



## Labour Pains: Mothers and Motherhood on the British Left in the Twentieth Century

Item Type	Article (Version of Record)
UoW Affiliated Authors	Muggeridge, Anna
Full Citation	Riley, C., Jenkins, L., Baughan, E., Beers, L., Burnett, J., Chappell, F., Davidson, R., Lundin, E., Martin, M., Muggeridge, Anna , Peplow, E., Pivatto, P. and White, J. (2025) Labour Pains: Mothers and Motherhood on the British Left in the Twentieth Century. Transactions of the Royal Historical Society. pp. 1-22. ISSN 0080-4401 (Print), 1474-0648 (Online)
DOI/ISBN	<a href="https://doi.org/10.1017/S0080440124000161">https://doi.org/10.1017/S0080440124000161</a>
Journal/Publisher	Transactions of the Royal Historical Society Cambridge University Press
Rights/Publisher Set Statement	<p>© The Author(s), 2025. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of The Royal Historical Society., This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (<a href="http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0">http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0</a>)</p> <p>This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons CC BY license, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.</p> <p>You are not required to obtain permission to reuse this article.</p>
Item License	CC BY 4.0
Link to item	<a href="https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/transactions-of-the-royal-historical-society/article/labour-pains-mothers-and-motherhood-on-the-british-left-in-the-twentieth-century/4980307CAAD73839F7B6029402C66695">https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/transactions-of-the-royal-historical-society/article/labour-pains-mothers-and-motherhood-on-the-british-left-in-the-twentieth-century/4980307CAAD73839F7B6029402C66695</a>

For more information, please contact [wrapteam@worc.ac.uk](mailto:wrapteam@worc.ac.uk)



ROUNDTABLE

# Labour Pains: Mothers and Motherhood on the British Left in the Twentieth Century

Charlotte Lydia Riley<sup>1</sup>, Lyndsey Jenkins<sup>2</sup>, Emily Baughan<sup>3</sup>, Laura Beers<sup>4</sup>, Jade Burnett<sup>5</sup>, Frankie Chappell<sup>6</sup>, Ruth Davidson<sup>7</sup>, Emma Elinor Lundin<sup>8</sup>, Mary Clare Martin<sup>9</sup>, Anna Muggeridge<sup>10</sup>, Emma Peplow<sup>11</sup>, Priscila Pivatto<sup>11</sup> and Jessica White<sup>12</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of History, University of Southampton, Southampton, UK, <sup>2</sup>Faculty of History, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK, <sup>3</sup>Department of History, University of Sheffield, Sheffield, UK, <sup>4</sup>History Department, American University, Washington, DC, USA, <sup>5</sup>Department of History, University of Birmingham, Birmingham, UK, <sup>6</sup>UCL Institute of the Americas, UCL, London, UK, <sup>7</sup>Institute of Historical Research, London, UK, <sup>8</sup>Department of Society, Culture and Identity, University of Malmö, Malmö, Sweden, <sup>9</sup>School of Education, University of Greenwich, London, UK, <sup>10</sup>Institute of Arts and Humanities, University of Worcester, Worcester, UK, <sup>11</sup>History of Parliament Trust, London, UK and <sup>12</sup>School of History, Languages and Cultures, University of Liverpool, Liverpool, UK

**Corresponding author:** Charlotte Lydia Riley; Email: [C.L.Riley@soton.ac.uk](mailto:C.L.Riley@soton.ac.uk)

(Received 1 August 2024; accepted 19 September 2024)

## Abstract

British left-wing politics does not know what to think about mothers. In left-wing women's movements, motherhood has been recognised as essential and difficult; necessary for future revolutions, not least in raising future revolutionaries. In less radical circles, it has been understood as a crucial contribution to the functioning of society, often forming the basis of women's claims to citizenship and maternalist forms of politics. On the other hand, motherhood has been seen as a 'natural' function of women and a private responsibility, rather than a public good or a collective act which needs comprehensive state support. The family, in this reading, is a rather conservative force, better left to social reactionaries. Mothering has added additional hurdles to the gendered obstacles women already face in pursuing politics as activists or elected representatives. Perhaps because of this, many mothers in politics have sought to downplay or distance themselves from their roles as mothers, emphasising instead their contributions as workers and activists who can be fully committed to the left cause. Feminist historians have often followed their lead and have tended to write around political mothers' maternal roles in their scholarship. This roundtable develops themes first explored in our November 2023 workshop, generously supported by the Royal Historical Society.

**Keywords:** motherhood; Labour Party; British Left; political history; feminist history

In her autobiography, the Labour MP Jean Mann recalled a touching scene from Parliament one day when the son of her colleague Edith Summerskill came in for a visit. Mann claimed that she had never seen Summerskill so happy. For Mann, the moment was given extra poignancy by the childless Bessie Braddock looking on. She asserted that for a mother, ‘political life can never satisfy her deeper needs or aspirations. Always she comes back to the family. Therein may be one reason why women don’t climb the heights. Her crowning glory may rest in producing the sons of men.’<sup>1</sup> She also expressed sorrow ‘for a single lady who had no children or grandchildren to go home to; no one to knit for – or admire her gardening. Everything behind one. The end of the woman who sets marriage and children aside for a political career is particularly lonely and sad.’<sup>2</sup> Her claims illustrate that motherhood was frequently understood, including by women activists themselves, as women’s first duty. In this framing, politics could only ever be second best.

These complexities and contradictions are at the heart of the relationship between mothering and politics. In left-wing women’s movements, for example, it has been recognised as essential and difficult, necessary for future revolutions, not least in their role in raising future revolutionaries. In less radical circles, it has been understood as a crucial contribution to the functioning of society, and thus often formed the basis of women’s claims to citizenship and maternalist forms of politics. On the other hand, motherhood has been seen as a ‘natural’ function of women and a private responsibility, rather than a public good or a collective act which needs comprehensive state support. The family, in this reading, is a rather conservative force, better left to social reactionaries. Motherhood is often subsumed within broader unspoken assumptions about women’s responsibilities for care and domestic labour, a form of labour which cannot easily be unionised.

These assumptions have shaped the experiences of mothers in politics. Mothering has added additional hurdles to the gendered obstacles women already face in pursuing politics as activists or elected representatives. As a result, mothers themselves have had difficulty furthering their political commitment and professional careers. Perhaps because of this, many mothers in politics have sought to downplay or distance themselves from their roles as mothers, to emphasise instead their contributions as workers and activists who can be fully committed to the cause.

Feminist historians, keen not to engage in essentialist or regressive analysis, have often followed their lead and have tended to write around political mothers’ maternal roles in their scholarship. This means that the complexities of the maternal in British politics have been largely overlooked, and the role of mothers on the left has been diminished or ignored. Much existing scholarship has thus focused on motherhood in the abstract: the ways that political parties imagined and invoked an idealised form of motherhood as a way of appealing to women voters – more often through warm words than adequate support.

New historical scholarship, however, is seeking more satisfactory ways to understand, interpret and contextualise the diverse experiences of motherhood.<sup>3</sup> Much of this is rightly seeking to make mothering visible as work, while at the same time

<sup>1</sup>Jean Mann, *Woman in Parliament* (1962), 40.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>3</sup>Sarah Knott, ‘Theorizing and Historicizing Mothering’s Many Labours’, *Past & Present*, 246 (2020), 1–24.

documenting how the relationship between paid and unpaid work has structured women's lives.<sup>4</sup> Other scholarship is examining how women themselves sought to improve their lives both as workers and as mothers through political activism.<sup>5</sup> But these new forms of analysis have not yet been consistently integrated into mainstream political history. The historiography of the Labour Party, particularly since 1945, still frequently takes a top down and masculine approach.

In November 2023, a Royal Historical Society grant enabled us to host a workshop which brought together historians of women and political activism, across a range of disciplines and at different stages in their career, from PhD students to professors, to interrogate the relationship between motherhood, the Labour Party, and the broader left in Britain. Collectively, we wanted to work through some of the ways in which mothers have shaped leftist politics, and vice versa. We focused on mothers themselves, rather than their children, and did not assume that their interests were identical or inseparable. Contributions ranged widely. We examined the role of mothers in local communities and councils; some of the legislation and policy which shaped, and was shaped by, mothers; experiences of pregnancy and fertility in politics; how motherhood informed activism and campaigning; and the memories and testimonies of women who had been both mothers and activists.

