# Child-centred matriarch or mother among other things? Race and the construction of working-class motherhood in late twentieth-century Britain

On the night of 29 January 1970, sisters Kathleen Locke and Coca Clarke, along with several other mothers, occupied the West Indian Community Centre in Chorlton-upon-Medlock in Manchester. They demanded that the Centre put nursery facilities in place for local mothers in the area. After a night of negotiations involving the police, the Centre’s organising committee conceded and gave the women permission to start the Moss Side People’s Nursery. The local community-run newsletter, *Moss Side News,* reported, ‘before you could say "Black Power" there were 20 kids, Black and white, playing together happily, while their mums had the chance to do a bit of shopping or tidy the house without having to worry about junior’.[[1]](#footnote-1) Rather than an isolated incident, the Moss Side women’s occupation was representative of the way in which Black working-class mothers in Britain had become increasingly confident in articulating and responding to their own practical, social and emotional needs. While historians have paid attention to these instances of maternal assertiveness among working-class white mothers in urban districts, they have failed to account for Black mothers, or the category of race, in their analysis. Yet, Black mothers, as this study demonstrates, were at the centre of various infrastructures – from tenants’ associations to mothers groups – that responded to the everyday challenges they faced as racialised and marginalised women living in Britain’s inner cities.

This study examines and centres the activism and experiences of Black mothers to demonstrate the primacy of race in the construction of working-class motherhood in late twentieth-century Britain. In this way, it not only responds to longstanding calls by Black scholars for western feminists to decolonise their theorisation of motherhood, but also to more renewed demands that historians of motherhood do the same.[[2]](#footnote-2) For instance, in her introduction to the recent supplement on ‘mothering’ in the journal *Past and Present,* Sarah Knott called for historians of motherhood to draw from alternative theories developed by Black and minority ethnic scholars to expand their understanding of the term ‘mothering’. [[3]](#footnote-3) She suggested that the term ‘othermothering’, developed by African American feminist Patricia Hill Collins, can encourage historians to re-think about modes of care beyond the mother-child dyad that can inform and expand the scope of the field.[[4]](#footnote-4) However, while the studies in the special edition covered the variety of different forms that mothering can take, there were no articles on British motherhood that did not centre the white experience. Similarly, despite great efforts by scholars such as Angela Davis and Helen McCarthy to historicise British motherhood, the themes of race and ethnicity remain peripheral.[[5]](#footnote-5) This article goes towards breaking down this ethnocentricity by analysing mother-centred activism and community work carried out by Black mothers in Britain’s inner cities.

By including, and largely centring, Black mothers’ experience of urban living, this study makes a critical contribution to the scholarship on working-class motherhood in post-war Britain. Recent scholarship has demonstrated the way in which working-class mothers could be vectors of social change in post-war Britain. Eve Worth has argued that rising number of working-class mothers re-entering education in the 1970s enabled them to destabilise conceptions of class through their own social mobility.[[6]](#footnote-6) Laura Paterson has shown that working-class mothers in the 1970s and 1980s differed from their own mothers and grandmothers by choosing to return to paid employment for a sense of self-sufficiency, as well as financial security.[[7]](#footnote-7) Yet, despite demonstrating how these mothers set up a mode of motherhood that encompassed women’s identity beyond her role as mother and housewife, the focus of this scholarship remains on the white experience with little interrogation of the subject of race. In the post-war decades thousands of migrant mothers from the Commonwealth arrived into Britain’s working-class neighbourhoods, however, recent studies have obscured these demographic changes. The labour of charting the lived experience of Black British mothers in the latter part of the century has in turn fallen onto scholars in other disciplines, and onto Black women themselves.[[8]](#footnote-8) This study therefore offers a history of working-class motherhood in the late twentieth century that highlights the importance of race in dictating the maternal experience. It corroborates recent scholarship by demonstrating that by participating in tenants’ associations, playgroups, and mothers’ groups, Black working-class mothers participated alongside white mothers in this mode of motherhood that worked around their own practical needs and demands. However, it also argues that these opportunities for assertiveness were refracted through the lived experience of both systemic and interpersonal racism that Black women faced in post-imperial and post-industrial Britain. The realities of racism also impelled Black mothers to take action on particular issues, such as economic and housing discrimination, that affected them as Black women. Working-class mothers thus had differing experiences of motherhood that hinged on their racialised identities, and they adapted to these experiences through community-based activism and engagement.

This study addresses the ethnic bias in the historiography of motherhood by drawing on the personal testimony of Black mothers, as well as the campaign literature generated by grassroots organisations in Britain’s inner cities. By examining the community efforts taken by Black women in inner-city areas, it also contributes to the growing number of studies on race, class and community activism in urban Britain. In his study *Black Handsworth,* Kieran Connell has examined the community efforts that Black and South Asian residents of inner-city Birmingham made to promote community life by setting up activist groups that accounted for racist housing policies and inferior schooling.[[9]](#footnote-9) Similarly, in their analysis of community activism in Notting Hill, Camilla Schofield and Ben Jones have explored how racism could often be a driver for community activism among its Black residents, who also often united with white community activists to demand housing rights from the council.[[10]](#footnote-10) They have argued that this activism enabled this multi-ethnic locality to rebuild the ‘working-class community’ that moved away from the ‘traditional’ image imposed by post-war social scientists. This study builds on these analyses, demonstrating that the experiences of race and class could combine to produce forms of community activism among mothers, particularly in the form of tenants’ associations. However, much like Schofield and Jones, it highlights how racism continued to persist in inner urban areas, which isolated Black mothers from mother-centred community groups. It shows that race and racism often impeded the construction of an identifiable and inter-racial working-class community in late twentieth-century Britain.

