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**La Pieza Que Falta: How Gender Roles and Cultural Norms Impacted how Latinas Learn  
about Sex**

Toni A. Gallegos

School of Social Work, University of Texas at Arlington

May 2023

*“Y que un grito cual trueno Nos arranque del duelo,  
Nos han quitado tanto Nos quitaron el miedo,  
Que quede la Esperanza Y el Azul del Cielo Mirarnos a la cara  
Hermana yo, te quiero” (Silvana Estrada, 2021)*

### **Abstract**

**Purpose:** The purpose of this study was to increase knowledge around what Latinas learned about sex growing up. It was used to create foundational work for future research with this population.

More importantly it is a means for members of the community to speak about their lived experiences surrounding sex education, gender roles, and growing up in their households.

**Methods:** This study used a mixed methods design due to the limited amount of research that is focused on sex education and Latinas. It was used to collect a wide range of data that could be used to help with future research I have planned in the doctoral program.

**Results:** Quantitative results showed commonalities within the completed population and those who did not finish. The qualitative results produced nine new themes with some being: “I wish I would have learned about how sex can affect me emotionally.”, Deafening Silence, “I don't think I had a relationship with my body before at all because it was looked down upon.

**Discussion:** A major problem within Latinx households can be tied to the silence that is faced in their day-to-day lives. Without silence that is a chance these issues would not be harming the community and there could be more understanding.

**Keywords:** *sex education, Latinas, gender roles, Latinx, generational silence*

## Reflexive Statement

Sex education is lacking adequate research with many sources being written in earlier years. Sexual education and gender studies for marginalized sexualities is constantly growing, and so should sexual education for marginalized ethnic and racial groups. Therefore, I feel a great call to expand knowledge around sex education. Since I identify as a Latina, starting with my community feels the most important. With time, I hope to expand my work into other cultures and continue educating others about sexual safety and protection. Being a Latina, myself has allowed me to grow up seeing how these forces cause anxieties in women who are trying to navigate “womanhood.”

My voice is not meant to be heard throughout this thesis due to the goal being to allow other Latinas a way to vocalize their shared experiences. Being a Latina today is not a clear-cut image, as we each move through the world differently. Just because *La Virgen* is important to me does not mean that other Latinas view her the same. Our home lives are unique but with the help of other Latinas this thesis airs out the generational hurt faced by others and me personally.

In my own personal experiences, I was not raised to follow the traditional gender roles other Latinas must face on a day-to-day basis. In my household, sex was not a topic that was discussed openly. Talking about those things was seen as taboo or sinful, especially coming from parents who did not have proper education, or in my case, proper examples. Not following traditional gender roles has allowed me to see the positives and negatives of these roles, specifically *Marianismo*. However, I am constantly reminded from my friends how hurtful these roles are. This has caused me to reflect on how I can help these women find empowerment in their homes. To me and my community having culture in our sex education is important, and I plan to find a way to do that through this thesis and subsequent research.

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## Introduction

According to the 2019 Census, there were an estimated 60.5 million Hispanics living in the US (US Dept of Minority Health). Latinas (people of Hispanic heritage who identify as females) make up roughly 30 million of the current general population in the US (AAUW, 2020). In my study, a Latina is a woman who either immigrated from Latin America herself or who's family claims Latin American heritage. While Latina is the term I have decided to use in my thesis, I acknowledge that some women may feel more comfortable using *Chicana*, *Mexicana*, *Boricua*, *Afro-Latina*, *Hispanic*, *Latine*, or *Latinx* and those terms may be used interchangeably. Even though the population of Latinas is constantly growing, there is a lack of research and knowledge about them and their experiences. The focus of this thesis is on increasing knowledge of Latinas' experiences with and desires for sex education.

The purpose of this thesis is to bring to light the importance of sex education for Latinas. This will be done by the voices of different Latinas who have experienced it first-hand. To properly understand the problems that will be talked about in the scope of this paper we need to define what sexual safety and sexual protection mean in the context of my thesis. The root of sexual safety comes from safe sex, defined as using forms of protection during sexual intercourse or sexual activities. In my thesis, sexual safety and sexual protection can be defined as knowledge and actions to protecting oneself in sexual situations. For example, condoms, consent, birth control, proper bodily care after intercourse, sexually transmitted infections (STI), sexually transmitted diseases (STD) knowledge, and resources for the possibility of pregnancy. Pregnancy resources do not include abortion access or provide organizations that offer abortions in this thesis.

## Explanation of the Problem

To bring light to the importance of sex education for Latinas, it is important to explain the outcomes Latinas experience that are influenced by lack of proper sex education. These include sexual victimization, intimate partner violence, and teen pregnancy. Each are explained here to further explain the complexities of lacking sex education.

### **Instances of Sexual Victimization**

It is incredibly important to talk about how these issues tend to happen to US born Latinas at a much higher rate than those who immigrated to the US. Both groups are equally important when looking at levels of victimization. The focus tends to be on US-born Latinas due to them reporting instances at a higher rate (Driver, 2019). This does not mean immigrant Latinas are not facing victimization, but most literature shows that they have more protective factors—the healthy immigrant effect-- such as *Marianismo*, due to it being used to shelter the women (Driver, 2019; Garcini, 2018). The term “healthy immigrant effect” is defined as those who have moved to a new country and have improved health conditions compared to people born in that country (Miller, 2016; Urquia, 2012). This could possibly be attributed to the fact that those who have an undocumented status are less likely to report sickness. Another factor is that the Latinx culture focuses on not being honest about their suffering, common for both men and women (Garcini, 2018).

Sexual victimization can lead to self-silencing, a common occurrence in Latinx households. Self-silencing is the process in which people hide or diminish their feelings to not cause an outrage. One of the main issues of self-silencing for sexual victimization is the way it can harm the family unit. Often mothers will not report their experiences of sexual victimization to their daughters out of shame. However, by the mothers not having these conversations, especially in Latinx households, it can lead to their daughters facing the same victimization

(Szylyk, 2018). Just as generational trauma can affect children, so can generational self-silencing. Generational self-silencing is the process where members of the family hide their sufferings to protect their loved ones. But in that protection the family can fail to see that their silence may be continuing the cycle of victimization.

### **Intimate Partner Violence**

Along with sexual victimization comes the conversation around intimate partner violence (IPV). Even though not every person who has faced IPV has faced sexual victimization, the two often go hand in hand. According to Cavanaugh (2013), 2013), 41% to 68% of women who have faced physical violence from a partner can face sexual victimization as well. These issues are not inherently just the Latina experience, but more so the experiences faced by women and men. Latinas have faced many different types of oppression such as IPV, sexual trauma, victimization, as well as forced gender roles within their family unit causing a wide range of issues as they progress in their life course. Within this realm, it is extremely important to discuss how citizenship status affects how women go about reporting abuse, if they report at all. This is commonly because of the fears around not being a citizen, especially if their partner has legal status (Bauer, 2000; Raj, 2002). Having the constant threat of being deported or losing their children keeps these women in the relationship as opposed to leaving.

Likewise, language barriers inhibit immigrant women from learning about programs that could ultimately remove them from the situation (Ayon, 2017). This stems from feelings of powerlessness many immigrants Latina's face when trying to develop their lives in the US. We can assume these feelings not only affect Latinas but affect all immigrant women and men. A prime example is that people who immigrate may not know the language thus, causing them to



not be able to find community or report what could be going on in the household. This can contribute to them staying in the constant cycle of abuse (Ayon, 2017; Reina, 2015).

There is a broad range of IPV experiences people face. Within the realm of IPV there is a form called Reproductive Coercion (RC). RC includes controlling outcomes of pregnancy, birth control, and bodily autonomy (Grace, 2020). RC puts these women in situations that continue the culture of submission for women inherent in Latinx culture. RC tends to happen as a way for the man to regain control of the relationship. However, when dealing with most cases of abuse, power and control is the central theme for it happening. For abusers to gain power, they must first gain control which can be done with the start of love bombing (using attention, compliments, or affection to gain control over a person) early in the relationship. By doing this the abuser can gain control over the survivor causing them to stay despite the negative outcomes (Hayes, 2016).