A number of themes emerged from this workshop, which highlight some important areas for further research. These included firstly an acknowledgement of the wide range of experiences of women on the left in Britain in their lives as mothers and as political actors, but also the points of solidarity and shared stories. A repeated theme was the mobilisation of motherhood as a campaign tool (the idea of a female MP claiming expertise 'as a mother ...'), but on the other hand the idea that motherhood might be an interruption – welcome or otherwise – to political life. Contributions explored the role of the mother, and the connected category of the 'housewife', in political literature as a figure to be appeased or appealed to. There was also recognition of the way some activists used maternity or motherhood as a way to further particular campaigns, such as Wages for Housework, the need for affordable childcare, or to improve the experience of women in public space and public life more broadly. The idea that maternal sacrifice might form part of a political life, and the sense of 'having it all' often came up in discussion – yet so did the alternative, the feeling that a political life might lead to maternal guilt, either internal or externally imposed. Questions about fertility, pregnancy, breastfeeding, the vulnerability felt by new mothers, and the idea that motherhood is a bodily experience within a political realm were also debated. Many of these discussions foregrounded the role of the media in both creating and reflecting ideas about motherhood and women in politics.

In this roundtable, we bring together reflections from some of the contributors and participants to the workshop, responding to some of the key questions which emerged from the day and reflecting the richness of the discussion across the different

---

<sup>4</sup>Helen McCarthy, *Double Lives: A History of Working Motherhood* (2020); Sarah Crook, 'Parenting during the Covid-19 Pandemic of 2020: Academia, Labour and Care Work', *Women's History Review*, 29 (2020) 1226-1238; Claire English, 'Emotional Labour and the Childcare Crisis in Neoliberal Britain', in *Feelings and Work in Modern History: Emotional Labour and Emotions about Labour*, ed. Agnes Arnold-Forster and Alison Moulds (2022) 234-254.

<sup>5</sup>Sarah Stoller, *Inventing the Working Parent: Work, Gender and Feminism in Neoliberal Britain* (2023).

panels. Given the breadth of issues, we have focused here on mothers as actors, not motherhood as an idea.

(Lyndsey Jenkins and Charlotte Lydia Riley, September 2024.)

**In what ways did motherhood represent an interruption to political involvement for women on the left? How did it constrain their political participation? Were there particular difficulties or challenges for women on the left?**

Lyndsey Jenkins: Caroline Ganley, who was MP for Battersea during Attlee's first term, remembered what she called 'the problem of family life' when her children were small – 'three children and a home and a burning desire to participate in a fuller political life along with my husband'.<sup>6</sup> The order is suggestive of where she felt her priorities had to lie. Later, as a member of the Women's Labour League, she was able to fit her political commitments on a school care committee around the children's school hours: leaving to visit schools as they left to attend schools, and doing the secretarial work when they were in bed.<sup>7</sup> Joyce Butler recounted a similar juggling act after she entered Parliament when her children were four and eleven. Her unpublished reminiscences document the rigorous timetable she had to undertake: shopping, cooking and childcare in the morning, ensuring there was an evening meal even when she was in Westminster. 'But even so, the wear and tear of trying to do two jobs adequately was very considerable, and the worry of not being able to control what was happening at home in my absence was constant.'<sup>8</sup> Shirley Williams, first elected to Parliament in 1964 when her daughter Rebecca was three, stated that 'politics is a hell of a profession to combine with motherhood' and remembered how her good intentions to get home for bedtime were so often frustrated.<sup>9</sup>

Women could not do this alone. 'Three things made my life just about possible,' Williams said. 'A helpful husband, sharing a home with devoted and tolerant friends, and being able to rely on my daily household help.'<sup>10</sup> Butler's network involved a succession of au pairs ('good, fair and positively horrendous') and 'older women in the constituency who came in to clean or baby-sit when I was in difficulty'. Ganley, meanwhile, relied on her own mother. This need for informal, unpaid care was common. Only a few, like Edith Summerskill, could enjoy the reliability of full-time paid care. Williams's recollection is also revealing about the role of husbands and fathers. They were there to be 'helpful' rather than to take up the equal burden of parenting. Helene Hayman said in 1980 that

it's no good thinking that in any family the commitment is fifty-fifty between husband and wife. When something happens, the child is ill, the nanny away, it's

<sup>6</sup>Autobiography of Caroline Selina Ganley, ch. 1 (no page numbers) Ganley 1/1, Bishopsgate Archives, London.

<sup>7</sup>Autobiography of Caroline Selina Ganley, ch. 2.

<sup>8</sup>Joyce Butler, 'A Backbencher Looks Back', unpublished reminiscences, Butler/2/6/3 Bishopsgate Archives, London.

<sup>9</sup>Shirley Williams, *Climbing the Bookshelves: The Autobiography of Shirley Williams* (2009) 153.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, 153.

the woman who picks up the pieces. No one can give your speech for you. To tackle those sorts of conflicting responsibilities is simply too daunting.<sup>11</sup>

Women could not manage alone, but they were in no doubt that the buck stopped with them.

Emma Peplow and Priscila Pivatto: The History of Parliament Trust sound archive demonstrates that for most interviewees, both men and women, becoming an MP was a long journey. However, the path to Westminster was even harder for mothers. Although motherhood was not an absolute impediment, it might have prevented women from undertaking the political work that allowed them to be eligible for selection. Most waited until their children were older. Our interview with Helene Hayman details her struggles with negative press attention, hate mail and opposition from rival (female) politicians and House staff when she was forced to attend in 1976 with a newborn.<sup>12</sup> This experience led to Hayman's decision to step back from the Commons while she had a young family: 'I think anyone who cares about family life and gives it a high priority has to think very seriously about being an MP.'<sup>13</sup> Parliament caused particular difficulties for young mothers: nevertheless some women on the left were able to combine motherhood and active local politics in such a way to help ensure they were in a position to be selected as Parliamentary candidates later, when their children were older.

Laura Beers: While the women's movement was structured around an ethos of choice for women, the implicit assumption was that women should be supported in choosing to reject the strictures of the patriarchy, including traditional domesticity, the embrace of which Ann Oakley denounced as 'a form of anti-feminism ... a rationalization of an inferior status'.<sup>14</sup> While not all mothers were housewives, with nearly a quarter of mothers of children under five working outside the home by 1976, Women's Liberation Movement (WLM) women often felt a conflation of this critique of domesticity with a broader critique of motherhood.

For infertile WLM women, this call to liberation could be experienced as a painful paradox. How do you reconcile feeling bereft about your own infertility with a political consciousness that validates and at times seems to encourage feeling motherhood as oppression? How do you reconcile a desire, and even at times a perceived need to pursue invasive infertility treatments, with a politics that denounces artificial reproductive technologies as tools of patriarchal oppression? And finally, how do you maintain solidarity with your political sisters when you feel that they are discounting your own emotional struggles – and particularly discounting your own lack of choice about motherhood while they privilege a woman's right to choose abortion? Many infertile women ended up feeling alienated from the WLM as a consequence of their infertility. Feminist media, including *Spare Rib*, on which my research for this workshop has focused, acted as productive spaces where the tension between feminist politics and the desire for motherhood was discussed and debated.

<sup>11</sup> Helene Hayman quoted in 'Why not 300 Women in the Commons', *The Times*, 24 Nov. 1980.

<sup>12</sup> C1503/115 Helene Hayman by Emmeline Ledgerwood, 2015 [2,00:24:10–00:34:45].

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, [1,00:44:05–00:44:15].

<sup>14</sup> Ann Oakley, *Housewife* (1974), 233.

