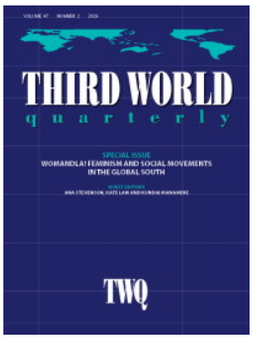

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Urban assemblages, motherhood and mobility in Johannesburg and London

Silvia Gullino[a] and Margot Rubin[b]

[a]Department of Architecture and Built Environment, Birmingham City University, Birmingham, UK; [b]School of Geography and Planning, Cardiff University, Cardiff, Wales

ABSTRACT

In this article, we explore the intersection of motherhood, mothering and mobility practices in Johannesburg, South Africa, and London, UK. Using an a posteriori mode of comparison that focuses on processes rather than repeated patterns, and drawing on assemblage theory, we examine the challenges of mothering and mobility in major cities of both the Global South and North. This approach enables us to show how the material and non-material shape everyday experiences of motherhood. In doing so, we argue that urban spaces are active components in the assemblages that make mothering both possible and challenging, rather than passive backdrops to human activities. By demonstrating how cities enable or constrain maternal mobility, we highlight the need for urban design and mobility policies that more explicitly account for mothers' lived realities.

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Introduction

In a 2018 *Guardian* article, Christine Murray, internationally renowned architect and founder of the Women in Architecture Awards, wondered what cities would look like if mothers designed them (Murray 2018). She illustrated her article with a powerful image[1] of a mother relying on a man (perhaps a stranger) to help her carry a pushchair down the stairs at a London tube station. The article sparked meaningful debates about the often poor design of urban spaces, particularly for mothers and 'others' on the move. However, the article and image also hint at mothers' complex assemblages as they navigate these spaces to care for their children and practice 'motherhood' in urban environments (Boyer and Spinney 2016).

In this article, we explore the intersection of motherhood, mothering and mobility practices in Johannesburg, South Africa, and London, UK, using assemblage theory to examine the challenges of caring and moving in major cities across both the Global South and the Global North. Assemblage theory provides a framework for understanding the roles both material and non-material aspects of the city play in the experience of motherhood

CONTACT Silvia Gullino silvia.gullino@bcu.ac.uk

(Araneda-Urrutia and Infante 2020). It underscores the idea that urban spaces are active components of assemblages, making mothering both possible and challenging, rather than passive backdrops to human activity. This approach also enables us to disaggregate the elements that contribute to the accoutrements of motherhood and mobility (e.g. transport, public spaces, the space of the home) and examine how these components shape conceptualisations and practices of mothering.

Furthermore, using the idea of assemblage allows us to engage with the affective nature of mothering, mobility and the city, an essential yet highly neglected aspect of these practices. This approach helps us to consider how mothers 'make do' in cities that were never designed for them and are indifferent to their needs (Gullino, forthcoming). We build on Shand's (2018, 261) premise that 'everyday life is a process of assemblage, forged in struggle to cope with marginalisation and efforts to realise ambitions for life in the city'. In doing so, we explore how women hybridise, mutate and adapt infrastructure, space and expectations to raise children and navigate their identities as mothers in complex urban environments.

Using assemblage theory (Araneda-Urrutia and Infante 2020) in two such diverse contexts, like Johannesburg and London, and with two distinct groups of respondents, provides valuable insights into the intersections of motherhood and urban mobility. Such a comparative strategy aligns with the turn towards comparative urbanism (Myers 2014; Peck 2015; Robinson 2013) in which a posteriori and seemingly unlikely comparisons operate as 'a creative space through which hypotheses are generated and tested' (Brill 2022, 253). Such an approach highlights how urban infrastructures, socio-economic conditions and culturally embedded meanings of motherhood co-produce everyday mobility in both the Global South and the Global North.

However, this approach also goes beyond mere consideration of difference, demonstrating core commonalities in mothering and mobility. Irrespective of the urban environment, the city remains a key part of the assemblage, which is why it is helpful to think about two such disparate cities.

By juxtaposing Johannesburg and London, we challenge the persistent stigma and exceptionalism often associated with southern cities whilst still recognising the unique inequalities they face. This work contributes to what Söderström (2021) describes as a 'radically inductive' a posteriori method that compares urban processes rather than idealised or hierarchical city types (Montero and Baiocchi 2022). In doing so, we foreground mothers' lived experiences in large cities and highlight how caring for different kinds of children shapes their mobility practices, constraints and claims to urban space.

This article undertakes three main objectives. First, it explores the relationship between mothers and their cities, focusing on the emotional and affective nature of this engagement as mothers navigate the urban landscapes of two major cities: Johannesburg and London. In doing so, we examine how motherhood is performed in both private and public spaces and how the city's infrastructure becomes an integral part of mothers' assemblages of care. Second, it focuses on the 'indifference of infrastructure' (Rubin et al. 2023), which can hinder both parenting and mobility. Finally, the article challenges assumptions about differences between cities in the Global South and the Global North, examines motherhood and mobility, and demonstrates that these experiences are not as divergent as often assumed. The article concludes by offering insights into how urban planning, spatial materiality and design can be reimagined to better support mothers, mothering and mobility in large cities.

Assemblages of motherhood and mobility in urban contexts

This section draws on Deleuze's philosophy and explores how cities shape people's daily lives and urban experiences. We begin by exploring the concept of cities, understood as constantly changing, as dynamic assemblages. We then explore the complex relationship between motherhood and mobility, highlighting how mothers' movement through urban spaces is significantly affected by inequalities. We finally explore the emotional and affective dimensions of motherhood in urban spaces.

Cities as dynamic assemblages

Assemblage, one of the key concepts in Deleuzian philosophy, has been interpreted, adapted and understood in different ways in urban studies over the last two decades (see, for example, McFarlane 2011; DeLanda 2006; Kamalipour and Peimani 2015). For this paper, assemblage is defined as a 'set or network of highly intertwined, non-hierarchical, and transhistorical discursive-material relations of power that desire and produce a specific situation in the present' (Araneda-Urrutia and Infante 2020, 343). This conceptualisation aligns with the view that assemblages are emergent processes of becoming (DeLanda 2006) – that is, a network of affective, material, discursive and embodied relations that 'develop in unpredictable ways around actions and events' (Fox and Alldred 2015, 401).

