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HISTORIOGRAPHICAL REVIEW

Revisiting the Politics of Motherhood in Modern British History

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Abstract

This article argues for the importance of motherhood as a category of historical analysis. This review will explore trends in the historiography of motherhood in modern Britain, first examining maternalist literature, then the turn towards maternity policy, examinations of motherhood and activism, and finally the recent turn towards experiential histories of motherhood. It suggests that these approaches have grown more expansive, but often remain disconnected. The article argues that motherhood is not a fixed identity; it has been defined, challenged, and performed in response to specific historical moments. In drawing these together, the article offers new ways to understand the histories of motherhood and mothering, and opens up potential avenues for future exploration.

In this article we seek to argue for the importance of motherhood as a useful category of historical analysis. We trace the different approaches historians have taken in seeking to consider motherhood historically, noting how these have evolved over time. We suggest that, while this evolution has led to a more expansive treatment of motherhood, these developments have often taken place in silos. Motherhood is not a stable identity, but one that has been asserted, contested, and performed as a consequence of, and in response to, particular historical contexts, reflected in the vast historiography. Yet, as we will conclude, for motherhood to have utility as a category of historical analysis we need to be attuned to the ways in which it has been used, by whom it has been used and why, and ultimately the political and other implications of these usages. This article examines the development of historical scholarship on motherhood in modern Britain, and suggests that integrating this rich historical legacy might strengthen and sharpen our understanding of 'motherhood' as a category of analysis.

Motherhood, or its absence, impacts on the vast majority of people in contemporary and past societies. Although not all women will choose to, or be able to, become mothers, this decision is something that many will give consideration to across their lifetimes. For some who experience infertility, an inability to conceive or carry to term a much wanted child can be a devastating, even traumatic, experience. Yet, for other women, the decision to remain childfree is a positive, life-affirming one. Furthermore, advancements in assisted reproductive technologies have in many

ways aided the processes by which trans and non-binary people become pregnant. It is important not to conflate the categories of 'woman' and 'mother', both because not all women are, or wish to become, mothers and because not all birthing people identify as women.[1] However, we might usefully recognize 'mother' as a category of historical analysis and begin to question how this might help us to rethink understandings of 'motherhood' in the past and, potentially, the present and future.

How, both now and historically, has it been different to be the mother of one child or of multiple children? How does 'motherhood' as an identity change as a mother and her children age? In what ways was and is mothering an adult child different from being the mother of an adolescent or an infant, or, indeed, how has the experience of *being mothered* changed over time? How does the identity of 'mother' evolve across the lifecycle: if an individual becomes a grandmother, for instance? What does it mean, and what has it meant, to be the mother of a child who has died? How do we, and have we, understood non-biological mothers: stepmothers, adoptive mothers, or 'othermothers'?[2] What has it meant to want to become a mother but to be unable to: conversely, what has it meant to make an active and positive choice *not* to become a mother? To these and other questions, we might add: what happens when we interrogate motherhood as it intersects with other categories of historical analysis, such as race, social class, or sexuality? The vastness of the scholarship, and the constraints of space, mean that we concentrate in this article on work on modern Britain, but, of course, 'mother' is a transnational concept and at times it is nearly impossible to untangle the ways in which attitudes towards mothers, or experiences of mothering, outside of Britain have influenced conceptions of 'motherhood' in this country. Likewise, it is far beyond the scope of this article to consider how conceptions of 'good motherhood' – a highly racialized and classed concept – in Britain impacted on other nations, both during the empire and in its aftermath, but there is much important work which does so.

Instead, as this survey and assessment of the literature will reveal, there are many intersecting ways to historicize motherhood and begin to understand some of its continuities and changes across modern Britain. Yet, while much important work has been done, as we outline, there are still some very significant gaps in our knowledge, understanding, and indeed framing of motherhood. It is striking, for instance, how infrequently mothers are mentioned in indexes for historical and policy texts. There are few specific policies addressed towards mothers; more often it is 'the family' or 'children' or 'working women' who are the focus. In all of these spaces there are mothers, but they are only an inferred presence. Furthermore, in contemporary society, maternalism, pronatalism, and normative ideas around what a mother should or should not do, or who is a 'good' or 'bad' mother, remain embedded, sometimes discreetly and at times much more overtly, in social attitudes and policy.[3] While these are changing, that change is only happening slowly. We argue

[1]Important work has been done in this area by the Trans Pregnancy Project. See, in particular, 'Fertility, reproduction and body autonomy', special issue, *International Journal of Transgender Health*, 22 (2021).

[2]We draw here on the concept of 'othermothers' as articulated by Patricia Hill Collins in *Black feminist thought: knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment* (New York, NY, 1990).

[3]Sarah Pederson, 'The good, the bad and the "good enough" mother on the UK parenting forum Mumsnet', *Women's Studies International Forum*, 59 (2016), pp. 32–8.

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that historical work can be a way to spotlight, uncover, and challenge these ideological imperatives.

Writing in 2020, Sarah Knott notes that she is 'wary of a politics grounded in the authority and experience of mothers, maternalism looking like feminism for conservative times'.[4] We concur with this sentiment. Mothering is both a personal and a public act, and, used in some contexts, maternalism can be a profoundly conservative and regressive concept. However, to not consider, contest, and expand its definition and uses cedes this territory to those who would seek to constrict the rights and roles of women. This is a big and broad challenge, and one beyond the scope of this article alone. Nonetheless, we believe that in revisiting the historiography of motherhood we can begin to map the territory of the politics of motherhood, and suggest some framings that allow future work to link the personal and reflexive with the political. This article seeks to do so in four sections which explore the historical scholarship on maternalism; maternity; grassroots activism; and experiential histories of mothering. While there is naturally some overlap between these categories, we have chosen this approach as it broadly mirrors the chronology of the historiography of motherhood in the British context.

I

In this first section, we explore the historiography of maternalism. By this, we mean histories that highlight how mothers and their needs have been used to facilitate broader ideological agendas, such as pronatalism. The needs of ordinary mothers themselves have often not been the focus of these policies; instead, mothers' functions as carers or domestic managers have been foregrounded. This deeply political approach to writing the histories of motherhood is evident in, but not confined to, feminists of a pioneering generation of historians of women, many of whom criticized statutory legislation around maternity. While the early literature was often sharply derisive towards legislation framed in this way, and this approach is now somewhat in abeyance, others have been more nuanced. Jane Lewis, for example, makes the central point that, to understand social policy decisions around motherhood, we need to understand why certain approaches were adopted and others ignored, and that these choices were often made because of political and ideological assumptions, many of which did not actually address the real needs or lives of mothers themselves, particularly those from the working classes.[5] The entanglements – many of which are contested and controversial – of mothers, activists, policy experts, and politicians thus sit at the heart of the politics of motherhood. The fight for mothers' rights therefore reveals much about the wider ideology and politics of society at any moment in time.

