beliefs as it mainly focused on forbidding sexual relationships outside the context of heterosexual marriage (226). The FBO’s outlined that

abstinence before marriage and faithfulness in marriage or when living together were the preferred, if not the only prevention message that they should communicate. One of the participants interviewed felt strongly about this stating: “Abstinence, abstinence, abstinence, abstinence, abstinence, more abstinence and abstinence. (Laughs out) Wait until you get married, get tested before you get married (Kang Dufour et al. 226).” It was noted that some FBO informants described their organizations participation in a program called ‘ATM’, or abstinence until marriage that was designed for youth, and teaches abstinence as a goal and way of life to fully protect from HIV and other STDS. The group teaches that abstinence refers to all types of sex, including anal sex and oral sex. The FBO’s stressed to the youths that it is not an acceptable alternative for young girls to remain a virgin. While this study does not directly address mother-daughter communication, it highlights the messages that are taught to young girls in the Caribbean. This is important in understanding why traditional mothers communicate in a manner that aligns with church doctrines. Another participant in the study reported that in some FBO’s they have programs for children as early as ages 7 to 10 to sign a purity covenant that they will remain abstinent until marriage (226). It is preposterous to have children, who know nothing about sex to sign a purity pledge at an age that they can barely understand what the concept of purity even means, but this shows how much of an influence religion has on behavior.

Another interesting finding in the study was that attitudes towards HIV were controversial. While you would believe that Christians would be less judgmental of someone living with HIV, the attitudes of the faith-based organizations did not reflect that. Majority of the respondents acknowledged that there is still very much an attitude

present that people living with HIV should be punished and outcasted because it is their fault for infecting themselves by being promiscuous. There is little sympathy for people living with HIV, completely ignoring religious teachings about all sin carrying the same weight. These attitudes persisted because people still hold the belief that HIV transmission is only passed on if you are promiscuous or dirty. These religious organizations tend to hold sins involving sex as even more appalling than judgement and hatred. The church held similar attitudes towards sex workers, homosexual men, and even single mothers because of the idea that they engage in sexual activity that is sinful, because it is outside the boundaries of heterosexual marriage. In addition, these attitudes were held for persons living with AIDS because they have engaged in sexual activities that are summed up in this quote by a respondent: “HIV when it first started out, it was basically a homosexual disease; it has transitioned to being a heterosexual disease now but people have not really seen it as, seen the transition, they're still seeing it as, if you get this, you or somebody that you were with, were behaving in dirty practices.” These religious ideologies only create stigma against people living with AIDS and create false notions of how STDS are passed (Kang Dufour 227-229). The negative stigma attached to sex outside of marriage results in an insufficiency of safe sexual health information provided to women to protect against these diseases. As a result, condom use could not be promoted because it is inconsistent with church doctrine. These findings suggest that when a young woman is predominantly socialized by the church, they are provided with very limited information on sexuality and safe sexual practice and poisoned against the topic of sex overall. When these young women become mothers, they will end up practicing those same communication styles with their daughters. Providing limited



information will only expose women to negative consequences if they do choose to engage in sexual activity and not have the adequate information to make safe decisions.

In the study by Castor, it was highlighted that sexual education of Haitian women often occurred in the context of spirituality and sex should only occur after a woman gets married (4). This becomes risky because while women may hold these spiritual ideologies, they still may have sex, not seek adequate sex safe information, and live in silence because of shame associated with pre-marital sex. Castor also mentions a study by Smith, where it is explained that when church leaders preach about HIV/AIDS, they tie it to immorality and say it is caused by not being a good Christian (4). An interesting finding from this study is that another group of women made the decision to abstain from sex regardless of their religious ideologies but rather to protect themselves from pregnancy and diseases including but not limited to HIV (4). This finding suggested that these women most likely chose to abstain because they were not aware or did not have any real safe sex information. They also may have wanted to avoid the stigma associated with pre-marital sex. The idea of communicating abstinence to young women is ludicrous. It does not prepare them for life or influence women to make safe decisions about their health (2-4).