This article focuses on inner-city areas in post-war Britain, looking at sites that underwent urban regeneration in the post-war period. It examines one district in particular, Hulme and Moss Side in southern Manchester, while drawing comparisons with other similar inner-city areas, such as Tottenham and Holloway in London, and Handsworth in Birmingham. In the early 1960s, the terraced homes of Hulme were demolished in one of the largest slum demolition programmes in Europe. These homes were replaced with several estates, including the notorious Hulme Crescents, which were later bulldozed in the 1990s as they fell into disrepair. Neighbouring Moss Side, home to Manchester’s African Caribbean population, faced a similar fate from the 1970s. The council bulldozed large parts of the area, displacing hundreds of white and African Caribbean families in the process or rehousing them in the newly-built estates. Hulme and Moss Side, like other inner urban areas, transitioned from a white working-class neighbourhood to an ‘inner city’, associated in the press with crime, unemployment and welfare dependency.[[11]](#footnote-11)

These conditions of marginalisation produced various forms of community-led activism often led by mothers, and this study draws from a range of archival material and testimony to trace the history of mother-centred activism in these areas. Local newsletters published by community groups and tenants’ association, along with local council reports and local history publications cover the institutional history of local community organisations. Where possible, the voices of Black mothers are prioritised, by building on oral history testimony, personal memoir, and sociological research data. The study focuses on three developments that became an important feature of inner-city mothers’ life in late-twentieth-century Britain. It begins by outlining the history of women’s involvement in housing and tenants’ activist groups. As local councils demolished thousands of homes and constructed cheap, system-built housing that was sometimes susceptible to falling into disrepair, tenants’ associations evolved in the late twentieth century and served as the mouthpiece of individual residents unable to cut through the red tape of the local housing department. The second section examines women’s involvement in inner-city playgroups, which were set up to account for the lack of play facilities in inner-city areas, while also giving young mothers a break from childcare to shop, carry out chores or to go out to work. The final section examines the role of mothers’ groups and the way in which their confessional environment centred the female self, while also allowing mothers to form significant bonds with one another after urban redevelopment dismantled established everyday forms of street-based maternal interaction, such as dropping-in and gossiping. Stitching together these themes, this study provides a complex analysis of race, gender, and class in inner-city Britain.

# Housing and tenants’ activism

In 1969, Manchester City Council, like many local authorities across Britain, drew up plans to demolish large sections of Moss Side, nestled two miles south of the city centre, and to replace the rows of Victorian terraced housing with a mixed development of both low- and high-rise housing blocks. Moss Side was a migrant gateway from the 1950s and, by the early 1970s, one third of the population was of Caribbean descent, housing Manchester’s highest concentration of African Caribbean people.[[12]](#footnote-12) However, all residents of Moss Side, regardless of ethnicity, knew the social impact that demolition could have on their local area after witnessing the slum demolition of Hulme, which had dispersed families and kinship networks to various overspill estates around Greater Manchester.[[13]](#footnote-13) In order to make sure the same fate did not fall upon Moss Siders, local residents set up the Moss Side People’s Association to make sure Manchester City Council heard their views on redevelopment. The Association was composed of both men and women, but Black women were at the vanguard of the Association’s protest efforts. In July 1969, Kathleen Locke and other Moss Side women, accompanied by their children, presented a petition of 3,000 signatures from local residents to the Ministry of Housing and Local Government.[[14]](#footnote-14) Marching through central Manchester, the women delivered the same petition to Alderman Edwards of the Town Planning Committee, as well as to the local Conservative MP Frank Taylor.

The Moss Side People’s Association did not oppose redevelopment. In fact, they welcomed improvements to the area. Their central concern was that the council recognise Moss Siders’ rights as long-standing residents and homeowners, and consult them in the process. As such, the Association positioned itself within a post-war ‘social consumerist’ ideology, built around achieving a fair deal for the public and protecting weak members of the community who would be affected by rehousing.[[15]](#footnote-15) The Association embedded this social consumerist ideology in their petition, which made two demands: that, if redevelopment were to take place, Moss Siders ‘should be consulted about their future and the new Moss Side they would like to see’, and also that ‘Moss Siders should be allowed to stay in the Moss Side District when it’s rebuilt’.[[16]](#footnote-16) This latter request was made to ensure that Moss Side’s robust Caribbean community was not split up, thereby serving as an example of the way in which Black mothers took action on issues that affected them as Black women. However, this racial component was not made explicit in the demands. Instead by demanding a consultation about the new Moss Side ‘they would like to see’, the Black mothers built on a longer rhetoric of working-class housing activism stemming back to the 1930s, during which women’s organisations such as the Women’s Co-Operative positioned themselves as consumers and citizens entitled to a home catered for them.[[17]](#footnote-17)