Assemblages consist of multiple elements that may be in tension, 'connections' and 'capacities' that are greater than the sum of their parts (DeLanda 2006). They contribute to the contemporary articulation of social–spatial relations by addressing the 'inseparability of sociality and spatiality and the ways in which their relations and liaisons are established in the city and urban life' (Kamalipour and Peimani 2015, 403). Kamalipour and Peimani (2015) and Tonkiss (2011) argue that their unfinished and often rickety status makes cities and urban systems perfect for assemblage thinking. Cities are formed by planned physical infrastructures and spontaneous and evolving interactions between human and non-human elements, like people, places and technologies. Cities are, in fact, an ongoing process of construction, consistently coming into being and never finished (McFarlane 2011). They are spaces in which politics and social attitudes are made concrete (both literally and figuratively), shaping processes of inclusion and exclusion and influencing daily life and the urban experience.

Cresswell and Martin (2012) extend this idea and look towards the relationship between 'turbulence', assemblage and mobility, showing how 'Assemblage theory, in particular demonstrates how various forces continually construct, deconstruct and reconstruct each other, offering forms of temporary stability coextensive with their potential collapse' (517). They argue that when brought into conversation with mobility this shines a light on when mobilities and their technologies falter, and that such failures are an inherent and important part of thinking about how, when and what moves and in what ways. Others have considered the interrelationship between the affective, sensory landscape and mobility, showing how the body becomes the interface between the assembled modes of mobility and those who use it (Jones 2012; Pile 2010). The usefulness of bringing together assemblage, mobility and affective thinking can be seen in Holton (2019, 435), who shows how, together with a wide variety of technology, 'the amalgamation of people, places and technologies can, in fact,

greatly influence how pedestrian experiences are assembled, transmitted, received and interpreted'.

We use such thinking to show how, at its core, assemblage theory is of the view that reality consists of dynamic systems, sometimes even conflicting, constantly changing, resulting from various domains, such as technological, social, political and biological factors. These elements interact with mobilities in ways that can produce new forms, behaviours or dynamics that each component, by itself, would not be able to produce. As pointed out by McFarlane (2011, 653), 'It is the interactions between components that form the assemblage, and these interactions cannot be reduced to individual properties alone'. These elements are not fixed but are always in the process of becoming and, when combined with mobility and affect, offer new understandings of the daily and differentiated experiences of residents.

As we will explore in the following sections, cities are not neutral backdrops of urban life but rather active participants in shaping gendered and other experiences, such as those of mothering. The material and non-material aspects of the city, such as transportation systems, public spaces, the home environment and socio-cultural norms, form a complex assemblage that either supports or hinders mothers in their daily roles. Mobilities provide a helpful lens through which these assemblages become visible, because they are shaped by physical infrastructure but also by motion and emotion, attitudes and temporality. This perspective provides key insights into women's daily lives and experiences while caring for children (Luzia 2010).

Motherhood and mobility

As feminist urban scholarship has pointed out, *whose* mobilities are considered is of great matter (Greed 2011; Hanson 2010; Kern 2021; Murray 2018). Not all urban residents experience mobility equally or at the same speed. There are significant inequities in how different people can and do move. In both the Global South and Global North, a fundamental axis of such inequalities is gender. Women's mobility is complex. Travelling is more difficult in systems and cities designed by and for able-bodied men (Loukaitou-Sideris 2020). As Kern (2021) points out, motherhood brings the gendered nature of the city into 'high definition', making visible the barriers and challenges that mothers face in navigating urban spaces. Issues such as transportation access and design, safety concerns, and the multiple social and economic roles women often play in unsafe environments highlight significant barriers to mobility within the city, particularly when travelling with babies and children (Gullino, forthcoming). As such, we take seriously the recursive and relational nature of mobility, mothering and infrastructure and build on Spinney and Boyer's (2016, 1117) insight that 'the materiality associated with travel "pushes back"' on subjects to shape experiences of mobility and identity construction.

As a spatial practice, motherhood involves both the mother's movement and the children they care for in the city. As such, it offers a valuable lens for understanding how the mothering assemblage is constructed and its implications for women in their daily lives. As Aitken (1998) observes, both everyday geographies and the geographies of parenting are intensely shaped by the arrival of children. Women, often the primary caregivers, bear the gendered burden of mobility as they accompany their children through daily routines (Bostock 2001). As Clement and Waitt (2017) argue, mobility and spatiality are central to the experience of motherhood; 'motherhood emerges while walking somewhere' (2018, 1187). Women

construct and negotiate their identities as mothers through movement, not just through caregiving (Boyer and Spinney 2016). In this sense, mother and child urban mobility forms a joint geography (Ataol et al. 2022), described by Boyer and Spinney (2016) as 'mother–baby–pram assemblage' (MBA). Waight and Boyer (2018, 461) expand on this by drawing attention to the 'mutually constitutive relationships between human and non-human' elements while parenting. Everyday practices of mothers (for example, dropping children off at nursery/school, commuting to work, or attending doctors' appointments) are deeply influenced by mobility, which in turn impacts how these tasks are carried out.

In undertaking these daily tasks, Neely (2023) shifts the focus from the mother as the sole actant in the mobility assemblage, arguing that 'the mother is only one actant in the MBA; agencies of the baby, partner, family, bodies, things, spaces, traces, hauntings, and histories all share in the response-ability' (Neely 2023, 10). In examining the mobility assemblage, it is crucial to consider how various transportation modes (cars, buses, and even pavements or parks) become part of these networks. However, as already alluded to, urban space is often poorly suited to motherhood and mobility, resulting in the day-to-day practice whereby 'mothers used their bodies as a means to bridge the gap between responsibilities and resources' (Bostock 2001,16), highlighting both gender urban deficit and how mothers' bodies become integral to the mobility assemblage. In this sense, navigating the city, whether by walking, pushing a pram, or taking public transport, becomes an embodied practice which is central to how mothers move through city spaces and balance daily responsibilities (Clement 2019).