Moving on from RC, our focus becomes intimate partner sexual violence (IPSV). IPSV has shown to have direct links to physically abusive men (Cavanaugh, 2013). This can be linked together because men who are typically physically abusive engage in sexually risky behaviors (El-Bassel, 2001; Frye, 2011). Sexually risky behaviors often include not using a condom during intercourse, having multiple partners, or not getting screened for STIs/STDs. This is how most women contract HIV because rape and sexual coercion happen in these relationships (Cavanaugh, 2013). Literature points to the fact that the more likely males are to engage in sexual risky behaviors, the more likely women in these relationships will contract an STD. Contracting an STD adds the pressure of staying in the relationship as well, due to the possibility of the person believing “*nobody will want me now.*”

There are individuals who cannot leave their relationship and have no choice but to stay in abusive situations. Some reasons for survivors staying can include immigration status, lack of resources such as finances, no support system, they have children, they do not speak the language native to the area, they do not have access to electronics, they are isolated, or they have sought help before, and nothing changed. A major problem for Latinas, especially those living in poverty who are in IPV relationships, is violence that leads to death. IPV related deaths affect women across the board and not solely Latinas.

In a study done by Petrosky (2017), she found that 61% of homicides faced by Latinas had major influences of IPV, while non-Latina homicides involving IPV was 44%. It had been a common belief that divorce would serve as a protective factor of IPV related homicide; however, studies have shown that to not be the case (Stansfield, 2021). Divorce in the Hispanic household is perceived as wrong, and often contributed to religious views (Hooge-Michalka, 2019). But greater than those views are the lack of control the husbands feel if their wife is abandoning their family that in many cases instigates lethal violence towards Latinas who leave their marriage (Stansfield, 2021).

### **Incidences of Teen Pregnancy**

In recent years teen pregnancy numbers have dropped across populations. According to the CDC (2021) in the year 2019, Latina teens were getting pregnant at a rate of 25.5 in every 1000. Compared to 2018 (26.7 in every 1000), the rates dropped by 5.2%. During that year non-Hispanic white teens experienced pregnancy at a rate of 11.4 in 1000. There is a drastic difference between the levels of teen pregnancy between Latinas and their counterparts. While there are many different factors for why teen pregnancy can happen, a common reason is due to

not having proper sex education. In Latinx households, the conversations around sex lack proper instruction on how to have sex safely (Keogh, 2016).

Interestingly, the cultural views around motherhood have been connected to some Latinas getting pregnant at a young age. This is a way for Latinas to achieve higher status in the household. A common theme that is experienced in the Latinx household is the pressures of not being able to leave the house until marriage. So, for some Latinas to receive freedom, they may find getting pregnant and being forced into marriage the easier option, compared to arguing with parents. Another important note about teen pregnancy for Latinas is that within the culture it can sometimes not be looked down upon, however, to those not in the culture, it is often viewed as wrong (Aparicio, 2014). The perceptions of teen pregnancy in Latinx households depends on the environment in which these women are raised. Foreign-born Latinas have been shown to have more embarrassment around teen pregnancy, while US born Latinas do not (Driver, 2019). This embarrassment can serve as a protective factor to foreign-born Latinas in the sense that it lowers their chances of teen pregnancy.

These instances are pieces that build the bigger picture of the lack of sex education for this community. It is a common experience for Latinas to not receive proper sex education or examples of healthy relationships. Without knowledge or experiences of what a safe relationship looks like, these women find themselves stuck. If these women had the proper knowledge of sexual protection, relationships, and boundaries, it could limit the chances of these instances happening. Having knowledge of protection does not mean that it eliminates the chances of danger, but it serves as a protective factor for Latinas because they will be aware of dangerous situations.

### **Purpose of the study**

There are two main purposes of my thesis. The first purpose of this study is to explore what Latinas wish they would have learned about sex education. The second purpose is to create a better foundation of research as it pertains to Latinas and sexual safety using the information learned from participating Latinas. This will ultimately lead me to find a way for Latinas to learn about sex while respecting their cultural identity.

## **Literature Review**

### **Typical sex education (2 types)**

There are two types of sex education commonly taught in schools. One is *Abstinence Only* which does not educate students about STIs, reproductive care, or sexual safety. The other is *Comprehensive Sex Education* focused on waiting to have sex until marriage yet still covering STIs, STDs, reproductive care, and sexual safety (Garcia, 2009). In a study conducted by Garcia (2009), they found that in cases where Latina students would ask questions during sex education, most teachers assumed they were sexually active—a cultural stereotype. Having these views come from educators perpetuated the belief in what Garcia (2009) termed the “*good girl/bad girl dichotomy*.” This belief was and still is detrimental to how young Latina’s view sex. If someone is teaching you sexual safety and accuses you of being promiscuous, why would anyone want to learn more? This can be the biggest problem when working with educating Latinas about sex. If educators are continuing the cycle of putting us into boxes as being the “*ones who will end up pregnant*” then how are we as a community expected to learn from an education system that was not made for us? Additionally, the issues noted here are exacerbated if Latinx families are not talking about sex at home.

### **Cultural Tension Around Sex Education**

A major problem within sex education and Latinas is the lack of communication with parents about sexual health, puberty, and reproductive health (Alcade, 2013). In some cases, daughters have felt that their parents did not share information simply due to them being female. These problems with communication further the problems with how Latinas learn about sexual safety. Latinas are not receiving the proper education in school and lack an open environment to talk about it with their parents. These issues can continue the cycle of sexual ignorance within this population. Additionally, gender roles play a major part in how these women learn about sex or if they learn about sex at all.

Gender roles are beliefs that are placed upon men and women starting at a young age. In the Latinx household the two main roles are *Machismo* for the men and *Marianismo* for the women. These gender roles do not always lead to negative outcomes but when these are used in an oppressive manner, it becomes complicated. It is common in Latinx households for men to learn about sex due to the need of upholding the gender role of *Machismo*. The reason it is common for men to learn about sex is so they can keep the persona of being “*sexually seductive*” (Walters, 2020). On the flip side, the focus of Latinas protecting their virginity and promoting sexual silence within the household can be tied to the gender role of *Marianismo* (Alcade, 2013) and contributes to the reluctance families must educate their daughters about sex. Further findings showed that parents’ education levels did not impact how Latinas learn about sex. In Gallegos’ 2007 study, even parents of higher education still resulted in low levels of teaching their daughters about sex.

Traditional gender roles within the Latinx household are a major reason for the issues discussed within this study. For example, going back to IPV towards Latinas, we see the clear power dynamic between the Latina women and their male counterparts mostly attributable to the

belief that men are superior and must hold all power in the household (*machismo*) (Barral, 2019; Ochoa, 2009; Walters, 2020). To balance power in Latinx households, there needs to be a push towards empowering the whole family and not a single group as is the cultural norm with *machismo*. *Machismo* can be viewed as the belief that the males in the household are seen as the providers. Within this gender role the males are not expected to help raise the family or do any duties that stereotypically fall on the women (Barral, 2019; Ochoa, 2009).

### ***Catholic Roots of Marianismo and Machismo***

Gender roles for the Latinx community tend to be shown in an extremely negative light due to a disconnect between the Latinx cultural lens and the American lens, however, there is a need to find empowerment in the roles. The *Macho* man can be viewed as having dignity, having family values, having respect for women (especially their mothers), and having a strong sense of who they are (Castro, 2000).

**Marianismo.** *Marianismo* at its roots can become something used to empower Latinas. *Marianismo* is a role that is directly tied to Latin America's Catholic roots but has been diluted toward an oppressive role far from those roots. Within this role in its current conceptualization, the women in the house are seen as the housekeepers who must cook, clean, raise the children, and listen to the men (Da Vila, 2021; Ochoa, 2009).

While not every Latina is Catholic, most of them were either raised Catholic or grew up with Catholic influences. Showing that *La Virgen* (the Virgin Mary) is strong because she loves her family is important to bringing *Marianismo* back to its roots. The teaching around *Marianismo* should be brought back to its roots to empower women and not focus on dehumanizing them. Greer (2013) synthesized Gonzalez's (1989) views around Latinas' devotion to *La Virgen* by stating,

The essence of everyday life of the Latina woman is bound in the sacredness of her devotion to Mary, the mother of Jesus, her ideal, role model, and mother of wisdom. Through viewing Mary as strong and courageous, the Latina woman can live through rituals that support her and her family.

Even though the world is striving to remove religion from conversations, this theme still rings true. For Latinas, *Marianismo* is a necessary role that helps guides women into finding value in their families. *La Virgen* is more than the submissive and meek mother; she was the one who led the family. However, finding positive aspects of these *Marianismo* and *Machismo* roles are almost impossible due to the current state of scripts that have been written.