From the perspective of Black women, who were being increasingly edged out of discourses of British nationhood and motherhood, the march was particularly salient in claims to belonging and citizenship. As several scholars have noted, the ‘motherhood mandate’ of post-war Britain did not extend to Black women, who, since the colonial period, were deemed by researchers and politicians incapable of possessing maternal qualities.[[18]](#footnote-18) Moreover, from the early 1960s, several political attempts were made to whiten the British citizenry, with the 1962 and 1968 Commonwealth Immigration Acts restricting immigration from the New Commonwealth and Pakistan.[[19]](#footnote-19) In the 1964 general election, Peter Griffiths of the Conservatives gained a seat in Smethwick, based on a campaign during which he pinned the area’s economic and housing issues on immigration and the Asian and Pakistani community.[[20]](#footnote-20) Enoch Powell’s ‘Rivers of Blood’ speech in 1968 also fanned the flames of anti-immigration political discourse, calling for the repatriation of Britain’s racialised minorities, citing Black and South Asian mothers as potential threats to Britain’s welfare state.[[21]](#footnote-21) However, the language around rights helped to revoke this racist rhetoric. As Grace Redhead has demonstrated, Black healthcare activists in the 1970s and 1980s positioned Black sufferers of sickle cell disease as consumers of the British welfare state, thereby employing the lexicon of British welfare citizenship to gain fair treatment from the NHS.[[22]](#footnote-22) In a similar way, as political legislation and a vocal minority of politicians made concerted and explicit efforts to exclude mothers of colour from discourses of British citizenship, the march through Manchester, which made claims to Black women’s housing rights as British citizens, enabled them to assert their belonging not simply in Moss Side, but in Britain.

While Black mothers were at the forefront of the Moss Side People’s Association’s protests, their racialised identity was subsidiary in their demands. In an interview with *The Guardian* about the Association from 1971, Locke stated that ‘all of us are poor whites or Blacks … we’re all still oppressed. Economic discrimination has brought us here together’.[[23]](#footnote-23) Locke collapsed racial signifiers into the language of class to find a sense of allegiance with her white neighbours. Similarly, on the Broadwater Farm Estate in London, one Black mother deployed the language of ‘ordinariness’ to mute labels of ethnicity and produce an image of class and community solidarity. Dolly Kiffin was one of the most active residents on the council housing estate, and set up a new Broadwater Farm Tenants’ group after finding that the pre-existing group included members of the National Front.[[24]](#footnote-24) Instead of leveraging manpower to gain repairs from the local authority for the Estate, she set up the Broadwater Farm Youth Association (BWFYA), which employed young residents to carry out the repairs themselves, while also setting up a food co-op that would cater for old people on the Estate. Kiffin saw herself as Black; she played a prominent role in anti-racist groups and set up her own Civil Rights organisation. Moreover, her action stemmed from the racist treatment of Black residents on the Estate. However, when it eventually came to discussing her tenants’ activism, there were no labels of ethnicity, but rather ‘ordinariness’. In an interview with *Race & Class* in 1987, Kiffin referred to herself as ‘an ordinary person’.[[25]](#footnote-25) She also used the term to position the Estate as collectively opposed to the local Haringey council, asserting that ‘as ordinary people, we didn’t realise that we were stepping on other people’s toes’ and that the council did not like the residents ‘because we as ordinary people came in and tried to experiment’.[[26]](#footnote-26) Matthew Hilton has argued that post-war non-governmental activism, and the issues they were concerned with, are examples of the ‘ordinariness’ of politics in post-war Britain.[[27]](#footnote-27) Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite has also argued that from the 1970s, the British working class adopted a new vernacular of ‘ordinariness’, a deeply politicised term which became pervasive in the language of class, used to refer to working people who were removed from the establishment and privilege.[[28]](#footnote-28) Kiffin’s descriptors of herself and her work as ‘ordinary’ demonstrates not only that Black mothers also threaded this rhetoric into their activism, but that it enabled them to mute matters of race in discussions around their class-based community action.

Despite the protests in Manchester, the Council demolished large parts of western Moss Side, replacing the terraced streets with new housing estates by the mid-1970s with little consultation with the residents. Failing to provide adequate compensation to former owner-occupiers, the Council rehoused these residents in local authority housing in Moss Side or Hulme, making them tenants of the state. However, within a few years of completion, Manchester City Council neglected the management of Moss Side’s new council housing stock. In 1974, the Neighbourhood Council, a group comprised of tenants’ associations from social housing estates in both Moss Side and Hulme, carried out a survey of the conditions of the housing. The Neighbourhood Council found that 41 per cent of maisonettes in the new Moss Side District Centre housing estate, completed in 1971, had bugs, 32 per cent had beetles while 83 per cent had mice.[[29]](#footnote-29) The Neighbourhood Council demanded that the local authority take action, but there was little success. As a result, on 8 October 1974, 80 parents occupied a newly completed council home on Quinney Crescent in Moss Side, along with their children. Gender played an important part in the occupation. While men participated in the protest, women were visibly at the forefront. A photograph of the event printed in *The Guardian* portrayed women at the helm of the protest, featuring two white women looking out of the tiny window of the occupied council home holding a sign that read, ‘homes not hovels’.[[30]](#footnote-30) Unlike the feminist, lesbian, and gay squats of the 1970s that Matt Cook and Christine Wall have examined, the women’s signs alluded to their traditional concerns with the home, rather the wish to forge radical alternative living arrangements.[[31]](#footnote-31) Again, this stemmed from similar rhetoric adopted in the rent strikes of the earlier part on the twentieth century, in which working-class women made demands for ‘decent’ housing in which to care for their family.[[32]](#footnote-32) The demands for acceptable housing standards fed into the Association’s previous demands for equal and fair treatment under the eyes of the state, which imbued these women’s collective identity as mothers with broader democratic concerns.

