

# Black mothering, paid work and identity

Tracey Reynolds

## Abstract

Recent figures suggest that in Britain today, 77.3% of black women are engaged in full-time paid work, a figure which has remained fairly consistent since the introduction of statistical data assessing the work activity of African-Caribbean women from post-war years (CRE 1997). The study addresses the extent to which black women's high work rate derives from a combination of historical cultural and structural economic factors. Historical and cultural, because the experiences of slavery, colonialism and economic migration have had a direct impact on black women's relationship to full-time paid work today in contemporary Britain. In addition, structural economic factors such as high rates of unemployment for black men and lower rates of pay for black men and women compared to their white male and female counterparts, actively encourage a high proportion of black women towards full-time paid work in order to make up for this economic shortfall. A primary consequence of these inter-locking factors is that full-time paid work becomes central to black women's mothering and black mothers' work status is part of their everyday family experience.

**Keywords:** Black mothering; paid work; racism; culture; identity.

## Introduction

Paid work, in particular full-time paid work, is a major characteristic of black<sup>1</sup> mothers' lives in Britain. In 1997, for instance, the Commission for Racial Equality (1997) reported that 77.3% of black women were in some form of full-time employment and that a high rate of economic activity by these women has remained fairly consistent over the years. This has led to several commentators writing in the field to claim that black women's roles as workers is valued over and above their maternal reproductive status (see Breugel 1989; Lewis 1993; King 1995). This article develops such a claim concerning black women's primary status as workers by investigating how specific cultural, historical and structural,

economic factors determine a strong work status among black women in Britain today and create specific employment experiences for these women.

## **Research background**

The article explores the employment experiences of twenty black mothers in order to consider the rationales that inform their decision to undertake full-time paid work. From 1996 to 1997 I interviewed each of these mothers on separate occasions as part of my doctoral thesis. The thesis, a qualitative piece of research, investigates the mothering and family experiences of African-Caribbean women in Britain from the post-war period (late 1940s onwards) through to the present day. In particular, it addresses the way in which race, notions of cultural identity and racism create collective mothering experiences despite generation and social class differences between the mothers (see Reynolds 1999). The interviews with the mothers took place in London, primarily because the region has the largest black population in Britain. The research sample (twenty mothers) is relatively small. The main advantage of this sample size is that it allowed me to focus in-depth on the lives and experiences of each individual mother concerned. This was particularly important because the research subject is in a research area of which there is little available research data in Britain. The ages of the mothers who participated in the research ranged from 19–81 years. This wide age range was central to the study in that inter-generational similarities and differences could be identified. Two of the mothers in the study were between the ages of 19 and 25 years; ten mothers were aged between 26 and 40 years; four mothers were aged between 41 and 60 years and another four mothers were retirement ages and above (60 plus years). This relatively uneven distribution of mothers according to age category was a consequence of the 'snowballing' sample method I used for the research. Following my interview with each of the mothers, they would refer me to another one or two women within their personal networks (primarily mothers, sisters, other family relations, friends and work colleagues) who I could approach for interview. Thus, the very randomness of this process made it impossible for me to secure an equal number of mothers in each age category.

All the mothers of working age, with the exception of one, worked on a full-time basis (a minimum of thirty-five working hours per week). Only the youngest mother in the study, Sharon, was unemployed at the time of interview. The four mothers who were now retired had also worked full-time prior to their retirement. They provide retrospective account of the mothering and the particular issues and concerns that they faced as first-generation mothers raising black children from the 1950s through to the 1970s. The retired mothers' retrospective accounts are

also vital in highlighting the generational shifts in childcare and employment patterns that have occurred for black mothers over the years. In addition, all the retired mothers assist with the care of their grandchildren and great grandchildren today and so continue to offer a significant contribution to the debate.