This perspective emphasises the complexity of the assemblage: mobility is co-constituted by multiple actors (including the mother, the child and the urban environment). As we will discuss in the next section, these relationships are particularly evident when moving through the city or, conversely, when encountering barriers that challenge the movement.

Affective nature of motherhood in the city

While women build their identities as mothers through mobility (Boyer and Spinney 2016), it is no surprise that their experiences of moving through the city as part of this assemblage can often be experienced as a struggle. Moving through urban spaces with a baby or a child requires constant renegotiation and adaptation to a range of (non-human) actors, such as modes of transport, access to those modes and the infrastructure that supports them (Luzia 2010). The simple act of 'taking the bus', for instance, becomes a complex joint practice involving the mother and child, where challenges related to space (e.g. pram size limits on buses, waiting for another bus), technology (e.g. prams that may not fit or get tangled while boarding), and social factors (e.g. overcrowded buses) intersect. Thus, the everyday experience of moving through the city requires multiple micro-negotiations. These decisions are based on considerations of where to go or to park (accessibility), how to go (safety, both physical and emotional), and when to go (avoiding peak times or overcrowded spaces) and the feelings and emotions that surround these choices. These point to the highly affected nature of motherhood and mobility. We view affect as relational, dynamic and beyond the personal. It shapes agency, rather than just being the result of individual actions.

In turn, the parent–child dyad and the local geographies (Platt 2024) co-constitute place and emotions. In these spaces, 'bodies on the move become intrinsically connected to place' (Boyer and Spinney 2016; Thrift 2004), with attachment or dislocation occurring both in and

through mobility (Banwell and Kingham 2023; Boyer and Spinney 2016). When mother–baby assemblages struggle with their environment, it creates a profound sense of dislocation and exclusion from the places where people live and move (Schindler and Neely 2024). Conversely, Schindler and Neely (2024) further argue that when motherhood assemblages feel catered for, at ease and a sense of belonging 'urban spaces then become sites of care' (Schindler and Neely 2024, 2). We argue that by acknowledging the affective nature of maternal mobility, we gain deeper insight into the emotional experiences of mothers navigating the city. Boyer and Spinney (2016) describe the experience of motherhood as a 'shockingly affecting one' (114). Similarly, Neely (2023) and others argue that affect is 'generative of different ways of knowing and modes of becoming' (Bozalek and Fullagar, 2021, 26). This perspective allows us to better understand the impact of city form, poor material infrastructure and the absence of care infrastructures. These elements, along with the human and non-human relations and affective flows between them, are central to understanding women's maternal distress and vulnerability (Schindler and Neely 2024). Acknowledging these factors is critical for developing a deeper understanding of maternal experiences in urban spaces.

The existing literature engages with the ideas of mobility, motherhood, assemblage and affect. However, there is little that brings these concepts into dialogue and demonstrates their relational dynamics. Our work begins to fill this gap and shows how mothers, in response to the indifference, and at times hostility, of urban environments, become assemblers: 'assembling resources', adapting spaces, making do and modifying infrastructures to meet their needs. In addition, the assemblage work that is needed to accomplish mothering in daily urban life does not come with an affective cost. An emotional, sensorial and material engagement is experienced by constructing and reconstructing these assemblages over and over again through the course of the day. In the next sections, we outline the research methods employed in our two studies in Johannesburg and London and provide insights into these arguments.

Bringing assemblages of motherhood in Johannesburg and London into dialogue

As mentioned, this article draws on two separate research projects that were conducted independently, both structurally and methodologically.[2] By bringing these cases into conversation, we aimed to develop a more nuanced understanding of the complex, multilayered nature of motherhood in cities. Our approach is steeped in two prevailing methodological approaches. The first draws inspiration from the work of Ramesh (2018), Soderstrom (2021) and Brill (2022), whose scholarship emphasises unlikely comparison as a creative space, one that lends itself to powerful and creative inductive processes. This allows the work to remain experimental, allowing us to think the cities through each other and to ask how the experiences and epistemologies emerging from Johannesburg can tell us about London and vice versa.

The second approach we employ is a posteriori comparison (Montero and Baiocchi 2022, 1537), which rests on three strategies. First, cases are selected after research has been completed when 'two or more researchers realise the comparative potential of their findings'. In our case, this realisation followed the Gender Urban Research Collective workshops on gender in city contexts held in Cardiff (2022) and Utrecht (2023), where we recognised the value of bringing these two projects into dialogue. Second, a posteriori comparison involves

'building comparative analyses based on repeated instances' (Montero and Baiocchi 2022, 1537) and, third, it seeks to generate new concepts and theoretical conceptualisations (Robinson 2016).

Through these discussions, we identified several overlapping themes and concerns, which led to a collaborative effort to combine our findings. These conversations revealed that the differences in mothers' daily experiences in cities in the Global South and Global North may not be as significant as sometimes assumed. This insight was the main reason for our decision to bring these two separate projects into dialogue: to challenge conventional assumptions and explore how similar patterns in motherhood, mobility, and urban life may be similar across diverse global urban contexts. And so we kept seeing 'repeated instances' where our work was throwing up the same findings in our different cases and amongst our different respondents. A further advantage of such an approach is that the particularities of each city are less important than understanding the nature of the processes and repeated patterns that arise through this dialogue between the two sites, and it is these that we focus on.