**In what ways might motherhood also represent an opportunity for women on the left? How might they use their status to assert political legitimacy, whether in campaigning or policy-making? Were mothers able to participate more fully and effectively in some spaces?**

Mary Clare Martin: For middle class women, with like-minded husbands, motherhood does not appear to have represented an interruption. Both Margaret MacDonald and Louise Donaldson were politically active while bringing up their children. As she was the wife of a prominent Labour politician, MacDonald's life is better documented, and she was pregnant and looking after small children while being very active in social and political causes.<sup>15</sup> Donaldson was a Christian Socialist whose religious, feminist and political convictions were inseparable and mutually constitutive.<sup>16</sup> As she was married to a radical Anglo-Catholic priest, her social and political activism included the Church League for Women's Suffrage, Women's Labour League, child health and sex education, women's place in the Church of England, the Mothers' Union, the magistracy and the abolition of the death penalty.<sup>17</sup> She was one of the few women to hold office in the Christian Socialist organisations, the Christian Social Union and Church Socialist League, but was also involved in grass-roots parish work.<sup>18</sup>

The activism of middle class women from the generation which included Margaret MacDonald and Louise Donaldson, who had six surviving children between 1887 and 1900, was facilitated by servants but did not preclude direct involvement.<sup>19</sup> Thus, during the January 1910 election, Donaldson was 'electioneering' and seeking signatures for petitions during the day, then rushing home to put the younger children to bed.<sup>20</sup>

Jade Burnett: Although the work that mothers did within the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) could be heavily gendered and some women found themselves unfairly sidelined, motherhood also opened spaces of political activism for communist women. Women looking to continue their activism after having children found that their space of motherhood, such as the home or the school, could become sites for political activism and community. Tenants' rights and school hygiene campaigns meant women could engage in grass-roots community politics, and make political space for themselves without the need to rely on the Party for organisation or access.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>15</sup>Anne Summers, *Christian and Jewish Women in Britain, 1880–1940: Living with Difference* (Basingstoke, 2017), 93–101. Ramsay MacDonald, *Margaret Ethel MacDonald, 1870–1911* (London and Lossiemouth, 1911).

<sup>16</sup>Robert Saunders, "'A Great and Holy War': Religious Routes to Women's Suffrage, 1909–1914', *English Historical Review*, 134 (2019), 1478–82, 1488–9 (1471–1502).

<sup>17</sup>*Peterborough Citizen*, 23 Nov. 1920: Mary Clare Martin, "'The Romance of the Slum': Gender and Cross-Class Communication of Religious Belief, 1880–1920', in *Elite and Popular Religion*, ed. Kate Cooper and Jeremy Gregory (Woodbridge, 2006), 394–406, at 398, 402.

<sup>18</sup>Peter D' A Jones, *The Christian Socialist Revival, 1877–1914: Religion, Class and Social Conscience in Late-Victorian England* (Princeton, NJ, 1968) 1640–302. *Church Socialist Quarterly*, 5, (1910), 249. *Peterborough Citizen*, 23 Nov. 1920.

<sup>19</sup>Martin, 'Romance of the Slum', 398, 402. Barbara Butler, *Vicar of the Unemployed: Frederic Lewis Donaldson, Christian Socialism and the March of the Unemployed, 1905* (Leicester, 2005) 1200–121.

<sup>20</sup>Westminster Abbey Muniments, Canons' Papers: Canon Frederic Lewis Donaldson. GDO/02/01/001, General correspondence, 1910–1952. Letter Louise Donaldson to Frederic Lewis Donaldson, 17 Jan. 1910, 8.15 p.m.

<sup>21</sup>British Library, C1049/65, Maureen Hardisty, interview with Kevin Morgan [audio], (20 April 2001).

For these women, motherhood gave them a sense of political legitimacy through which they could carry out activism on issues that mattered to them and their families, at times which were accessible and workable for them, and which allowed for the creation of new activist networks and communities.

These women were also given the opportunity to travel to the Soviet Union through their role as mothers, through channels which may not otherwise have been open to them. Women whose children were involved in the pioneer movement found opportunities to travel to the Soviet Union with their children, while women who had been active locally and had gained a reputation for being ‘good with children’ were able to accompany and chaperone groups of children on similar trips.<sup>22</sup> While these opportunities were based on women’s roles as mothers and as performers of gendered childcare and emotional labour, they also created chances for women to undergo otherwise difficult and tricky travel, which broadened their political experiences and worldviews. For women who placed importance in the idea of the Soviet Union, the opportunity to travel to it with their children was one which could be deeply significant and was something which many still looked back upon fondly in oral history interviews.

Emma Peplow and Priscila Pivatto: Many of the women we interviewed were politically active and members of the Labour Party or other movements before they had children. Indeed for some this went back to childhood: Ann Taylor, Mildred Gordon and Sylvia Heal all remembered canvassing, envelope-stuffing and fundraising alongside their families;<sup>23</sup> Llin Golding was the daughter of an MP and her family’s lives were built around the Labour Party.<sup>24</sup> This was not a universal experience, but for a number of these women political life was part of their childhood, and not something that having their own families would hinder.

Those who became active as young women often married husbands who were politically involved. Ann and Bob Cryer met at Labour Party conference, and he proposed during a Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament march.<sup>25</sup> This family support was common to most of our interviewees. So although several told us that ‘political activity died off a bit’ (Alice Mahon)<sup>26</sup> when their children were young, they retained their party memberships and were more active again once their children were older. Some combined politics with young children, finding the Labour Party remarkably welcoming. Eileen Gordon remembered pushing a pram back and forth while training to be a party agent.<sup>27</sup> Ann Taylor and the Social Democratic Party’s Rosie Barnes both campaigned for their own parliamentary seats with babies in pushchairs, Cryer did the same for

<sup>22</sup>British Library, C1049/91, Monica Luxemburg, interview with Kevin Morgan [audio], (4 July 2001) and Monica Robertson, interview with Kevin Morgan [audio], (3 May 2001).

<sup>23</sup>British Library, C1503/81 Ann Taylor by Emmeline Ledgerwood, 2012–13 [1,00:13:20–00:15:05]; C1503/87 Mildred Gordon by Richard Stowell, 2014 [1,00:10:20–00:10:40]; C1503/172, Sylvia Heal by Alex Lock, 2018–19 [2,00:33:50–00:35:05].

<sup>24</sup>C1503/60, Llin Golding by Emmeline Ledgerwood, 2013 [2,00:01:10–00:11:05].

<sup>25</sup>C1503/93, Ann Cryer by Henry Irving, 2014 [1,00:23:30–00:23:44].

<sup>26</sup>C1503/30 Alice Mahon by Mark Wilson, 2012 [1,00:12:40–00:14:20].

<sup>27</sup>C1503/167 Eileen Gordon by Isobel White, 2018 [1,00:17:30–00:17:44].

her husband.<sup>28</sup> In contrast Conservative women did not remember taking their children along on political activities; they instead waited until their sons and daughters had left home, or relied on babysitters.

Lyndsey Jenkins: If women with children could be seen as neglectful, those without were also subject to scrutiny. Childless women MPs often felt the need to justify or explain themselves. Barbara Castle, for example, explained in her autobiography that she and her husband Ted would very much have liked to have children, but were unable to do so, and so created what she termed a 'proxy' family.<sup>29</sup> Betty Boothroyd recalled another story of a woman voter who said:

Well I don't think I'm going to vote for you because you're unmarried, you don't know anything about life, you don't have any children or know what it is to make ends meet on a low income. You don't know how to run a house. I'm certainly not going to vote for you.

Boothroyd retorted that it was those very lack of responsibilities which enabled her to serve her constituents.<sup>30</sup>

Men did not face these challenges. But when it came to children, women were damned if they did and damned if they didn't. As Lena Jeger, MP for Holborn and St Pancras, wrote in 1972:

Local committees confronted by a young woman, wonder if she will get pregnant and neglect her duties. If she has children she is often asked, with obvious disapproval, how she proposes to care for them. 'Not a good mother' the worthy matrons will mutter. But I have never heard of a man being asked how he proposes to combine Parliamentary life with conscientious fatherhood.<sup>31</sup>

These experiences were, of course, by no means limited to women on the left.

**How did their role as mothers shape their politics? How far were their children visible and present – either in person, or as reference points? How did experience of pregnancy, childbirth, infertility, miscarriage, adoption, loss and mothering influence their political values and priorities? How did this change over the life cycle?**

Anna Muggerridge: The 1918 Maternity and Child Welfare Act, which mandated for the first time that local authorities should provide care for expectant mothers and children up to school age, also presented an opportunity for women to engage in politics locally. The Act stipulated that all local authorities should appoint a committee to oversee the care provided, and that committees should have at least two women members.

<sup>28</sup>C1503/81 (Taylor) [3,00:57:55–00:59:05]; C1503/ Rosie Barnes by Andrea Hertz, 2016 [00:45:10–00:48:15]; C1503/93 (Cryer) [1,00:30:40–00:31:20].

