

## **CHAPTER 1V**

### **SEXUALITY AND THE CARIBBEAN FEMALE**

*The Caribbean woman's attitudes towards sexuality may appear ambivalent and often puzzling to the onlooker from outside the culture. In a region where the role of the woman and mother is pre-eminent and where it appears that the woman is in control, there are signs of frustration and resignation. The woman in the Caribbean has been idolized, mistreated, scandalized, adored and sometimes exploited.*

*Women in the Caribbean are often compared in terms of their attitudes towards sexuality. Some are said to be aggressive, reserved, scheming or laid-back! Without a doubt it must be admitted that Caribbean women have had to 'put up' with a lot from Caribbean men. Even in their difficulties their strength, resolve and seemingly boundless caring is often the topic of conversation among Caribbean men.*

*In order to fully grasp their attitudes, we must look at the socialization process, which I see as the key to the way they act out sexually, and the way they understand their sexuality.*

#### **Socialization**

*In Caribbean society it has been traditional for girls to be told and constantly reminded that she is not a boy. A mother saying this to a girl is telling her that there are certain modes of behavior which boys are allowed but which are forbidden for girls.*

*Girls grow up with a perception that their mothers and fathers want to keep them from the full enjoyment of life outdoors. They are often told what they are not 'suppose to do' and where they are not 'suppose to go', who they are not be seen with, and the only explanation that is sometimes given is, "you are a girl-child, you are not a boy".*

*Strict discipline is the overriding factor in the socialization of girls in the Caribbean context. In the lower economic classes and sometimes in the middle class situation, this discipline is enforced by whipping, to which a girl may be subjected, even up to age of 17.*

*It seems that women who have had a difficult time with men are even more 'hard' and restrictive with their growing daughters, for the simple reason that they do not want what has befallen them to be their daughters' lot.*

*"Our parents led us to believe that men would kill or hurt us or make you pregnant. You had to stay away from them. Mother told me to be careful of men, but didn't explain what she meant. But she had five children with two other men before she came to live with my father and then she had five more."*

*Parents in the Caribbean often feel that sexuality is something one learns when one reaches the right age. To be asking for sexual information and to show knowledge about sexuality, especially sexual intercourse, at the age of 13 or 14, implies that the girl is playing she is a 'big woman', and having received the knowledge she is sure to put it into practice. Therefore, the longer knowledge of these matters can be postponed, and the gathering of relevant information, the less risk she would have of becoming pregnant.*

*If we look at the socialization process from a family system perspective we would see that the girls are given conflicting signals by their parents. On the one hand they are told that boys are 'bad' and they are not to be seen talking with them, which presents an image of the man as an object of fear, distrust and threat. Yet the girl*

*grows up in the home seeing the mother , despite her independence, and hard work and seeming self-assuredness, dependent upon a man, whether it is her father, or another man, for financial and emotional support. She soon learns that even though her mother speaks harshly about men she appears unable to keep them out of her life.*

*The girl will therefore be curious, if she has not already learned, to discover what keeps the fire burning in a seeming love-hate relationship. As we will come to see later, there are always men willing to help her stand up to her mother and become a ‘woman’ on her own, free from the parental conflictual messages.*

*The conflicting message of the father is also picked up and understood for what it is, as it is often reinforced by the remonstrations of the mother.*

*“Father a strict man... If I did anything he would beat me... when 18 couldn’t go anywhere except to church. He says he didn’t want me to have a baby too young... but him gambling all the time, and he away with women so when I got pregnant and was afraid, I had nobody to turn to.”*

*A girl can very well wonder why her father does not want her to associate with boys or men, while he is not saying to her brother that he is not to associate with girls.*

*There is therefore evidence of contradictory messages, leading to a degree of moral confusion which could encourage a willingness to find out for one’s self by way of the inevitable experimentation.*

*We will comment further on the church’s stance as a pivotal but heretofore quite reluctant participant in the sexual socialization of the young girl in the Caribbean context. The church was seen as a safe social outlet where parents could allow their daughters to go without the fear that they would get themselves into trouble.*

