

## Mothering, Migration and the Global Village

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### Understanding Support for Mothering in the 21st Century Caribbean

*This paper discusses some of the key findings from an exploratory study of Caribbean migrant mothers in Trinidad and Tobago and the role of the global media and web resources in supporting them as twenty-first century mothers. Social Capital theory was applied for assessing the importance of parental support networks for migrant mothers. The methodology employed included analysis of secondary data such as parenting web sites. Migrant mothers interviewed were identified through the snowball sampling method and questioned on their sources of support in their new home. The study reveals that post-modern Caribbean families are greatly affected by migration. Support networks are part of a mother's social capital and many benefits are derived from those networks, whether local, trans-national, multi-national or virtual. Though these networks may be weakened through migration, information and telecommunications technology are of key importance in facilitating the maintenance of old and the building of new support networks. The role of the "village" in providing support remains significant. However, the village in the twenty-first century can now be conceptualized as 'real' or 'virtual' spaces.*

#### Introduction

This is an exploratory study of the concept of 'parenting support' as it relates to Caribbean migrant mothers in Trinidad and Tobago. The theme has been explored in developing countries, but remains under researched in the Caribbean. To explore the potential of this topic for future in depth research, the following was assessed:

- the extent to which mothers keep in touch with the family they have

left behind, while at the same time getting support and a sense of comfort in their new environment from on-line parenting resources;

- the relevance of the concept of the “village raising a child” in this era for migrant mothers;
- the relevance of culturally specific parenting support for migrant mothers;
- the role of the globally accessible information technology and telecommunications technology, in providing support for mothers in the twenty-first century Caribbean.

Caribbean migrant mothers who have settled in a new space with their children are faced with the challenge of isolation from extended family. This space is characterized by a distance from her traditional family support network. Migrant mothers in the study are largely upper middle or professional class parents, who through the opportunities presented by globalization, pursue professional employment opportunities outside of their home country. Their economic status makes it possible to take their family with them. This is in contrast to female labour migrants who have traditionally (and continue to) leave the children behind and work towards reunification (Best-Cummings).

The methodology employed for this research included cyber-ethnography of mothering web sites and chat rooms. Analysis of secondary data such as previous studies on the subject and parenting web sites was also conducted. Using the snow ball sampling method, 18 migrant and 15 local mothers who work and or live in the Trincity, St. Augustine and Champ Fleur vicinity of North-East Trinidad, were identified and interviewed to determine how they use information and telecommunications technology to assist with ‘mothering’ in their new home. The survey consisted of a semi-structured interview questionnaire and was administered in person as well as via the telephone.

### **Migration and the Sociology of Caribbean families**

The study of motherhood from the standpoint of migration is quite fitting for the Caribbean, bearing in mind that migration has for over 30 years been a major influencing factor in Caribbean family life. The United Nations Population Division (2003) reports that “... Over the past four decades the Caribbean region has lost more than five million people to migration and an average of 40 percent of its skilled labour force” (cited in Bakker, Elings-Pels and Reis 2). Patterns of migration reveal mothers migrating and leaving their children in the care of relatives and friends, and sometimes the care of an older sibling (Crawford-Brown and Rattray; Baker, Elings-Pels and Reis).

Previous studies on migrant mothers include that of L. Barclay and D. Kent (1998) who “raised various issues with regards to motherhood and recent migration. They expressed reservations with conceptualizing extreme misery in new mothers as depression, and with screening for potential distress in women from non-English speaking backgrounds.” (They developed the Edinburgh Postnatal Depression Scale for measuring depression.)

There are a multitude of scenarios that can help explain the vulnerability of migrant mothers to experiencing reduced access to support networks in their new space. “Many studies of long-distance family migration demonstrate that female partners are often disenfranchised in the labour market. One factor that has not been fully considered is the role of children” (Boyle et al.). Heterosexual couples may be more likely to migrate in favour of the male “bread winner’s” career if the couple have children, or are “planning to commence childrearing in the foreseeable future” (Boyle et al.). They also found that “women in families with young children are most likely to be out of employment after family migration” (Boyle et al.). This removes women even more from access to potential needed support.