**Machismo.** Machismo, likewise, has Catholic roots and has also been diluted from its original intent. *Machismo* in the current context can be viewed as the patriarchy. My definition of the patriarchy is anything that is used to make women inferior to men. This has historically happened not only in Latinx households, but also in most cultures. The patriarchy is something that is widely accepted as we have followed it for centuries. Patriarchy is an inherently negative word due to the historical context of the word. A common mistake is the lack of conversations around how the patriarchy harms not just women, but men who are the ones forced into the role. Some men willingly stay in the role of oppressor, but some men decide to go against that narrative to protect women, while honoring their masculinity.

There is major debate within literature around the negatives and positives of *Machismo*. On the negative side, the *Macho* man is portrayed as being insensitive, arrogant, dominant, or being the end all be all when dealing with authority (Garcia, 2002; Korzenny, 2005). At this

point, the view of the “*macho man*” is not seen in a positive light due to the constant oppression that comes from this role. An interesting point to note is that the oppression is faced by men and women (Mosher, 1991; Walters, 2020). Latino men are expected to adhere to this traditional gender role and continue the perpetration of oppression of Latinas (Walters, 2020; Mosher, 1991). This brings into question how can we get to a point where both roles are used to empower the Latinx population and not harm them?

### ***Difficulties Resulting from Marianismo and Machismo***

A problem within the role of *Marianismo* is self-silencing (Cano, 2020, Szylyk, 2018). Self-silencing is a common theme in Latinx households due to the pressures of appearing to be the ideal family. These pressures can cause serious emotional distress for the children living in these homes (Fivush, 2010) that some literature has shown to perpetuate suicidality among young Latinas. The role of being a Latina daughter comes with many different challenges that are prewritten into her script such as not being able to participate in things outside of school because these can be too distracting from family responsibilities. Further than that, most women in these roles are taught to stay quiet about abuse or infidelity from their husbands; inherent in *Marianismo* is that women are meant to endure suffering if it is for the sake of the family (Cano, 2020; Szylyk, 2018)—emulating *La Virgen* who suffered for the sake of salvation.

Part of this can be attributed to the fact that Latina mothers put expectations on their daughters to redeem the family (Szylyk, 2018). But the dangers of self-silencing in Latina households ultimately lead to the deterioration of the family unit. Szylyk (2018) brings to light many different themes within their paper titled “*I Just Kept It to Myself*” which breaks down the cultural themes for silencing when dealing with Latinas who have attempted suicide. In the article, reasons for suicide attempts varied across many themes. Self-silencing becomes more and



more alarming the more one realizes just how generational sexual trauma is for these women. In many instances the mother and daughter can relate to sexual trauma as at one point they both have faced it. But a problem in this study was the fact that both mother and daughter kept their feelings to themselves and did not allow the other in toward healing in solidarity. There is a possibility if the mother and daughter pair had shared their feelings it could help build their trust and result in healing.

Suicide rates for the Latinx population have seen a drastic increase. According to the CDC (2020), Latinx populations were more than half of the numbers of suicide rates with the US being 13.5 per 100,000 and Hispanic rates being 7.5 (Suicide Prevention Resource Center, 2020). In the Youth Risk Behavior Survey conducted by the CDC in 2021, Hispanic females experienced feelings of hopelessness or sadness as 40% compared to White females (36%) and Black females (31.5%). In the section on seriously considering suicide, White females had a percentage of 19.1% with Hispanic females being 17.2%. Latinas in high school during 2021 were reported to attempt suicide 8.9%--higher than White females but less than Black females (CDC, 2021). In 2018, suicide related deaths for Hispanic women were at 2.8 out of every 100,000, however Hispanic men had a higher rate of 12.1 (CDC,2021). The Latinx community is hurting from these gender roles as self-silencing is a common barrier to mental health treatment making the importance of bringing these roles back to their original meaning crucial for the wellbeing of the community.

These gender roles lead to further victimization from outside forces such as the sexualization that comes from media. Media eroticizes Latinas in different TV shows, pornography, music videos, and that barely touches the surface. This kind of sexualization has led to many Latinas developing poor self-esteem issues as they see it impossible to live up to the

erotic images portrayed and increases their chances of having sexual relationships early (McDade-Montez, 2017) and being sexually victimized.

### **What are the Solutions?**

In Fortuna's 2017 study, her results showed that using sexual protection lowers chances of sexual trauma. Having a foundation of sexual safety could limit these Latinas from undergoing further sexual trauma that ultimately leads to lifelong, lasting effects in the lifespan. A way that sexual trauma can show itself in the lifespan is within the mother-child relationship. Lara-Cinisomo's study (2018) revealed that mothers who had experienced sexual trauma in their life had lower levels of oxytocin (OT). OT is the chemical that helps the mother bond with their baby, and by not having that, it can change how the mother understands the bond. Further than this, women who have experienced sexual trauma have been shown to have negative parenting habits and view themselves as terrible mothers (Grace, 2020).

In closing, *Marianismo*'s current conceptualization holds little empowerment for Latinas. Where it is now, it is only used to bring women down and restrict them to being the quiet backbone of the family whereas previously, *Marianismo* highlighted the woman's role in salvation that without her, would not have occurred. When we think of this problem long term, we see how it affects not just the daughter, but the whole family. Many families have broken the mold, but it was not an easy task to do. If we keep the cultural tension in the family, it limits the overall growth for these women, and continues to put them and their daughters in dangerous situations.

If Latinas were given the proper knowledge of their bodies, then we could see a decrease in traumas such as rape, RC, STDs and STIs, and femicide. Sexual education for this population needs to be built around the belief that their culture makes them strong. *Marianismo* needs to be

brought back to the role where women are powerful for loving their family and that having knowledge of sex does not make us weak or whores, but it makes us strong. For our protection, for our identity, and for our empowerment, having this knowledge allows us to find dignity within ourselves, and pushes us to model that dignity for our *familias* and community. But further than that, it allows us to nurture and grow dignity within ourselves and rewrite our scripts. Dignity of oneself comes from loving and accepting who you are as a person. But how can these Latinas learn to love their bodies when they do not have proper examples to show them? Sex education is more than sexual safety or creating healthy boundaries. Sex education begins when individuals are taught about their bodies.

The narrative around Latinas needs to be rewritten. We are a group that deserves to be taken seriously when discussing our sexual protection. This starts by the creation and implementation of proper sex education that resonates and is culturally relevant for Latinas. The goal of this study is to understand what Latinas wish they would have learned about sex while also creating a foundation for future research around creating sex education that is made for Latinas. This will allow my community a means to protect themselves as well as their future *hijas*.

### **Method**

My study was conducted using a mixed-methods approach. The main purpose for using this method is because it allowed for a wide range of data to be collected. As I have mentioned in earlier parts of this thesis, there is a lack of recent and relevant research with Latinas and sex education. This makes the process harder for those who are actively trying to find ways to build the community up since there are not many places to turn. Mixed methods is a lengthy form of research given the qualitative component. The reason I used mixed methods is because most

questions in my survey need to be explained more openly and freely indicating a need for qualitative interviews. Lastly, mixed methods allowed for more data to be collected and analyzed. This is important because it will create the foundation for others and myself to be able to explore the topic more freely.

### **Data Collection**

To begin the process of data collection I sent out surveys to numerous courses at University of Texas at Arlington (UTA), all Latinx organizations on UTA campus, and to one religious group made up of predominantly Latinx members.

### **Quantitative Data Collection**

The question that guided this study is “what do Latinas wish they would have learned about sex?” To collect quantitative data the researcher created a survey on UTA’s Questionpro. At the beginning of the survey, there is a consent form for participants to read and decide if they would like to be a part of the study. The survey is broken down into three major sections: *Demographics, Family Life, and Sex Education*. For demographics, some questions include Name and Age. Due to hesitancy from participants, this section got edited and took out name and identifying information. Ultimately a new section was added at the end asking if the participants would like to give their name and contact information. In the family life section, some questions are: who raised you? are your parents together or separated? Lastly, the sex education piece focused on how these Latinas learned about sex and what they would have wanted to know. The survey consisted of multiple choice, short answers, and long answers depending on the type of question being asked (Appendix A).

The surveys were expected to take anywhere from 10 minutes to 30 minutes, depending on how much thought was given. All participants were aware that they did not have to answer every question and could stop at any time.