However, what we noted in particular was how both projects explored motherhood and mobility in urban contexts but with distinct foci. The first study examined mothers and children, later expanding to include *parents* and children in Johannesburg, while the second centred on the urban experiences of first-time mothers of premature babies navigating the complexities of London. Our biographies had a place in both research processes, as we both played the combined role of mothers and social science researchers (Finch 1993; Oakley 2013). Our conversations revealed shared starting points and motivations for our studies. Margot Rubin had recently become a mother for the first time and was offered the opportunity to undertake research into motherhood in Johannesburg. Silvia Gullino was a first-time mother of a premature child who had experienced neonatal care in London. As new mothers, we both navigated the challenges of balancing work and childcare in cities that often felt alienating, dislocating and indifferent to our newfound needs. These research projects became a way for us to engage with motherhood's material and immaterial challenges. Our insiderness strengthened our understanding of other mothers' perceptions and feelings while learning to venture into the urban environment with their babies and children (Widdowfield 2000). We also shared a deep commitment and awareness of the built environment shaped by our disciplinary interests in geography and planning and feminist sensibility. This sensibility influenced our awareness of the gendered inequality of our own cities and the desire to investigate the commonalities of our own experiences as a basis for advocacy and to ensure that voices that had previously been ignored were given space.

Interestingly, the two research projects shared several methodological similarities. Because of our positionalities as both researchers and mothers, we both strongly emphasised the importance of reflexivity through the use of field notes, the organisation of focus groups and debriefing sessions, ensuring that additional support was available. Reflexivity was essential for addressing potential biases in data interpretation, but also because our emotions had a significant cognitive impact on the research process itself. Both studies also employed ethnographic methods and mobile trackers to map participants' movements and explore shifts in mobility within the city. These methods allowed us to explore mothers' experiences in the two urban contexts and to understand the challenges they faced and the adaptations they made. They allowed us to generate rich insights into the mothers' daily lives, capturing their emotional experiences as they navigated the complexities of urban

life. The enriching dialogue between the projects emerged from the two different urban contexts, participant selection criteria and the availability of public transport.

The Johannesburg-based research consisted of two separate but interrelated projects conducted between 2015 and 2019. The first project involved interviews with 22 women broadly defined as 'mothers' (including biological mothers, grandmothers, female relatives including cousins, aunts, sisters) from various socio-economic backgrounds across the greater Johannesburg area. This study explored how motherhood shapes and changes the way that women navigate the city, focusing on geographies of work, home, leisure and responsibilities. The research included a qualitative interview with each mother and an activity where mothers were asked to draw maps of their lives and responsibilities, which yielded a mixed array of responses.

The second project included 43 participants, 36 of whom were interviewed. Almost two-thirds (27) were mothers, and a third (15) were fathers, with a focus on understanding how gender influences these experiences. In this second study, we selected five sites in Gauteng (see Figure 1), that represented a cross-section of racial, socio-economic and geographical diversity. We held five focus groups, one in each area, with 6–25 people in each and then selected 8–10 participants from five households to partake in a more detailed study. This phase involved tracking their mobility for two weeks, supplemented by auto-photography and audio-journaling through WhatsApp voice notes. After the two-week mobility tracking, each participant took part in an interview covering aspects of parenting, daily activities, roles, identity and values.

The five sites varied significantly, as did the participants. In the initial study with 22 respondents, the mothers were drawn from across the region, representing all racial groups and spanning the socio-economic spectrum. However, due to issues of access, there was a higher representation of professional mothers who were well-educated and identified themselves as middle class. In contrast, in the second study, we deliberately chose sites that provided access to different forms of transport, proximity to the Central Business District (CBD) and levels of amenity, and diversity in race (see Table 1).

In the Gauteng region, the majority of people rely on minibus taxis which are controlled by private cabals. These taxis operate along set routes but are largely unregulated. Although the state has introduced a light railway and a Bus Rapid Transport (BRT), both are generally underused by the majority of commuters (Rubin et al. 2023).

Figure 1. The five sites chosen in the Gauteng case study.

Table 1. Summary of key features of case study sites in Johannesburg, Gauteng.

Site	Income levels (average)	Race*	Transport infrastructure	Location	Amenities
Mamelodi	Low	Black African	Walking Paratransit	Old, established township outside Tshwane	Very limited, low state investment
Bertrams	Low	Black African (largely migrant communities)	Paratransit BRT	Centrally located, close to the CBD	Decaying infrastructure: remnants of apartheid investments
Lenasia	Mixed but generally middle income	Indian	Buses Private cars	15km from the Johannesburg CBD	High levels of amenity, maintained by the community
Denver	Very low	Black African	Trains Paratransit Walking	Informal settlement. Peripherally located in old industrial area	Old hostel housing and no other amenities
Edenvale	Middle to High	White	Private cars	Old "white" suburbs	Very high levels of amenities

*The inclusion of race and racial categories in South African is relevant due to legacies of exclusion and contemporary spatial politics.

The London-based project was run between 2013 and 2015 and, differently from the Johannesburg project, it was an interdisciplinary socio-medical project focused on first-time mothers[3] and their prematurely born babies.[4] The project was undertaken with a team of neonatologists and focused on first-time mothers of babies born prematurely in two socio-economically diverse boroughs of inner London (Lambeth and Southwark) (see Figure 2). It focused on mothers' and babies' experiences of the urban environment in the first four months after hospital discharge, when mothers and babies were trying to adjust to life at home. The research used a subject-control research design and sought to address a knowledge gap: understanding how mothers cope with urban life with a vulnerable baby once they leave a neonatal unit and how the transition from the home to a broader built environment affected mothers and their babies. While still in the hospital, 19 mothers and babies were recruited by one of the consultants who was part of the research team. It was a qualitative study that used diaries (in paper format and in digital format as a Webapp) walking interviews with the researchers (see Figures 2 and 3). Thematic network analysis was used to analyse the experiences of these 19 mothers (Gullino et al. 2017).

The context of inner London played a fundamental role in the project as, in Lambeth and Southwark, most of the population doesn't own a car and essentially relies on public transport – buses, as there is minimal underground transport coverage. The vast majority of Johannesburg residents also do not own cars and often walk, in combination with paratransit in the form of minibus taxis for everyday travel, largely due to the unreliability of trains and the poor bus options in most areas. In exploring mothers' sensory experience and entanglement with the material world once they have a baby (Boyer and Spinney 2016), the project used two ethnographic methods: diaries and GPS-tracked walking interviews (Evans and Jones 2011; Jones et al. 2008; Meth 2003).