Support for mothers in some cultures starts from pregnancy and may involve mother centred rituals. “Having a child is one of the most culturally and spiritually significant events for women and their families and the significance of this transition is validated through ritual. It is thought that cultures that have supportive rituals for new mothers have lower rates of post natal distress (PND) and that, women in Western countries are at higher risk of developing PND. Rituals reflect the vulnerability and special status of the new mother and include being restricted to the home, being given assistance, being given special foods and massage” (De Souza).

While mothering as a social issue in Caribbean societies remain under-researched, we have a few issues that point to the need for research in mothering and Caribbean family life. Dr. Joyce Toney, in her reflection/analysis of Caribbean migration, concludes that:

... female-dominated migration has had negative effects on Caribbean family life at home and in the Diaspora ... calling on regional governments and policy makers to re-examine the ramification of current emigration patterns. (60)

### **Technology, Parenting Support and the Post-modern Caribbean Family**

Parenting is a challenging affair. Although parenting is promoted through the family system, particularly the nuclear family, many of us are familiar with the phrase ‘it takes a village to raise a child’. The parent and the child have

over time benefited largely from the support and influence of those outside of the immediate network—“the village.” Migration challenges the importance of the “village.” Parenting is often a “mother-centric” affair. Throughout the region’s history, women have developed a range of coping strategies while “mothering.” Some have close knit families where the extended network lends support. Neighbours were often welcomed in the family circle especially in rural Caribbean societies.

However, the changing nature of Caribbean family life and community organisation begs the question of just how relevant is this ‘village’ in the twenty-first century. The shift in the sources of support accessed by mothers can be understood by noting that the family itself has changed. Families may now be regarded as post-modern. Bäch-Wiklund describes the post-modern family “as a network of close relationships” rather than a closed social unit (Plantin and Daneback). For the Caribbean family and others, these networks increasingly transcend national boundaries. The task at hand therefore involves reconceptualising the village and distinguishing between the “real” versus “virtual.” The “virtual village” exists because parenting support has changed in the twenty-first century, with the advent of web resources to aid parenting. These resources are used mainly by mothers and have been criticised for their inherent “mothering” bias (Plantin and Daneback). The presence of these resources, particularly blogging and chat rooms, calls for a revisiting of the concept of the “local village” which is a physical space, a geographic locality or community which serves to offer parenting support. We are now challenged to revisit the importance of support networks by assessing to what extent they have been replaced, reduced in importance or are maintained (yet reconfigured) through the use of information technology and telecommunications technology.

Web-based resources provide information and support for mothers. Parenting knowledge is important. “Parenting knowledge encompasses understanding how to care for children, how children develop and diverse roles parents play in children’s lives” (Bornstein and Cote 557). “The majority of today’s parents search for both information and social support on the internet” (Plantin and Daneback). Differences in race, class, and educational status have been observed among users, and seem to affect use of such resources. This information is accessed throughout the stages of parenting, starting with pregnancy, and sometimes before. Though helpful, studies are biased to developed country experiences (Plantin and Daneback).

Within the Trinidad and Tobago society, there are a few social service organizations which provide support for mothers. Their real local presence is supported and enhanced by web sites and web based information for mothers, allowing for transition to potential sources of virtual support. These include:

- Moms for Literacy T&T
- Families in action (against drugs) T&T
- T&T Innovative Parenting Support (TTIPS—offering discipline and anger workshops and parenting support at every stage)
- Mamatto Resource and Birth Centre T&T
- The Informative Breastfeeding Service (TIBS) T&T
- Pregnancy Resource Centre T&T
- Love and Logic Institute (aim is support for every parent) T&T
- Frontier Kids Care (formerly La Joya Pediatrics).