### **Qualitative Data Collection**

Once the surveys were completed, the researcher conducted interviews with willing participants of the survey. Those selected to be interviewed were given a \$25 Amazon e-giftcard after completing the interview. Some of the questions asked during the interviewing phase included: Can you tell me about your life growing up? What did sex education focus on? Can you tell me more about/describe your parents' relationship? Who taught you consent? Before the interview began, I sent out the questions to each participant to allow them time to formulate responses. Each participant was also given a consent form to decide if they would like to participate in the interview. It was expected interviews would last an hour.

### **Protection of Human Subjects**

This study had the potential to handle topics that would be difficult to talk about, especially if participants have faced sexual victimization. The potential risks in this study were not expected to be above normal risks. The study was approved by the University of Texas at Arlington's Institutional Review Board to ensure participants' safety (Appendix B). If at any time the participant wanted to terminate their survey or interview, they had the right to do so without punishment. As a social worker, I am required to report any current abuse to Title IX, and if the participant were seeking further mental health resources, those were provided to them at the time of need. Confidentiality was protected due to the storing of all files in UTA's encrypted cloud.

### **Recruitment**

UTA is a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) that is in a predominantly Latinx metropolitan area. Since we are an institution that focuses on helping the Latinx community, having this research will allow a wide range of students to find their voice. My recruitment process involved sending out a flyer for the survey to UTA's Human Sexuality, Marital and Sexual Lifestyles, The Latina Experience, Introduction to Social Work, Immigration Policy, and Intimate Partner Violence courses, all UTA Latinx organizations on campus, and one religious organization whose population is mostly Latinx. Flyers were also posted on campus in common areas where students go and in the School of Social Work building. My inclusion criteria included those who identified as a Latina, aged 18 or older, and they needed to be fluent in English.

During this time, I noticed that there was an extremely low turnout for participants in completing the survey and making it past the demographics stage. Once I went back to analyze the layout of the survey, there was a common theme of participants dropping out at the stage where I required them to put identifying information such as name, email, and phone number. Given the fear Latinas have when talking about sex, this piece of information was seen as harmful to many participants. Due to that I changed the survey layout with all identifying information at the very end of the survey, and I gave them an option. After this change was made participant increased some, with others leaving their information to be interviewed.

In the demographics section of the survey participants were asked how they identify based on race, gender, and sexual orientation. As stated earlier, after the participants have completed the survey and the researcher had analyzed the results, they then selected 10 participants to be interviewed. For those selected to participate in our survey, they were given a \$25 Amazon gift card. Each participant who was selected were invited via text message to

participate in the interview section that would take anywhere from an hour to an hour and a half in person or via MS teams. If the person would not like to participate, they can decline the offer and the researcher will either find a substitute or not find a replacement. One participant retracted her interview leaving four interviews that were conducted.

### **Data Analysis**

When working with the quantitative data, I used frequencies and percentages. The data that was collected during this portion of the study is focused on demographics of the person, family life, and sex education. The purpose of analyzing data this way is to find how many Latinas based upon age, gender, or cultural background have had the same experiences. The hope was to have a wide range in the age groups, so I could see how these experiences affected Latinas across the lifespan. All the data was analyzed through Questionpro analytic dashboard.

The method I used to analyze the qualitative data is Phenomenology, the study of a lived experience from the individual perspective. I did this by taking my field notes after the interview to be able to give my participant my full attention during their time. Once I had the transcript from MS teams, I immersed myself in the data by listening to the interviews and reading the transcript. After these steps had been completed, I started the process of open coding by assigning new ideas with a word. At that time, I moved into *in vivo* coding to highlight important quotations. After open coding was completed, I moved into *horizontalization* or identifying common themes in the interviews. Lastly, I met with my committee chair to conduct triangulation of analysts.

It is important to note that during the coding process the research was dealing with coding fatigue. This made the need for triangulation more necessary, as it was easy for personal

biases to arise. With the help of my committee chair I was able to work through any biases and see the themes the participants shared.

## **Results**

### **Survey Findings**

Of the 50 (n=27 completed n=23 not completed) responses collected in the survey, over half (n = 27, 56%) of participants completed the survey. For those who completed the survey, 13 participants left their information to be interviewed. After the participants were contacted about participation, five completed the interview. One of the interviewees ultimately withdrew her interview and her data was not used in the qualitative section. Thus, the final sample of interviews was four. Seven of the 50 participants terminated the survey either because they did not consent (n= 3) or because they did not identify as Latina (n= 4). There was one participant that completed who did not identify as Latina and their data was completely removed from analysis. Question 28 and 29 were removed and data was not analyzed due to the two questions having syntax issues (appendix a).

### ***Description of People who did not Complete the Survey***

From those that started but did not complete the survey (n= 16), half (n = 8, 50%) dropped out at the question asking for their date of birth. Another participant dropped out after being asked if their parents were together or separated. Five additional participants dropped out at the question asking how many siblings they had. Finally, the last two participants dropped out after the question asking where they learned about sex. The average age from the group that dropped out prior to completion was 22 and the ages ranged from 19 to 29 years old.

Eighty-eight percent (n = 7) of participants identified as female while 13% identified as nonbinary. Seventy-five percent of the group did not identify as part of the LGBTQIA+



communities leaving 25% that did identify as part of this group. All participants identified as Latina, with 75% being born in the US and 25% being born outside of the US; participants' parents were all born outside of the US. Eighty-seven and a half percent reported being raised by both parents with 12.5% only having their dad raise them.

Seventy-five percent (n = 6) of participants held Latina heritage from Mexico, of these 75%, one participant held heritage from Mexico and El Salvador. The last two Latinas held heritage from Colombia and Spain. Eighty-seven and a half percent were raised with Christianity/Catholicism. Sixty-two and a half percent reported practicing Christianity or Catholicism. Twenty-five percent reported practicing a religion but did not identify which religion, and one participant reported "not applicable." Half of the participants (n = 1) reported having one sibling, and the other half reported having three siblings. Refer to Appendix A for all information.

### ***Delivered Sample Description***

My study had a total of 26 participants who finished the survey completely. All of them identified as female and Latina. Their ages ranged from 18 to 46 years old with an average age of 23. Eighty-eight percent did not identify with the LGBTQIA+ community while 12% identified as part of the community. Seventy-three percent were native to the US leaving 27% who were not born in the US. As for the participants' parents, 85% were not born in the US and 15% of parents are natives. Of the 26 participants, Sixty-five percent of participants were raised by both parents, 31% by their mothers, and 4% by their grandmother. Eighty-one percent of participants' Latina heritage from Mexico, which was the biggest demographic, the other descriptive statistics are in appendix a. The biggest percentage for religion appeared to be sixty-two percent practicing Catholicism/ Christianity, thirty-five percent reported not practicing a religion, and 3.8%

reported “not really”. One participant reported being raised Catholic and Jehovah’s Witness. Ninety-two percent of participants were raised as Catholic/Christian.

Thirty one percent reported having two siblings, twenty-seven reported one sibling, 23% reported three, and 15% reported four Refer to appendix for full descriptive statistics.

### **Qualitative Results**

Data analysis revealed nine new themes: “I wish I would have learned about how sex can affect me emotionally.”, Deafening Silence, “I don’t think I had a relationship with my body before at all because it was looked down upon.”, “That it’s okay to not be ready if your partner is ready.”, “As though being a wife and a mother is the ultimate goal and (academic) education wasn’t important.”: How they sacrifice everything for their loved ones, “I feel like it (our relationship) is positive for the most part they (parents) just don’t know about every aspect of my life as I don’t share everything with them.”, : Complex Maternal Relationships, If we do not learn from you, we will learn from somewhere else, and Finding their way to Religion on their own time. Themes are explained and then illustrated using quotations from participants. Participants have been assigned pseudonyms to protect their identities.

#### **Theme 1: “I wish I would have learned about how sex can affect me emotionally.”**

For many Latinas, it was a common occurrence for them to struggle with knowing the implications that came along with having sex. Since many Latinx households have a culture of silence about sex (Keogh, 2016), talking freely about sex is not something that is given space for in the household. For many of Latinas they face a lack of openness in their expression. “I wish I would have learned that sexual expression was ok. Instead, I mostly ignored or repressed sexual feelings” (Rebecca, 29, survey). For Natalia, 21, having conversations with anyone in the family was not possible, “being shameful about having a conversation like this, I feel like I wouldn’t be

able to have a conversation like this with anyone before if it was in my family, not even my older sister because I know we both come from the same parents.” This was not the case for one participant that will be mentioned in another theme. However, this culture of silence moved into most of the women not having a safe space to vocalize their experiences or feelings surrounding sex.