<sup>29</sup>Barbara Castle, *Fighting all the Way* (1994), 197.

<sup>30</sup>Linda McDougall, *Westminster Women* (1998), 30.

<sup>31</sup>'The Missing Women', Draft Article for *Nova*, November 1972, 6, Jeger/6/36, London School of Economics.

Because so few councils then included women – Patricia Hollis estimates that there were only forty-eight women town and county councillors in England and Wales in 1914 – many authorities coopted members from local women’s organisations.<sup>32</sup> As yet, not enough research has been done to understand what proportion of these women were politically engaged, but it is clear that in some parts of the country, councils looked to the Women’s Cooperative Guild to fill vacancies. The Guild, which in 1915 had published *Maternity: Letters from Working Women*, a moving collection written by its working-class members on their experiences of motherhood, had a history of campaigning for women’s rights, and importantly, rights for working women. While not all Guildswomen were Labour Party members (and vice versa) there was significant crossover in membership.

In interwar Britain, prior to the transfer of maternity services to the NHS after 1948, members of council maternity committees had a reasonable degree of sway over maternity provision in their locale. Legislation was permissive, and women often fought hard to improve services. Women coopted from left-wing organisations, including the Guild or local Labour Party women’s sections, often drew on their own experiences of working-class motherhood and some seem to have prioritised measures for improving maternal welfare, at a time where much emphasis was placed on child welfare. Meanwhile, for some Labour women, cooption onto these committees appears to have been a route into local government more fully: in some cases, after several years sitting as a coopted member of a maternity committee, these women were persuaded to stand for election to the full council. Here, evidence suggests that while they took on an increased range of responsibilities, maternity provision (as well as many other issues impacting women, like housing) remained a priority.

Ruth Davidson: Frequently, women’s arguments for policies to support the working mother voiced in *The Labour Woman* and at the Labour Women’s conference drew on their own familial and community experiences of poverty. As Pat Thane has argued, most working-class women had experience of poverty, either through the lack of a male breadwinner or because their husbands’ earnings were insufficient to support a family. As such they were empathetic towards working mothers. For this reason there were regular debates at conference or in the pages of *The Labour Woman* over how best to support the working mother, particularly mothers of younger children. The two main policy ideas were the endowment of mothers (an allowance for the mother rather than child endowment) and childcare provision for younger children (seen as a social welfare provision rather than educational service). Between the 1920s and 1970s there was a marked change from calls for the former towards the latter policy, with debates around nurseries and childcare far more frequent from the 1950s onward.

While Labour women always argued for the right for a woman to choose to work, increased calls for practical support for the working mother opened up more impassioned arguments about the ‘mother’s role’ and the need of young children to have mothers at home. A key facet of these arguments was whether working mothers ‘needed’ to work, especially in the post-welfare state era. Often such work is characterised as ‘pin money’ or for ‘extras’ and thus a choice. But many Labour women

---

<sup>32</sup>Brenda Crowe, *The Playgroup Movement* (London, 1983) At line 954, after ‘the sector’, please insert reference: Emily Baughan, *About the Budget, Feminism, work, and childcare*, substack, PLAYGROUP, 23 March 2023.

challenged that view, arguing that in some industrial sectors and different geographic areas wages were low and there also remained many unmarried and widowed women. Working motherhood, for some, they contended, remained a necessity. The growing emphasis on nursery provision as a policy option challenged the implicit assumption that a mother's primary role was in the home and opened debates about working mothers. Thus, considering policies for working motherhood, how these changed and the way activists drew on the personal offers a wider understanding of how shifting expectations and experiences of mothers and motherhood modified the development of the policy priorities of working-class Labour women activists.

Jessica White: Some of the most well-known cases of black female activism in twentieth-century Britain were prompted by black women's experiences of motherhood. The Macpherson report came out of a six-year campaign spearheaded by Baroness Doreen Lawrence, who began her attack on the Metropolitan police when they failed to investigate the racist murder of her son, Stephen, in 1993. Before the murder of her son, Doreen Lawrence's everyday experiences of raising her son were remarkably common among other black mothers in Britain. For instance, in the 1970s, the Lawrences were moved into council housing. Their flat was in dire condition with no play space for young Stephen, who, one afternoon, went to play outside, only for Doreen to rush after him as she saw him walking into a busy main road.<sup>33</sup> The lack of play space, dangerous roads, and high-rise living were common for black mothers, and were the subject of numerous studies on young black motherhood in Britain.<sup>34</sup> These circumstances, as I have explored in an article elsewhere, were important drivers for black women's engagement in politics; it was the experience of having no state-provided childcare, no room for their children to play, and few support structures that guided black women to set up day centres and mothers' groups.<sup>35</sup>

Martha Osamor, who became a Labour peer, set up an after-school club on her estate in north London as she noticed that children had nowhere to go while their mothers were at work, indicated that these childcare organisations came about simply through the immediate needs of working mothers.<sup>36</sup> While not as explicitly influenced by Black Power as other playgroups I have explored, Osamor's story is an example of how black mothers' childcare activism was often their first experience of political activism. After setting up the childcare group, Osamor became a key community activist in London: she was a member of the Socialist Workers' Party, set up the United Black Women's Action Group, and became closely involved in the Scrap SUS campaign in the 1970s and early 1980s.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, the Scrap SUS campaign is one of the most significant examples of black maternal activism in the twentieth century. Set up by a group of black mothers from south London, led by Mavis Best, and formed from a collection of different

<sup>33</sup>Doreen Lawrence, *And Still I Rise* (2006), 42.

<sup>34</sup>For example, see Pauline Davies, *Trapped! Unmarried West Indian Mothers in Handsworth*, Papers on Community and Youth Work (Birmingham, 1983); Lozells Social Development Centre, *Wednesday's Children: A Report on under-Fives Provision in Handsworth* (Birmingham, 1975).

<sup>35</sup>Jessica White, 'Child-Centred Matriarch or Mother among Other Things? Race and the Construction of Working-Class Motherhood in Late Twentieth-Century Britain', *Twentieth Century British History*, 33 (2022), 498–521.

<sup>36</sup>Harmit Athwal and Jenny Bourne, 'It Has to Change: An Interview with Martha Osamor', *Race & Class*, 58 (2016), 85–93 (p. 88).

<sup>37</sup>*Ibid.*, 88.

anti-SUS organisations, Scrap SUS was formed from the traumatic experiences of black parents, but especially mothers, who had witnessed their children being severely and violently policed in Britain.<sup>38</sup> The campaign was ground-breaking in its ability to have Section 4 of the 1824 Vagrant Act repealed, ending some of the more nefarious aspects of the police's 'stop and search' powers. The Scrap SUS campaign set the benchmark for determining what black mothers' activism could achieve in twentieth-century Britain.

Frankie Chappell: The Campaign Against the Child Support Act (CACSA) is one example of how the Wages for Housework (WFH) network centred its organising and demands on mothers, while also opposing restrictive conceptions of mothering and families.<sup>39</sup> This campaign was formed by WFH with PayDay Men's Network as a response to the Child Support Act of 1991, which aimed to enforce child maintenance payments from absent fathers through a new Child Support Agency.<sup>40</sup> Payments retrieved by the agency would be deducted from single mothers' benefits, and those who refused to name their children's fathers faced a 40 per cent cut to their payments.<sup>41</sup> CACSA and its demands were led by single mothers on benefits, who were the primary targets of the Act. CACSA recognised the Act's true purpose as a punitive and impoverishing piece of legislation, designed explicitly to lower costs for the Treasury and push single mothers into work.<sup>42</sup>

While not opposed to men paying maintenance for their children, particularly if they could afford to, CACSA objected to the state using child maintenance as an excuse to shirk their responsibility to mothers, and to take away women's autonomy. They argued that it should be women's decision as to 'if, when and on what basis fathers make a contribution, because it is women who do most of the unwaged work of raising children'.<sup>43</sup> They also argued that 'women's unwaged (and waged) work has helped to create the State's wealth and we are owed it; most men don't have the money we're entitled to; and we don't want to be dependent on them anyway'.<sup>44</sup> In this way, CACSA placed the material needs of single mothers and poor families at the centre of their organising and showed their struggle to be the frontline of the WFH demand. They were also concerned that enforcing financial dependence on men made women and children vulnerable to domestic violence.<sup>45</sup> In February 1992, CACSA launched a movement to shield single mothers on benefits from discrimination and to promote

<sup>38</sup>Adam Elliott-Cooper, *Black Resistance to British Policing* (Manchester, 2021), ch. 1; Adam Elliott-Cooper, "'Our Life Is a Struggle": Respectable Gender Norms and Black Resistance to Policing', *Antipode*, 51 (2019), 539–57.