Anna Davin's pathbreaking article 'Imperialism and motherhood' offers one of the first histories of motherhood in Britain. She examined early efforts to improve infant welfare in Britain from the late nineteenth century onwards, arguing that these efforts were informed by imperialist and eugenicist discourses and particularly the impact of the Boer wars on revealing the inadequacies of welfare provision

[4]Sarah Knott, *Mother: an unconventional history* (London, 2020), p. 258.

[5]Jane Lewis, *The politics of motherhood: child and maternal welfare in England, 1900–1939* (London, 1980).

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in Britain. Davin identified a range of voluntary associations and statutory organizations which began to provide basic maternity care in very local, exclusively urban, areas in an effort to improve infant mortality rates, and the corresponding tensions which evolved between working-class mothers and the often middle-class women and medical professionals who sought to teach 'mothercraft'.[6] In identifying the combination of voluntary and state-funded organizations which sought to provide this support, Davin anticipated by some years what Geoffrey Finlayson termed the 'mixed economy of welfare' in early twentieth-century Britain.[7] Many feminist historians followed Davin's lead in examining the mixed economy of maternity care and, in particular, the inherent class tensions within the infant welfare movement, particularly as it existed before 1914. Carol Dyhouse, Jane Lewis, and Ellen Ross argued that women voluntary workers within infant welfare organizations, although often well-meaning, lacked an understanding of the reality of working-class motherhood and that, in many cases, these women were more concerned with controlling mothers from the lower classes.[8] Social class, and more specifically class tensions, were therefore at the forefront of early histories of maternalism.

Discussion of women and welfare more broadly were part of a ferment of thinking being developed by activists within the women's liberation movement (WLM). In 1977, Elizabeth Wilson argued that 'only feminism has made it possible for us to see how the State defines femininity, and this definition is ... central to the purposes of welfarism'.[9] For Wilson, this definition included values of submission, nurturance, and passivity. She suggested that these values were encouraged to keep women in their roles as reproducers and carers, and that the welfare state was thus not just a set of services but also a set of ideas about society and about the family. Since then, there have been a number of developments to this analysis. Critiques of state policy have been maintained by feminists in the WLM and after: for example, in protests against measures such as the cohabitation rule, the lack of childcare facilities, or the dependence of wives within taxation and benefit policies.[10] These critiques, in the view of Mary McIntosh, did not go far enough in challenging women's dependency within state welfare; she argued for work that did not simply 'snipe' at the existing welfare state but instead outlined what sort of welfare state feminists want, such as

[6]Anna Davin, 'Imperialism and motherhood', *History Workshop Journal*, 5 (1978), pp. 9–66; see also Lewis, *Politics of motherhood*. More recently, scholarship has begun to interrogate elements of imperialism and colonialism in relation to Britain after the 'ends of empire'. See, for example, Radhika Natarajan, 'The "bogus child" and the "big uncle": the impossible South Asian family in post-imperial Britain', *Twentieth Century British History*, 34 (2023), pp. 440–66 (which explores familial relationships more widely), and Saima Nasar, 'The Asian mother and baby campaign', *Journal of British Studies* (forthcoming).

[7]Geoffrey Finlayson, 'A moving frontier: voluntarism and the state in British social welfare 1911–1949', *Twentieth Century British History*, 1 (1990), pp. 183–206.

[8]Carol Dyhouse, 'Working-class mothers and infant mortality in England, 1895–1914', *Journal of Social History*, 12 (1978), pp. 248–67; Lewis, *Politics of motherhood*; Ellen Ross, *Love and toil: motherhood in outcast London, 1870–1918* (Oxford, 1993).

[9]Elizabeth Wilson, *Women and the welfare state* (London, 1977), p. 7.

[10]Ruth Lister, *As man and wife: a study of the cohabitation rule* (London, 1973); Ruth Lister, *Social security: the case for reform* (London, 1975); Hilary Land, *Parity begins at home: women and men's work in the home and its effects on their paid employment* (London, 1981); Jane Streather and Stuart Weir, *Social insecurity: single mothers on benefit* (London, 1988).

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challenging the basis of the family and the wage system.[11] Sheila Blackburn argued that the main feminist appraisers of the welfare state were socialist feminists, for whom Beveridge was the main culprit of establishing women's dependent status.[12]

These criticisms have been nuanced in recent years; as Blackburn also pointed out, there were many voices, including women, that contributed to the development of the welfare state. She argued that socialist feminists have made a significant contribution through centring family and its relationship to work, paid and unpaid, in discussion of welfare, but she also suggested that we need to look at the complex interactions, of which gender is only one.[13] Moreover, as Helen McCarthy has noted, mothers, and women's, needs were considered in the provisions of the Beveridge Report, with some subsequent material benefits.[14] Laura Schwartz, meanwhile, draws attention to feminist critiques of the 1911 National Insurance Act and particularly 'its failure to recognize the economic contribution of women's unwaged reproductive labour'.[15] This body of work has offered a framework for how to treat the family and women's dependent status within analysis of the welfare state. As Susan Pederson argued, 'the British welfare state developed along deeply gendered lines. Both labor [*sic*] and social policies were premised on a normative vision of the family in which men were presumed to be the principal family breadwinners, and dependence was considered the normal destiny of wives.'[16] This has led to a focus on the family as a central part of any analysis of motherhood.

More recently, social policy academics have focused on the role of family policy in addressing issues around the 'male breadwinner' model. Jane Lewis noted that the post-war settlement between capital and the Labour government inscribed female dependence into this model, but that this never fully reflected reality. She suggested that this model existed at the level of policy prescription but that, since 1997, there has been a shift to an 'adult worker' model (AWM). This shift, she argued, is not necessarily a bad thing for women, given the 'dependence inherent in the male breadwinner model'. But the problem with the AWM is that policies which assume full individualization of support do not recognize the reality of women's dual role as earners and carers; until they do this, women's needs will remain unmet.[17] Mary Daly concurs and has noted that the UK has lacked an activist family policy, unlike European states such as France and Germany, and that, while some financial supports were in place, such as child benefit, support for the family as a 'social institution' never really developed in the UK.[18]

[11]Mary McIntosh, 'Feminism and social policy', *Critical Social Policy*, 1 (1981), pp. 32–42, at p. 35.

[12]Sheila Blackburn, 'How useful are feminist theories of the welfare state?', *Women's History Review*, 4 (1995), pp. 369–94, at p. 372.

[13]Ibid., p. 375.

[14]Helen McCarthy, *Double lives: a history of working motherhood in modern Britain* (London, 2020), p. 209.

[15]Laura Schwartz, 'Feminism, reproductive labour, and the gendered welfare state in Britain's National Insurance Act of 1911', *Past and Present*, 266 (2025), pp. 150–87, at p. 150.

[16]Susan Pedersen, *Family, dependence, and the origins of the welfare state: Britain and France, 1914–1945* (Cambridge, 1993), pp. 12–13.