All the mothers interviewed were either in heterosexual relationships, with partners of African-Caribbean origin or were single-mothers who had children by an African-Caribbean male.<sup>2</sup> The mothers existed in various types of family formation and family household arrangements. This mirrored similar findings by Goulbourne and Chamberlain (1999) whose large-scale project on Caribbean life in Britain found a great diversity in Caribbean family formation that was not always easy to categorize. In the study ten of the mothers had 'traditional' relationships: married or co-habiting in long-term stable relationships. The remaining ten mothers in the study were either single-mothers, with the male partner completely absent from their lives or had 'visiting' relationships. This term was first introduced by writers, such as Dorian Powell (1986) and Olive Senior (1991) and Janet Momsen (1994) investigating the diversity of family household patterns among (lower-class) black families in the Caribbean. 'Visiting' relationships denote those households where the male partner does not live within the household on a permanent basis. Instead, he will regularly visit the household, continue to have a relationship with his family and contribute towards the family economy as and when funds are available. In the Caribbean 'visiting' relationships are predominately found among the urban and rural poor (Momsen 1994). The father has a limited role within the household primarily because he does not earn enough to economically sustain the family on his own. As a consequence the mother, who has a lower earning capacity as a result of gender inequality in society, combines a domestic caring function alongside the role of sole (or primary) financial provider to the family household.

Writers discussing the black family in the British context have drawn upon some of these ideas concerning 'visiting' family relationships in the Caribbean to explain a similar phenomenon in Britain. The work of Ken Pryce (1979); Geoff Dench (1996) and recently findings in my own research (Reynolds 1999) suggest that in many low-income black households, the father may be actively involved in family life. However, economic constraints (such as unemployment or low paid employment) prevent him from living in the household on a full-time basis.

This identification of a commonality in family experiences and household arrangements between black families in the Caribbean and black families in Britain could in itself be considered problematical. The (mis)representation of the Caribbean as a collective and unitary region, for example, conflates and disguises the Caribbean as a number of diverse and differentiated regions with each island possessing its own

unique traditions and customs. Further to this, class, caste, ethnicity and rural or urban region living all influence household family patterns, and the level of women's financial contribution to family income through paid work. Work by Patricia Mohammed (1988) concerning black women in the Caribbean is indicative of the fact that not all black women in this region have historically engaged in paid work, as is commonly assumed. Across the region black women coming from backgrounds from the post-slavery time through to the present day have remained at home while employing poor black women, as 'helpers', to care for their children and undertake domestic work in their homes. The practices by these women chime with the long-practised tradition of white affluent women in Britain (see Woodward, 1997) and the USA (Higginbotham and Romero 1997) who employ black and minority ethnic women from the Philippines, the Caribbean and Latin America to undertake a similar function in their homes. The experiences of these black women from affluent backgrounds also have little in common with the vast majority of black women in the Caribbean, USA and Britain. Studies, such as those by Jocelyn Massiah (1986) in the Caribbean, Sandra Harley (1997) in the USA and Beverley Bryan *et al.* (1985) in Britain, all highlight historically, and across successive generations, the majority of black women in each of these societies have had little alternative but to seek paid work outside the home.

### **Cultural and economic rationales for paid work among black mothers**

In Britain, studies by black and white feminists recognize the centrality of paid work to the lives of black women, (Fiona Williams 1989; Westwood and Bhachu 1988; Gail Lewis 1993). It is suggested that this centrality to paid work is a consequence of black women's status under slavery, British colonialism in the Caribbean and economic migration of black women to Britain from the Caribbean during the post-war era. What connects each of these distinctive historical moments to each other is that black women in each of these instances are socially positioned as workers. Black women irrespective of a mothering status were expected to work alongside their men folk. Slavery, where black women acted as free labour, first removed women's (also black men's) 'human' status and instead conceptualized them as 'mules' and 'work-horses' (Gutman 1976; Mohammed 1988).<sup>3</sup> Black women were not only constructed as human chattel but they were judged purely on their reproductive labour capacities.<sup>4</sup> Work to emerge from the USA, exploring the implications of colonial slavery illustrate the dichotomous relationship of man/woman, work/home and dominant/subordinate, dominant ideological patterns of Western societies, were not applicable to the slavery experiences of black men and women. Angela Davis (1981), for example, sums up the

significance of slavery in creating black women's unique position as workers:

The enormous space that work occupies in Black women's lives today follows a pattern established during the very earliest days of slavery. As slaves, compulsory labor overshadowed every other aspect of women's existence. It would seem, therefore, that the starting point for any exploration of Black women's lives under slavery would be an appraisal of their role as workers. (Davis 1981, p. 5)

Herbert Gutman's (1976) study of African-American life in the USA also returns to slavery to explain black women's role as workers in contemporary society. He argued that slavery produced a cumulative effect for black people, that is, structural oppression and systems of inequality and disadvantage that in turn affected black men's ability to earn a sufficient wage for his family. Black families had to culturally adapt themselves to survive this and a primary survival strategy involved black communities culturally adapting themselves to accommodate the socio-economic need for black women (including mothers) to work outside the home. Christine Barrow's (1996) work investigating black families in the Caribbean presents a similar argument. She suggests that black women's actions as workers is regarded as a 'positive response to adverse circumstances of poverty and unemployment especially amongst males' (p. 65).