Just like Haiti, Grenada is also conservative and highly driven by Catholic customs as well as Protestant influences. Frederick et al. highlighted that in Grenada, whether you consistently attend church, the primary message that is taught about sex is abstinence (2). These beliefs are important sources of socialization for adolescents about sexuality and life issues. The researchers also noted that abstinence was the general message to adolescent girls via their mothers and experiences with churches and schools.

Study participants received messages that were specifically abstinence centered “unless you’re married, you shouldn’t be having sex.” These types of messages are closely connected to their religious beliefs. For example, another participant said: “Mom always goes back to the Bible and say just like how the Bible says that you must not have sex before you married...she always go back to the Biblical word and gives me information about it. So, we always go back to the word.” In reference to school-related obligations, a participant described the warning that her mother gave her: “...don’t have sex at an early age, I don’t want you to get pregnant...at an early age you have to drop out of school; education is the key to success nowadays and she don’t want me to end up like her having a child at 14.” Some participants had direct Church experiences and they discussed some of the religious rationale used to deter them from engaging in sex. One said that she learned, “sex before marriage is a sin.” At times these messages are delivered within church settings, “because I grow up in church, unless you’re married you shouldn’t be having sex...” From the adolescent perspective, mothers wanted adolescents to demonstrate responsibility for their actions by promoting abstention. Adolescents then countered that they should receive a better quality of sex communication and were open to alternative sources, such as the internet and peers (Frederick et al 5-6). In general, mothers in the study endorsed church attendance and abstinence from a religious standpoint. Adolescents were also encouraged to delay sex due to completion of school. In Grenada, the sexual socialization that daughters received from their mothers was often consistent with those of religious teachings. While this is not always the case, religious pressure plays a huge role in affecting mother-daughter sex communication.

Gabbidon and Shaw-Ridley also made mention of the effect that religion has on mothers' sex communication styles. Mothers reported that when their mothers did engage in conversations, they mainly entailed messages with religious undertones encouraging abstinence and viewing pre-marital sex as sinful (1451, 1454). The mothers explained that the communication styles practiced by their mothers had long lasting effects and it was hard for them to view sex as anything other than a sin making it harder to communicate with their daughters about sex. A Haitian mother made comments like: "I look at sex as a sin. Even when I was married, it felt wrong. I can't wrap my mind around sex being a normal thing." A Jamaican mother said "Parents put fear inside of you because sex is a sin... because the bible say you must not fornicate. "Haitian and Jamaican sexual beliefs are known to be deeply rooted in Christian values. For mothers, these beliefs may have restricted their families' openness towards sexual discussions (Gabbidon and Shaw-Ridley 1451).

It is evident from these studies that religious beliefs play a role in pressuring those women who aspire to be 'good traditional mothers' to only have conversations in the context of abstinence. Due to the Caribbean region being so heavily dependent on, and influenced by Christianity in particular, many mothers find it hard not to show some conformity to the Christian religion. While many women choose not to go to church, many of their mother-daughter conversations will carry religious undertones and when they do not, the conversation is usually very limited. Effective mother-daughter communication about sex and sexual health must be fostered if we are to limit the negative sexual consequences faced by many of our young women. Mothers can be good mothers without having to conform to religious pressures.