*A teenage girl was often sent to church, and her brother would sometimes reluctantly accompany her to report any boy-girl liaison initiated on her way to or from social outing at the church. Women were usually actively involved in the church and often took their daughters along with them. This was seen as a way to keep an eye on the girl.*

*The fear and inability to relate to their daughters other than on a protective basis, did not help in allowing the growing girl to understand why her mother behaved in the way she did. The teenager interpreted her mother’s over-protection as distrust and the exercise of an unfair double standard.*

*Adolescents, no matter where they are and in what culture, are undergoing changes in their physical and psychological make-up; they are therefore less prone to be simply unquestioning in their acceptance of pronouncements made by parents without being open to the impressions and views of their peers.*

*The middle adolescent period seems most troublesome for Caribbean parents, for the period between 15 – 17 is a time when a lot of teenage pregnancies occur. This is a time of adjustment for the teenager, and sexuality, its expression and understanding, is most important.*

*“At this age young people become very concerned and discerning About values, not accepting those of the past on authority but having The immediate need of developing principles upon which to live everyday life. They are idealistic and at the same time skeptical. As they leave the last of childhood and turn anxiously to the new responsibilities of adulthood, they tend to go through periods of vague anxiety and dis-ease. The peer group and the mixed male and female group of friends become increasingly important in social development: for a sense of individual identity, as a source of values, and for mutual support, often the first*

*actual heterosexual experience occurs as an isolated experiment. Adolescents at this age experience varying degrees of sexual activity from little or infrequent to more regular sexual relationships.”*

*Judith Blake found that most of the respondents in her survey (of teenage girls) had no explanation for becoming sexually involved during middle adolescence. Given the strictness of upbringing, the mixed and conflictual message which they receive from their parents, and the psychological development and changes they go through during this period of their socialization, it is not surprising that many teenage girls become sexually involved at the time they do.*

*When one compounds all of the above with the fact that most teenagers are given little or no formal instruction and information about sexuality from the major socializing agents – the home, school and church – one does not have to look far to find out why teenage pregnancy is a problem.*

*But the answer is not as simple as I may be making it. Surely, many would quickly contend that we presently have some lessons on sexuality being taught in the schools. Surely, some would even say that the churches are making some effort to disseminate information about sexuality. I have not ruled out the rejoinders and rebuttals which are sure to come. I am however making a point concerning the overall socialization process in the Caribbean in relationship to the females in the culture.*

*I am fully aware, as I have stated before, that there are certain considerations which will be evident, and certain patterns which will be different in the various classes in Caribbean society. However, ideas about sexuality generally transcend class lines.*

*Eugene Brody found that women who were better educated and more economically secure (middle and upper class women), tended to be more self-determined, more prone to use contraceptives, and thus avoided pregnancy, whereas those who had been raised in economically deprived situations followed a pattern of lacking knowledge about sexuality and sexual reproduction. Although one cannot make a case for their being more sexually active, girls and women in this latter group become pregnant more often.*

*In order to fully grasp the meanings which Caribbean women attach to sexuality, we need to look at sexual experiences and attitudes towards fertility, and how they perceive their overall role in terms of their sexuality.*

## **Sexual Experience**

*Having noted the reluctance of parents to give specific information on sex and sexuality to their teenage daughters, and having also mentioned the predisposition of adolescents to seek their own information and to experiment sexually, we see in the Caribbean, as a result of the experimentation and the acting out, a plethora of teenage pregnancies.*

*Caribbean women seem to learn about sex and sexuality as a matter of course, as they usually gather information from their peers; from men who have their own secret and more often selfish agenda; and as a matter of trial and error. This seemingly naïve approach to sex and sexuality is evident in Judith Blake’s study of Jamaican women:*

*“The majority of respondents attribute the heedlessness with which they entered their first unions to their naivete and ignorance regarding sexual intercourse, or its ‘consequences’ in pregnancy. In fact, Two-thirds of the women claim to have known little or ‘nothing’ of sexual relations and pregnancy before their first unions. The most striking gap in their knowledge evidently concerned the casual relationship between intercourse and conception.”*