Britain's colonialism in the Caribbean further strengthened claims regarding black women's work status (Shepherd *et al.* 1995). This culminated in the introduction of government policy during the late 1940s to actively recruit black women and men from the region to Britain and thus act as a source of cheap and flexible migrant labour. Black women were recruited to key public services that were suffering from an acute labour shortage at the time: the National Health Service, manufacturing industries, public transport and public utility services (Breugel 1989; Lewis 1993; Bhavnani 1994). One striking aspect of this recruitment pattern of black women was that a 'significant number' (Bryan *et al.* 1985, p. 43) of black women who arrived in Britain to take up full-time paid work were themselves mothers with young children or women who became mothers within a few short years. This finding is supported by my own research where eight out of ten first-generation mothers who migrated to Britain, and who also worked full-time arrived with young children or had had children within the first five years of arrival. Black mothers' entry into Britain as workers directly contradicted the popular discourse of the time that advocated notions of the 'good mother' whose central location is in the home with their primary role as domestic homemaker, nurturer and carer (Kathryn Woodward 1997).

There is evidence to suggest that the legacy concerning black women's status as workers still exists today. Black women continue to represent

the highest proportion of women in full-time employment. This fact has remained unchanged since statistical data first emerged during the early 1980s to measure ethnic differences in women's labour market participation (Bhavnani 1994). Furthermore, black mothers themselves still continue to view their work status as part of a longstanding cultural practice. In my study, one mother Michele, when discussing her own relationship to paid work, surmises:

**Michele:** Why I work is not something that I have really thought about. My mother worked, my grandmother worked and my foremothers before that, so I don't see why I should be any different. I would imagine that it is the same thing for most black women too. Certainly the black women that I know, their mothers and even their grandmothers have also worked and so I don't think what I'm saying about my family is that unusual

[Michele, age 28, single-mother – occupation: legal secretary]

Michele's comments about her own work identity forge a historical and cultural link between past and present, and between her own individual experiences, and that of other mothers within her family and social networks. Yet, to understand black women's status as workers in Britain today purely within this context of black women merely continuing a long-standing tradition disguises the way in which structural and economic necessity is at the forefront of this assumed cultural practice. Most notably, both black men's and women's subordinate location within the labour market on account of race and gender discrimination act as key factors in encouraging black mothers towards full-time employment.

Today in Britain, for instance, there is a high rate of unemployment for black men specifically and across the black community in general. Recent findings indicate that black men are more than twice as likely to be unemployed as compared to white men, (Richard Berthoud (1999). Research by the Moyenda Project (1997) found that the high rate of black male unemployment has indirectly contributed towards maintaining high rates of black women in full-time paid work. Indeed, one of the mothers in the study presented her choice to work full-time as an outcome of her partner's inability to find employment:

**Denise:** At one stage both of us were unemployed. I decided it would be easier for me to find work and he would stay at home and take care of our son because I feel that it is a lot easier for a black woman than a black man in this country to get a job. Companies would rather take a black woman over a black man and that's the main reason why you have so many black men out there drawing dole money

[Denise, age 22 – living with partner hairdresser]

Even in instances where black men are in full-time employment, lower

earnings and greater job insecurity compared to their white male counterparts, across all sectors of the labour market, (Modood 1997)<sup>5</sup> ensure black men's financial contribution cannot always, on its own, adequately sustain family and household expenditure. The working mothers to whom I spoke, in partnered relationships (married/living together), stated that one of the main reasons they remained in full-time employment was to cover the financial deficit of their husband's salary. One working mother:

**Zora:** his wages are not enough for all of our bills and so I feel I have no choice but to go out to work so that all of our bills can be covered  
[Zora, age 26, living with partner – occupation: housing officer]

Anita, a married mother expresses a similar viewpoint:

**Anita:** We depend more on my salary if not more than his because I earn a little more than 'David'. His money covers most of the household expenses like the electricity, gas, his car repayment for instance and my money goes on the mortgage, shopping, my car repayment, nursery fees and buying things that the children need. I have thought about staying at home but that's a dream. Realistically speaking there's no way that his salary alone, his money would be able to do everything