[17]Jane Lewis, 'The decline of the male breadwinner model: implications for work and care', *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State and Society*, 8 (2001), pp. 152–69, at p. 154.

[18]Mary Daly, 'Shifts in family policy in the UK under New Labour', *Journal of European Social Policy*, 20 (2010), pp. 433–43.

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Feminist approaches, then, have been important in asserting the problems of assigning to women the role of mothers and carers and to men the role of breadwinners, and in tracing how this has inscribed dependence for women. This literature has moved historiographical debates on from the poverty focus of earlier social policy literature. It enriches and expands the top-down perspectives of broader histories of welfare. But it also exposes the complications that a focus on families has in then isolating the needs of mothers apart from women, or parents more generally. Some key examples of this work come from Jane Lewis, Denise Riley, and Deborah Dwork. Lewis's influential work centres the development of medical services for women in the pre-welfare era: the decisions made by policy-makers and politicians that impacted the care that mothers – particularly more impoverished mothers – were offered. She examined issues of social control and the ways in which ordinary women's agency over their pregnancies, births, and reproductive rights, while improving in some ways, were at times taken out of their hands.[19] Riley, meanwhile, focused on nursery provision and the way that this was offered during the Second World War to promote women's engagement in the workforce, before being withdrawn at the end of the war as part of a pronatalist agenda that leant on the work of psychoanalytic theories of motherhood promoted by experts such as John Bowlby.[20] Dwork's work argued that war was 'good for babies and young children', suggesting that the First World War added impetus to pre-existing efforts to improve infant welfare and especially mortality rates in Britain, culminating in the passage of the 1918 Maternity and Child Welfare Act.[21] These studies were complemented by examinations of the role of politically engaged women in challenging and evolving party policy on motherhood and maternity, such as Pat Thane's exploration of Labour women's role in advancing maternity policy.[22] Motherhood, therefore, has been part of many assessments of social policy legislation, but we would argue that this work must be revisited in the different legislative and more challenging welfare landscape of the twenty-first century.

II

In this section, we thus explore histories of maternity policy and politics: we trace the development of maternity services, from either the local or the central state. We draw, too, on policy literature, which, we argue, highlights how slightly the needs of mothers have been directly addressed in the modern British context. As the previous section outlined, much of the early work uses 'maternity' as a central frame. However, when we look more broadly at policy literature, the focus is often on the

[19]Lewis, *Politics of motherhood*.

[20]Denise Riley, *War in the nursery: theories of the child and mother* (London, 1983).

[21]Deborah Dwork, *War is good for babies and other young children: a history of the infant and child welfare movement in England, 1898–1918* (London, 1987); Deborah Dwork, 'The milk option: an aspect of the history of the infant welfare movement in England 1898–1908', *Medical History*, 31 (1987), pp. 51–69.

[22]Pat Thane, 'Women in the British Labour party and the construction of state welfare, 1906–1939', in Seth Koven and Sonya Michel, eds., *Mothers of a new world: maternalist politics and the origins of welfare states* (New York, NY, 1993), pp. 343–77; Pat Thane, 'Visions of gender in the making of the British welfare state: the case of women in the British Labour party and social policy, 1906–1945', in Gisela Bock, ed., *Maternity and gender policies: women and the rise of the European welfare states, 1880s–1950s* (London, 2008), pp. 93–118.

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wider legislation and its impact on 'the family' or children, rather than mothers themselves.

We begin by looking at the historiography of motherhood 'from the top down': that is, the perspective of politicians, policy-makers, and legislators. Many social policies include mothers, if only tangentially. For example, mothers benefit from improvements in education, health services, pensions, and social insurance even if they are not the intended beneficiaries of these policies. However, taking a longitudinal view of modern Britain, there have been surprisingly few policies that have specifically targeted mothers. Those that have include policies aimed at improving maternal healthcare (such as the 1918 Maternity and Child Welfare Act); providing maternity benefits (such as the Family Allowances Act of 1945); or providing support for specific categories of mothers such as unmarried mothers or widowed mothers (such as the premium provided for one-parent families in the 1975 Child Benefit Act). In none of the major general surveys of social policy do policies for mothers form a separate section – indeed, 'mother' does not even appear in the index of these texts.[23] This is arguably unsurprising, as policy-makers and politicians have not considered 'mothers' as a separate category (the same is also true of fathers). Nevertheless, we would argue that there is merit in looking at legislation from the perspective of mothers because, in tracing the impact of how the state conceives of, supports, and imagines the responsibilities of mothers, we will be able to understand continuities and changes in the way that the state and policy-makers have overtime understood 'motherhood', both progressively and regressively. Maggie Andrews's important work on evacuation in the Second World War, for example, draws attention to the ways in which government policies around evacuation impacted on experiences and meanings of motherhood during the conflict, both for mothers who sent their children away and for those who cared for evacuees.[24]

One way of understanding cultural constructions of motherhood is to consider how mothers fitted into related policy and legislation, for example, health and social care. Across this period, some specific policies have been framed around benefiting 'the family', but importantly have been intended to be for mothers: in many cases, this was as a direct result of feminist campaigning. Examples include family allowances and child benefit; nurseries and childcare; and child support such as free milk or free school meals. While much work has been done around these policies, this has frequently been by social policy scholars.[25] One key area where

[23]Howard Glennerster, *British social policy since 1945* (Oxford, 2000); Nicholas Timmins, *The five giants: a biography of the welfare state* (London, 2001); Rodney Lowe, *The welfare state in Britain since 1945* (Basingstoke, 2005); John Cooper, *The British welfare revolution, 1906–1914* (London, 2019).

[24]Maggie Andrews, *Women and evacuation in the Second World War: femininity, domesticity and motherhood* (London, 2019).

[25]Hilary Land and Jane Lewis, *The emergence of lone motherhood as a problem in late twentieth century Britain* (London, 1997); Kathleen Kiernan, Hilary Land, and Jane Lewis, *Lone motherhood in twentieth-century Britain: from footnote to front page* (Oxford, 1998); Liz Bissett and Jean Coussins, *Badge of poverty: a new look at the stigma attached to free school meals* (London, 1982); John Welshman, 'School meals and milk in England and Wales, 1906–45', *Medical History*, 41 (1997), pp. 6–29; John Welshman, 'Dental health as a neglected issue in medical history: the school dental service in England and Wales, 1900–40', *Medical History*, 42 (1998), pp. 306–27; *Underclass: a history of the excluded, 1880–2000* (London, 2006); Angela McRobbie, 'Inside the socialist nursery: welfare maternity and the writing of Denise Riley', *Feminist Theory*, 21

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legislation has been looked at separately is the development of maternity policies that relate especially to ante- and postnatal care, and to birth itself. However, this work is uneven chronologically: there is a wealth of scholarship on maternity policy before the advent of nationalized healthcare in 1948, which often takes the form of local studies, given the patchy and uneven nature of maternity care in this period.[26] But much less has been done on the years after 1948. The most significant intervention on maternity policy in the second half of the twentieth century is that of Angela Davis, with recent work by Andrew Seaton also contributing important insights into classed experiences of maternity care in the National Health Service (NHS).[27]