The occupation was a success: on the 15 October, the Council finally approved an extermination scheme to rid the homes of pests. However, shortly after the Neighbourhood Council withdrew from the occupation of Quinney Crescent, sixty women carried out their own march with their children and prams, blocking the busy Moss Lane East during rush hour to protest over the poor condition of the maisonettes.[[33]](#footnote-33) The use of prams was a method used by mothers elsewhere living on newly developed housing estates. In 1970, a group of mothers from Wansford, Cheshire had also marched into the town centre with their prams to protest against fire hazards on a new housing estate.[[34]](#footnote-34) The pram march, which Black women led alongside white mothers, fractured traditional practices of working-class motherhood.[[35]](#footnote-35) Prams had symbolic functions, serving as a visual and material device that turned the women into ‘mothers’, and as such they became a literal defence mechanism against violence from the state or frustrated motorists. In this way, rather than facilitating a mundane liminal performance that usually lacked significance, the prams imbued an embodied everyday activity with renewed political meaning. Similar situations were mirrored through the construction of play streets, as Krista Cowman has also explored, with mothers in urban areas barricading their streets to protect their children’s right to play, turning traditional street minding into a political act.[[36]](#footnote-36) The use of these objects in such a way challenged the notion that these particular residents of Moss Side and Hulme were just mothers, but citizens protecting their rights.

Housing as a basis for political action for working-class mothers was not new. However, by the 1970s, Black working-class mothers began deploying the same methods of protest and language of white working-class housing activists of previous decades, which enabled them to forge solidarities with their white counter-parts in housing and tenants groups. It also enabled them to be equally assertive as white mothers in making demands for her family, and the locality. Black women spoke about their housing activism through the rhetoric of class, rather than race, demonstrating how housing activism could be the basis for inter-racial community solidarity. However, the language of dem­ocracy that penetrated housing activism served two-fold for Black mothers, also enabling them to highlight, albeit implicitly, their rights as Black citizens and mothers in Britain. In this way, class status, rather than ethnicity, drew them into solidaristic relationships with white women. However, there was the potential for racial disparities in maternal activism to occur. The next two sections will explore further how mother-centred organisations had the potential to create racial fissures within working-class motherhood.

# Playgroups and childcare

By the late 1970s, Moss Side and Hulme had a nationwide reputation for crime and deprivation. In 1978, the ITV magazine programme *World in Action* visited the Hulme Crescents. ‘No Place like Hulme’ examined the dilapidated housing estate, opening with the bold statement from the narrator that, ‘it’s not necessary to go as far as South Africa to observe the reality of second-class citizenship’.[[37]](#footnote-37) The show featured a segment on one mother, following her as she struggled to carry her shopping trolley and baby up several flights of stairs. Walking along her balcony, she was asked about the dangers of high-rise living for children. Talking directly into the camera, she gestured towards to the balcony ledge, ‘well, they put their feet on there, and their hands on there and try to look over. And if you look over yourself, look at what a drop it is’. It is unsurprising that the mother was concerned for her child’s safety. Three years prior, a young child had fallen to his death from the fifth-floor balcony of the Crescents.[[38]](#footnote-38) There was no playground on the Crescents, and the balconies provided the only source of play space for young children. Similarly, in the neighbouring ward of Moss Side, the erection of the Monton Street Estate in the early 1970s also stoked anger among residents about the limited play facilities. Local mother Alice Evans articulated her frustration in the local newsletter *Moss Side News:* ‘One fault of the estate is that, although building family houses, they did not consider the children…there is not one play area anywhere on the estate’.[[39]](#footnote-39) In 1974, Alice, along with her husband Billy, eventually set up a play-scheme for local children in the area.

Mothers commonly complained about the lack of play space on housing estates in the post-war period. As Valerie Wright et al. have shown, the home-centred disposition of post-war Britain pushed child’s play indoors.[[40]](#footnote-40) However, indoor play was a rarity for inner-city children living in flats or smaller homes, and at the same time, the rise of urban traffic and the demolition of cloistered streets in industrial cities impeded their ability to play outdoors.[[41]](#footnote-41) In their rush to build homes during the housing shortage of the post-war years, urban planners did not always factor this cultural and environmental juxtaposition into their designs, and failed to provide play space for children living on housing estates. Working-class mothers took it upon themselves to set up playgroups to provide much needed play space for their children. For instance, when Judy Walker set up a playgroup on the Hillfields Estate in Coventry in the 1970s, she did so because of the lack of play facilities offered to the children on the new estate. When looking back on her time as a mother and playgroup leader, Walker reflected ‘so, so all my life, it’s been about kids, that’s been my motivation in life, is kids’.[[42]](#footnote-42) As Matthew Thomson has demonstrated, the concern for child’s play and safety outdoors in the post-war period extension from ‘the post-war focus on the importance of mothering and provision of a secure, loving home’, as such, the provision of a safe place for child’s play in the form of playgroups became an important aspect of mothering in itself.[[43]](#footnote-43) Walker defined her play work as largely a form of self-sacrificial maternalism, placing her own story outside of mothering in the background. In this way, she was similar to the working-class mothers in Lancashire studied by Elizabeth Roberts in the 1970s, who were considered ‘mothers first and workers second’.[[44]](#footnote-44)

Women elsewhere, particularly in built-up areas, were proud to consider their establishment of playgroups as examples of their individual identities, rather than a natural part of motherhood. Dolly Kiffin, the Jamaican-born mother from the Broadwater Farm Estate, also set up Willan Road Day Centre in the early 1980s to account for the lack of play facilities in the area. In her role as local community activist, Kiffin prided herself on her title as ‘the mother’ of the local area, a nomenclature that indicated her awareness of her exceptional status on the Farm.[[45]](#footnote-45) Kiffin stressed her role as the community mother as a way to elevate her own activism and become a marginal celebrity in her own life story, demonstrated further by commissioning a biography about herself.[[46]](#footnote-46) In her recent examination of mother-centred organisations, Lynn Abrams has suggested that working-class women in deprived areas may not have developed the same understanding of their individual identity and sense of empowerment that these organisations provided middle-class women.[[47]](#footnote-47) However, Kiffin’s commissioned biography is a testimony to the ways in which child-centred groups could open up new avenues for self-exploration among working-class, migrant mothers, allowing them to express a style of selfhood that was becoming typical in the 1970s, one which took note of women’s individual identities beyond their role of mothers.