Aside from the physical implications that are included, these women needed someone to talk to involving the emotional aspect of giving yourself to someone. In Selena’s, 47, experience, I was a teenager when I started having sex. It was very taboo and I wish I had someone to talk to that would have given me good advice on how to handle the emotions that come along with having sex. A safe space to talk about how I felt making this decision.

## **Theme 2: Deafening Silence**

If parents were to mention having sex, it would be full of shame or fear-based language. For Yesi, 20, she explained that,

I feel like I could never go talk to her about it because she would state that having sex is like...she will make it seem like having sex is the biggest sin in the world so you’re gonna go to hell. You’re gonna die for that. So it scared me off and it's like, OK, then what (who) do I talk to?

These experiences further the unlikeliness of Latinas learning about healthy sexual expression in a way that promotes sexual safety. These instances depict the reality and cycle of silence that is a common occurrence in Latinx households.

### ***Subtheme 1: Body***

In addition to sexual silence, silence around bodily functions was a common theme for some Latinas. Dahlia, 33, reported that,

I remember one time like I traveled to the DR (Dominican Republic) ...So I remember one time like we were all basically like just playing around in the water outside with my aunt and she was on her period and I freaked out. And I was like, what the hell is that? And that was like the first time ever that I saw somebody on their period...like that's how I learned about it, period, which was like very traumatized. And I'm like, what's that? Why (is) she bleeding...They just kind of like brushed it off. Like laughed it off. It wasn't like a whole...It wasn't like a conversation about it.

Which was also a common situation for Sara, 29, who explained that,

My mom got me like this, like, and I don't remember what I know. There's, like, different ones, but like some book about my body. When I was probably in elementary school, and it was mostly about periods like, so this is what happened in puberty. You get periods. And that's probably the only thing I learned about puberty.

***Subtheme 2: We need to break the Silence.***

This silence ultimately harms women since having proper education helps them learn about taking care of themselves. As Hedi,20, said,

Sex education is something that plays a major role in our lives, but not many people see it that way because of the lack of information they receive. Women need to be educated on every little detail when it comes to sex education from protection to after care, after they have been sexually active.

Which is the main concern and want for these Latinas. The focus is not to just have sex because as multiple participants mentioned, sex is not everything, but the goal should be protection and safety. Dahlia, 33, brought attention to the complexities around educating others when she said “You can teach kids to not have sex until they get married and teach them to have

healthy relationships and not make the whole community mad. But I don't think even that and that's all like tied together.” Finding ways to educate this community take not just the familial system, but every system that is a part of the development phase.

**Theme 3: “I don't think I had a relationship with my body before at all because it was looked down upon.”**

Body issues were a common theme among these Latinas. Many of them felt that because of the lack of openness in the household, they were not able to create a solid connection with their body. One participant (Sara, 29) mentioned that for her, she does not necessarily view her body in a negative way. In her experience,

When I feel like most empowered, I think like my body is like this physical thing that, like helps me do things you know, like it is like this very like functional sort of like helpful part of me, I guess, um, But I don't think I think a whole lot about my body in general.

Out of all the participants, her experience does not fit the usual narrative around body. Which is a blessing in disguise, as she can navigate and focus solely on the discomfort and changes, she faces.

In the case of Natalia, 21, she explained having a complicated relationship with her body and not having the environment to explore her body. She went on to explain,

There's days where I do love my body and I feel like I can embrace it a lot...Like even just wearing like a crop top like that was a little that was way too promiscuous in my household because I feel like I wasn't allowed to do anything like that like I hadn't been able to be comfortable and buy stuff that I knew I looked good in.

These issues around body bled into instances of not being educated of the normal changes that happen during monthly cycles. Natalia, 21, goes on further to talk about the desire of learning how her cycle affected her mood. She described,

How it's ok to be reacting the way that I am if I'm complaining about something not just because, ohh like you're a woman, you're going through or like, ohh are you mad because you're on your period? Like no, I wish. I knew more about it, so that way I could defend myself and not feel guilty about doing it.

In her experience we see how views around women shape the need to find ways to empower themselves when others view normal reaction as “being on your period”. This is the usual narrative for those who do not have periods to silence the voices of those who menstruate.

In Yesi's, 20, experience, her issues around her body led to her developing an eating disorder and body dysmorphia. For her, the fight between her views of her body is still ongoing. She explained that,

I never liked my body the way it was and to this day, I still have body dysmorphia gladly I don't have an eating disorder anymore, but. I just feel like my relationship with my body has been a little toxic in a way where I just instantly give myself negative talks or I automatically compare my body to other peoples.

In many cases it is easy to fall into the cycle of comparison just as Dahlia, 33, went on to explain,

It wasn't until like an adult that I really started to, like, hate my body like I actually got plastic surgery. I like a few years back because I was like, very unhappy with my body.

But I think that is just. I blame that I don't blame that on my upbringings, though I blame

that more on like society, the new norm that you need to have a fat ass and the skinny waist I fell into that

Dahlia, 33, was able to find empowerment in her body after becoming a mother. She explains,

Like I just feel more mature in my body. So, to me like I'm content with how I look and then especially because I know what my body went through so I can, so it just makes me feel good to know like hey like this body gave birth to this baby

Which is in line with previous research explaining how some Latinas feel a deeper sense of femineity after becoming a mother.

**Theme 4: “That it’s okay to not be ready if your partner is ready.”**

A theme that appeared in the responses was finding and needing bodily autonomy. In many of the Latina’s experiences having control over when or how sexual safety took place was important. A survey participant (Ester, 20) explained the importance of discussing “what you are comfortable with and how to do it.” Because it is a common occurrence in Latinx households for daughters to not have a say, it makes perfect sense why they are desiring some freedom. For Naomi, 21, she felt that “It should be standard to ask for consent before engaging in sexual activity”. Self-care is an area that many of the Latinas wished would have been talked about more. Learning how to take care of your body is incredibly empowering, especially if you feel like you do not control aspect of your life. To Gabi, 20, it would be important to know the proper measure of “taking care of myself after sexual intercourses.”

Yesi’s, 20, boyfriend and sister offered her new insight when dealing with consent, which is not something that is often taught with sex education. In her experience she explained that

He also reassured me it's OK to say no, you know, he tells me. It's OK to say no to me too. It was mainly my older sister and my boyfriend who taught me that. It's OK to say no

and not feel bad about it. It is my body. And I have every right to choose who will give it to

In Dahlia's, 33, case she did not learn what consent was until "When I was raped in high school, I didn't know that I was raped until after the fact that the police officer asked me this like, is that what you wanted?" Consent should not be viewed to promote sex but to help individuals learn the importance of protecting their body. To help limit the chances of sexual victimization and for them to be able to identify if they have been victimized.

Lastly, in many of the Latinas experiences sex and virginity were important but the stigma around them was unnecessary. As one participant, 22, put it "virginity is an important thing but it does not define you as a person so you shouldn't feel pressured to keep it or not." Overall, the importance of taking care of one's body led the narrative for many of these Latinas.

**Theme 5: "As though being a wife and a mother is the ultimate goal and (academic) education wasn't important.": How they sacrifice everything for their loved ones**

Traditional gender roles are common in Latinx households and other minority houses. For many Latinas the focus is on taking care of the family and sacrificing your dreams for those that you love. With this theme we get a closer look at how these beliefs shape how many Latinas see themselves in the unit.

Sara's, 29, experience showed us the breaking of gender roles as her parents did not raise her to follow the roles strictly. In her experience, her parents always encouraged her to do what she wanted to do "... I don't think I was ever explicitly told I had to do anything because I was a girl. But I do think there were certain like conversations about like modesty that were different." In the experience of Natalia, 21, her father had the hope of them to "just us being good woman independently and hoping that whatever they taught us was gonna be able to help us whenever



we start our own family.” Showing that family can be added to expectations without the need to restrict Latinas. These instances only slightly show that there is a possibility to find empowerment in *marianismo* but it takes a understanding from the parents.

While these two experiences paint an uplifting picture most of the participants did not share the same experiences. In Dahlia’s, 33, experience since she was the only daughter her upbringing focused on “you get married, you have kids, you take care of the home” She went on to talk about the difficulties regarding her parents not being home. She explained,

I've always have to make food for my little brother. You know, even though he could have easily ate like cereal or something because he was a kid. But I always had to be the one to do like those typical female, you know, kitchen duties, if you may

However, Dahlia, 33, was not expected to fulfill other duties such as doing laundry and all her siblings had to help clean.