Affect and the everyday practices of mobility for mothers

In this section, we explore the insights that emerged from the individual analyses of each study and the collaborative dialogue between them during the workshops. We focus on how a range

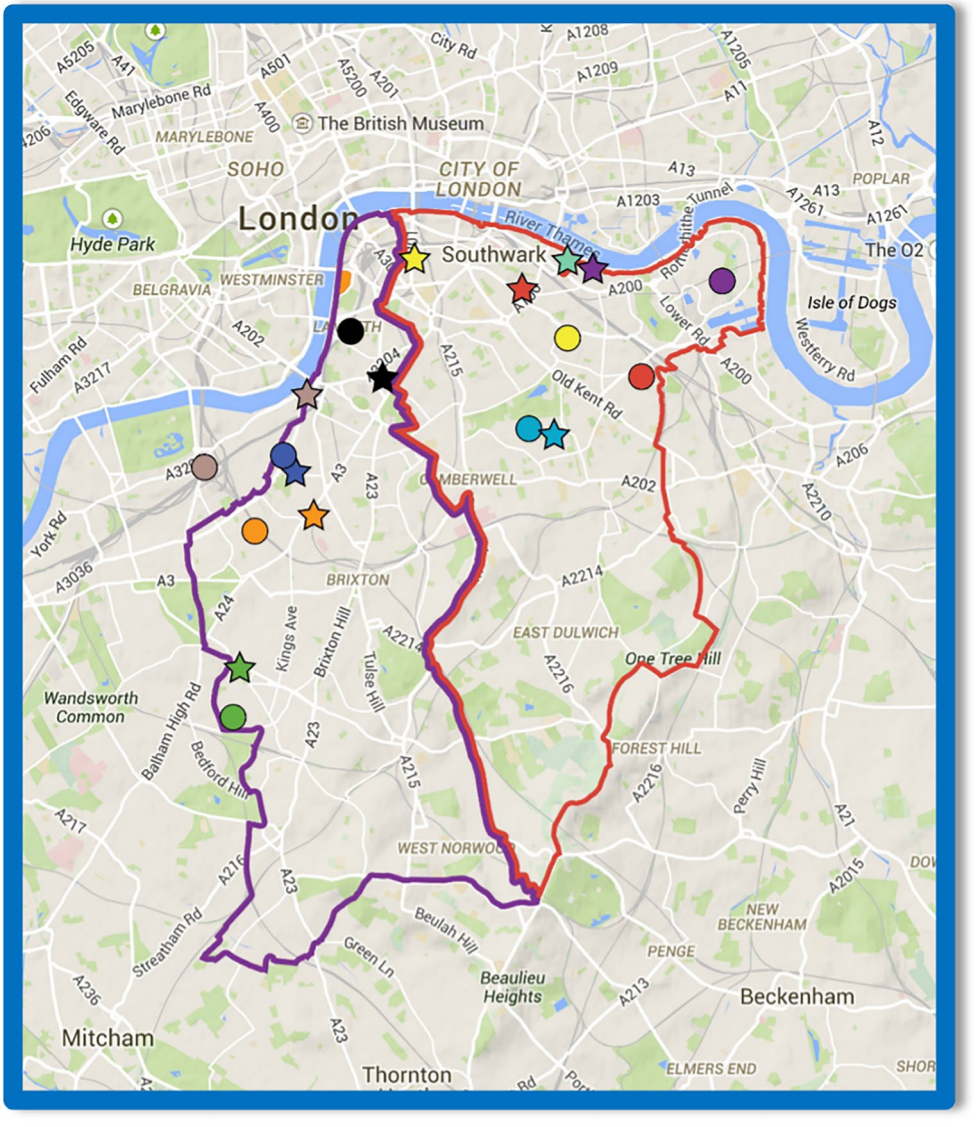

Figure 2. Location of participants in the project. Participants are matched by colour: the stars identify subject mothers and the circles the control mothers. Source: authors' elaboration using Google Maps.

of factors, both *material* (such as home environments, public spaces and transportation) and *immaterial* (including social networks and mothers' identities), shape the mobility and the experience of mothers and their children in these two urban contexts. We also explore how cultural and contextual differences influence mothers' mobilities and we draw attention to a number of key themes, namely home, the public sphere, mobility and affect, and we then highlight how these factors collectively influence daily practices of mothering within the two cities.

The paradox of home

Like many other urban dwellers, mothers are forced to negotiate the city daily. As Kern (2021) argues, motherhood brings the gendered city into high definition. Everyday practices like

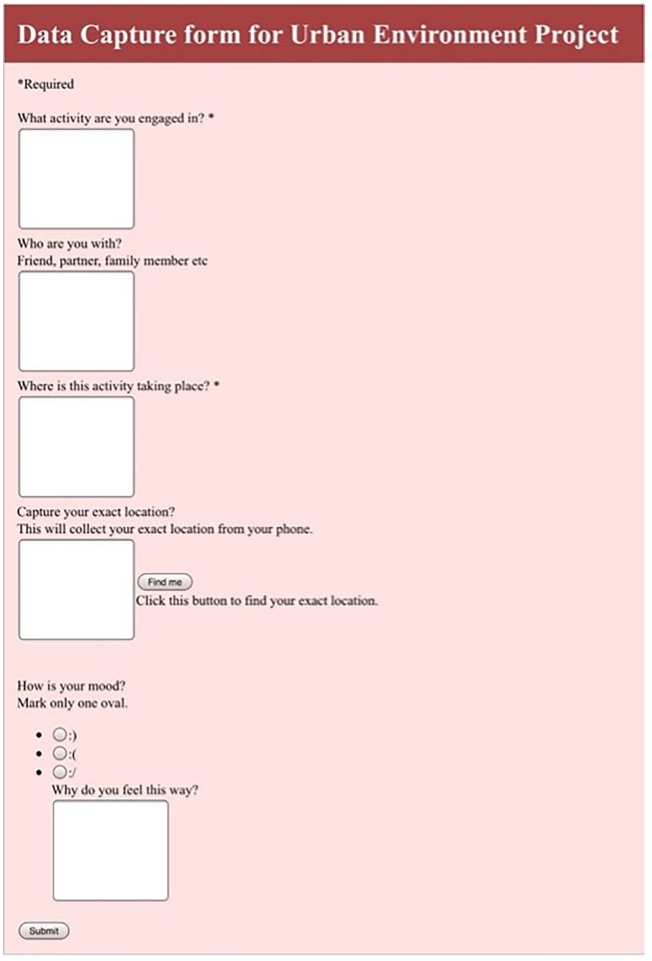

Figure 3. The web app used to capture mothers' experiences while navigating London.

going to work, taking children to nursery/school, running errands and accessing healthcare services reveal the complexity of the assemblages that emerge from these interactions.