[Anita, age 43, married – occupation: university lecturer]

There is no doubt that the high proportion of lone-mother households prevalent among black families in Britain has also contributed towards black mothers' work status. Over half (51 per cent) of the total number of African-Caribbean families in Britain are single-parent households (Modood 1997; Goulbourne and Chamberlain 1999). All but one of the single-mothers in my study chose full-time work over unemployment or part-time hours because it offered them the only viable option to maintaining some degree of economic freedom and financial independence. One single-mother comments:

**Jamilla:** I am determined not to rely on welfare because it's a trap. They only give you so much money and they expect you to live on that but of course you can't live on the pittance they give you, and so you go into debt. Getting up and going to work every morning is hard but it's the only way I know to have a comfortable life and to be able to afford the things that I want to do.

[Jamilla, age 25, single-mother – occupation: special needs teaching assistant]

Financial contributions from 'absent'<sup>6</sup> spouses towards childrearing and other domestic costs in some instances provide single mothers with an alternative source of income. However, the level of financial support that the single-mothers in the study received from these men varied

according to individual circumstances, and it was also largely dependent on the father's current relationship, his employment status and the level of contact he had with the mother and his children. In 1991 Children Support Agency [CSA], was set up to increase the financial contribution of 'absent' fathers towards their families. However, this agency, in reality, has had little effect on these single-mothers' lives because they were reluctant to involve the CSA in their financial arrangements with the 'absent' father. Instead, these single-mothers preferred to make their own private financial arrangements with these men or receive no financial support from him at all. Their reluctance to report their children's fathers to the CSA was based on the justifiable fear that societal institutions (of which the CSA is one example) pathologize and criminalize black men. Such economic constraints facing black mothers mean that even if they do support the 'traditional' Western ideal of mothering – that is to remain at home with their children while their male partner assumes sole or primary responsibility for household family provision (Richardson 1993; Ribbens 1995) – these ideals take second place to the economic realities that they encounter.

Recent statistics by the Commission for Racial Equality (1997) show that black women work longer hours, and engage in higher rates of full-time employment (77 per cent at a minimum thirty-five working hours per week) than white women (56 per cent at a minimum thirty-five working hours). Importantly, for white women the number of women in full-time employment has more than doubled in rate over the last thirty years. Yet, for black women, their working hours have remained virtually unchanged from the late 1970s when the figure was 74 per cent (Jones 1984). There is a far greater tendency for white women with children of school age and younger to work part-time (40 per cent) whereas the rate for part-time employment among black women is much lower (Dale and Holdsworth 1998). For example, the proportion of black mothers working part-time is as low as 12 per cent in London (Owen 1994). In comparable jobs across all sectors of the labour market, black women earn disproportionately less than their black male and white male and female counterparts (Bhavnani 1994). While it is true that an increasing minority of black women are entering professional and managerial occupations (5 per cent), the vast majority of black women (69 per cent) are positioned on the lower rungs of the occupational ladder (Modood 1997). Moreover, the jobs they are concentrated in tend to be administrative and other non-manual posts that offer lower pay and little opportunity for career (and with it salary) advancement (Bhavnani 1994). One primary outcome of black women's subordinate location in the labour market is that black women have to work longer hours (hence greater rates of full-time employment) or remain in a post for longer continuous years in order to earn similar rates of pay to other social groups.

The employment activity of black mothers and their high rates of employment suggest that paid work is a central aspect of their mothering despite the fact that unemployment is becoming an increasing phenomenon for young black women (including mothers) in Britain. In speaking to the mothers it was common for them to identify paid work and mothering practices (the emotional and physical care and nurturing of the child) as two interlocking and interdependent functions:

**Zora:** I don't see them as separate things – I work so I can be a mother. If I didn't work, I wouldn't be able to take care of them [children] properly, or take care of their needs, so I wouldn't really be doing my job properly as a mother if I didn't go to work.