The increased use in web resources has been attributed to the “...weakened support many of today’s parents experience from their own parents, relatives and friends” (Plantin and Daneback). They also attribute this to “changing circumstances of parenthood under post-modernism and an increased risk-awareness, [dissatisfaction] ... with simple descriptions of parenthood, [desire for] more experience-based information, [i.e.], knowledge that conveys the experiences of others in similar situations as themselves” (Plantin and Daneback). The extent to which web resources are used are not only influenced by the need for support but also by perceptions about the reliability of the information made available (Plantin and Daneback). Issues of credibility and reliability of sources of information exist in spite of this increased use (Plantin and Daneback).

### **Theoretical Framework: Social Capital Theory**

The major tenets of social capital theory applied in this study highlights the importance of social networks for mothers. Migration may reduce the mother’s access to the benefits of social networks (her social capital) and her inability to assimilate may further erode this capital. Twenty-first century or post-modern mothers however, can either retain or build on this capital using information and telecommunication technology and benefit from real local or trans-national networks as well as virtual local, trans-national and multi-national networks. Migrant mothers may maintain trans-national and multi-national networks with distant family through information and telecommunications technology, form new social networks in the new community and/ or form new networks in online communities.

According to Nan Lin “...social capital is captured from embedded resources in social networks” (28) (it involves access to and use of resources embedded in social networks). Lin adds that “...the notion of social capital is rather simple and straightforward: investment in social relations with expected returns” (Lin 30). The most widely agreed upon return: “Maintenance of mental health and the entitlement to resources.” These returns prove valuable

beyond measure for mothers in all spaces.

Lin identifies information, influence, social credentials and reinforcements as the four elements of social capital that help explain “why social capital works in instrumental and expressive actions not accounted for by forms of personal capital such as economic capital or human capital” (Lin 28). All migrants, to succeed at assimilation in their new space, seek to rebuild the social capital they have lost through migration. However, in the twenty-first century, the process involves reliance on both real and virtual networks. Information technology and communications technology, also allows for reduced diminishing effects of lost capital due to distance.

### The Importance of Support Networks for Mothers in Post-modern Caribbean Families

Participants in the study supported claims for the changing nature of Caribbean families as they revealed aspects of their family life. There appears to be the increased incidence of professionals taking up employment outside of their country of residence. These “global professionals” (including women) pursue career opportunities across national boundaries. Trinidad and Tobago’s vibrant economy places it as a key destination for intra-regional migration, especially for professional Caribbean women. The Trincity through to Champ Fleur area on the island of Trinidad is home to many migrants who work at the Universities and Hospitals (among other institutions) in the vicinity. Figure 1 below shows the origin of the Caribbean migrant mothers interviewed in this study.

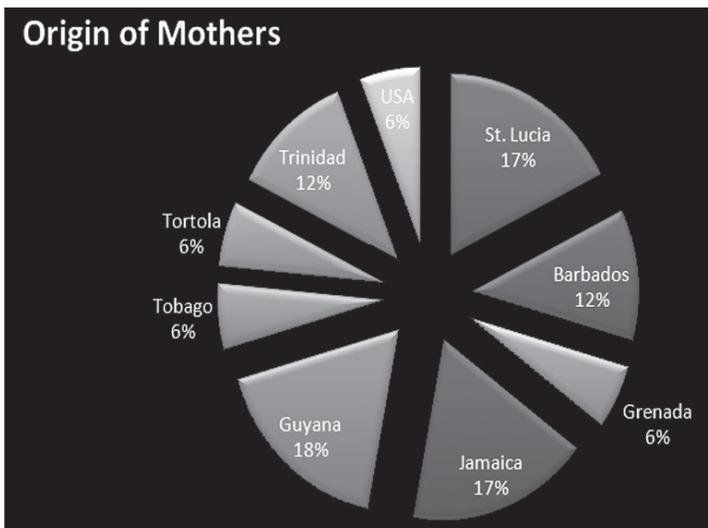


Figure 1 - Origin of Caribbean Migrant Mothers

Professionals migrate with children, or start their families in new locations. Families may move multiple times as careers often keep families on the go. All these developments present new challenges for mothering in the twenty-first century. As mothers seek support, some may only retain networks through use of telecommunications technology, with persons in their country of origin (trans-national networks) and for others networks are maintained across multiple boundaries as family members have become spread across the globe (multi-national networks).