<sup>39</sup>For an overview of the history of Wages for Housework, now Global Women's Strike, see: <https://globalwomenstrike.net/history/>. Many thanks to Solveig Francis, Kay Chapman, Sara Callaway and Cristel Amiss of Crossroads Women's Centre for their generous input and feedback on my original comments.

<sup>40</sup>Pat Thane and Tanya Evans, *Sinners? Scroungers? Saints? Unmarried Motherhood in Twentieth-Century England* (Oxford, 2012), 183.

<sup>41</sup>Crossroads Women's Centre Archives: *Single Mothers' Self-Defence Newsletter*, 1 (1998), Single Mothers' Self-Defence, 'Points for Opposing 40% Benefit Penalty Under the Child Support Act'.

<sup>42</sup>Philip Loft, '30 Years of the Child Support Act', *House of Commons Library Insight* (blog), 20 July 2021, <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/30-years-of-the-child-support-act/> (accessed 22 July 2024).

<sup>43</sup>Wages for Housework Campaign and Payday Men's Network, *Against Redistributing Poverty: Counting the Cost to Women, Children and Men of the State's Child Maintenance Plan*, 2nd edn (1993), 25.

<sup>44</sup>Wages for Housework Campaign and Payday Men's Network, *Against Redistributing Poverty*, 9–10.

<sup>45</sup>*Ibid.*, 25.

non-cooperation with the Department of Social Security. When the Child Support Agency came into being in April 1993, Legal Action for Women and Single Mothers Self-Defence supported single mothers through practical legal advice, including producing a self-help handbook. With their assistance, many single mothers on benefits refused to cooperate with the Child Support Agency.<sup>46</sup>

Laura Beers: Zoe Strimpel has found in her analysis of the British Library's archive of interviews with WLM women that some interviewees evidenced shame and discomfort around their involvement in heterosexual relationships (many of which resulted in the birth of children) in the silences and elisions of the interviewed woman when these relationships came up in discussion. Other women, such as self-professed WLM feminist Terry Slater, were able to own and articulate these emotions, and their articulation offers a valuable insight into WLM women's conflicted feelings about motherhood. In an article in *Spare Rib*, Slater described feeling that her yearning for a family was 'selfish' – a prioritisation of her individual 'needs' above the needs of the movement.

In those hopeful days after 1968 we felt that the political work which needed doing was so urgent that our own needs – including our need to have kids – were a distraction and even 'counterrevolutionary' as we set a different course for ourselves as 'revolutionaries' from 'ordinary people,' who had children.<sup>47</sup>

Fertile women's discomfort with their fecundity and their unwillingness to discuss openly the importance of parenthood to their personal and political identity in turn posed a challenge for infertile women seeking sympathy for their inability to bear children. One infertile woman, writing in the pages of *Spare Rib*, argued that fertile WLM women should be sympathetic to their infertile sisters specifically *because* of this ambiguity around motherhood. 'Our pain has more in common than in contrast. Women having abortions and women with children suffer from ambivalence, as I do. We all suffer guilt. All of us are bruised by the negative images of whatever aspect of womanhood we represent.'<sup>48</sup>

The literary scholar Margaretta Jolly has identified 'an ethic of care' within the women's movement, tied to women's biologically and socially inscribed identities as mothers and nurturers.<sup>49</sup> While infertile WLM women were definitionally not mothers, their inclusion within this broader culture of care made them feel more comfortable in voicing their feelings of anger and alienation than they would be in other company. On the issue of the WLM's approach to infertility policy, infertile women believed that their sisters were acting in good faith, and that their lack of awareness and sympathy for infertile women stemmed not from malice but from ignorance. As such, infertile feminists showed an eagerness to engage with their fertile sisters over their views, in an effort to change their attitudes. The culture of care within the movement allowed space for the articulation of disagreement, and the changing of views. The frank discussions between mothers, those who were not mothers by choice, and infertile women, contributed to a shift in WLM discourse on infertility which ultimately produced a

<sup>46</sup>'Points for Opposing 40% Benefit Penalty Under the Child Support Act'.

<sup>47</sup>Terry Slater, 'Why I Decided to Have a Baby', *Spare Rib*, Oct. 1977.

<sup>48</sup>Anon., "'The Right to Choose?'" Facing Infertility', *Spare Rib*, April 1982.

<sup>49</sup>Margaretta Jolly, *In Love and Struggle: Letters in Contemporary Feminism* (New York, 2008), 87.

greater sympathy for infertile women within the movement, as well as a more nuanced understanding of the importance of motherhood to WLM women.

Charlotte Lydia Riley: The final line of Barbara Castle's Oxford National Dictionary of Biography entry is simply 'She had no children'. At the end of a very dismissive biography that explains sadly that she had 'few if any other interests' beyond politics, this sounds like a moral judgement that is generally absent from male politicians' biographies.<sup>50</sup> Indeed, it is often noted in passing that Castle's lack of children was 'a source of regret'.<sup>51</sup> We rarely spend time as historians thinking about whether childless male politicians regretted their lack of children; indeed, we rarely spend time thinking about whether they had children at all. Perhaps a feminist position once required that we extend the same disinterest to women's personal lives: and yet questions of parenthood, of fertility or infertility, are often huge looming clouds over people's lives. Why would we not extend our analysis to think about this aspect of their experience?

The 1995 Fabian pamphlet *Infertility, Feminism and the New Technologies*, which explored the ethical, moral and political issues around IVF provision, does take this aspect of people's – predominantly women's – lives seriously.<sup>52</sup> Sally Keeble, the pamphlet author, who became a Labour MP in 1997, explains that fertility technologies were opening up new debates in 'old questions that were once thought to have been resolved but which have been revived in our post-feminist times – in particular, the dominance of women's role as mothers and renewed interest in the two-parent family'. The pamphlet engages seriously with the sense of loss and grief felt by women who had wanted but been unable to become mothers, while also thinking through some of the ethical issues around IVF (such as age limits for conception) and questions of equality in terms of access and provision. But it also underlines that for many mothers, having a baby was a difficult choice precisely because of political and societal inequalities; Keeble called on the Labour Party to 'end the wider discrimination against women either by relegating motherhood to a secondary status or by making women choose between motherhood and career'.<sup>53</sup>

**Did more radical forms of leftist politics create or reduce space for mothers? What critiques did they offer – and what new possibilities did they imagine? What was the role of feminism in changing understandings of motherhood, and how far were its objectives realised?**

Jade Burnett: Communist women interviewed by the historian Kevin Morgan consistently recalled feeling that their political participation had been negatively impacted by their having become mothers, and often felt actively sidelined by the Party.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>50</sup>Howard, A. (2012, May 24). Castle [née Betts], Barbara Anne, Baroness Castle of Blackburn (1910–2002), politician, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, <https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-76877> (accessed 24 July 2024).

<sup>51</sup>Jenny McCartney, 'Remember, Magda Goebbels was a Mother, Mother Theresa was not', *Sunday Times*, 12 July 2015.

<sup>52</sup>Sally Keeble, *Infertility, Feminism and the New Technologies* (1994).

<sup>53</sup>*Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>54</sup>British Library, C1049/154, Monica Robertson, interview with Kevin Morgan [audio], (3 May 2001).

Kirschenbaum has argued that communist women were viewed as imperfect revolutionaries, torn between incompatible commitments, and this is reflected in how the CPGB women interviewed reported their experiences of activism after childbirth.<sup>55</sup> Mothers found themselves unable to attend Party meetings held in the evenings, and despite the fact that they believed that the Party made little attempt to make events accessible to them, still felt the pressure to be as active and involved as they had been before having children.<sup>56</sup> These issues were compounded for women who combined the responsibilities of motherhood with commitments such as paid employment or long-term education.