[Zora, age 26, living with partner – housing officer]

**TR:** Do you think that going out to work is an important part of being a good mother?

**Joy:** Most definitely yes, it's very important to me, knowing that I'm out there working for my family.

[Joy, age 39, single mother – government administrative officer]

Both of Zora's and Joy's comments implicitly convey an understanding of 'good' mothering being dependent upon their ability to financially support their families through paid work. This supports similar work on black women in the USA (such as Hill Collins 1994) and Britain (Duncan and Edwards 1999) that identify the 'mother/worker' status as being 'good mothering' for black women. Interestingly, such comments as expressed by Zora and Joy are in opposition to traditional Western ideologies of mothering and employment that present the two as separate, and often incompatible, gendered entities (Richardson 1993). Their perceptions of 'good mothering' concerning paid work and mothering as two interlocking functions present a distinctive alternative to the idealized and normative representation of the 'good mother' – the mother who remains at home to care for her children, in particular during the children's formative years (Woodward 1997). Recent debates concerning maternal employment in Britain recognize that 'gendered moral rationalities' on maternal employment remain rooted in this idealized notion of 'good mothering'. As a consequence mothers who work full-time are perceived as 'morally wrong', irrespective of whether or not they work because of economic considerations (see Duncan and Edwards 1999).

This Western idealized notion of 'good mothering' has to some extent influenced black mothers' views concerning working mothers. Two of the mothers whom I interviewed openly questioned the culturally accepted practice of working mothers and they also voiced a desire to change their working practices in order that they can have more time at home with their children:

**Melanie:** I don't know where it says that we [black women] are automatically expected to keep working all of the time. It just seems to be the done thing for black women. Given the chance I would stay at home with my baby son. Also I like the bit with my daughter coming home from school where I could be home when she's there. So, what I would like to do is set up my own nursery. Or if it costs too much maybe I could set up a childminding service at home. That way I'll be able to choose my own hours and have more time for them [children].

[Melanie, age 29, single-mother – inland revenue officer]

**Lydia:** There is that expectation and pressure that comes, more from within the black community, that as a good black mother, then you work to provide for your family. However, if I could afford it then I would be at home with my family, although I would have to probably find something to fill my days. I could do some form of charity work and help other children who are sick or disabled. Or I could make things such as little arts and crafts and sell them to raise money for a charity. That would be really good.

[Lydia, age 28, single-mother – clerical officer]

Two other mothers in the study also offer retrospective accounts of their own childhood in order to reflect upon the way in their own working mothers negatively impacted on their childhood:

**Melanie:** When we were younger my mum was at work all the time. She used to do shifts so it just depends on if she was on early shift or late shift, but she wasn't at home from four o'clock or whatever time school finishes and you sort of notice the difference. We missed out on a lot of things because our mum was always working. We didn't go anywhere. We didn't go brownies or anything. We even had to beg just to go to church (laughing).

[Melanie, age 29, single-mother – inland revenue officer]

**Jamilla:** Going back to my childhood, I do remember thinking I wish my mum was there to take me to school and pick me up. I went to a childminder, she used to take me to school. In the mornings my mum and dad used to leave for 7.30am and I used to go over there first to have breakfast, it was only when I got big that I could cater for myself. I did miss not having a mum there when I woke up in the mornings to make breakfast for me and send me off to school and be there when I got back from school. I want to have a kind of job, I don't know if it's possible, where I could be there first thing in the morning and last thing – you know drop them off at school and pick them up. I just missed that in my childhood and I want to have that for my daughter.

[Jamilla, age 25, single-mother – special needs teaching assistant]

Melanie, Lydia and Jamilla appear to speak the language of the Western 'gendered moral rational' discourse concerning 'good' mothering and celebrate these ideals. Indeed, the latter two accounts and, in particular, Melanie's account, also imply a 'maternal deprivation model' (O'Brien 1996) of full-time working mothers. However, despite the mothers' claims to want to remain at home with their children, all of them in their accounts consider the option of doing activities that would take them outside the home. Lydia, for example, speaks of a desire to do charity work. Jamilla and Melanie want employment opportunities that offer flexible working patterns. The fact that these mothers still consider the option of some form of work (either paid or charity work) suggest that these mothers do not completely reject all elements of the black cultural practice of working mothers. It also reveals the implicit tension black mothers commonly experience in balancing Western ideas mothering alongside with their own cultural expectations.