Much of the literature on maternity care in the interwar period focuses on how this was delivered and experienced at local level, which was, of course, where most women experienced it – something which did not change following the introduction of the NHS. Indeed, Davis's work focuses on women who had their children in Oxfordshire between 1945 and 2000, but it has not been complemented by studies of maternity in other parts of the UK in this period, in which localized experiences may have been significantly different. Furthermore, while government reports such as 1993's *Changing childbirth* might set out specific approaches to maternity care, these were often not enacted – for a host of reasons – in hospitals or other care settings, as important forthcoming research by Agnes Arnold-Forster indicates.[28]

Arguably, much more has been written on changes in policy and legislation that relate to the *prevention* of motherhood and women's right to choose: specifically, histories of birth control and abortion in modern Britain.[29] Both of these extremely important aspects of reproductive health, while now championed as part of an

(2020), pp. 287–96; Ruth Davidson, 'Family politics: campaigning for child benefits in the 1980s', *Twentieth Century British History*, 31 (2020), pp. 101–24.

[26]Hilary Marland, 'A pioneer in infant welfare: the Huddersfield scheme 1903–1920', *Social History of Medicine*, 6 (1993), pp. 25–50; Lara Marks, *Metropolitan maternity: maternal and infant welfare services in early twentieth century London* (Amsterdam, 1996); Pamela Dale, 'The Bridgewater Infant Welfare Clinic 1922–1939: from an authoritarian concern with 'welfare mothers' to a more inclusive community health centre?', *Family and Community History*, 11 (2008), pp. 69–83; Ruth Davidson, '"Dreams of Utopia": the infant welfare movement in interwar Croydon', *Women's History Review*, 23 (2014), pp. 239–55; Anna Muggeridge, 'Suffrage, infant welfare and women's politics in Walsall, 1910–1939', in Alexandra Hughes-Johnson and Lyndsey Jenkins, eds., *The politics of women's suffrage: local, national and international dimensions* (London, 2021), pp. 109–28. The majority of this work focuses on England, but there is a smaller body of literature on Wales and Scotland: see, for example, Elizabeth Peretz, 'Maternal and child welfare in England and Wales between the wars: a comparative regional study' (PhD thesis, Middlesex, 1992); Alison Nuttall, 'Maternity charities, the Edinburgh maternity scheme and the medicalisation of childbirth, 1900–1925', *Social History of Medicine*, 24 (2011), pp. 370–88; Angus Ferguson, 'The Glasgow Corporation milk depot 1904–1910 and its role in infant welfare: an end or a means?', *Social History of Medicine*, 19 (2006), pp. 443–60. Forthcoming work by Donnacha Seán Lucey examines experiences in Belfast: *Healthcare in Northern Ireland, 1921–1973: politics, policies and management* (Manchester, 2026, forthcoming).

[27]Angela Davis, *Modern motherhood: women and family in England, c.1945–2000* (Manchester, 2014); Andrew Seaton, *Our NHS: a history of Britain's best loved institution* (New Haven, CT, 2023), pp. 60–74.

[28]Department of Health, *Changing childbirth* (London, 1993); Agnes Arnold-Forster, 'The national baby: NHS maternity services reform, "natural birth", and the National Childbirth Trust', in Sarah Crook and Sarah Kenny, eds., *The Routledge handbook of contemporary British history* (London, forthcoming).

[29]A detailed overview is beyond the scope of this article but, for recent interventions, see Clare Debenham, *Birth control and the rights of women: post-suffrage feminism in the early twentieth century* (London, 2018); Olivia Dee, *The anti-abortion campaign in England, 1966–1989* (London, 2019); Sally Sheldon, Gayle Davis, Jane O'Neill, and Clare Parker, *The Abortion Act 1967: a biography of a UK law* (Cambridge, 2023).

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individual's right to choose, were originally advocated as being for the benefit of working-class mothers who lacked the means to control their own fertility, a cause of much poverty and ill-health.[30] More recently, historians have built on this with a wider emergent literature around the whole reproductive process, including miscarriage, infertility, and menopause, discussed in section IV. This literature reveals the gaps in the welfare state, many of which were missed by policy-makers and politicians as they established health provision for mothers, and in the continued evolution of these services. But it also charts the development of new needs, services, and possibilities. Most significantly, we argue that histories of social policy have been written in a broadly chronological way, which means they can, at times, lead to narratives centred around certain key interventions, or moments of progress or regress. However, by framing these histories through the lens of mothers and motherhood, as some of the emerging literature has begun to do, there is a different chronology and narrative, one we believe needs to be recognized.

III

If policy histories at a national level have often elided or made assumptions about the impact of legislation surrounding motherhood, there are two linked and interconnected approaches that have centred mothers: histories that examine activism by mothers themselves, and histories of organizations that overtly seek to represent mothers (which are sometimes, though crucially not always, the same). Many of these histories look at more diverse experiences of motherhood, such as working mothers, single mothers, Black, lesbian, or disabled mothers, and the ways in which policy has impacted on, and been impacted by, them. We examine some of these histories in this section, drawing on the vast literature that demonstrates the ways in which so-called 'ordinary' women have supported mothers through activism.[31] In the early twentieth century, this often involved establishing services locally to support mothers, or campaigning directed at the state for improvement in services. But, more recently, scholarship has revealed a diverse activism around motherhood and, significantly, has sought to shine a light on the activism of mothers whose experiences do not fall within the boundaries of affluent, white, heterosexual, or married.

Women's collective activism, particularly around motherhood, has always been important in pressing for welfare reform. This has been reflected in the historiography, which spans a wide range of groups with different ideological perspectives. There are those from the labour movement, such as the Women's Co-operative Guild.[32] Maternity rights, and support for new mothers, have long been a central plank of non-party women's organizations, as Caitríona Beaumont

[30]Pamela M. Graves, *Labour women: women in British working-class politics, 1918–1939* (Cambridge, 1994); Gillian Scott, *Feminism and the politics of working women: the Women's Co-Operative Guild, 1880s to the Second World War* (London, 1998).

[31]We draw here on Claire Langhamer's framing of 'ordinariness' as a category of historical analysis: Claire Langhamer, "'Who the hell are ordinary people?" Ordinariness as a category of historical analysis', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 28 (2018), pp. 175–95.

[32]Barbara J. Blaszak, *The matriarchs of England's cooperative movement: a study in gender politics and female leadership, 1883–1921* (Westport, CT, 2000); Scott, *Feminism and the politics of working women*.