Being mobile in cities like Johannesburg and London is often challenging for mothers, but home is also a paradoxical space. On the one hand, it (mostly) offers safety (see, for example, Blunt and Dowling 2006) and comfort, but on the other, it also offers isolation and boredom. Diary entries from the London study reported how activities like walking in a park, shopping at the local supermarket and stopping at a café and the local pharmacy were often undertaken for women's well-being. Expressions like 'Get out of the flat', 'Keeps my mind clear', 'Get some fresh air', 'Boring for both of us to stay at home', 'I would go a bit crazy if I were stuck at home', 'Get exercise' and 'Mother's sanity' highlighted how such ordinary, daily routines were important to maintain their mental health and how trapped women could feel when staying at home. In Johannesburg, a mother spoke about the mundaneness and tedium of being at home with small children:

> I've been home [sic.] and I was even crying yesterday because I was saying how I can't do this anymore. I need to go back to work. I just need change because I'm doing the same thing every

> day; like waking up in the morning, feeding her, then I bath her, then she sleeps, then I'm sitting there doing nothing. I love it, but I also just need some me time. (J1)

Another mother of small children from the same study reflected on how 'The only time that I have peace is when I am out of my house and they [her children] are at school' (J2), describing how

> You come home and these children have homework and everybody is on your ears wanting to tell you everything and anything and even when you are trying to let them know that 'No, wait, I will listen to you', that causes a fight and that is so stressful. It's like you talk forever.

The home, while often seen as almost synonymous with motherhood (though this can be contested), is not always an easy place to be as a mother. It can offer safety but also be isolating, mundane and stressful, with risks to mental well-being (Schindler and Neely 2024). The immobility experienced in the urban context and its emotional implications are not well explored in the literature. There is the tendency to assume that home is a part of the material and the mother–baby assemblage without recognising that such an assemblage is paradoxical, inconsistent and ambiguous in motherhood practices.

However, mothers from both studies expressed a strong need to be out of the house (Gullino et al. 2017). The result was the need for safe spaces for mothers to engage and children to play. J3 (2014), a middle-class mother, spoke about the importance of their weekly playdates: 'Some moms come from all over Johannesburg. We play together, and we get a chance to chat, and they [the children] get a chance to play'. However, this need for socialising often goes beyond mere companionship; social interaction plays a crucial role in the process of becoming a mother. As one participant noted, it provides 'someone to talk to, to ring with silly questions' (L1). In the absence of established networks, these interactions, especially those involving their children, emerged as highly significant in affirming mothers' sense of identity as a 'good mother' but also in learning how to be a mother (Marshall, Godfrey, and Renfrew 2007; Miller 2005). Passing on 'tips', sharing ideas of how to deal with problems, these social interactions become important sites for learning mothering practices.

Urban spaces play a fundamental role in the mothering experience. Parks, outdoor spaces, coffee shops, social networks and playdates all contribute to how women perform mothering. As Aitken (1998) observes, both physical and immaterial infrastructures of care, such as 'accessible spaces, welcoming neighbours, friendly "strangers", people who appear similar to "me", and familiarity with the local environment', are crucial for parental health and well-being (Strange et al. 2015). Feeling welcomed in space and experiencing a sense of belonging is vital for mothers seeking comfort and inclusion within the city. Struggling to navigate their surroundings can lead to a profound sense of dislocation and exclusion from the spaces they inhabit and move through (Schindler and Neely 2024).

Mobility and the public sphere

Going out in the public sphere allowed women to embrace their new identity as mothers by assuming a socially defined and publicly visible role (Collett 2005; Miller 2005). This public performance continued as their children grew older. Through new friendships and specific social activities, women with children affirmed their sense of motherhood. Apart from a 'few cues, hints, and stage directions' (Goffman 1959, 72), women are not told how to become

mothers. An essential part of adopting and maintaining this social identity is 'looking and acting the part' (Collett 2005, 327).

Mobility in the urban environment plays a crucial role in allowing women to get out of the house, network with other mothers and carry out the everyday tasks of motherhood: taking children to school, medical appointments and after-school clubs, amongst a host of other activities (all discussed below). Navigating the urban landscape can be daunting, often requiring adjustments and calculated efforts. Many women are well aware of the scrutiny, gaze and judgements they face in the public sphere, and always conscious not only of performing motherhood but of being seen as 'good mothers'. Yet the physical environment as women move through space is not always supportive of these efforts. At times, it raises doubts about their ability to take care of their children. In this way, the assemblage falls short, creating spaces of doubt and discomfort that undermine mothers' confidence.

Mobility and transport challenges in London and Johannesburg highlight the complexities of these affected motherhood assemblages. The reliance on public transport in inner London is a common aspect of urban living, but the accessibility of these modes of transport for mothers with prams (in particular, the underground and train) emerges as highly problematic. Public transport accessibility and physical barriers were raised by every participant in this study. Mothers shared stressful experiences either because of bus drivers showing a lack of understanding or because they had to negotiate the limited space on the bus with other buggies or with a wheelchair.

A London mother of a pre-term baby remembered that she took her daughter

> … on the bus… the pram tipped and [name of the baby] fell out … and so I hadn't been holding onto the pram, and I suppose I didn't know that you had to because I had never been on a bus before with a pram … so obviously I was … stressed, so I shouted at the driver which I shouldn't have done.