*The conflicting messages which are transmitted to a girl escalated on her reaching menarche. Mothers often say to their daughters, "You are a woman now, stay away from those boys". Brody found that four-fifths of his 150 respondents were between the ages of 12 and 15 at the onset of menarche. Most of the young ladies reported having their first sexual experience between 14 and 19.*

*The lack of preparation for menarche by the imparting of information on sexuality, evoked fear, uncertainty and confusion in many girls at onset. The mixed messages led to exploration and experimentation, and placed many teenagers in a position where they were often exploited by callous, self-serving older men.*

*Another attitude, born of the conflicting messages, that Caribbean women are forced to overcome – although many of them do not – is the non-acceptance of their sexuality and the inability to see their sexual organs and sexuality, as a whole, as being good. This ambivalence towards sexuality often elicited much apprehension and insecurity in young girls facing the prospect of adulthood. The socialization process did not help very much in preparing teenage girls for the role of adults in their society; hence they were made to face adulthood dependent upon their mothers or for the most part, the suspect and uncertain tutelage of men.*

*"For more than half the respondents, the idea of entering adult female status, symbolized by menarche with its sexual and reproductive connotations, evoked fear, worry or pessimism. Almost as many, 41.3 percent, said they were indifferent or neutral about 'becoming a grown-up woman.'"*

*The teenage girl receives messages which on the one hand signals tht sex is natural, that one can become mentally ill if one abstains totally from sexual intercourse, and on the other hand, one cannot play "big woman."*

*In the Caribbean society fertility is highly prized, and this attitude seems to be more pervasive among economically and educationally deprived classes in the society. Edith Clarke found that the association of sex with pregnancy and the positive outcome in terms of fertility were important references for women in the Caribbean.*

*"Not only is sexual activity regarded as natural, it is unnatural not to have a child and no woman who has not proved that she can bear one is likely to find a man to be responsible for her since 'no man is going to propose marriage to such a woman'. Maternity is a normal and desirable state and the childless woman is an object of pity, contempt and derision... A barren woman may be rejected to as a mule."*

*Given the prevalent attitudes to fertility and the mixed and conflictual messages which are received by young women in the society, there are most often negative reactions, more especially from the mother, when an adolescent daughter becomes pregnant.*

*The statement of Edith Clarke is important in trying to grasp what I consider to be an important feature in the understanding of women's attitude towards sexuality.*

*"In view of the general attitude to sex and the high value placed upon fertility it is remarkable that the first pregnancy of an adolescent girl in Sugartown no less than in Mocca or Orange Grove, normally provokes from a mother a reaction which would imply general recognition of a much stricker code.*

*It would seem that mothers in their effort to instill values and to prevent their daughters from becoming pregnant at an early age, continue a process of strict protectiveness without being able to communicate to their daughters the reasons for or virtues of their mode of socialization.*

*Mothers warn their daughters against sex-play; they scold their daughters who stay out later than the mothers think is right; mothers, through threats and disciplinary actions, say in effect to their daughters, "I do not want you to have the hardships which I had to go through".*

*Furthermore, mothers feel uneasy discussing sexual matters with their daughters; the daughters are simply told they are not to be seen with boys; they are to avoid premature sex and procreation. Interestingly, the injunctions to avoid premature sex are not given to the teenager boys in the family.*

*Considering all that has been said before it is certain that the denial, restriction, and lack of information that the maturing woman is forced to accept will shape her attitude towards sexuality.*

*If the adolescent girl is to fully identify with her role model (mother), she would have to follow her instinctual curiosity and enter into a conflictual relationship with a boy, or man, for that matter. Why was her emerging sexual feelings bad, why was intercourse bad?*

*Some adolescent girls saw sexual intercourse, and perhaps a baby, as a means of dealing with the conflictual messages and feelings they were receiving. This path may also lead to liberation from a seemingly possessive mother who did not want the girl to attain the joys and benefits of adulthood. Many adolescents saw their mother's behavior as a means to keep them as subservient, obedient children, and to deny them the status of adulthood.*

*Therefore, many adolescents opted to show their contempt for what they perceived as a denial of how they were feeling about their body and their sexuality.*

*Eugene Brody puts in perspective the feelings and responses of many Caribbean adolescents and young ladies:*