#### **4.5 Communication Expectations of Mothers and Expected Outcomes**

Taking into account all the mentioned: the traditional role, pressures, cultural norms, and religious ones, what are the possible outcomes? one of them is expectations: In the Caribbean, young women continue to take part in reckless and irresponsible sexual behaviors because of ineffective communication about sex and sexuality between mothers and daughters. Lack of mother-daughter sexual communication influence the likelihood of teenage pregnancy and contracting STDS. In 2020, Jamaica recorded the third highest adolescent pregnancy rate in the Latin America; Caribbean region (Mason). In Addition, HIV/AIDS is one of the top 10 causes of death and HIV/AIDS is the number one cause of disease burden for women from ages 25–44 years. In 2010, HIV/AIDS was ranked as the leading cause of disease burden measured as disability-adjusted life years (DALYs) in 21 countries including Haiti (Castor 1). These alarming statistics place more importance on the mother's role in sex communication. Informative and effective communication about sex and sexual health is necessary to decrease participation in risky sexual behaviors in the Caribbean region. There is great interest and need for providing young people with the comprehensive sexuality information and decision-making skills they require to avoid unplanned pregnancy, HIV, STIs, sexual exploitation, and gender-based violence (The Jamaican Task Force Committee 3). However, while this is so, many Caribbean people still debate over whether young people should only learn about abstinence, whether certain controversial topics such as masturbation should be discussed, and at what age other topics should be introduced. Equally important, due to cultural and religious influences and other factors inhibiting open discussion of sexuality, many professionals may be too embarrassed, lack accurate information, or not have the

comfort and confidence to effectively discuss sexuality issues with young people (The Jamaican Task Force Committee 3). In addition, as before mentioned in the study by Kang Dufour, many faith-based organizations who play a pivotal role in HIV prevention plans still only promote the message of abstinence (Kang Dufour et al. 226). While it is evident that young women are not choosing to abstain from sex until marriage, Afro-Caribbean mothers are expected to predominantly share messages about abstaining, providing their daughters with almost no safe sex information. Simply talking vaguely about abstinence, knowing limits and condom use is supposed to prevent young girls from engaging in risky behaviors. By doing this we have left the playing field wide open. Many young girls have no idea about many sexually transmitted infections and diseases. They have no idea that they can be transmitted and lay asymptomatic in your body for years sometimes causing fatal complications such as infertility. Many young women have no idea how to use a female condom, or other birth control methods that are available to protect them from unwanted pregnancy. Many of them are too scared to ask questions and seek help from a health care provider. The practices that Caribbean women have previously been using to communicate with their daughters is not influencing better decision making, proven by the increasing rates of teenage pregnancy and STDs.

CHAPTER FIVE:  
IMPORTANT DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE ROLE OF MOTHERS WHEN  
DISCUSSING SEX WITH THEIR DAUGHTERS IN NATIVE CARIBBEAN  
CULTURES OR IN NORTH AMERICAN DIASPORA

In the Caribbean, mothers are highly influenced by cultural, and religious pressures when talking to their daughters about sex. While some mothers may choose to educate their daughters about safe sex, majority of mother-daughter communication promotes the message of abstinence, or at least abstinence until marriage or the ending of school. Few mothers educate their daughters on the various birth control options, the use of protection and conversations about sexuality. However, this communication practice often differs by culture. It was noted that American mothers of European descent tend to be more open with their daughters about sexual conversation (Coffelt 122). However, many African American mothers who have strong religious beliefs may be less likely to promote open conversations about sex and sexuality (Grigsby 135). American mother-daughter communication styles vs. Caribbean mother-daughter communication styles are compared in the following section.

**5.1 American Conversations About Sex vs. Caribbean**

Research conducted by Gore et al. indicates that in the United States, mothers and their young adult daughters often take on communicative styles more akin to friendships than to intergenerational relationships (994). This makes talking about health practices of some importance to their daughter's behavior, but Jamaican mothers have higher

influences on their daughters because of the collectivistic culture and their prioritization of family. In the Caribbean the quality of family conversations seems to have a stronger connection to healthy behavior than among Americans. It is noted that when conversation about health is positive, the daughters engage in positive health practices. When those conversations are negative, the daughters engage in negative health practices. The study showed that three important factors matter in the promotion of healthy behavior: (1) the frequency that the mother and daughter address the topic, (2) the quality of their relationship, and (3) their culture. Having frequent conversations about health within a positive relationship context seems to be the most effective in promoting a healthy lifestyle, and this is more so the case among the women from Jamaica than those from the United States (1002-1003). In essence, Gore explains that while American mothers find it easier to talk to their daughters about sex, Jamaican mothers can have a greater effect on their daughters because of the high levels of family prioritization.