And again:

> [number of the bus] is only a small bus and also you can't fit the buggy down the aisle so you have to get on at the back doors, then you have to leave the buggy, walk to the front to do your oyster card [electronic payment] and then come back again, the bus driver always drives off and you have to leave the buggy while the bus is going and it's a bit [check here, dangerous], but also people like to look at her and when I'm not there to supervise her interaction it's a little bit strange. (L2)

Implicit in this account is the anxiety of using transport that is not designed for mothers, or anyone else taking care of a baby, and the sense of being judged while forced to leave her baby unattended in order to navigate public transport.

However, opting out of public transport came with its own set of challenges and rewards. London-based respondents shared how walking and pushing a pram with a small baby allowed them to see the urban environment in a new light. As one mother put it, 'I have spent more time discovering little parks and squares because I have been walking' (L3). They began noticing hidden corners of their local spaces, and familiar places like Boots and Sainsbury's acquired new meanings: 'My daily trip to the local supermarket generally makes an excuse, I like to come down with a reason … I can't believe it has become my local hangout' (L4). Such local places were now visited with new excitement, even becoming their new hangouts. Expressions like 'My Marks and Spencer' and 'My [café] Nero' (L5 and L6) claimed new personal connections. But circulating in the city with a tiny baby also meant a highly

magnified awareness of environmental and physical features emerged, influencing mothers' emotions and decisions on where to go (Gullino et al. 2017).

During the walking interviews, many discussions concentrated on the multi-sensory aspects of the environment, such as dirt, heavy traffic and fumes. Mothers expressed concerns about pollution and the overcrowded spaces, often deeming them unsuitable for their vulnerable babies. Some participants mentioned the traffic as something that 'scares me…'. 'It's such heavy traffic and that I think has been the main problem in London for me when I go out …. Also if it's heavy traffic, all the fumes you breathe in … it sounds silly but … traffic is horrible! You have big big trucks, lorries passing by and buses just spitting out all that fumes and the noise'; '[London] is a very dirty city, especially public transport, we don't have a car … we live in the centre so we don't need it' (L6).

The situation in Johannesburg shares some important parallels but also reveals stark differences. In both cities, using prams presents challenges. A mother in London noted how walking with a pram on certain pavements can be enjoyable – (helping the baby fall asleep) 'normally we go to this part because she likes the bumpy [cobblestones]' – or be a reason for various concerns – 'because there's a lot of curbs and things that you have to push things up and down, you have to lift the buggy up and down steps and getting on or off buses. You need to be quite aggressive in a way to make space for yourself …'. She continued: 'Now that [the baby] is heavier it's fine. When she was small, she was flying around in the pram. So that's been an issue and that actually decides where I walk sometimes' (L5). A mother living in a more affluent area of Johannesburg spoke about the difficulties of walking with a pram:

> oh, the City of Joburg [local council] has not looked after their pavements, the people who live in the suburbs are not as neighbour-friendly as they should be. So you get people who go, outside of [their] house, the sidewalk is going to be this design. And it's a design that makes it impossible, for not only me to push a pram through, but for pedestrians. So then why, when everyone goes 'why is everyone always walking in the road?' you go 'well because, you [referring to homeowners …] have deliberately stuffed up the pavement for them to walk on' (M1, 2016)

Another mother, reflecting on walking through the Johannesburg CBD, remarked:

> In the city I feel like when walking down the street, there aren't enough sidewalks to push the pram. It is actually quite dangerous. … I actually prefer to put him on my back. I know that he is close to me, I do not have to look around and he is safe. (M21)

In a mixed informal and state-supplied housing area, a mother told us "In Diepsloot, it's a rough place. So I can't go around with a child in a pram. So many cars, many people. So …' (M10) (Parker and Rubin 2017). In these cities, the physical landscape becomes part of the mothering assemblage, shaping an affective landscape where women feel "afraid," frustrated or forced to be "aggressive.""

These comments highlight both similar and different assemblages in the Global North and South. One key difference is that in the Global South babies and small children are often put on their mothers' backs and secured with blankets and towels for long periods of time as mothers traverse their cities. The assemblage thus is not with a pram but is far more intimate and involves taking children on and off their backs to enter any kind of transport. In these cases, the mothers' bodies become a form of urban infrastructure. The second is that due to the lack of adequate public space and fears around safety, children often

accompany their parents on many of their daily journeys. M2 described it as a situation in which '[the kids go with me] All the time, the one is my handbag, and the other one is my purse'. Marisa mentioned that the 'The kids go with us to these places [grocery shopping and running errands] though. If we need to go shopping during the festive season, they go with us but it doesn't make it easier' (M8).

There are, however, consequences to these assemblages. One Johannesburg mother described her children as 'menaces' and explained that

> they're old enough to realise that shopping isn't fun. They're still quite small and then I've got to try and keep A in, in the seat of the trolley. And R, he usually jumps on to the back and holds on. But then, you know sometimes, they've actually tipped the trollies before and fall then with the trolley and the groceries and, you know, it gets, it gets a bit out of hand. (M5)

The assemblages that women are forced to make are often not ideal, as everyday objects like trolleys are not designed for the entirely expected rambunctiousness of small children. Prams and pavements are another example of the environment not accommodating, causing babies to be 'flung about' and consequently affecting children and parents.

Emotionally and physically safe spaces

Mothers often feel that one of their primary tasks as a parent is to keep their children safe; in fact this is generally seen as the hallmark of 'good parenting'. How this is done is highly dependent on the needs of the children and the nature of the spaces that they inhabit. In the London case, the prematurity of their babies, in their first months of life, often shows signs of diversity: they might be physically smaller than their peers and display tubes either for feeding or for oxygen support (Gullino et al. 2017). Participants in the London research indicated that engaging in activities in social environments perceived as accepting and supportive helped them: 'they [the café owners] are very welcoming … it's quiet and they are very helpful'. However, positive experiences often come at the cost of negative ones: 'sometimes you go to a restaurant and they say they don't have a space, or don't make an effort', 'people kept staring at us … I didn't go back', 'we don't really go there anymore as the woman who ran it doesn't like having too many buggies in there, she made us feel very unwelcomed' (L6).