As these networks of support are largely initiated and maintained by mom, both information and telecommunications technology offers mothers a medium for making connection possible (See Figure 2 below). The dynamics of mothering and family life are therefore very different in the globally interconnected twenty-first century parenting space that mothers now have to function in.

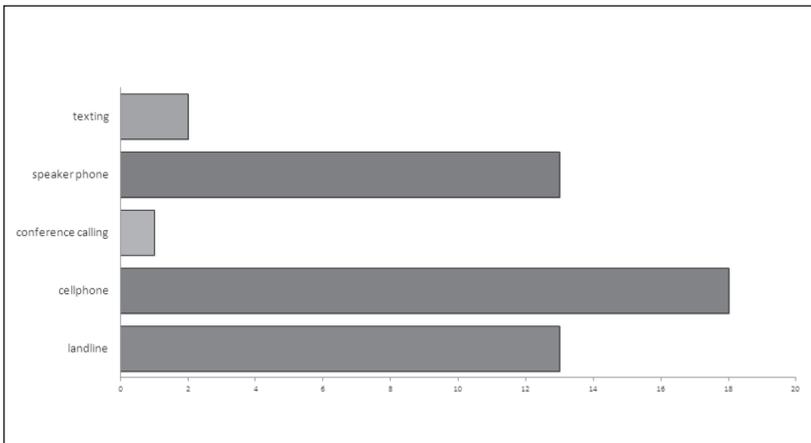


Figure 2 - Telecommunications technology used

### Support Network Distribution

The data in Figure 3 shows that support networks are still made up of family members and friends who do not share geographic proximity. Parents and siblings still remain a primary source of support. Other sources of support include church, co workers, in-laws, school/day care, paid help. Even church members in home countries continued to be a source of support. One family reported creating a Facebook family page to keep networking. Least mentioned sources of support included, co-workers and friends of co-workers, children’s day care, neighbours and in-laws. (See Figure 3 for insight into the composition of the support networks that mothers rely on).

Also striking in the data is that few mothers seemed to have built local

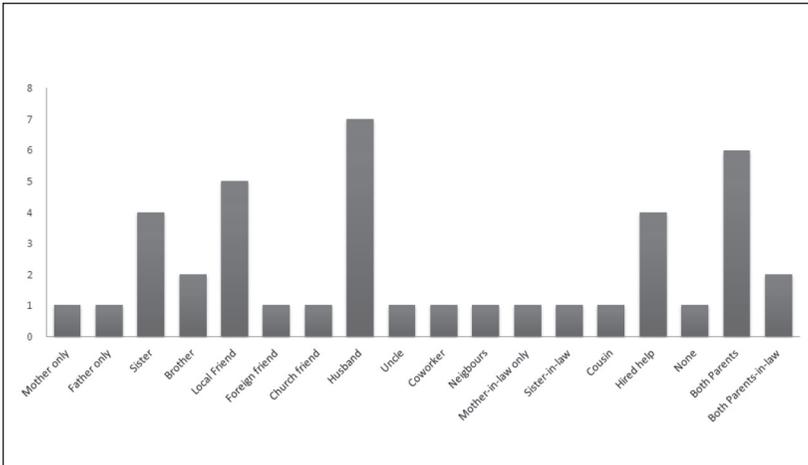


Figure 3 - Support network distribution for migrant mothers

networks but those who have, do so in work and church circles and not the geographic neighbourhood where they live. These trends point to the significance of the concept of “village.” Even among local mothers, the concept of migration and trans-national virtual sources of support appeared to be significant. This is because even local mothers loose sources of support to external as well as internal migration (from the South to the North of the country, or from Tobago to Trinidad).

Support networks tend to be mother-centric because it is the mother who ultimately chooses who is part of her network and the trend is to draw on her own family irrespective of geographic separation. Those who have local family (including local spouses and in-laws) do not ultimately report getting support from in-laws. Those who do get support from in-laws reported so reluctantly, pointing to a preference to have their own family’s support.