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has demonstrated.[33] Motherhood also formed part of the discourse of the WLM, as work by Anna Coote and Beatrix Campbell, and more recently Eve Setch, Elizabeth Homans, and Sarah Crook, illustrates.[34] Ann Oakley, sociologist and feminist, has reflected on motherhood and its role within women's struggles from a historical perspective, following her groundbreaking study of early motherhood in the 1970s.[35]

The place of motherhood activism within the WLM needs careful unpicking, and it is important to recognize that different parts of the movement approached it differently. However, recent work reveals the interactions between WLM organizations, older, non-party women's associations, and pressure groups in campaigning for support for mothers.[36] This historiography might indicate a lull in campaigns around motherhood in the immediate post-war era, with little historical work looking at the circumstances and welfare of mothers in the 1940s and 1950s.[37] However, there was in fact an uptick in sociological research during this period around the needs of mothers, with significant publications by, for example, Hannah Gavron, Pearl Jephcott, Margaret Wynn, and Harriett Wilson.[38] These women uncovered the needs of specific cohorts of mothers and, in many cases, used this information to campaign to support them. Their pathbreaking work is now being more widely recognized by historians.[39] Elsewhere, historians have examined activism that resulted from specific experiences connected to motherhood, with a burgeoning emerging literature on experiences of postnatal depression.[40] Women's activism around access

[33]Caitríona Beaumont, *Housewives and citizens: domesticity and the women's movement in England, 1928–1964* (Manchester, 2013); Caitríona Beaumont, "'Where to park the pram?" Voluntary women's organisations, citizenship and the campaign for better housing in England, 1928–1945', *Women's History Review*, 22 (2013), pp. 75–96.

[34]Anna Coote and Beatrix Campbell, *Sweet freedom: the struggle for women's liberation* (London, 1982); Eve Grace Setch, 'The women's liberation movement in Britain, 1969–79: organisation, creativity and debate' (PhD thesis, London Royal Holloway, 2001); Elizabeth Homans, 'Visions of equality: women's rights and political change in 1970s Britain' (PhD thesis, Bangor, 2014); Sarah Crook, *Unhappy mothers: women, motherhood, and social change in postwar Britain* (Manchester, 2025).

[35]Ann Oakley, *Becoming a mother* (London, 1980); Ann Oakley, *Social support and motherhood: the natural history of a research project* (Oxford, 1992); Ann Oakley, *Women, peace and welfare: a suppressed history of social reform, 1880–1920* (Bristol, 2018); Ann Oakley, *Forgotten wives: how women get written out of history* (Bristol, 2021).

[36]Caitríona Beaumont, 'What do women want? Housewives' associations, activism and changing representations of women in the 1950s', *Women's History Review*, 26, no. 1 (2017), pp. 147–62.

[37]Angela Davis's and Sarah Crook's monographs are important exceptions here.

[38]Hannah Gavron, *The captive wife* (London, 1966); Pearl Jephcott, Nancy Seear, and John Smith, *Married women working* (London, 1962); Margaret Wynn, *Fatherless families* (London, 1964); Harriett Wilson, *Delinquency and child neglect: the first comprehensive study of a group of families often referred to as 'problem families'* (London, 1962).

[39]McCarthy, *Double lives*; Helen McCarthy, 'Women, marriage and paid work in post-war Britain', *Women's History Review*, 26 (2017), pp. 46–61; Helen McCarthy, "'I don't know how she does it!" Feminism, family and work in "neoliberal" Britain', in Aled Davies, Ben Jackson, and Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, eds., *The neoliberal age? Britain since the 1970s* (London, 2021), pp. 582–602.

[40]Hilary Marland, "'Drowned in a sea of inhumanity": natural childbirth, postnatal depression and the National Childbirth Trust, 1956–80s', *Social History of Medicine*, 37 (2024), pp. 69–92; Fabiola Creed, 'Nemone Lethbridge's play *Baby Blues* on BBC television: maternal mental illness narratives, stigma and support in 1970s Britain', *Women's History Review*, 34 (2025), pp. 93–117; Crook, *Unhappy mothers*.

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to childcare provision – one of the seven core demands of the British WLM – is also beginning to be considered by historians.[41]

An important and developing literature concerns campaigns led by diverse groups of mothers. There were and remain many groups of mothers whom state welfare ignored, or failed to support sensitively and appropriately. At different moments, these have included Black and Asian mothers, single mothers, lesbian mothers, and disabled mothers.[42] While these are very different case-studies, there are some consistent themes across this literature. First, motherhood was often a moment when disadvantage was experienced most keenly, which could lead to activism. Second, for some, being a mother meant that their activism could sometimes be viewed more sympathetically, simply because they were mothers. Indeed, scholars have identified grassroots campaigns where women used their identity as mothers to add legitimacy and force to their activism. For example, Madeline Routon's study of the squatting movement indicates that some squatters who were mothers were looked on by the press more compassionately than squatters who were not, although conversely she also indicates that at least some social workers believed that involvement in such housing activism made a mother 'unfit'.[43] This was similarly the case with grassroots community activism, where housewives and mothers, particularly on council estates, fought for services for their communities.[44] Often these activists used the vernaculars of 'mothers' and 'housewives' interchangeably, which is something to which we must be attentive.

The assertion of motherhood as a political identity is an important facet of campaigning in modern Britain. The implicit and explicit assertion under social democracy that everyone has rights to equality of services makes starker the disadvantages faced by some mothers, and has spurred demands for equity. Some of

[41]Jane Lewis, 'The failure to expand childcare provision and to develop a comprehensive childcare policy in Britain during the 1960s and 1970s', *Twentieth Century British History*, 24 (2013), pp. 249–74; Amy Palmer, 'Nursery schools or nursery classes? Choosing and failing to choose between policy alternatives in nursery education in England, 1918–1972', *History of Education*, 45 (2015), pp. 103–21; Rachel Collett and Krista Cowman, 'Home Link: women's community activism, childcare, and radical self-education in 1970s Liverpool', *Women's History Review* (forthcoming).

[42]Tracey Reynolds, *Caribbean mothers: identity and experience in the UK* (London, 2005); 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), pp. 498–521; Olivia Wyatt, '"The enemy in our midst": Caribbean women and the protection of the community in Leeds', in Hakim Adi, ed., *Many struggles: new histories of African and Caribbean people in Britain* (London, 2023), pp. 177–97; Josie McLellan on behalf of the SPAN History Group, '"Proud of our families": single-parent activism in the 1990s', *Contemporary British History*, 34 (2024), pp. 633–56; Madeline Routon, 'Mothers, wives, friends: women's role in London squatting struggles since 1969', *Gender, Place and Culture*, 32 (2025), pp. 176–207; Caroline Rusterholz and Laura Kelly, 'Depo-Provera, class, race, and the domiciliary family planning services in Glasgow and Haringey, 1970–1983', *Historical Journal*, 68 (2025), pp. 216–38.

[43]Routon, 'Mothers, wives, friends', p. 183.