Yesi, 20, offered a different perspective as she was born in Mexico and migrated when she was nine. Her views around gender roles showcased the difficulties and worries that parents, specifically mothers, have around their kids succeeding. She explained that:

Until I got to college, where they knew that I could do handle myself and provide for myself but in the back of my mom's mind, it's like I still want you to marry someone rich as a backup kind of thing So there's like the doubt that us woman can't provide for ourselves, especially being immigrants, it's like this country has nothing to offer for you. So that's like the negativity that surrounds my status and also how, as women were portrayed in the Mexican culture.

Her mother’s belief perpetuates the control around Latinas goals and plans. Even though it can be viewed as a way of protection, it ultimately hurts them long term. One participant, 20,

mentioned that “It just made me work harder for a place.” Implying the need to constantly prove your worth in the household, to show that you can achieve big things.

Selena, 47, put into words the bonds that have followed Latinas through the generations she explained:

I feel Latino parents make sex so bad, when we obviously like to have sex; we have the highest birth rate! But I believe because this is generational trauma passed on when men controlled their women and women did not have consent to have sex, sex is a taboo. If we educate our children that sex is very natural, we could provide a safe space for our children to come talk to us, ending this generational trauma that surrounds sex.

This need to be the suffering silent women has followed Latinas for years. This is not what defines this group of women. Collectively they have suffered in silence to protect each other; however, it harms the future generations.

***Subtheme 1: “It made me feel like I wasn't respected as a person.”***

Because family is the life source of many Latinx homes it is easy for Latinas to get forced into the role of serving others. This makes it incredibly difficult for them to navigate and find themselves outside of the home. Which is challenging as the US tends to be focused on the individual rather than the whole. It causes those who do not follow the status quo to be viewed as outsiders to others and in their home.

One survey participant (Selena, 47) reported that “Growing up I felt that I had to serve others to feel accepted.” Another participant, 22, mentioned “It made me view myself as only capable of doing household stuff. As if I am not able to do anything other than serve my future husband in all his needs.” These instances displayed the role that some Latinas must take in the households to take care of others. Riley, 32, stated:

I had to always be "confrontational" when stating my opinions because I hated the beliefs that men can do no wrong and women are to just cater to them. If I did not learn how to cook or clean, I was a "lazy woman".

In the experience of Ale, 20, "I saw myself as something less than a man. I believed that I had to always praise men and do as they say because they are the ones who rule over me." Her experience describes the harsh reality that many Latinas' deal with. Whether they are daughters, wives, or sisters, in the home their body is not their own, it becomes the family's.

In Latinx culture women are not seen as anything more than their body and worth. It could be a reason why so many Latinas must constantly overachieve, to show that they are worthy of love. If Latinas are expected to take the weight of the house and family, why is it so hard for men to claim some ownership in the conversations around sex. It can be easy for parents to put the weight of redeeming the family which can lead to views as mentioned by survey participant, Lupe, 24, "Parents are usually very disappointed when their female child gets pregnant early on although they did it as well, also there is double standards with men".

**Theme 6: "I feel like it (our relationship) is positive for the most part they (parents) just don't know about every aspect of my life as I don't share everything with them."**

Sometimes silence is the easiest option for Latinx kids, so they do not face the shame from their parents. It can be viewed as a means of protecting and reclaiming their autonomy in situations where they do not have control. While having a positive relationship with parents was common, there were many instances where the daughter felt that it was lacking, especially with the mother-daughter relationship. In general, having a strong bond with their mother was something that offered support or emotional challenges.

Because silence around sex is a generational occurrence, conversations with parents about sex would not be seen as helpful. As Riley, 32, explained “Sex conversations with my parents would have not worked because it would have just been brought back to shaming me for even knowing what sex is.” Due to this it would be helpful to tackle conversations with parents to promote changes in beliefs at home. But it must be done in a way that is mindful of the differences of experiences between the parents and daughters.

In most experiences Latinas found it difficult to bond with their parents. In Dahlia’s, 33, experience “I was raped in high school and that's where, like the closeness with my family, that's how I began to be more closer with my parents after that tragedy.” Sometimes when suffering is introduced into a family is allows opportunities to grow together, but that is not always the case. Yesi, 20, explained her difficulties being raised by her grandma and then her mother coming into the picture. To her this caused difficulties in how she has bonded with her mom. She stated that with her mom,

it's like I can't even have simple conversations as like, well, like, I like this guy in school or like hey mom like My friend said this...I don't have that and I and I wish I did, but it's like It's the emotional attachment that I don't have towards her, and I feel like it's also vice versa.

She has learned how to navigate sex education with the help of her older sister and boyfriend. With the help of her sister who

Gave me a whole visual. She was like men use this thing called condom. It's a plastic, they place this on their penis for protection because as soon as they, what is it? Their semen. Comes out. That's what gets you pregnant.

### **Theme 7: Complex Maternal Relationships**

Complex maternal relationships were a theme that popped up throughout the survey responses and interviews. Yesi, 20, perfectly encompassed the complexities around bodily shame and rejection from her mother when she explained that

I remember this day specifically I was growing pubic hair and I was panicking. I was like, what is this? And I remember asking my mom, my mom, what is this? She just looked at it. She started laughing and she walked away. So I thought I instantly felt rejected in that moment so, I just started crying.

As mentioned throughout previous themes, silence is a huge factor for if and how these Latinas learned about sex. A survey participant, 34, reported “That is it something intimate and normalizing that sex is okay, but my mother always made it seem like it was the worse thing in the world.” The main difference for these responses is how their mothers were a cause for the negative views around sex and normal body functions. As Selena, 47, explained,

My mother taught me that sex was dirty and only bad girls had sex. So when I did have sex, I was ashamed of myself for not waiting. I wish someone told me that sex is a very normal part of a healthy relationship, and it is not dirty.

It’s common for mothers to be part of the process of keeping silence in the household possibly related to needing their daughters to redeem the family. However, just as some participants explained the negatives with their mothers, others talked about the positives. Cheri, 20, showed a deeper understanding of her parents when she stated:

Now it's good, but in the past, it wasn't the best. I think my parent's sufferings were so big that they didn't really pay a lot of attention to me because they were not mentally there. Now I can see a big growth in them that I feel comfortable around them, and I can talk to them about a lot of things, especially my mom.

Identifying parents' sufferings is not something that can come naturally, and it takes a great amount of understanding. Many participants reported having positive relationships with their moms, but their relationship with their dad was complicated. Bella reported:

I have a positive relationship with my mother because she raised me. My father and I have a cordial relationship. Because of my ethnicity I still have to respect and hold my father to a certain stature even though, the relationship is strained.

Familial relationships offer many different challenges for Latinas as the complexities around fitting into the family and outside of the family are different. These Latinas showed the importance of having family uplift experiences and offer support. But offering support takes breaking down the walls of generational silence.

**Theme 8: If we do not learn from you, we will learn from somewhere else.**

Relying on yourself appears to be the most common theme that was seen across the board with this group of Latinas. This finding is surprising given the central belief that within Latinx culture, family is the backbone. Many of these women had to learn about these things either through their own research or word of mouth from friends and media consumption. For many of the women it appeared that it would have been more helpful if their parents or mother was the one teaching them. While many of these women wanted to have more freedom in the home having parental support was important.

Parents completely separated themselves from the conversations which left these Latinas to learn from different systems. However, most other systems did not teach them about the sexual safety or bodily functions. As mentioned by Natalia, 21, "when I would go to the doctor's office it also wasn't really spoken about... It was just like preventing pregnancy or my menstrual cycle. It never went beyond that." In the school system many Latinas reported the lack of

conversations around sex. As Riley, 32, reported “it explained about being passed around (we used a chocolate bar) and how no one wanted to take a bite after it being passed around.” One respondent (Sara,29) reported she had the help of her soccer coach,

But she told us, you know, even if you like end up like not having your period 'cause, you're exercising so much because we would run so much. She's like you could still get your period cause like your period could come back, you know, like you could still. I mean, she didn't use the language. You could still ovulate after you have sex.

Her experience was not a common theme among participants. Most systems kept the air of silence making it difficult for these women to be educated. In Sara's, 29, experience, she learned on her own as an adult and through friends “I've like sought out a lot of information. I've had a lot of friends that have been maybe like have had conversations about that with me, so with peers.” The same was true for Natalia, 21, who had to rely on herself to learn about bodily functions she said,

I guess I learned about it through my own research. Some through my doctors, but it was super vague. My mom had only touched about like me getting my period, but as far as like everything now, I feel like I've. Researched it on my own. Before I feel like I couldn't name you everything, all of the parts of my reproductive system, like, I couldn't tell you. I didn't know what a uterus was, I didn't know what an ovary like, I didn't know any of that. And I feel like I had to do all the research myself.