Families continue to suffer the effects of diminished support, when persons from newly formed networks migrate, for e.g., one migrant mother lost her mother in law’s support to migration, leaving her to rely only on her church. This mother in question laments, “*no one to call to pick them up from school, or no drop off by granny after school.*” These and other responses from mothers confirm the continued importance of having a support network.

The study revealed that as mothers decide who forms part of her social network, at times, not even family may meet the grade. What is evident is that those who are kept in the circle do enhance her success at mothering. Very few mothers in this study turned to co-workers for support. Those who did tap into social capital from their work space demonstrated potential for significant benefits (for e.g. co-workers in the medical profession). This points

to how the work space can enhance a migrant's social capital. In other cases, work related social capital may be depleted when key resource persons who were once part of a mother's inner circle or support group are left behind in their old space. Replacing such valuable sources of support (capital) can prove to be challenging. For example, one mother reports missing her old support network and found it difficult accessing adequate health care in new space because she misses her old friends who were doctors. Technology, however, allows mothers to bridge distance and continue to benefit from networks left behind. For example, another mother reports using information technology to keep benefiting from her network resources by emailing pictures of her daughter's rash to family friend who is pediatrician as well as strangers who offer medical advice on web.

Surprisingly, some mothers welcome the isolation and the opportunity to shield their children from undesired influences and engage in what one mother refers to as "up close mothering." However, it seems that some mothers are challenged to build new networks and sources of support (new social capital). For some, it proves to be a great challenge. Some mothers report fear of strangers in light of crime or security issues in country, while others report difficulty adjusting to culture. In the final analysis, the resourcefulness of a mother seems to make a world of difference.

### **Challenges Faced by Migrant Mothers**

The most consistent challenge mothers reported facing while being away from family is *"finding baby sitters and balancing work and home life."* This speaks again to a mother's preference for assistance and issues of trust when it comes to leaving children in the care of strangers. (See Figure 4 for more insight into challenges). Some mothers reported issues like connecting with other mothers and accessing kid-friendly spaces. This is not surprising as social capital theorists have shown that communities that have strong networks are more likely to have better public spaces (Lin 9). Mothers can improve their chances of greater access to kid-friendly spaces if they could build and use their social networks to improve their surroundings.

Very few mothers reported problems with retaining traditional parenting practices. In light of the fact that Caribbean-oriented information is scarce on the web, this finding supports the practice of accessing information on the internet which would support modern parenting more than traditional parenting.