### **Working mothers and childcare**

Black mothers' work status produces childcare implications. In terms of the first-generation mothers who arrived in Britain during the post-war period, the occupations that they were primarily congregated in, such as nursing and manufacturing industries, were worked on a shift system. Elyse Dodgson's (1984) study of black women's family life during this period shows that the shift system of working perversely helped to facilitate these women's childcare and domestic arrangements, despite the long and unsocial hours of work that they did. Working on a shift system meant that black mothers could arrange to work different shifts to their partner (and others involved with childcare), leaving someone available to care for their children at different times of the day and night. The mothers were particularly forced to depend upon their own family members and their social networks because white childminders would often refuse to care for black children (*ibid*). The other forms of childcare options available to these mothers included sending for relatives, usually the women's own mother, from the Caribbean to care for the children, or alternatively sending young children back to the Caribbean to be cared for by family members, (see Goulbourne and Chamberlain 1999). Black mothers who could not afford the cost of sending their children back to the Caribbean or bringing a relative to Britain depended upon their husbands to play a key role in child care. As one first-generation mother recalls:

**Enid:** The jobs we did meant that I worked nights and my husband worked in the day. After work I would rush home to get my children's breakfast ready and then my husband would leave for work.

In the afternoons we would eat together and then I would leave for work and he would care for them until the next morning when I arrived back home.

[Enid, age 68, first-generation mother – retired nurse]

Black men's prominent position as carers remains largely undocumented, and they continue to be represented as absent or marginal from family life. The research work by Goulbourne and Chamberlain (1999) and my own research (Reynolds 2000) are some of the few attempts to re-insert black fathers into constructions of the black family.

In comparing the childcare options available to black mothers today with black mothers during these early post-migration days then on a theoretical level black mothers today have more child care resources available to them. Thirteen mothers in the study with pre-school children or children of school age used some form of formal childcare service, such as childminders, nurseries, work crèche, after-school club and holiday play schemes.

The demand for childcare provision far outnumbers the supply in Britain (Cohen and Fraser 1991). Research findings by Burghes and Brown (1995) also indicate that the race, social class and occupational status of working mothers largely determine their access to childcare. Social class and occupational status certainly influenced the mothers' childcare choices and options in the study. Those black mothers with professional occupations and levels of high income have the easiest time with their childcare arrangements. For instance, one mother employed as a Director of a mental health trust on a relatively high income employed a live-in nanny to care for her children. Another high income working mother, employed as a lawyer, has a childminder who assists in getting her children ready for school in the mornings, taking the children to and from school and caring for them at the end of the school day until the parents arrive home. Unsurprisingly, those black mothers with lower incomes had a more difficult time accessing affordable childcare provisions. Their experiences mirrored those of many low-income mothers across all ethnic and racial groups (Daycare Trust 1997). Childcare costs comprise the largest proportion of monthly expenditure for all the working single-mothers in the study. **Nizinga**, one single-mother, comments:

'At the end of the month she [daughter] is starting nursery. It's going to break my bank.

**TR:** Can I ask you how much it will cost you?

**Nizinga:** £347 a month but my mum is going to help me out otherwise I couldn't afford it on my own.'

[Nizinga, age 31, single-mother – university administrator]

Black grandmothers are the primary childcare source for the working

mothers. One reason for this is that demographically the black population in Britain is a relatively young one with 75 per cent of black women under the age of sixty-five years (Owen 1997). As a result, black grandmothers are unlikely to act as primary childcare providers during the working week because they themselves are likely to be in full-time employment.

### **The impact of black female unemployment on black mothers' work status**

Of course, not all black mothers are in full-time employment. Increasingly, high rates of unemployment, traditionally the preserve of black men is now starting to impact on young black women too. Recent CRE figures (1997) place unemployment for all minority ethnic women between the ages of 16 and 24 years at 30 per cent compared with 12.5% of white women. Within this minority ethnic group of 16–24 years old, black women represent 37 per cent of unemployed women. One outcome is that the employment activity between black women under twenty-five years and black women over twenty-five years is becoming more pronounced than ever. This leads to a tentative, and as yet unproven, suggestion that paid work at the centre of black mothering can no longer be universally assumed. Instead a 'bi-modal pattern' (personal correspondence, 2000) of black mothering is being developed where there is a high commitment to full-time paid work and high employment activity for those mothers over twenty-five years and a low commitment to full-time employment (primarily determined by unemployment) for those mothers aged 16–24 years.

Those mothers who cannot afford childcare costs, or are denied access to it as a result of unemployment or low incomes have no choice but to remain at home and are dependent on the state to look after their children financially even if they are keen to work. **Sharon**, a single mother of 19, and the only mother in the study who is unemployed, encountered the barrier of a lack of available free nursery places for low-income mothers in seeking employment. As a consequence she felt that it was more beneficial to remain at home and care for her own children instead of securing employment with low wages that do not adequately cover the cost of childcare.