There was not room in the household to have open conversations around what goes on with your body. Leaving these Latinas to learn from experiences of friends or from the internet.

A survey participant (Cheri,20) further vocalizes the importance of leaning on friends to learn about protecting yourself,

My friends will talk about their experiences with guys and that how I learned about sex. They will tell me that it's important to use protection but some types they made it seem that nothing will happen if you didn't use protection. I think I'm pretty covered in all the areas of sex.

It makes it complicated if the information received from friends is not factual and ultimately can lead to uninformed decisions.

***Subtheme 1: "That it (sex) needs to be valued as more than it is and the precaution."***

Latinas are seen as a sexual icon for many people in the world along with most other minority groups. From their "spicy" attitude to their sometimes-curvy body, they are viewed as the pinnacle of sex. This belief has made navigating sexuality difficult for many Latinas. To Cheri, 20, knowing about consent would have let her know "That it's okay to say no to a guy when you don't feel comfortable and to not feel sad if a guy rejects you when you don't want to have sex with him." On top of that opening the doors to talk about sex show that "it is healthy and can be part of a relationship just like the other physical and emotional parts." (Jenni,29, survey).

Multiple survey participants expressed the harm caused by these perceptions the world has around sex by saying "The toll it might have on the women." (18) Or "I wish I would've learned to not be scared to speak up." (Lia,25) The most telling quotation comes from Alex when she explained the sometimes-unconscious coercion that can happen "How easy it is to do something that you didn't want to do with a conscious mind" (Kim,21).

Some survey participants reported that sex is not important in reference to what others should know. These quotes include: "That sex does not define me as a woman." (Lia,25), "That sex isn't everything" (33), "to not feel rushed into it." (20), and "It is not the end all be all."



(Kim,21) Proving that to others sex seems important but really it is a normal part of our lives and should be respected as such but talked about in a normalizing way. For Kim (21) “I believe that sex is meant to be enjoyed in the bounds of marriage.” She was the only participant who shared this belief and deserves respect for following a more traditional view of sex.

### **Theme 9: Finding their way to Religion on their own time.**

Religion can be an important part of life in some Latinx households. Depending on the parental views around religion, some Latinas will be expected to follow the religion they were raised with. This could cause some issues especially if the Latina is not interested in following a religion they do not feel called to, and ultimately forced into. This theme encompasses the importance of these women finding their own footing in how they practice their faith. To some it is a way to reclaim lost independence, and for others it is a normal part of their life. Faith is complicated across the board; however, this shines some light on the struggles around how these Latinas found their footing in religion.

All interview participants shared the same notion around religion. All of them were raised in a Catholic home with their parents who are still practicing. Sara, 29, explained that,

I grew up Roman Catholic and both of my parents are Catholic. My mom's from Louisiana, so it's a very Catholic area. And then my dad being from South America, and I still practice Catholicism. Yeah, it's something that is more complicated than I guess for me now, but I still practice it with it some days. It's just like, well, I guess that's what I was raised with. So, I guess I don't know. But yeah, I, I am still, yeah. Practicing so.

In Natalia's, 21, experience she shows the complexities around following a faith you were raised in. Latinx parents tend to believe that their kids need to be practicing faithfully

(probably for redemption) but that is not true for some Latinas. Natalia, 21, explained for her she's,

not open to them (parents) either. About like they don't really know that I'm not consistently going anymore. But I do believe. in God, I do believe in...I do hope to, hopefully be able to get closer to it, but as for right now, I guess I'm practicing it in my own my own version.

As for Yesi, 20, and Dahlia, 33, their experiences learned towards not actively practicing but still having a religious foundation. Yesi, 20, said,

To this day. I do practice it, but I feel like I'm more of a believer... And I do believe in God and everything, but I wouldn't say I'm like predominantly religious to all of it. I'll just say I'm a believer But I don't do all the practices Catholics do.

While Dahlia, 33, explained "I'm Catholic I was raised in that religion, but I myself I don't like, I don't go out of my way to practice, if that makes sense." Finding your footing in religion is hard and poses many different challenges but it takes leaning into yourself to understand where to go.

Regarding contraception Natalia, 21, talked about realizing that it is ok to not follow parents' beliefs. She explained in her experience:

it wasn't until a few years ago maybe like a year, really all of high school and it wasn't maybe until like my senior freshman year of college where I was like, OK, I think it's OK for me to have my own views on it and if I've if a female is not ready to have a baby, then they're not ready to have one and that's totally OK.

Navigating where your views and beliefs fit into the family can cause tension, but for the well-being of the family it is important to vocalize them.

## Discussion

This thesis was formed around finding what Latinas learned about sex, however it shifted into seeing what Latinas are lacking. This group is bounded by generational trauma that ultimately follows them until they decide to take a stand in changing the cycle. Silence in general is a major contributor for keeping these Latinas in a place of full control in the family. Which makes it difficult for them to find who they are and explore the world with freedom. Likewise traditional gender roles have a major impact on how these women move through life. It is a perpetrator for keeping the women silent and focused on redeeming the family.

There is a clear need for moving towards allowing Latinas to become empowered while working with the family. The issue is not traditional gender roles, familial expectations, societal views, or cultural beliefs. Those issues are all building blocks that lead to the missing piece which is generational silence. It is clear because some of the Latinas in my study were not raised with these traditional gender roles, and still dealt with silencing. Without the presence of silence, these issues have the possibility of being resolved with open communication. Silence is what keeps Latinas trapped in the constant cycle of victimization and suffering. For future research there is a need to expand on this silence that occurs in Latinx households. The silence needs to be unveiled to eventually have conversations around sexual safety. Without tackling the issue of silence there is a slim chance of sex education being allowed in conversations. There is also a need to be develop new family therapy approaches that work with Latinx families on silence and understanding each other.

As mentioned in the recruitment section of my thesis, for future work it is extremely crucial to not begin instruments with identifying information with this population. For their safety and trust there needs to be complete control of how or if they expose who they are, and

that must be done in a way that is inviting. It could be more beneficial to use a more personable sampling process where the participant gets to meet with you before agreeing to do the survey. My future work will be focused on opening these communication channels in the family and developing a sex education program that focuses on Latinas. In my PhD program, I plan to conduct research that brings answers and application to these issues.

### **Limitations**

Limitations are a normal part of research that allows the researcher a way to check their work. Within this thesis there were possible limitations that must be taken into consideration. The first being the sample size of the surveys and interviews, since the size was so small it does not accurately show all areas of the population. This is magnified due to the range of lived experiences within the Latinx community. The sample demographic is a limitation due to it being students, as the focus was on college students and not the public. By not having a bigger pool, it limited the scope of this research. Time constraints are a limitation to this study due to having only three semesters to conduct research that realistically needed a year plus to complete. Personal biases are a limitation as the researcher identifies as Latina and has shared some of these experiences, making some biases appear in the process.

### **Conclusion**

Even though the overarching theme is about how Latinas are restricted in their families these conversations are filled with resilience. During these experiences I learned that nothing would stop these Latinas from learning information that ultimately helps them. As someone who never had the space to learn about sexual safety, I thought I was always alone. However, in this process I realized how many other women shared the experiences I did, making it more impactful to me. There was never a word for what would go on within the household expect not

being able to understand my parents. But seeing that silence was riddled in the house every word a participant said spoke volumes to me. I am incredibly grateful for all the Latinas who participated in my thesis as they are the reason, I have been able to unveil this silence. Without their suffering and experiences, I would not be able to help others. It is because of them that future generations of Latinas will be able to tackle generational silence head on.

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## Appendix A: Tables

Table 1.