### **Benefits from Using Web-based Parenting Resources**

Caribbean mothers appear to be interested in getting health, child development

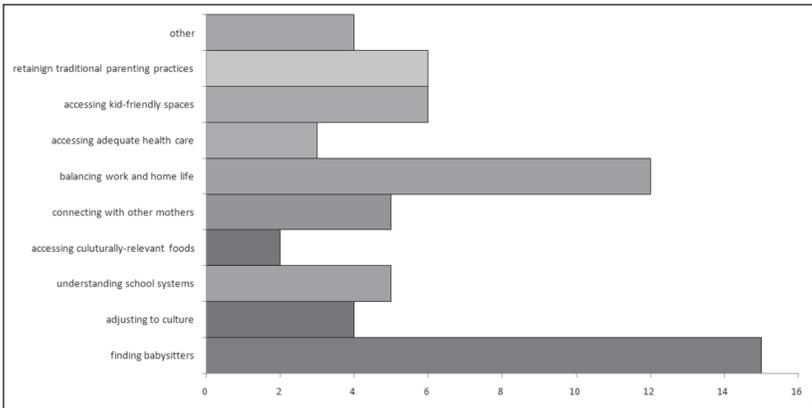


Figure 4 - Challenges of Family Separation for Mothers

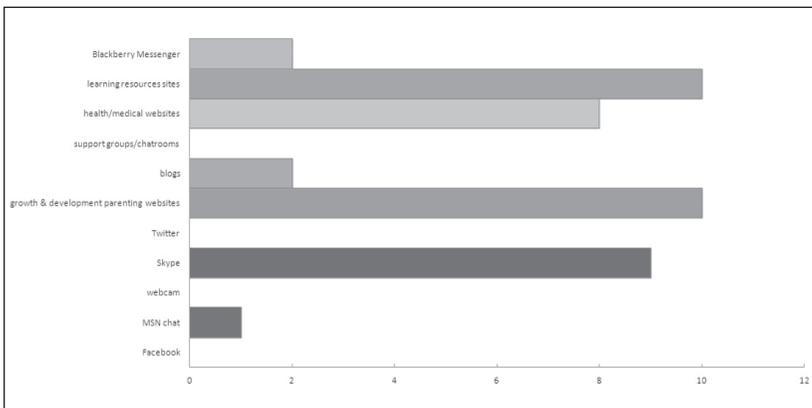


Figure 5 – Reasons for using technology

information, learning material, cultural material and nutritional information but seem to stay away from chat rooms and blogging. (See Figures 5 and 6 for the details about web resources and telecommunications technology used by mothers). Mothers studied are therefore largely passive users who enhance their social capital by tapping into information, a key element to building social capital. They look up cultural material to facilitate teaching family heritage, child development information such as nutrition and potty training tips, educational material and more. Mothers look to co-workers and other mothers for advice on parenting or on good web resources to access.

Other uses of web resources include seeking tips on spiritual development and how to be a good mother. This use was driven by a deficit of such information coming from one mother’s family. Another mother in question tries to keep informed on how to tackle race issues, hence she looks up black mothering

**Web resources used by moms in study include:**

Nick Jr, Disney Jr, PBS Kids;  
Minieco (craft blog);  
Modern parents Messy kids (blog);  
babycenter.com;  
starfall.com (phonics and learning);  
WHO & CDC websites  
Trinimoms (face book group);  
LoveandLogic.com;  
A Little Learning for Two (blog);  
Frontierkidsare.com;  
TTISP (parentingt.com);  
Pampers.com;  
Education.com;  
LeapFrog.com;  
WebMD;  
Dr. Oz;  
GoGSAT;  
Allrecipes.com.

*Figure 6 – Social media and web resources*

issues and black craft ideas to help raise her black daughter in racially diverse Trinidad.

The new parenting space proves to be a challenge. One mother reported that she tends “*to become indecisive even though it is not in my nature—brought on by not knowing what to do or how to do things in new space.*” Mothers reported feeling lonely, and that reading shared experiences help. (Figure 7 provides more insight into the benefits of web resources for mothers.)

Local “virtual” networks are emerging and being used by mothers. Mothers in the study use some of them and showed no preference for Caribbean based information. Three elite interviews with different providers of parenting services in the study area were conducted: Dr. Rose Marie Thomas of Frontier Kids Care; Ms. Vanda Gomes, a nurse who provides birthing classes and TIBS (Trinidad and Tobago Informative Breastfeeding Service) which provides information and support to mothers to encourage breast feeding.

They have all embraced technology in order to reach mothers more adequately, offering sources of culturally specific mothering advice. Nurse Gomes has a blog ([www.vagomes.weebly.com](http://www.vagomes.weebly.com)). Frontier Kids Care which was established