These women made significant attempts to continue their political participation after motherhood, and looked towards ways of merging childcare with activism by organising events during the day which children could also attend. The women felt that some of these events were very fulfilling, and stressed the significance of peace marches, which children could attend, as central to their activism and as something which connected them to broader feminist groups.<sup>57</sup> However, they also often felt that their activism could be deeply undermined by Party officials because it was considered 'women's work'. Some felt that the work that mothers in the Party undertook, such as fundraising, was dismissed as the auxiliary work of wives of Party members rather than real activism, despite the important financial contribution that it made.<sup>58</sup> Here, a perceived split developed, between the industrial organising which was central to the strategy and public messaging of the Party, and the gendered labour of Party women which was considered secondary.

Frankie Chappell: The Campaign Against the Child Support Act (CACSA) was an intersectional struggle which challenged how the state and mainstream politics defined motherhood in favour of a more expansive understanding. Black Women for Wages for Housework (BWWFH) highlighted the predominance of families headed by single mothers in black Caribbean communities, and showed that black families (including all people of colour) would be particularly harshly affected by the Act.<sup>59</sup> Meanwhile, fathers in poverty faced wage or benefit docking, as well as being threatened with fines, imprisonment or deportation: again hitting the most vulnerable the hardest. Wages Due Lesbians also argued that the label of 'pretended families' – which Section 28 applied to gay and lesbian families – was being extended to 'all single mothers on benefits' through the Child Support Agency's attempts to force the involvement of fathers, or even sperm donors, and to police who should be involved in a child's life. The group recognised that increased monitoring by the state would have dire

<sup>55</sup>L. Kirschenbaum., 'The Man Question: How Bolshevik Masculinity Shaped International Communism', *Socialist History*, 52 (2017), 76–84.

<sup>56</sup>British Library, C1049/45, Ros Faith, interview with Kevin Morgan [audio], (18 April 2001).

<sup>57</sup>British Library, C1049/65, Maureen Hardisty, interview with Kevin Morgan [audio], (20 April 2001).

<sup>58</sup>British Library, C1049/114, Carol Owens, interview with Kevin Morgan [audio], (21 April 2001).

<sup>59</sup>Black Women for Wages for Housework, 'Open Letter to All Anti-Racists: Boycott the Child Support Act, Defend Black and Immigrant People's Right to Claim Benefits', 12 Feb. 1993, (<https://globalwomenstrike.net/open-letter-to-all-anti-racists-boycott-the-child-support-act-defend-black-and-immigrant-peoples-right-to-claim-benefits/>) (accessed 8 July 2024).

consequences for those already vulnerable to its violence, including lesbian mothers who were black, immigrant, disabled or sex workers.<sup>60</sup> Both groups came together with other organisations such as the English Collective of Prostitutes and WinVisible (Women with Visible and Invisible Disabilities) to ensure that legal advice to mothers reflected the needs of different communities.<sup>61</sup>

Through campaigning against legislation that would reduce mothers' money, and providing legal and practical advice to try to preserve the resources available, CACSA fought against the state's attempts to increase mothers' financial reliance on private networks, promote so-called traditional family structures and extend surveillance. At the same time, the campaign asserted the right of mothers – and particularly poor and single mothers – to safety, privacy, autonomy and independence. CACSA's campaign, together with widespread non-cooperation, meant that compulsory use of the scheme for those on benefits was eventually scrapped. Today, the scheme is voluntary, and maintenance paid by the absent parent is no longer deducted from benefits, so single parents keep all the money paid to them.<sup>62</sup>

Jessica White: The relationship between black motherhood and 'the left' was not a straight and narrow path in late twentieth-century Britain. Black mothers have constantly had to negotiate the spaces made for them within left politics. In Manchester in the 1970s, Elouise Edwards and Kath Locke set up the Black Women's Mutual Aid to combat educational racism and help parents whose children were facing issues at school. Edwards and Locke were involved in local Black Power groups, and Locke was strongly influenced by leftist politics. She had grown up with house visits from African independence leaders and trade unionists Kwame Nkrumah and Jomo Kenyatta, and had even paid a visit to Maoist China.<sup>63</sup> However, the ordinary mothers involved in, or turning to, the BWMA were not cut from the same cloth. At BWMA conferences, for instance, parents would turn up, not necessarily eager to hear the proceedings, but intent on getting tailored solutions for their specific issues. Crucially, one member remembered, the BWMA appealed to parents who considered themselves 'apolitical', primarily because it did not have a strong political agenda and was aimed at educating parents on issues around educational injustice.<sup>64</sup> While the BWMA is a unique case, this type of labelling forces historians to consider the extent to which labels of 'the left', or 'politics' in general, can be readily mapped onto the black British maternal experience.

As has been well documented, white women in the Women's Liberation Movement of the 1970s were reluctant to take on issues of race for fear of splitting the movement. But this argument was not unique to feminism.<sup>65</sup> In 1981, Dorothy Kuya wrote a small

<sup>60</sup>Wages Due Lesbians, "'Pretended Families" Against the Child Support Act: Defend Lesbian Mothers' Rights to Benefits', 15 June 1994, <https://globalwomenstrike.net/pretended-families-against-the-child-support-act-defend-lesbian-mothers-rights-to-benefits/> (accessed 22 July 2024).

<sup>61</sup>Legal Action for Women, *The Child Support Act: Your Rights and How to Defend Them*, 3rd edn (1994).

<sup>62</sup>Philip Loft, '30 Years of the Child Support Act'; Child Maintenance and Other Payments Act 2008 Section 15, <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2008/6/part/3/crossheading/removal-of-compulsion-for-benefit-claimants> (accessed 22 July 2024).

<sup>63</sup>Ahmed Iqbal Ullah Race Resource Centre, Roots Oral History Collection, Interview with Coca Clarke, 1982.

<sup>64</sup>Lambeth Archives, Do You Remember Olive Morris? Oral History Collection, Interview with Dianne Watt, 2009.

<sup>65</sup>See Natalie Thomlinson, *Race, Ethnicity and the Women's Movement in England, 1968–1993* (2016).

article for the Communist Party Pamphlet *Black and Blue* about the policing of the black community. Kuya, not a mother herself but a keen educational activist and anti-racist campaigner, criticised the labour movement, and trade unionists in particular, for not taking issues around race, racism and police brutality seriously.<sup>66</sup> The article was written at the zenith of the ‘Scrap SUS’ campaign and Kuya’s critiques were significant at the time, drawing attention to the frustration that some black activists in post-war Britain had in finding solidarity with white activists on the left.

**How might feminist approaches to history inform the questions we ask about motherhood, politics and the left? How might historians frame their work on this topic through the lens of their own experiences? How might our own subjectivities and positionalities inform this history?**

Charlotte Lydia Riley: I became more interested in the role of motherhood in Labour politics after having my own child. It wasn’t only that the struggle of raising a child while also trying to have a career as an academic and writer made me think more carefully about the way that female politicians might have experienced this juggle. Although I did do that, thinking often during my own maternity leave of Stella Creasy’s attempts to get maternity leave recognised as a requirement for MPs, and being reminded of Helene Hayman breastfeeding in the chamber while I did the same at an academic conference. (James Graham’s play, *This House*, dramatises the Labour whips desperately trying to enforce their slim majority in the 1974–9 government. It includes a scene where Helene Hayman breastfeeds in the whips’ office, pushing the experience of a young Labour mother to the centre of the party’s political history, but also using this image of public, messy mothering as a symbol of how chaotic the political space had become.)

I also wanted to centre the idea of motherhood in the history of the Labour Party because it struck me that the left – and feminist historians – were often uncertain about how to account for motherhood as a transformative personal and political experience, in a way that didn’t reduce women to *only* mothers. And in trying to do this, it is easy to fall back on lazy moral certainties about motherhood preparing women for the caring, ethical work of left-wing politics: the revolutionary commune, born in domestic space. But, in fact, the experience of motherhood is often profoundly selfish, in the choices it forces and the attitudes it embodies: there is a reason that ‘as a mother’ became a catchphrase for a particular type of narrow-minded conservatism. And the promise of the joy of communal politics has never felt further away than in the loneliness of early motherhood and its overwhelming focus on one tiny person in one little flat. It felt like this was a historiographical question that was also a question I had about my own life.