<b>Category</b>	<b>Terminated</b>	<b>Completed</b>
<b>Gender</b>		
Female	n=7, 87.5%	n= 26, 100%
Nonbinary	n=1, 12.5%	n=0, 0%
<b>Sexual Orientation</b>		
Not LGBTQIA+	n=6, 75%	n=23, 88.46%
LGBTQIA+	n=2, 25%	n=3, 11.54%
<b>Were you born in the US?</b>		
Yes	n=6, 75%	n=19, 73.08
No	n=2, 25%	n=7, 26.92%
<b>Were your parents born in the US</b>		
Yes	n=0, 0%	n=4, 15.38%
No	n=8, 100%	n=22, 84.62%
<b>Who raised you?</b>		
Mom and Dad	n=7, 87.5%	n=17, 65.4%
Mom		n=8, 30.8%
Dad	n=1, 12.5%	
Grandma		n=1, 3.8%
<b>Heritage</b>		
Mexico	n=6, 75%	n=21, 80.8%
Puerto Rico		n=1, 3.8%
Dominican Republic		n=1, 3.8%
El Salvador		n=1, 3.8%
Spain	n=1, 12.5%	
Columbia	n=1, 12.5%	n=1, 3.8%
Acapulco		n=1, 3.8%
<b>Practicing Religion</b>		
Catholic/Christian	n=5, 62.5%	n=16, 61.5%
Not Practicing	n=1, 12.5%	n=9, 34.6%
Somehow	n=1, 12.5%	
Not Really	n=1, 12.5%	n=1, 3.8%
<b>Raised Religion</b>		
Catholic and Jehovah's Witness		n=1, 3.8%
Catholic/Christian	n=7, 87.5%	n=24, 92.3%
N/A	n=1, 12.5%	n=1, 3.8%
<b>Sibling Amount</b>		

One	n=1, 50%	n=7, 26.9%
Two		n=8, 30.8%
Three	n=1, 50%	n=6, 23%
Four		n=4, 15.4%
Five+		n=1, 3.9%
Formal Sex Ed		
Yes	n=2, 100%	n=17, 65.4%
No		n=9, 34.62
Informal Sex Ed		
Yes		n=7, 77.8%
No		n=2, 22.2%

## Appendix B: IRB Approval



1/6/2023

### IRB Approval of Minimal Risk (MR) Modification

**PI:** Toni Gallegos

**Faculty Advisor:** Regina Praetorius

**Department:** Social Work

**IRB Protocol #:** 2022-0569.6

**Study Title:** *La Pieza que Falta: How Gender Roles and Cultural Norms impacted Latinas learning about Sex.*

**Effective Approval:** 1/6/2023

#### Protocol Details

- Original Protocol Approval Date: 8/8/2022
- Continuing Review required: No

The IRB team reviewed and approved the modification request for this non-federally funded, non-FDA regulated protocol in accordance with the UTA IRB Internal Operating Procedures. The modifications are minimal risk and do not change the study risk level. The approved modifications are limited to:

- Updated study start date to January 2023
- Expanded inclusion criteria to anyone 18 years of age or older and a member of the LGBTQIA+ community
- Added recruitment from more courses (HEED 2317, PSY 2317, WOMS 2317, SOCI 3328, and WOMS 3328) as well as recruitment outside of UTA through a group chat
- Added extra credit option and alternative for those students in SOCW 3314 who complete survey
- Updated consent forms to reflect changes

#### Principal Investigator and Faculty Advisor Responsibilities

All personnel conducting human subject research must comply with UTA's [IRB Standard Operating Procedures](#) and [RA-PO4, Statement of Principles and Policies Regarding Human Subjects in Research](#). Important items for PIs and Faculty Advisors are as follows:

- \*\*Notify [Regulatory Services](#) of proposed, new, or changing funding source\*\***
- Fulfill research oversight responsibilities, [IV.F and IV.G](#).
- Obtain approval prior to initiating changes in research or personnel, [IX.B](#).
- Report Serious Adverse Events (SAEs) and Unanticipated Problems (UPs), [IX.C](#).
- Fulfill Continuing Review requirements, if applicable, [IX.A](#).
- Protect human subject data ([XV](#).) and maintain records ([XXI.C](#)).
- Maintain [HSP](#) (3 years), [GCP](#) (3 years), and [RCR](#) (4 years) training as applicable.

My name is Toni Gallegos, and I am asking you to participate in a UT Arlington research study titled, “La Pieza que Falta: How Gender Roles and Cultural Norms impacted Latinas Learning about Sex.” This research study is about examining how Latinas were educated about sex considering your lived experience of the expectations from your parents. You can choose to participate in this research study if you are at least 18 years old and UTA student who identifies as a woman and Latina who is able to speak English. Reasons, why you might want to participate in this study, include: if you want to increase the knowledge of Latinas and sex education or if you would be interested in sharing your experience for others who grew up in similar environments. You might NOT want to participate if you feel uncomfortable sharing information about your experiences growing up or do not want to participate in the survey. Some questions may ask you to discuss negative experiences. Your decision about whether to participate is entirely up to you. If you decide not to be in the study, there won’t be any punishment or penalty; whatever your choice, there will be no impact on any benefits or services that you would normally receive. Even if you choose to begin the study, you can also change your mind and quit at any time without any consequences. If you decide to participate in this research study, the list of activities that I will ask you to complete for the research are 1. Read through this Informed Consent and talk with the research team to make sure that any questions you may have been answered; then make your choice about whether to participate., and 2. Follow the link that was sent through your organization which will take you to QuestionPro. It should take about 10 to 30 minutes depending on your answers. Although you probably won’t experience any personal benefits from participating, the study activities are not expected to pose any additional risks beyond those that you would normally experience in your regular everyday life or during routine medical / psychological visits. However, some of the questions that I will ask may be about sensitive or uncomfortable topics. You will not be paid for completing this study. There are no alternative options to this research project. The research team is committed to protecting your rights and privacy as a research subject. We may publish or present the results, but your name will not be used. The data collected about you for this study may be used for future research studies that are not described in this consent form. If that occurs, an IRB will first evaluate the use of any information that is identifiable to you, and confidentiality protection would be maintained. If your information is used for future studies the information will be handled by Toni Gallegos. At that time, she will reach out to you, or the IRB board to navigate maintaining confidentiality. While absolute confidentiality cannot be guaranteed, the research team will make every effort to protect the confidentiality of your records as described here and to the extent permitted by law. If you have questions about the study, you can contact me at txg2078@mavs.uta.edu or on my cell at (806)-778-2656. For questions about your rights or to report complaints, contact the UTA Research Office at 817-272-3723 or regulatoryservices@uta.edu. You are indicating your voluntary agreement to participate by clicking on the “Accept” button below.

1. I accept
2. I do not accept

What is your date of birth?

• \_\_\_\_\_

Gender

1. Male
2. Female
3. Nonbinary
4. Other

Do you Identify as part of the LGBTQIA+ Communities

1. Yes
2. No

Do you identify as Latina? (e.g. Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or Hispanic)



1. Yes
2. No

Were you born in the US?

1. Yes
2. No

Were your parents born in the US?

1. Yes
2. No

Who raised you? (e.g. with whom did you live and who was your primary caregiver?)

From what countries does your Latina heritage stem from?

Do you practice a religion? If yes, what religion?

What religion were you raised with?

Are your parents together or separated?

1. Yes
2. No

If separated, how old were you when they did?

How many siblings do you have?

1. 1
2. 2
3. 3
4. 4
5. 5+

In your household as a girl/woman were you expected to cook, clean, serve the men, raise your siblings, etc?

1. Yes
2. No

Have you ever felt that the men in your family were put on a pedestal?

1. Yes
2. No

Do you think the men in family are respected more than women?

1. Yes
2. No

If you were raised with the two previous questions beliefs how did that make you view yourself? (N/A if not applicable)

Do you have a negative or positive relationship with your parents? Please explain, however if you do not feel

comfortable you do not have to give specifics.

Did your parents have high expectations for you as a woman? As in getting good grades, not going out with friends, remaining a virgin, and practicing your faith/religion.

1. Yes
2. No

Is religion important in your household?

1. Yes
2. No

Did you receive formal sex education? Parents, school, religious organizations, etc.

1. Yes
2. No

How did you learn about sex?

1. Parents
2. School
3. Religious Org
4. Other

Did you receive informal sex education? Friends, siblings, porn, etc.

1. Yes
2. No

How did you learn about sex?

1. Friends
2. Siblings
3. Porn
4. Other

How did you learn about sex? Please explain

Did the sex education you received cover sexual safety? As in STI/STD prevention, condom usage, consent, abuse, or pregnancy. Please explain what areas it did or did not cover

Is having your religion or culture important to you in sex education?

- 1. Religion
- 2. Culture
- 3. Both
- 4. NA

What do you wish you would've learned about sexual safety?

What do you wish you would have learned about sex in relationships?

Who would you have been more comfortable learning from?

Is there anything else you want me to know?

First Name

Last Name

Phone

Email Address