Sharon's experiences support those studies which find that while the number of mothers in full-time employment is increasing overall, the number of low income single-mothers in employment is declining as a result of high childcare costs (see Phoenix 1991; Edwards 1993; Silva 1996). The current Labour government is to some extent working to redress this issue and also shift 'gendered moral rationalities' for welfare dependent single-mothers towards maternal employment instead of a moral reasoning that mothers should be at home with young children

(see Duncan and Edwards 1999). In 1998 the New Deal Initiative for Lone-Parents was introduced to encourage single-mothers away from welfare state dependency and towards self-sufficiency through paid employment. The initiative provides a range of services targeted towards single-mothers, such as training, work placements, flexible working hours, personal advisers and assistance with seeking childcare to help them in seeking employment. Recent reports, such as Millar 2000 suggest that in the short term, the programme has been relatively successful, with nearly two-fifths of lone-parents on the scheme, but it is too early to measure the long-term benefits of this scheme for lone-parents. Despite the introduction of such policy initiatives as the New Deal, however, there still remains a shortfall in adequate and affordable childcare provision for mothers on low incomes.

### **Black mothers in the labour market: 'mother-ism, racism and sexism'**

Despite black women's long work history in Britain's labour market, they have enjoyed a less than successful relationship in it (see Westwood and Bhachu 1988; Williams 1989; Lewis 1993). The intersecting factors of racism, sexism and 'mother-ism' have all impacted on black mothers' relationship to work. The term 'mother-ism', first introduced by Heather Joshi (1991) highlights the way in which employers discriminate against working mothers based on their mothering status and continue to remain sceptical in their attitudes towards them. The following comment by, Michele, clearly depicts the way in which 'mother-ism', has combined with the racism and sexism to constrain black mothers' employment choices:

**Michele:** I was the first black woman the firm ever took on. What made it worse was that I was a mother, a single-mother and so they made certain assumptions about me. When I first started the firm put me on three months probation. It wasn't probation to see if I could do the job, they wanted to see if I would dash home because my childcare arrangements were not sorted. I never had to leave the office because of childcare arrangements. When there was another vacancy going in our department, they got another mother. I gave them the incentive to choose somebody else who was a single-mother, another black girl, but her childcare arrangements were not sorted and she left after a period of time. Then my boss went back to, 'I don't want another mother, I want somebody who hasn't got any children. [sic]

[Michele, age 28, single-mother – legal secretary]

As the above quotation by Michele indicates traditional expectations of mothering still underpin employers' attitudes to working mothers. In many instances being a mother, in particular a single-mother with young

children, can act as a significant barrier to securing employment, or inhibit promotional prospects for those mothers already in work (Joshi 1991). For black mothers (as the previous quotation illustrates) there lies the additional burden of being the 'first' and 'only' black woman within the organization alongside being the 'first' and 'only mother'. The interlocking experiences of racism, sexism, and 'mother-ism' encountered by working black mothers also make it difficult to determine which of these factors, are most influential affecting their employment conditions and working practices.

Reena Bhavnani's (1994) study of black women in the labour market recognizes that their historical position is characterized by patterns of horizontal and vertical segregation. Horizontal segregation, because black women are continually concentrated in specific occupations and sectors of the labour market. In the early post-migration years black women were concentrated in nursing or semi-skilled manual work, in specific industrial services (such as catering). Today, most black women are employed in public administration: central and local government (40 per cent); and retail and distribution (22 per cent), (Bhavnani 1994). Within these occupations vertical segregation exists because black women are over-represented in the lower paid and lower status posts across these employment sectors. For example, in the public administration sector, a large employer of black women, black women are disproportionately employed as junior clerical/administrative workers (69 per cent) and their presence as senior managers is virtually negligible (a slight increase from 1 per cent in 1982 to 4 per cent in 1997) (Modood 1997).