[44]Krista Cowman, 'Play streets: women, children and the problem of urban traffic, 1930–1970', *Social History*, 42 (2017), pp. 233–56; Krista Cowman, '"The atmosphere is permissive and free": the gendering of activism in the British adventure playgrounds movement, ca. 1948–70', *Journal of Social History*, 53 (2019), pp. 218–41; Barry Hazley, Lynn Abrams, Ade Kearns, and Valerie Wright, 'Place, memory and the British high rise experience: negotiating social change on the Wyndford Estate, 1962–2015', *Contemporary British History*, 35 (2021), pp. 72–99; Kerrie McGiveron, '"Notes on a community struggle": Big Flame, the Kirkby rent strike and the "mass struggle of housewives"', *Women's History Review*, 32 (2023), pp. 517–39.

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these disadvantages were filled by activism of a practical nature, such as the establishment of refuges for mothers escaping domestic violence.[45] Increasingly, however, pressure groups with a focus on mothers began to press for policy change, as did women within political parties. While there is a politics and social policy literature around some of these groups, the historical literature is slight.[46]

Third, and perhaps most significantly, the literature highlights that motherhood as an identity could be used regressively, whether by mothers themselves or by others seeking to act on their behalf. This could be a notable feature of the early twentieth-century maternalist movement, discussed above, where middle-class 'do-gooders' foisted their ideals onto working-class mothers. As the twentieth century progressed, race became a central dividing line within activism related to motherhood. For example, Jessica White's exploration of activism by Black mothers argues that racism often meant that, despite their participation in activism alongside white mothers, the needs of Black working-class mothers remained unmet and they were isolated from mother-centred community groups.[47] The experiences of Black and ethnic minority women were particularly significant around issues of reproductive justice, as the Campaign Against Depo-Provera (CADP) demonstrates. As Caitlin Lambert argues, campaigns for reproductive freedom include the right to *have* children as well as not to. She argues that the CADP demonstrates that, while working-class and ethnic minority women could have different experiences of gender oppression, white feminists could engage with 'axes of difference' to fight an oppression that was not their own.[48] Earlier work by Beverley Bryan, Stella Dadzie, and Suzanne Scafe makes this point in relation to abortion access for Black women.[49] Elsewhere, historians have noted examples where those on the political right claim to speak 'as a mother' in order to lay claim to specific agendas. Victoria Gillick, for example, 'aimed to bolster, exert, and protect parental rights over the bodies of children, especially girls', in bringing a case to try to prevent health authorities providing contraceptive information to under sixteens without parental knowledge.[50]

What activism around motherhood and social policy reveals is that there is a clear need to knit together these discrete histories. Taking a frame of motherhood across a range of activist groups and cohorts of mothers opens up new narratives of social policy and welfare in the twentieth century. It identifies which mothers were being unsupported within welfare regimes, and the lack of understanding by

[45]Alice McKimm, '"We've been left out": women's refuges in Northern Ireland, 1974–2008', *Modern British History*, 35 (2024), pp. 475–92.

[46]Pat Thane and Tanya Evans, *Sinners? Scroungers? Saints? Unmarried motherhood in twentieth-century England* (Oxford, 2012).

[47]White, 'Child-centred matriarch', p. 501.

[48]Caitlin Lambert, '"The objectionable injectable": recovering the lost history of the WLM through the Campaign Against Depo-Provera', *Women's History Review*, 29 (2020), pp. 520–39, at p. 522.

[49]Beverly Bryan, Stella Dadzie, and Suzanne Scafe, *Heart of the race: Black women's lives in Britain* (London, 1985), pp. 103–5.

[50]Hannah J. Elizabeth, '"If it hadn't been for the doctor, I think I would have killed myself": ensuring adolescent knowledge and access to healthcare in the age of Gillick', in Jenny Crane and Jane Hand, eds., *Cultural histories of the National Health Service* (Manchester, 2025), pp. 255–80, at p. 258.

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central policy-makers of the experiences of mothers themselves. Mapping this literature reveals gaps: chronologically, where decades are less well researched, but also geographically, socially, and economically. Developing a more systematic, historically nuanced understanding of how women experienced motherhood, and what they did about it, allows for a more careful reading of the successes and failures of British welfare policy. It might also offer some pointers to how to improve it in the future.

IV

This final section is most focused on the embodied experiences of mothering, which can, at times, be hard to untangle from activism or memoir. Historians can find themselves reflecting explicitly on their own lived experiences in writing histories of mothering. Sarah Fox, in her history of birth in eighteenth-century England, notes that 'It is no coincidence that conferences about the history of birth and midwifery are one of the few academic arenas in which delegates share their personal experiences ... alongside those of their historical subjects', while Jessica Cox's history of the maternal body in the nineteenth century also contains her reflections on her own pregnancies and births in the twenty-first.[51] Both monographs fall outside of our period of study, but illustrate that the recent turn towards embodied or experiential histories of motherhood are far from limited to historians of modern Britain.

In contemporary Britain, there has been an explosive rise in the 'motherhood memoir'. Journalists, politicians, writers, and celebrities among many others seek to contextualize their own experiences and often draw on historical examples of mothering alongside those of their contemporaries: recent examples include books which consider everything from the decision to (not) have a baby, and infertility, to birth trauma, matresence, and conditions such as postnatal depression. These memoirs are, of course, not just a phenomenon within modern Britain and, although many of these writers are from white, affluent backgrounds, an increasing number of such accounts focus on the experiences of mothers from Black and minority ethnic communities, disabled mothers, mothers who are homeless or from impoverished backgrounds, or mothers who are in other ways minoritized, such as being from the LGBT+ community. These are not presented as academic texts, but their influence can be seen in academic work, most significantly in the groundbreaking work of Sarah Knott.

Knott's *Mother: an unconventional history* (published, notably, as *Mother is a verb* in the United States) has centred the 'lived experiences' of mothers across time and space (albeit the largely modern, anglophone world) and draws out the archival traces of the everyday, ordinary, and even mundane. She blends this with her own experiences of becoming a mother, taking a new and exciting methodological approach – history as 'anecdote' – reflecting the scattered, interrupted experience of mothering infants. Knott argues, here and elsewhere, for the importance of viewing

[51] Sarah Fox, *Giving birth in eighteenth-century England* (London, 2022), p. 193; Jessica Cox, *Confinement: the hidden history of maternal bodies in nineteenth-century Britain* (Cheltenham, 2023).

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motherhood as 'labour' or (usually unpaid) work.[52] This argument for motherhood as work is distinct from working motherhood – that is, mothers who returned to (or indeed did not stop) paid employment after birth. These histories, too, have been recently recovered by historians including Helen McCarthy, Eve Worth, Laura Paterson, and Eve Pennington.[53] But striking omissions still remain: there is, for example, no history of maternity leave in the British context.