Laura Beers: I came to the question of the relationship between the left and infertility as a consequence of my own experience with secondary infertility after the birth of my first child. Until that point, I had not even known that secondary infertility was a condition. As a political historian with a focus on feminist politics, I was naturally inclined to question how feminists had historically understood infertility, but when I went to look at the scholarship on this question, I realised that there was very little of it, and that what there was had principally been written by sociologists.

<sup>66</sup>Dorothy Kuya, ‘100 Years of Abuse’, in *Black and Blue: Racism and the Police* (1981), 17–18.

Historical scholarship on infertility was largely the preserve of historians of medicine, who approached the issue from either a medical or social perspective, largely ignoring the political questions about regulation, funding, and rights to access that naturally interested me as a political historian.

In approaching this research project, I have turned to many of the sources that have informed my other works of political history, including parliamentary debates over the regulation and funding of infertility treatments, the papers of official committees like the Warnock Committee on Human Fertility and Embryology, and documents produced by non-governmental agencies interested in women's health, including the Fabian Pamphlet referenced above and papers of the Family Planning Association, the Brooks Advisory Centres, and other organisations, and writing in the 'political' press – in this case not mass circulation newspapers and periodicals but the feminist alternative magazine press that emerged in the 1970s to challenge the hegemony of these publications. I have also looked at publications like *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, produced by the Boston Women's Health Collective from the 1970s, which offer a politicised approach to rethinking women's health. Together, such sources reveal a rich debate over the politics of infertility and its potential treatment dating back at least to the beginning of the twentieth century.

Emma Elinor Lundin: I grew up in Sweden, where the first gender equal government, in which women held fifty per cent of the ministerial portfolios, was appointed in 1994, and I felt I regressed a generation after moving to the UK in 2002: the issues that my mother's generation solved in Sweden – childcare, representation, equal parental leave, equal access to political office – were still unresolved. Comparing countries is complicated for a myriad of reasons, but it has given me insights into different types of struggles and obstacles and how these might be overcome. I certainly felt that motherhood in the workplace was a difficult question when I experienced it myself, and I tried to downplay being on parental leave with my first child as I thought it would hinder my chances of getting a job.

I am very grateful that I got to spend the years between having my two children interviewing, alongside Rachel Reeves, a lot of women who had been elected as MPs for *Women of Westminster: The MPs Who Changed Politics*. Our interviews confirmed that ad-hoc solutions, needing to ask for support, and being inspired to change the circumstances in which children grow up, were all common. It also made me grateful to have a job that didn't demand that I pull all-nighters. Harriet Harman told us that:

The fear was that I was letting my constituents down and that I was letting my children down. When I look back at it now, of course, I was overcompensating. I went around the country, I was in every tenants' association AGM in my constituency. I had five-hour surgeries, I did monthly reports, which detailed all my work. Overcompensating with the kids as well, because I just didn't sleep.<sup>67</sup>

She also remembered that Tessa Jowell worked in a similar fashion, even forgoing sleep to work through the night twice a week. 'That's how pressurised we felt, because we couldn't not do all these things other mothers were doing, and we couldn't not do

<sup>67</sup>University of Leeds Special Collection: MS 2249/21 Harriet Harman interviewed by Rachel Reeves.

all the things we thought other MPs were doing.<sup>68</sup> The way women of that generation tried to change the opportunities for themselves and other women remains a source of inspiration to me, both professionally and personally. I made no effort to hide my second pregnancy or parental leave from prospective employers, strengthened by the resolve of other women around me and the work of the older generation.

Emily Baughan: I became a mother and lost my own mother almost at the same moment. The two things together reconfigured the questions I wanted to ask about the past, and also where I looked to find answers. It shifted the way I thought about infant subjectivities. In my first book (mostly written before my children were born) ideas about the bonds of attachment that babies form to their mothers drove a particular vision of humanitarianism and welfarism after the Second World War. When I wrote this, I'd always felt – as seemed the decent feminist opinion to hold! – that ideas about attachment had functioned as a means to imprison mothers. But then finding myself drawn into a relationship with my babies, at the same time as grieving that same lost relationship with my mother, changed the questions I wanted to ask about infant attachment. I became less interested in whether attachment had to be maternal (obviously not), or what the political function of attachment ideology has been (often bad for women), and more interested in what the potency of attachment can tell us about the human mind before memory. It suggests that early experiences are powerful in ways we don't fully understand, and might not be instantly accessible. I became interested how early experiences shape people, and how we could recover them if they're only faintly recalled, and never written down. Do we hold our own embedded archives? I would – for example – remember lullabies my mother sang to me at 3 a.m. on a sleepless morning, or smell Sudocrem and remember not just that she had changed my brother's nappies but how she had done it.

This interest in forgotten care isn't purely personal; it's deeply political. Having my babies in lockdown rendered the already invisible labour of care doubly so. Academia wires us to think in a particular, output-driven way about production but now I found myself doing the work of social reproduction. Of feeding, changing, shh-ing, rocking where there is no product, and the labour disappears. This was, of course, much of the work and lives of women for much of the past. So, in a way, motherhood drove me towards a project of the recovery of women's past work which itself has a longer, left-feminist genealogy. But it also pushed me to think about this project of recovery in new ways. If I change a nappy as my own mother did, without consciously ever having been shown by her, is there something of women's history in my own baby's present? What if the care work is not in the archive, but is the archive itself.

**Overall, then, how can historians effectively integrate histories of motherhood and histories of politics? What sources have proved fruitful – and what else should be explored? What methods and approaches might be valuable? How should historians approach the history of motherhood on the left in modern British politics?**

Mary Clare Martin: History from below and of localities embraces both. The lens of family history has provided insights which would otherwise have been lost. I knew that

<sup>68</sup>Rachel Reeves, *Women of Westminster: The MPs Who Changed Politics* (2019), 162.

my great-grandmother Louise Donaldson was an active political and social campaigner (making her unpopular with her own children). But she was absent from most secondary texts. This highlights how much historical research is driven by the availability of archives.

Layers of serendipity led to the survival of fragments of family history. For example, my (now) 94-year-old father inherited bundles of loose newspaper cuttings which he made into scrapbooks, and letters which he painstakingly sorted out but then partially disposed of. A passed-on phone message from an unknown cousin, noting the depository of family archives, coupled with a chance meeting after the Institute for Historical Research Women's History seminar with one of the few people who had researched Louise Donaldson, a centenary event in Leicester, the wonders of the British Newspaper Archives and Ancestry.com, and repeated conversations contributed to the process not only of constructing a biography, but reflecting on how family myths are constructed and perpetuated.

Anna Muggeridge: My current research examines the experiences of women from across the political spectrum in local government in the interwar years. While not all women councillors in this period prioritised issues of maternal and infant welfare, a significant proportion did, either because this was a personal priority for them, or because contemporary understandings of 'women's politics' often centred on women's 'special knowledge' in this arena. Yet despite this, it can be hard to hear directly from local activist women who worked on such issues.<sup>69</sup> Very few women councillors who did not go on to achieve a national profile have left personal papers to the historical record. However, as Stephanie Ward has recently argued, we can instead turn to more bureaucratic records – minutes of meetings, or annual reports – to begin to understand how these women constructed a political self, including the place which maternity and motherhood may have occupied.<sup>70</sup>

While some local authorities appear to have kept only very brief records, in other areas it is possible to track the work done by women of all political persuasions on maternity committees, often in minute detail. These suggest that, at local level, and at a time when much legislation related to infant and maternal welfare was very permissive, Labour women in particular understood the practical steps that local authorities could take to help mothers living in their communities. Labour women councillors in Smethwick, for example, organised for council budgets to be spent on 'home helps' for women during confinement, to assist with housework and other domestic chores, and successfully lobbied for the building of shelters for prams parked outside of the town's infant welfare clinics, to help improve attendance in winter months. In contrast, elsewhere, I have found that authorities without Labour women were more likely to prioritise measures surrounding infant welfare, and made little provision to assist women themselves. Local bureaucratic records can therefore suggest how Labour women inserted themselves into contemporaneous debates around welfare, and, more importantly, how a left-wing 'politics of motherhood' operated at local level in communities across Britain. This was a locally focused politics of the mundane and

<sup>69</sup>A key exception is Hannah Mitchell, who wrote about her experiences in her autobiography: *The Hard Way Up: Autobiography of Hannah Mitchell, Suffragette and Rebel* (2000).