Back in Moss Side and Hulme, playgroups in the mid-1970s became indispensable tools in the fight against racialised unemployment in the area. The deindustrialisation of Britain’s northern manufacturing towns meant that mothers in inner-city Manchester, who had often relied on factory-line work in the textile or packaging industries, did not hold the secretarial skills necessary to enter the flourishing world of clerical, white-collar work.[[48]](#footnote-48) Many Black mothers needed to re-train, and local skills training schemes provided childcare as an incentive to get women to attend courses designed especially for them. For instance, the Manchester Black Women’s Co-Operative was a skills training project set up in Moss Side in 1975 to equip unqualified Black mothers with office skills so they could re-enter the workforce. Notably, the Cooperative ‘catered for the children while their mothers attended classes’.[[49]](#footnote-49) Childcare organisations were an afterthought to the more pressing project of providing Black working-class mothers with career mobility and some form of financial independence. Observers often only recognised the benefits of a nursery or playgroup to a mother’s professional development after the establishment of a childcare scheme. After Kiffin set up the Willan Road Day Centre on the Broadwater Farm Estate, she and her fellow organisers only realised afterwards that the facility ‘has givern [sic] quite a few mothers the chance to go to work, which they could not do before’.[[50]](#footnote-50) Child-centred groups opened up professional avenues to Black women, to alleviate their racialised poverty and give them greater control over their livelihoods.

It is important to be sensitive to the complexities around childcare, female autonomy, and working motherhood. The professional independence bolstered by playgroups was not necessarily a happy by-product of these childcare schemes for all mothers. A large number of the schemes described above were designed specifically for Black mothers, who were some of the most financially dependent individuals living in Britain’s cities. Racist wage differences (in some areas Black women earned six percent less than white women) and insufficient support networks had made working motherhood a necessity for Black mothers.[[51]](#footnote-51) Moreover, for some Black mothers, the reunification with children at the end of the day was the beginning of a second shift of work. In the account of her stay in Handsworth, Birmingham, travel writer Dervla Murphy painted a picture of the exhausted Black mother, leaving her children at a nursery, and returning from work at the end of the day in no mood for ‘individual dialogue’.[[52]](#footnote-52) The sense of self-sufficiency and personal growth that work provided white working-class mothers, as explored by Laura Paterson, often reinforced the racialised system of inequality for Black mothers in Britain.[[53]](#footnote-53) For many African Caribbean inner-city mothers, improving the professional and personal self was simply a method of survival.

And yet, the playgroups in Manchester attracted Black mothers by also affording them time to carry out domestic chores. The Moss Side People’s Nursery marketed itself on allowing ‘mums…the chance to do a bit of shopping or tidy the house’.[[54]](#footnote-54) Similarly, when Emily Hope set up a playgroup in Holloway in 1972, she wrote in an advertisement in her local newsletter that mothers could ‘leave their children when they needed to go shopping’.[[55]](#footnote-55) In oral history testimony, Black women also noted that childcare groups made shopping alone possible. Valerie Bonsu, who moved from Ghana to the Woodberry Down Estate in Hackney in 1979, praised the mother-led crèche because ‘you…can go and do your shopping and come back’.[[56]](#footnote-56) In her study of urban redevelopment, Charlotte Wildman has explored how the act of shopping allowed working-class women in interwar Britain to escape domestic drudgery and to perform an aspirational model of womanhood, to become someone else.[[57]](#footnote-57) While Valerie saw playgroups as catering to her busy life as a mother, her comment that she could ‘come back’ suggests that the crèche also allowed her to relinquish motherhood, if only temporarily. By allowing Valerie to go and come back to being a mother through the act of shopping, the crèche gave her the opportunity to fashion a different sense of self that was set on her own time.

It is never clear within this discourse whether the act of shopping was for the mother to buy items for herself, or for the family and domestic household. The discourse certainly marked a shift from the rhetoric of the earlier decades of the twentieth century, particularly during the First World War, during which childcare was only seen as acceptable if it enabled working-class wartime workers to be productive, therefore fulfilling their service to the state.[[58]](#footnote-58) Nevertheless, the fact that shopping is the only viable reason why a mother would want time away from her child still suggests that maternal independence was only acceptable if mothers still fulfilled their gendered role as consumers. This stipulation also ties in with Dolly Smith Wilson’s argument that in the post-war decades, mothers from all classes could only explain their employment in terms of benefitting the family.[[59]](#footnote-59) Black and white mothers in inner-city areas could not yet fully articulate a desire for maternal independence in the form of self-care or rest and relaxation. Regardless of this ambiguity, the way in which shopping was considered an act best done alone still demonstrates that mothers sought out, perhaps even enjoyed, time away from their children, and time to themselves.