Although most of the children in the Johannesburg-based study were healthy, the physical dangers of the city were often at the forefront of mothers' concerns:

> [The pressure of living in Johannesburg] is extremely high … here you need to be so wary of so many things, theft … not to say they do not have it that side but if you are walking down the street and not everybody knows you they can pickpocket you – you know, or your child could [be] lagging at the back and all of a sudden you cannot find him or her if you are not holding her hand …. (M10)

The lack of appropriate and child-friendly spaces weighs heavily on women:

> There are not a lot of places in Johannesburg where you can not worry about your child running out into moving traffic. And that's because most of our places are based next to or on top of a car park/street/something-else, something-else. So, taking him anywhere, you are constantly aware of "he's going to run out". And he did the other day, I took him to Baby City with me, to the shop, to buy in Cradle Park, which opens straight onto a car park. And while I was paying, he ran out the door. Straight down the ramp, into the car park. (M1)

The consequences for many mothers are to make their worlds as small as possible while still trying to perform motherhood and meet their social and domestic needs, as moving around the city with these assemblages and concerns was a 'whole hassle' (M8). When asked about decisions on schooling and where to go, mothers responded by saying: 'My decisions are based mostly on proximity. I am trying as much as possible to create a world that is quite close by that we operate in (M1), and "It's all about the proximity" (M5) and stating that all activities "must be close by"' (M6).

Conclusions

As clearly emerged from our research, mobility within the urban environment is essential to mothers of children of all ages and vulnerabilities. Ensuring the space, social interactions and opportunities for mothers to enact their new identities is essential. However, cities also feel like mazes which challenge mothers as they navigate through them (Gullino et al. 2017; Parker and Rubin 2017). Mothers are forced 'to make do' in urban environments, by constantly renegotiating and reconfiguring their assemblages as they move through spaces. At times, they bridge gaps between the physical environment and their children's needs by carrying them with their bodies (putting children on their backs), keeping them always by their sides, or disassembling their assemblages to address logistical obstacles, such as paying bus fares. Throughout the day, mothers may feel 'cared for', ignored or dislocated from environments and mobility infrastructures that are often indifferent to their needs. The stress of commuting or navigating unsafe urban spaces whilst requiring that women move out of their homes (due to both boredom and necessity) deeply affects mothers' emotional and physical well-being.

The city, or rather its components, which include the residents and fellow urban denizens, cannot be separated from the assemblage, the assemblers or the practices of motherhood. They are directly implicated in the mobility choices that women make, their daily movements and the impacts that they have on women's inner lives. By bringing together these two cases, we have highlighted how the materiality of the urban landscape plays a key role in shaping how women assemble their motherhood practices, the constraints, joys and struggles that they face and the daily realities of navigating cities that too often overlook the needs and pleasures of more than half their population.

Ethical approval

Both projects were granted ethical approval, and written consent was obtained from participants: MR's project from the University of the Witwatersrand (Johannesburg) in 2015 and 2017 and SG's project from the NHS London Riverside Research Ethics Committee (London) in June 2013 (study number 13/LO/0752).

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Notes on contributors

Silvia Gullino is a Professor of city making in the Department of Architecture and Built Environment at Birmingham City University, where she has also held key leadership roles, including EDI College Lead. She previously taught and conducted research at the Politecnico di Torino, Politecnico di Milano, Johns Hopkins University, University College London and King's College London. Her work centres on urban well-being, sustainable cities and inclusive futures. She drives feminist conversations about urban space and collaborates widely with experts in health, computer science, geography and gender studies. Trained in both architecture and urban planning, she approaches cities as intricate socio-economic, physical, environmental and political systems. She argues that today's urban challenges demand long-term, integrated thinking and bold, creative methodologies. Her research and practice push the boundaries of contemporary city-making, championing active citizenship, gendered well-being and community-led transformation. Through transdisciplinary work, she reimagines how cities can support diverse lived experiences and foster socially just, equitable urban futures. She is a member of the Gender Urban Research Collective and the Urban Cultures Research Cluster at Birmingham City University, where she leads the Co-creation in City Making group, advancing collaborative, people-centred approaches to shaping cities.

Margot Rubin is a lecturer in spatial planning at the School of Geography and Planning, Cardiff University. She is an urban geographer with a PhD in planning and politics who works across and between spatial and political disciplines. She explores key questions of the urban through various lenses, such as housing provision and mobility, framed by broader theoretical analyses of governance and gender. Her research projects have ranged in focus from urban housing, land use management and transit-oriented development to urban governance, questions of mobility and accessibility, and work on gender and the geographies of care. This has given her the scope to engage with broad conceptual themes of socio-economic rights, urban sustainability, spatial change and identity politics and their relationship to the city through comparative studies. These have included comparisons among Delhi, India and Johannesburg; Johannesburg and Cairo, Egypt; Maputo, Mozambique, and Gauteng, South Africa; and more recently Wales, South Africa and Tanzania. She has published over 25 journal articles and book chapters and has edited two books on density, housing and urban governance. She is also the co-convenor of the Gender Urban Research Collective and sits on the Royal Geographical Society Gender and Feminist Geography Research Group.

Notes

1. The full article can be accessed from this link: https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/aug/27/architects-diversity-cities-designed-mothers
2. Both projects received ethical approval: the first from the University of the Witwatersrand (Johannesburg) in 2015 and 2017 and the second from the NHS London Riverside Research Ethics Committee (London) in June 2013 (study number 13/LO/0752).

3. As mothers for the first time, they did not have any pre-existing knowledge gained by having other children able to influence their behaviour in the urban environment.
4. Premature babies are born before 37 weeks of gestational age, while a typical pregnancy lasts about 40 weeks. Even when discharged from the hospital, premature babies are still vulnerable to infections from the environment and, for some time, still at risk of being re-admitted to the hospital. They are more vulnerable as they are typically more at risk of long-term health conditions, more susceptible to infections and often still rely on medical aids like oxygen support or monitoring equipment. In the UK, around 8% of births are preterm and require intensive care in their first months of life. That is around 60,000 babies each year. Complications arising from premature birth can be a leading cause of permanent health conditions.

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