<sup>70</sup>Stephanie Ward, 'Labour Activism and the Political Self in Inter-War Working-Class Women's Politics', *Twentieth Century British History*, 30 (2019), 29–52.

the ordinary, but rooted in the lived experiences of working-class mothers in interwar Britain.

Emma Peplow and Priscila Pivatto: The History of Parliament Trust's life story interviews are proving a rich and detailed source for historians of politics in general, but particularly so for those interested in how politicians balanced their family lives with their careers. Our archive now contains well over 200 interviews with former MPs, and over forty with women MPs, all held at the British Library. Interviewers ask not just about life at Westminster, but attempt to explore in depth the lives of the individuals we speak to. So memories of childhood, schooling and an MP's own family life are all topics that appear frequently in our interviews, and give us a real insight into how motherhood can impact a politician's entire career.

Because these interviews are wide-ranging and take a long time, often interviewer and interviewee are able to build up a close relationship that can allow for deeply personal reflections to be shared. We have interviews that discuss in some detail how family lives were impacted by politics, and even describe decisions about whether or not to have children. We of course are well-aware of the downsides of oral history as a source: these are memories of events that might have happened a considerable time ago; we are talking to politicians who are aware that their words will be public and care about their historical reputation. That said, there are few other methodologies where these issues can be discussed so openly, and placed into the context of an individual's wider life story.

Emma Elinor Lundin: As an oral historian, I find that it is a method that helps restore conflict and nuance to the record, something that often disappears when parties or organisations write their own histories. Gossip and off-the-record information, which might not be usable, can be incredibly helpful in making sense of tensions that impact the dominant histories of a group of people.

I will continue to ask the traditional feminist question of 'where are the women and what are they doing?' for as long as I keep researching political organisations and activism. These days, I have added a follow-up: 'what are the men doing around them?' This is driven partly by a wish to investigate individual women's lives from a more intersectional perspective and mapping their private and public lives thoroughly is part of that. But, importantly, it is also a means to reveal deeper gender conflicts and constructions: women's visibility in politics challenges gender hegemonies, and the resistance to their presence says a lot about norms and how these change, sometimes over quite short time frames. Still, women are opposed on several levels but in very different ways, and organisations that pride themselves on their gender equality are often just one argument away from resorting to misogynist critiques and briefing against their own party members along some very gendered lines.

Jessica White: Historians ought to be reminded that for some black families, aligning with 'politics' could open yourself up to further scrutiny from the state, while the suspicions held by black communities towards politicians and experts in the 1970s and 1980s also meant that an immediate affinity to the left was not necessarily the default political option.

Historians would also do well to acknowledge the sticky relationship the left had towards race and anti-racism. I hope in this analysis I have been able to highlight these tensions between the left and motherhood, while at the same time demonstrating the 'life cycle' of the black maternal activists. From childcare groups, to the BWMA, to

Scrap SUS, black women's experiences of motherhood closely informed their participation in politics and political activism and, as Doreen Lawrence's case demonstrates, this could result in a lifelong dedication to social justice.

Emily Baughan: Motherhood gives women on the left a legitimate claim to speak for pre-political subjects: children. Across the last 150 years 'the children' have held a privileged position in left political discourse. I often think of the suffragette poster from the turn of the century – 'we want the vote to save the children' – or the 1910 Liberal party poster, 'save the children from tariff reform'. Speaking for 'the children' has been integral to women's gaining legitimacy as political actors in the twentieth century, as well as to left-liberal claims to represent 'universal' interests. The pre-political child is constructed as a universal subject. But doing politics 'for the children' has always had a rightward tow. There is a phenomenon where women on the left who become involved in child-centred political campaigns, for early years education, child-focused international aid, safer streets or environmental regulation, attempt to build coalitions with the right, swayed by the idea that their cause could be above politics, or at the very least 'cross party'. This has led often to these movements accepting, or even advocating for, 'solutions' to problems which stem from right-wing economic thinking. In the 1980s, the Playschool Movement collaborated with the Thatcher government in finding market-based and charitable funding solutions for their survival, all the while looking away from cuts to local council funding which ultimately sounded the death knell for their movement.<sup>72</sup> Recently, we saw campaigning group Pregnant Then Screwed supporting the Truss mini-budget, which promised more free childcare for parents while ultimately underfunding childcare in a way that, if unaltered, will decimate the sector.<sup>73</sup>

At the first academic conference I ever attended, someone asked 'what is wrong with British women?' What they meant by that, it turned out, was 'why historically have British women tended to favour the Conservative party, when in other western democracies women tend to lean left?' I've been thinking about this question ever since. As historians working on mothering and the left in Britain, we can provide an important corrective to the idea of motherhood as an inherently conservative institution. We can show that it doesn't need to be so. But in doing so we're making the question of the alliance between mothering and conservatism in Britain all the more intriguing. If mothering *seems* to have this convergence with left politics (often described in terms of the love for one's own child awakening a sense of duty to the universal child) then why, historically speaking, have left politics failed to attract British mothers? I want a political history of left-wing and labour mothers which can hold its failures alongside its vibrancy and radicalism.

## Conclusion

Lyndsey Jenkins and Charlotte Lydia Riley: This conversation demonstrates the depth of material to be explored on the question of motherhood and the left. We recognise the understandable desire to restrict historical analysis of female politicians' lives to

<sup>72</sup>Patricia Hollis, *Ladies Elect: Women in English Local Government, 1865-1914* (Oxford, 1987) 486.

<sup>73</sup>Emily Baughan, *About the Budget, Feminism, work, and childcare*, substack, PLAYGROUP, 23 March 2023.

their public persona, focusing on the political in order to resist the narrative that women were inseparable from their domestic roles as mothers and caregivers. And yet, in limiting our analysis in this way, we may have ignored the richness and complexities of the intersections between the maternal and the political. Equally, in trying to avoid too close a connection between female citizenship and motherhood – an important corrective to earlier political material that too often recognised women only as important in their production of children to supplement the body politic – historians have sometimes failed to consider the specific politics of motherhood and mothering which could be deeply meaningful to women themselves.

The right has always been more comfortable talking about motherhood than the left, falling back on a cosy conservatism of the domestic space that imprisoned women while also supposedly providing their worth – but motherhood has been central to leftist politics too, from the socialist baby clinics created as a memorial to Mary Middleton and Margaret MacDonal in the early twentieth century, to profound concerns for maternal mortality and health in welfare state activism, to ground-breaking campaigns for maternity leave and child benefit, and the maternal anti-militarist activism of the Greenham Common women. Connecting these threads creates a rich and consistent tapestry of a left politics which is grounded in, but not the sum total of, women's lives, and which was an important practical corrective to a mainstream leftist politics which frequently celebrated and invoked, but did not provide sufficient practical support for, mothers and motherhood. We hope, then, to widen this conversation to include not only other historians of women and motherhood who might have much to contribute to an analysis of the place of mothering in politics, but also political historians who have yet to recognise fully the potential of this ever-present, but little-understood, history.

We hope that feminist historians, political historians and historians of the left might feel encouraged by this conversation to resist the temptation to dismiss the personal and domestic as trivial or irrelevant, while at the same time resisting a prurient interest in personal lives which upholds gendered double standards. While it is clearly not true that only parents – only mothers – have a stake in the politics of the future, parenthood shapes, frames, shifts and disrupts politicians' careers but may also inform their values, ideologies and priorities in different ways. Parenthood should thus be taken seriously, just as we take account of other experiences that shape the life stories of politicians: their class, race or gender, their family background, their educational experience, their early mentors and their career trajectories. And because of the patriarchal structures within which politicians operate, motherhood should be considered as a specific and distinct category of experience in politics, which demands further interrogation by scholars.

---

**Cite this article:** Charlotte Lydia Riley, Lyndsey Jenkins, Emily Baughan, Laura Beers, Jade Burnett, Frankie Chappell, Ruth Davidson, Emma Elinor Lundin, Mary Clare Martin, Anna Muggeridge, Emma Peplow, Priscila Pivatto and Jessica White, 'Labour Pains: Mothers and Motherhood on the British Left in the Twentieth Century,' *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* (2025), 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0080440124000161>