In addition, a study by Coffelt, using all participants of European descent explained that sex communication was not challenging between mother and daughter. The study used nine, 19-year-old daughters and their mothers to have personal as well as joint interviews (120). The results from the study revealed that sex communication was not at all challenging for these dyads and they seem to have very close relationships. The interviews led to three main discussion points. The first one was that the perception of sex as a natural topic prompted them to have open conversations about sex. The second discussion point was that despite communicative openness about sex the challenges they faced were acknowledged. In some cases, daughters were uncomfortable with conversations about sex when they were younger, which tends to be the opposite case in

the Caribbean. Mothers remain the ones who are uncomfortable while the daughters yearn for their mothers to have these conversations with them. The third discussion point was that relational dialectics can be used to understand the complexities experienced by these participants. Therefore, sexual communication may be dialectical in nature and can be framed as challenging and not challenging rather than challenging or not challenging (127-128). This study revealed that many white Americans do not find sex challenging because culturally they view sex as a natural topic.

It is also interesting to note that in more recent times, African American mothers have sexual health communication with their daughters. While these mothers tend to communicate messages with strong religious undertones as well as authoritarian values, the fact that they have initiated communication is a good step. This may be because of their obvious saturation in American culture which is more open to mother-daughter sexual communication. However, their African descent sometimes played a role in previous generations avoidance of the topic. According to Grigsby, the mothers in this study wanted their daughters to be well rounded who maintained a healthy balance between traditional church attendance and other social activities. Mothers used their faith foundation as the framework to teach their daughters about life and womanhood. Like many African American women, participants relied heavily on their faith and religious traditions to manage their health and well-being (135). However, some mothers in the study did display discomfort when their daughters had questions on topics concerning oral sex and same-sex relationships. This is because African Americans still have a certain stigma attached to same sex relationships. The origin of this stigma mainly comes from Christian biblical teachings that African Americans are very heavily reliant on.



Despite more media and television exposure supporting the acceptance of same-sex relationships, marriage laws and civil rights legislation, some from this community have been slow to adjust to these changes across racial and cultural lines. However, the difference is that many of these new African American expressed a desire to be trained and educated on topics such as oral sex and same sex relationships so they could talk to their daughters about it (Grisby 135). While Grisby noted that mother-daughter communication about sex is significantly understudied, it is the same situation in the Caribbean. The Caribbean currently lacks studies on mother-daughter sexual communication, especially for this new generation of mothers. To deduct whether this generation of Caribbean women hold the same desire for training and education, we must hear from them.

However, as the world becomes more globalized, and the media now transcends to everyone who has access the internet the Caribbean becomes more “Americanized” by the day. In a study by Ferguson and Iturbide, they found that Mothers’ description of Jamaican parenting strategies as stern and evolving over generations aligned with prior research on Jamaican youths’ perspectives of modern parenting. However, the mothers in the study described an evolution of parenting strategies in Jamaica but indicated that there are differences across context and demographic groups. They explained that an evolving aspect of parenting by Americanization is the openness of parent-adolescent communications. The mothers also described behavioral shifts in both adolescents and in parents: mothers listened and validated teenagers’ opinions more frequently, and teenagers shared their opinions more readily. This open parent-adolescent communication style creates a chance for more negotiations between parent and adolescent instead of the