Elsewhere, we have seen a turn towards more experiential histories of motherhood, particularly around technological and medical advances since the latter half of the twentieth century, which have shaped how people have become pregnant and experienced pregnancy and birth. For example, Jesse Olszynko-Gryn explores histories of pregnancy testing in Britain from the 1970s, highlighting the grassroots work of the WLM to show women how to undertake pregnancy testing outside of a medical setting.[54] While many of those seeking support in accessing pregnancy tests were young women with a desire not to be pregnant, groups frequently assisted women who were trying to conceive, or older women going through the menopause, to further understand their bodies.

Perhaps surprisingly, though, there is relatively limited work on the embodied experiences of pregnancy in the modern period. While, for example, there is a large and growing literature on abortion, this tends to concentrate on the legislative history behind access to legal terminations, and not the experiences of women who underwent abortion.[55] Similarly, there is limited work reflecting on embodied experiences of infertility, although Gayle Davis and Tracey Loughran's recent pathbreaking edited collection on infertility, and the work of Laura Beers on the politics of access to fertility treatments, is beginning to change this.[56]

[52]Knott, *Mother*; Sarah Knott, 'Theorizing and historicizing mothering's many labours', *Past and Present*, 246, supplement 15 (2020), pp. 1–24.

[53]Laura Paterson, '"I didn't feel like my own person": paid work in women's narratives of self and working motherhood, 1950–1980', *Contemporary British History*, 33 (2019), pp. 405–26; McCarthy, *Double lives*; Helen McCarthy, 'Career, family and emotional work: graduate mothers in 1960s Britain', *Past and Present*, 246, supplement 15 (2020), pp. 295–317; Eve Worth and Laura Paterson, '"How is she going to manage with the children?" Organizational labour, working and mothering in Britain, c.1960–1990', *Past and Present*, 246, supplement 15 (2020), pp. 318–43; Eve Worth, *The welfare state generation: women, agency and class in Britain since 1945* (London, 2021); Eve Pennington, 'Gender, paid employment, and deindustrialization in new towns in north-west England, c. 1970–1990', *Historical Journal*, 68 (2025), pp. 442–65. See also Dolly Smith Wilson, 'A new look at the affluent worker: the good working mother in post-war Britain', *Twentieth Century British History*, 17 (2006), pp. 206–29; Davis, *Modern motherhood*, ch. 6; Aleena Dinn, 'British-Pakistani homeworkers and activist campaigns, 1962–2002', *Women's History Review*, 32 (2023), pp. 496–516, at pp. 503–6; Emma Peplow and Priscila Pivatto, '"It's got to be possible": women's political careers and family lives since the 1960s as told to the History of Parliament Trust's Oral History Project', in R. Davidson, F. Hussain, L. Jenkins, and A. Muggeridge, eds., *Women, power and politics in Britain, 1945–1997* (Oxford, forthcoming).

[54]Jesse Olszynko-Gryn, 'The feminist appropriation of pregnancy testing in 1970s Britain', *Women's History Review*, 28 (2019), pp. 869–94.

[55]Dee, *Anti-abortion campaign*.

[56]Gayle Davis and Tracey Loughran, eds., *The Palgrave handbook of infertility in Britain* (London, 2017); Katherine Dow, 'Looking into the test tube: the birth of IVF on British television', *Medical History*, 63 (2019), pp. 189–208; Laura Beers, 'Both feminist and practical politics: the incorporation of infertility treatment into family planning in Britain, 1930s–1950s', *Journal of British Studies*, 60 (2021), pp. 563–84; Laura Beers, 'Not a priority: infertile women and the symbolic politics of IVF in 1980s Britain', *Gender*

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Future work on assisted reproductive technologies might well consider the history of surrogate pregnancy, or pregnancy outside of a supposed 'heterosexual norm': LGBT+ couples, or single women who might use donated sperm, building on Rebecca Jennings's important work on lesbian mothers' use of artificial insemination by donor.[57]

If the history of infertility and assisted reproduction is beginning to be uncovered, histories of miscarriage or stillbirth have not generally been considered within the UK context. While there has been limited work done on the history of sudden infant death syndrome, this takes a medical history approach and examines changing understandings of medical technology or diagnosis.[58] Likewise, although there is a very limited literature which considers advances in genetic screening of the foetus (such as ultrasound imaging, commonly offered in the UK as a standard part of maternity care from the 1970s, or screening through blood tests, for conditions such as Down's syndrome), this tends to focus on the development of such technologies rather than the sociocultural impacts of their use.[59]

Similarly, there is at present only a limited historiography of the rituals surrounding pregnancy, which is notable given what the changing nature of these might tell us about understandings of gender and gender roles in contemporary society. Arguably, we know far more about the rituals of pregnancy and birth in the early modern period and nineteenth century than for the twentieth and twenty-first.[60] Notable early works of women's history 'recovery', such as Elizabeth Roberts's oral histories of Lancashire in the early twentieth century, do cover pregnancy and birth (during which the 'neighbourliness' she identifies as central to the culture of these communities was particularly in evidence) but only as part of wider life histories.[61] As Britain became an increasingly secularized society, rituals such as 'churching' (giving thanks for a mother's survival of birth) and, to a lesser extent, christenings became less common.[62] Until very recently, within British culture there was much superstition surrounding the purchase of gifts or baby items prior to birth – anecdotally, many people recall storing items like prams at relatives' or friends' homes rather than their own – but in recent decades, celebrations such as 'baby showers' or 'gender reveals' have become more widespread, in part because of the increasing cultural hegemony of the United States, where both originated. Precisely

and History, 35 (2023), pp. 1111–34; Tracey Loughran, 'Stories without pattern, lives at the edge: the Mass Observation Project and emotional histories of in/fertility before IVF', *Social History of Medicine* (2026), https://doi.org/10.1093/shm/hkaf115.

[57]Rebecca Jennings, 'Lesbian motherhood and the artificial insemination by donor scandal of 1978', *Twentieth Century British History*, 28 (2017), pp. 570–94.

[58]Angus H. Ferguson, 'Ignored disease or diagnostic dustbin? Sudden infant death syndrome in the British context', *Social History of Medicine*, 28 (2015), pp. 487–508. Lara Freidenfelds has done important work on the cultural history of miscarriage in the American context: see *The myth of the perfect pregnancy: a history of miscarriage in America* (Oxford, 2020).

[59]The latter is somewhat considered in Ilana M. Löwy, *Imperfect pregnancies: a history of birth defects and prenatal diagnosis* (Baltimore, MD, 2017), although not expressly within a UK context.

[60]See, for example, Fox, *Giving birth*; Cox, *Confinement*; Joanne Begiato, 'Pregnancy and childbirth', in Susan Broomhall, ed., *Early modern emotions: an introduction* (Basingstoke, 2017), pp. 211–14.

[61]Elizabeth Roberts, *A woman's place: an oral history of working-class women, 1890–1940* (Oxford, 1995).

[62]William Coster, 'Purity, profanity, and puritanism: the churching of women, 1500–1700', *Studies in Church History*, 27 (1990), pp. 377–87.