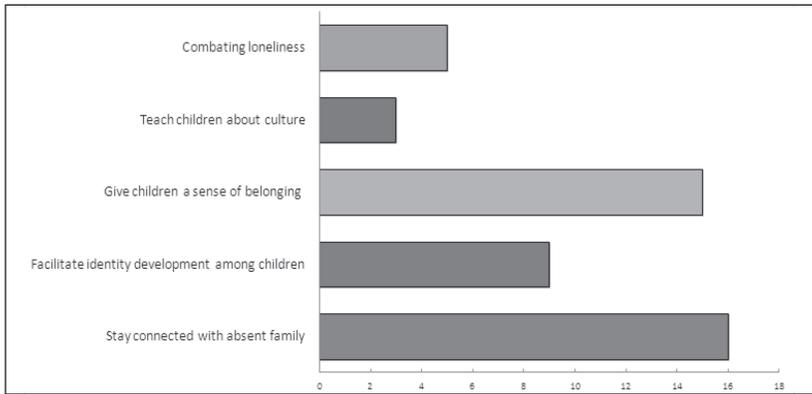


Figure 7 – Benefits of web resources

in 2008 has a website and aims to provide collaborative and holistic pediatric, medical and home care through technology (“paperless”). TIBS, which was established in 1977, hosts monthly focus group meetings with breastfeeding mothers. They also advocate for breastfeeding through the Ministry of Health; information shared restricted by funding. They have a website and a Facebook page. An integrated service is provided through their partnership.

### Challenges and Limitations of Web Resources

Out of the 18 mothers interviewed only four were non-users of web resources. Some of the reasons include the fact that books are a preference because children are teenagers now and web resources were not available when they were younger; not being tech savvy; being forced to use it (through help of kids). One mother reported using web resources once to deal with a family crisis, namely the death of a family member from AIDS.

Most mothers seem to have reservations or some concern with web based resources and do navigate the web with some degree of caution. Mothers find information readily accessible, applicable and useful. They welcome the warnings advising on how to use information. However, some of the commonly cited challenges include material not being culturally relevant (especially when recommendations for services are not feasible, given cultural differences); not being effective for teen parenting challenges; not being able to trust sources; doubting the quality of the content and therefore preferring printed material. Regarding pregnancy information, one mother expressed disappointment with the information, because she expected more detail. Another mother complained about the American bias in material. Baby Center ([www.babycenter.com](http://www.babycenter.com)) for example, has 19 different international sites, but no Caribbean site.

Non users of web-based resources claim to prefer print, and face to face interaction, and prefer as well to rely on instinct. One also thought web resources were time consuming and another prefers learning from her own mother, but distance is a challenge (pointing to implications of distance complicated by the digital divide among generations).

## Conclusion

Migrant mothers in the study seem to confirm a shift to gaining support from the virtual community and the declining importance of the local external community. Since these elements are not found in a migrant mother's local community, such support is often accessed using information and telecommunications technology. The local community though secondary, continues to play a limited role. This study reveals that the post-modern Caribbean family is characterized by diverse networks spread across national boundaries. Globalisation and migration has also allowed for this twenty-first century "mothering space" to be "trans-national" or "multi-national" in nature and support is derived from either "real" or "virtual" sources, depending on the mother's needs and preferences. Networks now include strangers and professionals in virtual spaces who prove valuable in providing support. Families that desire to stay connected provide support for mothers. Maintaining contact is facilitated by telecommunications technology, information technology and travel.

"Real" and "virtual" networks build a mother's social capital. Eroded social capital can have negative consequences. We are yet to determine the effects of depression, isolation and loneliness on mothers and their children, as well as the detached existence of children in new communities in the Caribbean. These could range from decreased productivity and income for families, potential impacts on mental well-being of mothers and children, impacts on quality of marriages and divorce. There is a need for further research on this topic. Additionally, having identified the need for support by Caribbean families, the opportunity therefore presents itself for the expansion of Caribbean-based web support to address the issues faced by Caribbean mothers.

### *Policy recommendations*

1. Health care professionals should look into post natal depression research among Caribbean mothers as information is lacking. Contemporary practitioners should be weary of the risk that migrant mothers face and work towards providing the needed support. Local community entities that have ventured into the business of providing support for mothers and parents should be encouraged by the apparent need for support by mothers and should look into ways of reaching those mothers in order to avoid the distress of isolation.

I highly recommend the La Joya/Frontier kids service delivery model as a supportive “mother-centric model.”

2. Migration continues to be a central issue in Caribbean Development. Caribbean leaders should assess emigration policies not just at the economic level but also to understand its effects on Caribbean families. Professionals in the education system should note that they do have a role to play in facilitating the assimilation of children and their families and should look into being a greater source of support for migrant children and their families. Training for counselors and therapists should involve raising awareness of the impact of migration on children’s ability to adjust in school and form healthy identities.

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