parent making all decisions without discussion which is likely to increase the occurrence of parent-adolescent conflict. This finding explains why Americanized Jamaican mothers and youth tend to report higher levels of parent-adolescent conflict relative to cultural traditional families. According to Ferguson and Iturbide, another aspect that might influence the likelihood of family conflict is the fact that extended family such as grandparents, are sometimes disapproving of Americanized parenting, which may create ambivalence or inconsistency in parental strategies (57-60). Previous generations are less likely to adopt more American styles of parenting, however they are the same generations that were opposed to any conversation about sex at all. With the spread of American culture into the Caribbean, the possibility of the mindset of the younger generation shifting from a stance of silence to open communication about safe sex is more likely now than before. However, literature on current ideologies about sexual communication is greatly lacking. The voices of young girls, the voices of the next generation of mothers, need to be heard to truly evaluate where Caribbean women stand on beliefs about safe sex communication.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study has identified the current dimensions that impact mother-daughter communication about sex in the Caribbean. However, in doing this it was noted that research in this area is severely lacking, and a comprehensive analysis of the entire region would require more studies. The traditional mother is pressured by the cultural and religious expectations which thwarts her communication with her daughter about sex. Many islands have unique cultural pressures such as STI/STD stigma, the rejection of early sexual onset, lack of awareness on many sexual topics and the rejection of sexual conversation as an American value. Religion plays an integral role in Caribbean culture but at some point, religious beliefs will have to facilitate more effective sexual health education that goes beyond the preaching of abstinence. Caribbean women cannot continue to be crippled with the fear, shame and the stigma associated with pre-marital sex when seeking out sexual health information.

Taking into account: [a] the role of the traditional mother [b] cultural pressures/expectations; [c] religion; and [d] distinct communication differences in native vs. north American diaspora – the role of mothers when discussing sex with their daughters in Caribbean cultures has a multifaceted set of communication challenges that continue to face mothers and daughters today. When they do communicate, the conversation is predominantly about abstinence and in some cases, condom use completely excluding information about STDS, methods of birth control conversations about sexuality, same-sex relationships, masturbation, and many other sex topics. While

Caribbean adolescents place an important value on family, this is sometime negative. Mothers who have positive, and open communication with their daughters have the capability to influence their daughters to have positive sexual experiences. However, mothers who predominantly have negative experiences with their daughters will often result in negative consequences. To truly have effective mother daughter sexual communication, mothers need to craft informative safe sex messages and communicate that with their daughters. Adhering to the traditional mother role, which has been passed down through Caribbean culture, haunting us for generations with its crazy expectations of how a mother should parent her daughter will only continue to cause negative consequences. Mothers must refrain from conforming to cultural and religious pressures that will only increase the likelihood of daughters engaging in dangerous sexual behaviors. While it is impossible to alter the culture of the entire Caribbean, mothers need to be aware that the lack of communication with their daughters about safe sex has a direct result on her daughter's sexual health.

Future studies need to examine the various communication styles between mother and daughter in more areas of the Caribbean, the few islands that the research includes is not sufficient in understanding communication styles in the entire region. While previous generations have severely lacked having safe sex conversations with their daughters, mothers are now saying that future generations are more open to having these conversations. Are the mothers of the next generation equipped with the right strategies to break the generational stronghold of ineffective sexual communication between mother and daughter? Are they getting the right information? Will their communication

strategies be effective? All these questions and more continue to remain in the forefront of the need to provide more scholarly work in the area of sexual health communication.

To ensure these new mothers are adequately prepared to educate their daughters, we need to have more safe sex interventions to facilitate open and informative communication. While we have heard from the previous generation of mothers, I believe it is necessary to hear from the mothers of this current generation, when I say current generation, I refer to the mothers ages 18-28, an age range where research on this topic is severely lacking. I recognize the challenge, this research is lacking information, but due to the rise in digital communication, and access to media, hopefully, social media platforms will allow this new generation to help mothers change those rules in the future. Through this use of digital and social media, sexual health education programs for mothers can be fostered in the Caribbean so mothers who choose to educate their daughters are passing on the correct information to have safe sexual encounters. This can also aid in a shift of mindset, from one of silence and rejection, to a mindset that is open to normalize sexual health communication in the Caribbean. I do salute the mothers who have spoken to and educated their daughter about sex and sexual health in the past. It is a conversation that every mother should have with their daughters once given the chance. I wished my mother spoke to me about my sexual health when I was younger to avoid simple mistakes. Mothers being aware of their influence on their daughter's sex lives would hopefully influence earlier, more informative, and clearer communication about sexual health.

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