The 'glass ceiling' cuts across all sectors of the labour market to limit black women's promotion prospects and the opportunity to enter specific areas of employment (Phizacklea 1988). For those black women in professional and managerial positions the career choices and opportunities for career advancement that they face are narrowly defined. For example, an early study (Reynolds 1997) indicates that management posts black women predominantly secure are occupations that have a majority of black client users.<sup>7</sup> Chris Ham (1991) analysis of race and gender in the National Health Service also point to the prevalence of black female senior managers in the least glamorous 'Cinderella' health care services such as geriatric care and mental health. To suggest, however, black women are always marginalized or even 'ghettoized' into making their employment choices denies their agency. Five of the mothers in the study that were employed in professional posts – a teacher, lawyer, social worker, academic lecturer; mental health director – identified that they actively sought out employment in predominantly 'black areas' or with a high proportion of black client users. To some extent their employment choices represent a 'strategic' means of securing greater opportunity for professional mobility and career success. Nonetheless, their employment

choices can also be viewed as a means through which to 'give back' to the black community and act as a positive role model for others. Two mothers offer frank appraisals of their employment choices that support these claims:

**Cara:** I teach at a school just down the road from where I live. When I heard about the vacancy, I thought I wouldn't mind teaching in a place like this because of the challenge there would be. It used to have a really bad reputation but they got a new headmaster, a black man, and he has done some wonderful things. I thought that I could also do some good, maybe make a difference here and make my contribution to the local community.

[Cara, age 50, widow – art teacher]

**Jamilla:** I think the major issue faced in being a black teacher is probably just being seen. As it is I'm not a teacher but a support assistant now and the children look at me as an adult within the school and therefore somebody who deserves respect. I'm also training to be a teacher because I think there aren't many of us [black teachers]. The school I'm working in now has a school roll of 325 children. There are only three black members of staff in the school but yet there are a large amount of black children from our background in that school. I think we need a lot more black teachers because I think they [schoolchildren] should see that they are represented, and as a teacher I would be able to do that. A lot of the teachers here tend to be from middle-class backgrounds and don't have much in common with the children here.

[Jamilla, age 25, single-mother – special needs teaching assistant]

## Conclusion

To conclude, there is evidence that black mothers' long employment history in Britain is shaped by interlocking cultural and economic factors. Historically and culturally black mothers in Britain, along with black mothers in the Caribbean and the USA, have been constructed as workers. These women possess a mother/worker status. The historical experience of slavery, colonialism and economic migration, within a British context, shows black mothers' economic labour capacity for work is a primary status.

For black mothers today a tension exists in balancing this mother/worker status against the discriminatory conditions that they face as part of their daily working lives and the desire for greater personal choice and freedom in their working practices. Within the study this has translated itself into increasing numbers of black women considering employment options that would take them out of full-time paid

employment (but not necessarily situate them in the home as full-time carers). Other mothers have sought to resolve this tension by actively looking for employment opportunities that allows them to 'give back' to the wider black community and act as positive role models for others. In reality economic constraints limit these options for many black mothers and they continue to work in work settings in which racism, sexism and mother-ism is an everyday aspect of paid work.

## Notes

1. For the purpose of this article the term 'black' refers specifically to people of African-Caribbean descent.
2. Recent figures suggest that nearly 50 per cent of black men and 30% of black women are in mixed-raced relationships in Britain, (see Berthoud, 1999). The fact the sample comprised families with exclusively male-female partnerships is indicative of the mothers' own personal networks and the sample is not meant to be representative of the population as a whole.
3. Not all theorists agree with this point. Nnaemeka (1997), for example, identifies a high work activity among black women in pre-slavery societies.
4. This includes black women's fertility and reproductive capacities. As black slave women they were positioned as 'breeders' whose role was also to reproduce a future workforce (Davis 1981).
5. There was strong variation within this group varied according to individual circumstances such as level of educational attainment. Those African-Caribbean men with degrees have a far less risk of unemployment compared to those men with only a secondary school education and little or no formal qualifications. However, overall as a group the average risk of unemployment was high and those African-Caribbean men with degrees had a considerably higher risk of unemployment in comparison with white men with similar academic qualifications (Berthoud 1999).
6. The men who shared a 'visiting' relationship with mothers in the study (ie. not living within the household on a full-time basis) also come under this category.
7. A case in point being Lambeth Council, London, England who appointed the first African-Caribbean woman as Chief Executive of the borough of Lambeth which has the highest proportion of African-Caribbean people within a local population in Britain (Owen 1997).

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**TRACEY REYNOLDS** is Research Fellow in the Faculty of Humanities and Social Science at South Bank University.

ADDRESS: Dept of Humanities and Social Science, South Bank University, 103 Borough Road, London SE1 0AA, UK.