By giving local mothers the time and space to shop, playgroups and crèches in Moss Side and Hulme facilitated the physical separation between mother and child, allowing women to disengage from the emotional labour of mothering. As well as allowing mothers to shop, the Moss Side People’s Nursery noted that it gave Black mothers time alone ‘without having to worry about junior’.[[60]](#footnote-60) While this emotional detachment from the child was merely to direct the mother’s attention to the home, it still provided the local mothers with the physical distance to nurture their own emotional experiences that were not directly related to the concerns of childcare. Similarly, simply by bringing mothers into contact with one another, playgroups allowed mothers to form friendships that reduced their loneliness. In an Inner London Education Authority report on playgroups in Hackney and Tower Hamlets, it was noted that ‘mothers involved in playgroups frequently remark on the pleasure they get from the companionship of the friends they have made for themselves within the playgroup’, alleviating the ‘lonely, frustrating, and confusing’ aspects of mothering.[[61]](#footnote-61) By offering women, both white and Black, time away from worrying about her child, and liberation from the loneliness of mothering, playgroups freed working-class mothers from the emotional labour that was associated with post-war motherhood.[[62]](#footnote-62)

Playgroups of the 1970s naturally feed into discussions around the Women’s Liberation Movement. In 1984, Janet Finch argued that voluntary playgroups exacerbated a gendered division of labour by often reinforcing women’s unpaid work within the household.[[63]](#footnote-63) And yet even if playgroups were a conduit for some of their organisers to perform a model of child-centred motherhood, these mothers were aware that this was a decision that they had made, rather than one imposed on them. When asked to talk about her relationship with the feminist movement of the 1970s, Walker articulated a form of autonomy that complicated the contingent nature between playgroups and selfless motherhood. Walker found that she did not have the time or the emotional energy to engage with the WLM, which criticised the reliance on women for childcare and demanded 24-hour childcare to balance out this division of labour. Walker noted that ‘[feminism] didn’t enter my lifestyle...What I was doing was, was a good thing, was the right thing for me…so err, you know, people got on with their feminism, I got on with my nursery and my kids’.[[64]](#footnote-64) Walker’s play-work was not a form of feminist activism, but was a way for her to reach a mode of mothering that worked around her own lifestyle and on her own terms.

The playgroups explored in this section were often short-lived, usually only surviving for as long as the founding mothers needed them. However, regardless of their longevity, playgroups and childcare groups enabled working-class mothers of all ethnicities in the late twentieth century to explore and practice different modes of motherhood. This motherhood took on an autonomous nature, in which women could pursue her sense of self outside of mothering in the form of financial mobility, time on her own, and emotional distance from her child. Often Black mothers were at the forefront of this mode of motherhood, responding the racialised nature of unemployment that exacerbated the need for children. However, race also drew limits to these outcomes: childcare groups could often uphold discriminatory practices of labour among Britain’s racialised minorities. Ethnicity determined the benefits of childcare for working-class working mothers in paid employment. As the next section will demonstrate, racism itself served to isolate some Black women from modes of working-class maternal self-reflection and community derived from mother-centred groups.

# Mother and Toddler Groups

In 1973, the Manor Gardens Centre, a health clinic situated just off the bustling Holloway Road in north London, transformed their abandoned dispensary into a Mothers’ Club.[[65]](#footnote-65) The Club offered local mothers, who lived in the new housing estates in the area, the opportunity to converse with other mothers while their toddlers, who were too young to attend the playgroup, played around them or sat on their laps. The Club offered regular social interaction for those mothers who had little respite from round-the-clock childcare. The establishment of the Mothers’ Club was a significant move on behalf of the Centre, which had always engineered its activities towards improving the health of local children. Opening up an empty room to local mothers was a recognition that the well-being of the child was contingent on the emotional well-being of their mothers.

Unlike playgroups, which were predicated on providing care for the child, mother and toddler groups catered for the social needs of the mother. In Moss Side, these groups were essential to working-class mothers in combatting the social isolation that derived from inner-city living. They evolved in tandem to the urban redevelopment programme of the 1970s, as a means of negating the deleterious effects of the new housing estates on women’s social lives. These mothers’ groups were especially important for Black mothers, who were statistically more likely to be lone mothers separated from partners and families due to migration.[[66]](#footnote-66) One lone Black mother from Handsworth described herself as ‘lonely, friendless, and anxious to meet people and escape from her dreary home situation’.[[67]](#footnote-67) Similarly, a mother and toddler group based in the Hideaway Youth Project in the 1980s arose out of ‘an expressed need’ by Black single women who were isolated from wider family support structures.[[68]](#footnote-68) These mother and toddler groups appealed to Black mothers because they recognised, and legitimised, their need for social interaction. These groups actively encouraged this form of maternal self-centredness. A local report on the Moss Side group reported that ‘it [the group] has encouraged parents to … take part in activities organised by, and *for them*’.[[69]](#footnote-69) Considering the vilification and fears around lone Black mothers during the 1970s, who were seen as harbingers of social disorder among young Black men, the acknowledgement that lone Black mothers would and should receive personal satisfaction from the group demonstrated an attempt to undermine the pathologisation of lone motherhood from within inner-city community groups.[[70]](#footnote-70)