*"Most of the women with whom we talked had 'lived' their bodies up to the time of first intercourse as sexually devalued and often hated; they treated their genitals as 'bad' or psychologically silent areas. If they recognized the body's pleasure-giving, attractive aspects they were punished by the woman who was their primary gender-role model. An impasse emerged as the maternal figure presented herself, through her own earlier life, as an example of the sexual and reproductive behavior she denied the maturing girl, yet seemed to no longer to connect herself with that existence. The impasse could be resolved through sexual action. This meant intercourse, hurriedly at the first opportunity, with little reflection, minimal communication with the partner, and no contraception. It is often meant little pleasure or actual physical or emotional discomfort. The sexual act was symbolically important, however: it affirmed the previously denied status of female adulthood."*

*The maturing girl often entered into the sexual act without taking into consideration the reproductive consequences which might emerge. The act was an unconscious effort to rid herself emotionally of and to cope with the punitive and non-information-giving mother. It was therefore an act unwittingly contrived to get back at the role-model mother who was perceived as trying to keep the maturing girl 'small'.*

*Many maturing girls who become pregnant are often physically beaten by their mothers, and sometimes fathers. The mother reacts more with a sense of shame and loss of status than the father often does. One can appreciate that the mother who has been trying to protect her daughter from the ravages of men who are perceived as*

*‘irresponsible tricksters’ who only want to have sex with a girl and when the baby comes, ‘run and leave her’, would be disappointed.*

*Even though marriage is not the most dominant type of union being practiced, it is still the ideal that many mothers envision for their daughters.*

*One can therefore account for the sometimes harsh reactions of mothers, in light of their disappointment. The girl many times is forced to seek residence with another relative until the baby is born. More often than not, the girl’s mother forgives her and eventually takes care of her grandchild.*

*The pregnant maturing woman often finds herself deserted by the man by whom she has become pregnant. Sometimes the man would deny paternity and/or seek sexual favours in another relationship. The pregnant girl then is left to rely upon the support of family members.*

*The first pregnancy for the Caribbean female elicits mixed feelings, which can be related to their feelings about first intercourse and becoming a “big woman”. The lack of emotional support from the man she has become pregnant for, in many instances, and the “I told you so” and disappointment expressed by her mother, leaves many girls alone to sort out their ambivalent feelings towards their mother and the male partner.*

*For many Caribbean women there is a more positive picture, as Eugene Brody found. Those who were able to receive early information about sexuality from the mother or surrogate were able to develop meaningful communication with the partner in intercourse. Brody found that girls who had some knowledge about sexuality were able to be more in control of their sexual encounters.*

*“Girls with the options and security provided by sexual knowledge supported by their mothers in their developing status as adult females, are able to begin their sexual reproductive careers in more positive and less traumatic fashion than others. They select more open men as partners, and insist on some mutual sharing of feelings and ideas as well as bodies.”*

*Without giving the impression that we are being hard on women in the society who, in many situations, are forced to take on the parental socialization singlehandedly, the point must be made that information on sexuality, or lack of information is a factor in the attitudes women have towards sexuality.*

*Women develop an attitude of accommodation in terms of their responses to sexuality when they are not allowed to appreciate themselves as sexual persons who have a right to be sexual.*

*David Mace comments on an aspect of female sexuality:*

*“Middle-aged women in the Caribbean where marriage is the exception rather than the rule have a quaint way of describing their arrival at this point in the life-cycle. They say they are ‘done with the world’, and one frequently observed manifestation of this, is that, now freed from guilt about their sex life, they become ostentatiously religious. The aging husband making advances to a young girl or other woman will be termed as dirty old men. He has been denied access to his wife.*

*It seems that having had to put up with the often exploited and unequal sexual encounters with men during their younger days leaves women with a negative attitude towards sexuality in middle age and beyond.*

*There is therefore a need for Caribbean women to be able to see the positive aspects, and the part they play in bringing equality to sexual encounters.*

*One cannot say categorically that Caribbean women do not like sex; but we must conclude that some of the negative attitudes they have need to be looked at and seen for what they are.*