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how, when, and why certain rituals fell in and out of fashion, however, has yet to be the subject of sustained historical enquiry.

In contrast, much recent literature has examined the history of birth. Importantly, this adds to earlier histories of midwifery which focused on developments in this field,[63] and instead centres the experiences of birthing. Much of this scholarship concentrates on the mid-century onwards, which coincided with the medicalization of childbirth as, increasingly, patients gave birth almost exclusively in hospitals rather than the home – a trend that, historians have pointed out, predates the Peel Report of 1970, which recommended hospital births for all expectant mothers.[64] There is an emerging literature on so-called 'natural birth' which considers how women were prepared for birth and phenomena such as 'twilight sleep'.[65] Most recently, Victoria Bates, Jenny Crane, and Maria Fannin have studied the construction and development of the 'birth experience'.[66] As this significant literature reveals, the medicalization of childbirth arguably coincided with the politicization of childbirth, as mothers' choice and agency over what 'type' of birth they wanted – and, of course, what 'type' of birth they ended up having – has been continually stretched, challenged, and contested. Although our focus in this article is on mothers and motherhood, it is also pertinent to note important work by Laura King on the presence of fathers during the birth itself; as she argues, the reasons behind the shift towards a majority of men being present during birth are complex, but one factor was a desire by both parents to 'choose' this.[67]

V

In this article we have made a number of broad points on the historiography of motherhood. The first is how historically contingent this has been, and how its focus has evolved over the decades, from a predominantly feminist analysis of the ways in which motherhood policies have been used to control women, through to the spaces where mothers have been politically active, and finally to more experiential and embodied histories of motherhood. Within this analysis we have also

[63]Enid Fox, 'An honourable calling or a despised occupation: licensed midwifery and its relationship to district nursing in England and Wales before 1948', *Social History of Medicine*, 6 (1993), pp. 237–59; Hilary Marland and Anne-Marie Rafferty, eds., *Midwives, society and childbirth: debates and controversies in the modern period* (London, 1998); Pamela Dale and Kate Fisher, 'Implementing the 1902 Midwives Act: assessing problems, developing services and creating a new role for a variety of female practitioners', *Women's History Review*, 18 (2009), pp. 427–52.

[64]Tania McIntosh, *A social history of maternity and childbirth: key themes in maternity care* (London, 2012), ch. 5.

[65]Paula Michaels, 'The sounds and sights of natural childbirth: films and records in antenatal preparation classes, 1950s–1980s', *Social History of Medicine*, 31 (2018), pp. 24–40; Paula Michaels, 'Childbirth and trauma, 1940s to 1980s', *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences*, 73 (2018), pp. 52–72; Joanna Bourke, 'Becoming the "natural" mother in Britain and North America: power, emotions and the labour of childbirth between 1947 and 1967', *Past and Present*, 246, supplement 15 (2020), pp. 92–114.

[66]Victoria Bates, Jennifer Crane, and Maria Fannin, 'The construction and politics of the "birth experience" in Britain, 1948–93', *Cultural History*, 13 (2024), pp. 100–23; Victoria Bates, Jennifer Crane, and Maria Fannin, 'Fluid modernities: the birthing pool in late twentieth-century Britain', *Medical Humanities*, 50 (2024), pp. 312–21.

[67]Laura King, 'Hiding in the pub to cutting the cord? Men's presence at childbirth in Britain c.1940s–2000s', *Social History of Medicine*, 30 (2017), pp. 389–407.

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sought to emphasize the breadth of ways we think about mothers and motherhood. Nevertheless, we would argue there remain some significant gaps. As we have noted, we know less about how women experienced motherhood in the era immediately following the introduction of the welfare state. We know less, too, about how motherhood was experienced in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland than in England; even in the English context, we know little about how motherhood was experienced in specific locales. In what ways has it been different to be a mother in rural Cornwall, compared with urban Manchester, or the suburbs of London?[68] As we have discussed, important work is being done on the specific experiences of, for example, Black motherhood or lesbian motherhood, but much of the historiography still centres white, middle-class or affluent, able-bodied, and heterosexual experiences of mothering. Our understanding of the history of motherhood will shift and change as greater attention is paid to aspects of motherhood outside of this perceived 'norm'.

Elsewhere, the role of the state needs to be understood more deeply: both the ways in which mothers collectively and individually have interacted with agencies, and how 'experts' and practitioners have thought about the way policies impacting mothers were structured and implemented. We would also stress how limiting it is to think about motherhood purely in the context of maternity and young children. There are many histories to be written about, for example, mothers of older children or adults; grandmothers; or mothers of children who have died. The provision of care for young children by grandparents, especially grandmothers, has a long history, and much resonance in contemporary Britain, given the prohibitive costs of formal childcare. But, at the same time, grandparents do not (at the time of writing) have an automatic right to see their grandchildren in the UK. There is much to be uncovered around the complexities of these histories. In this context we need to think about the experiences of mothers but also how the statutory and voluntary sectors have responded (or, indeed, not responded) to their welfare needs.

The early maternalism literature put the politics of motherhood firmly at the centre of its analysis, but largely examined the interwar years. Future work might connect the mother-centred policies of the nascent welfare state with post-war social democratic and neoliberal approaches. How should we understand the subsuming of motherhood into family policy from the 1980s? Are we as historians equally guilty of not foregrounding the politics of motherhood, for fear of seeing mothering as an old-fashioned, conservative, regressive subject?[69] As we noted in the introduction, there is a risk that, if we do not offer a historically nuanced, carefully traced history of motherhood in Britain, we cede these histories to a more pronatalist agenda. Likewise, it is important to recognize that such agendas often carry with them clear assumptions around who 'should' or 'should not' be able

[68]Sarah Crook's recent monograph is a welcome exception to this, revealing the significance of local support groups for mothers in communities across England, Wales, and Scotland: Crook, *Unhappy mothers*, esp. ch. 3.

[69]Charlotte Lydia Riley and Lyndsey Jenkins, for example, eloquently make the point that the right has always been more comfortable talking about motherhood than has the left: Charlotte Lydia Riley *et al.*, 'Labour pains: mothers and motherhood on the British left in the twentieth century', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 3 (2025), pp. 405–26, at p. 426.

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to become a mother. Race and class, as we have illustrated, have long played a disproportionate role in such debates, but gender identity is being increasingly weaponized, particularly around issues of fertility and surrogacy.[70] We can see in the literature impressive and thoughtful ways of treating motherhood that point to connections between diverse groups of mothers across time and place. The more these approaches speak to one another, challenge stereotypes, and recognize that, while mothers are not homogeneous, there are meaningful ways in which to frame motherhood as a key political concern, the likelier we are to develop a history of motherhood reflective of the politics and society of twenty-first-century Britain.

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[70]For a radical rethinking of the potential of surrogacy, see Sophie Lewis, *Full surrogacy now: feminism against family* (London, 2020).

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