Mother and toddler groups were also important in counteracting individual feelings of low self-worth. In his analysis of the politics of the Greater London Council in London in the 1980s, Stephen Brooke has argued women were united through the burden of full-time parenting, arguing were 'engendered by the emotions around issues such as childcare’.[[71]](#footnote-71) These emotions also had agency in forging bonds in mothers groups. In London, on an estate in Islington, ten women set up a mother and toddler group in the 1980s, with the Family Welfare Association noting that ‘what unites them is their loneliness and depression’ that had left members with ‘an inability to feel they had any value in the outside world’.[[72]](#footnote-72) The FWA report noted that the mothers’ group allowed the women to ‘explore problems that they experience in their daily lives’. Once again, this sense of worth was particularly pertinent for lone parents, as mothers’ groups provided alternative spaces for single mothers to escape isolating experiences of inner-city living.[[73]](#footnote-73) Judy Walker remembered that on her estate in Coventry in the 1970s, there ‘seemed to be so many single mothers in these high-rise flats and I distinctly remember so many of them were on Valium’.[[74]](#footnote-74) However, as a single mother herself, Walker could offer some emotional support to these mothers through the mothers’ group she set up. ‘If there were single mums…I used to tell them about my hard time’, she noted, referring to a period of domestic violence in her past, and ‘they knew they weren’t just out there on their own’. Walker indicated that by simply possessing the identity as a ‘single mother’, other women considered her group as a refuge where their experiences were shared and normalised.

As women’s sense of self-worth became increasingly dependent on these homosocial spaces, mother and toddler groups provided opportunities of collective belonging for mothers in Britain’s inner cities. Even prior to attending groups, mothers were made aware that their transgressive experiences of motherhood were acceptable. In a community association newsletter produced in Holloway in north London in 1985, an advert for a mothers’ support group noted: ‘Calling all mothers, do you need an outlet for your pent up frustrations?’[[75]](#footnote-75) Black mothers were instigators of this rhetoric as well. In the neighbouring borough of Haringey, an advertisement for Kiffin’s mothers’ club on the Broadwater Farm Estate asked, ‘Mums – Do you fancy a chat?’[[76]](#footnote-76) These advertisements signalled towards an imagined, emotional community of women, structured on the awareness that other mothers elsewhere were going through the same emotional experience.[[77]](#footnote-77) By the 1980s, sharing the negative aspects of motherhood soon became an accepted norm among all mothers. When discussing her experiences of a mother and toddler group, one woman commented that other mothers, ‘talked about what they felt, and some of their problems, and I knew I wasn’t the only one who felt like bashing the kids or running out on them’.[[78]](#footnote-78) Therefore, through mother and toddler groups, mothers were included into a collective unit of women all ethnicities, in which the feelings of guilt, frustration and loneliness were accepted as a part of a mother’s daily reality.

The construction of these female communities functioned equally on the rejection of outsiders, and the personal gains of mothers’ groups often came at a racialised cost. For instance, when discussing access to welfare support, Jean Darlington, who lived on an estate in inner-city Birmingham, remarked that ‘if I’d have come over on a so-and-so banana boat, I’d have it handed to me on a plate’.[[79]](#footnote-79) Incidentally, Darlington ran the Estate’s mother and toddler group, but her overt racism prevented Beryl Ferguson, her Caribbean neighbour, from attending. ‘Now I’ve been to the mother and toddlers here and they don’t even talk to you’, Ferguson noted, ‘and then they wonder why you don’t go back’.[[80]](#footnote-80) Angela Davis has noted how class differences in Oxfordshire impeded on women’s ability to enter into certain women’s organisations, leaving their memory of motherhood tainted by a sadness at lacking any female social support.[[81]](#footnote-81) Similarly, while Ferguson never experienced direct racial abuse from Darlington, her identity as a Black woman affected her ability to participate in the confessional culture that forged belonging in mother and toddler groups. Thus race and gender continued to work together to determine women’s experience of motherhood.

Some mother and toddler groups were not characterised by racial exclusion. In the television documentary *Scenes from the Farm* (1988), which sought to chart life on the Broadwater Farm Estate in the wake of the Disturbances that took place there in 1985, there is some evidence of harmonious multiracial relations within the mothers’ groups on the Estate. In one scene, four local mothers, two Black and the others white, in the Broadwater Farm Mothers’ Project discussed the subject of setting up a babysitting co-operative:

Mother 1: What is it you’re looking at? Just a babysitting stint two, three hours a night or something? Or an all night sleepover sort of thing?

Mother 2: It could lead to that, I mean, it’s up to whoever’s looking after -

Mother 3: Well this is it isn’t it? ‘Cos everybody’s got different lives int’ they? Some people go out nine, come home eleven. I mean I wouldn’t go out ‘til eleven and come home next morning.

Mother 4: Can I come with you?

[They laugh] [[82]](#footnote-82)

Not only did the footage show both Black and white women discussing a subject unrelated to their racialised identities, but they were also discussing their collective desire to carry out hobbies outside of mothering. In his study of progressive rock in the 1970s, Martin Johnes has drawn attention to the individualistic nature of this genre of music, which nurtured personal experience and separation from education, family, and class background.[[83]](#footnote-83) He has argued that the collective appreciation of the genre among music fans created a sense of community, that he has termed a ‘cult of individualism in unity’. Similarly, in this mothers’ group, the women came together in their group to find a way in which they could allow each other to prioritise their individual lives. The mothers had never met before, but they found an affinity with one another by the end of the scene by their desire to nurture their own need for autonomy and agency. Ironically, it appears as though while the marketing literature on playgroups did not offer up opportunities for mothers to articulate their desire for self-care, these homosocial settings promoted the discussion of such matters.

Private childcare arrangements, more common among single Black mothers, also provided sources of friendship for Black mothers alongside mother and toddler groups. In his popular anthropological study of a housing estate in Southwark carried out in the 1980s, *The People of Providence* (1996), Tony Parker followed Barbara, a seventeen-year-old white resident who looked after the children of her Jamaican and Guyanese neighbours, Hazel and Gloria.[[84]](#footnote-84) Hazel and Barbara had an excellent friendship, with Hazel noting:

We're great friends…Barbara offered me anything I wanted out of her house when I moved in, and God knows she's got little enough herself. But she's such a warm open-hearted sort of person, she just came in and said 'Come into my house and see if there's anything that you need and help yourself to it...’[[85]](#footnote-85)

These practices are demonstrative of Collins’ ‘othermothering’ concept, with women attending to cooperative childcare arrangements in order to attend to the economic discrimination and structural injustices that required Black women to work longer hours than white women.[[86]](#footnote-86) Not only do these arrangements illustrate the operation of diasporic mothering practices in inner-city Britain, but the way in which these global practices weaved into the lives of white working-class mothers.

Inner-city mother and toddler groups contributed to an ‘interior turn’ among working-class mothers, but this turn was predicated on women’s ethnicities. By acknowledging women’s need for social interaction and nurturing their individual experiences, these groups allowed inner-city mothers to look inwards and acknowledge the painful and often isolating experience of mothering. While inherently centred on the maternal experience, these groups gave women the space room to explore their personal identities and emotions beyond motherhood, and thus they mark a shift towards a more self-centred mother in these areas. Moreover, mother and toddler groups drew attention to the fact that women had similar emotional experiences of mothering, bringing them into a community of mothers. Often these experiences surpassed matters of ethnicity, enabling young mothers to form coalitions of support that did not take into account women’s racialised identities. By the same merit, racist members of mothers’ groups could often exclude Black mothers, forcing them to forge separate spaces where other mothers did not spotlight or marginalise their ethnicity.

# Conclusion

The changes brought about by urban redevelopment and colonial and post-colonial migration created changes to the ethnic make-up of working class motherhood in Britain, which historians have yet to examine. This article has demonstrated that threats of slum demolition and consequential inferior social housing provided opportunities for Black mothers to take part in housing activism and make demands as mothers. In many areas, Black mothers were driving forces in this mode of motherhood, as they took action on particular issues that affected them as Black women, particularly housing demolition and dispersal measures. By the same merit, through housing activism they could participate in the shared language of democracy that stemmed from traditions of white working-class mothers in the earlier part of the century. Housing activism united working-class mothers of different ethnicities, as Black mothers used the language of class and new discourses of ‘ordinariness’ to represent their shared experience of material inequality with their white neighbours. Moreover, childcare organisations and mother and toddler groups provided space for the formation of communities based on collective support - particularly among single mothers - and the shared emotional experiences of mothering in Britain’s inner cities, bringing together working-class mothers across racial lines. Thus through the case studies explored here, this article has shown that Black mothers were driving change in many inner-urban areas, while also participating in change alongside white working-class women.

These forms of activism also enabled working-class mothers to nurture their sense of self outside of motherhood. As Paterson, Worth, and Abrams have also demonstrated, mother-centred organisations enabled working-class mothers of different ethnicities to look inwards, nurture their own emotional and social needs, while also enabling them to carry out paid employment. And yet this article has also demonstrated that these groups were not oases of multi-ethnic solidarity where the politics of race did not reach. Childcare groups did not create equal patterns of mothering, as they offered financial independence and self-sufficiency to white working-class mothers, while often perpetuating the system of economic inequality in Britain that required Black mothers to work longer hours for less pay. In a similar vein, mother and toddler groups could at times foster inter-racial solidarity, but could equally operate on the exclusion of Black mothers. Examining the differing experience of working-class motherhood through these organisational aspects of inner-city living demonstrates that while working-class mothers were not defined purely by their race, ethnicity often cut through class to determine women’s experiences of motherhood.

In demonstrating the limits of community organising for working-class mothers, this article has also contributed to ongoing discussions around the nature of race, class and non-governmental activism in the late twentieth century. Mothers from different ethnic backgrounds came together to form political collectivities in the name of their children and their locality, articulating their shared concern for the community through a discourse centred on individual rights. This not only suggests that inner-city areas were not split neatly across ethnic lines, but that, as Jon Lawrence has also argued, community ‘hasn’t died, but it has changed’.[[87]](#footnote-87) As Schofield and Jones have also demonstrated, housing activist groups in the worked across racial lines as the shared conditions of housing inequality in late twentieth-century Britain could function irrespective of ethnicity, thereby producing forms of mother-led community activism. [[88]](#footnote-88) However, in gendered spaces, such as playgroups and mothers’ groups, race could come to fore the shape the nature of mother-led community activism. As Stuart Hall has argued, ‘race is the modality through which class is lived’. [[89]](#footnote-89) Examining motherhood at the granular level demonstrates the importance of viewing the British working class from the perspective of not only gender, but also race.

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87. Jon Lawrence, *Me, Me, Me? : The Search for Community in Post-War England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-87)
88. Schofield and Jones, '“Whatever Community Is, This Is Not It”', 151–61. [↑](#footnote-ref-88)
89. Stuart Hall, ‘Race, Articulation and Societies Structured in Dominance’, in *Sociological Theories: Race and Colonialism* (Paris: UNESCO, 1980), pp. 305–45 (341). [↑](#footnote-ref-89)