My doctoral research examines the role of women politicians in shaping maternal and infant welfare in post-war Italy (1948-1975). It focuses on the campaigns and debates surrounding the introduction of social policies aimed at reconciling childcare and paid work, namely maternity leave regulations and the institution of crèches.

My first findings suggested that Communist and Socialist ideas for childcare facilities were experimented first at the local level, especially in the region of Emilia-Romagna. In particular, the city of Reggio Emilia appeared to be at the forefront in this process. Interestingly, the first childcare facilities (crèches and preschools) created there in the 1960s and 1970s were based on a new pedagogical approach, which became known as the “Reggio Emilia approach” and is still internationally known and appreciated.

Thus, I decided to undertake a research trip to Reggio Emilia during the summer term, to understand how and why this local experience had an impact on the political debate at the national level. As most of my archival sources are located in Italy, I am very often incurring travel and accommodation expenses. The award I received from the Expeditions Fund was very helpful in this sense and it enabled me to make the best out of my research trip to Reggio Emilia.

My stay in Reggio Emilia has been extremely fruitful, as I was able to carry out all the activities I had planned. I spent part of my two-week journey pursuing bibliographical research at the International Centre “Loris Malaguzzi” and at the Reggio Emilia Council Library. There, I could have access to various publications on the history of childcare services in Reggio Emilia, which are not available in London and not very easy to find even in other Italian libraries. I also carried out archival research on the local branch of the main left-wing women’s association Unione Donne Italiane (Union of Italian Women – UDI), whose records are kept at the Council Archive. These records were very well preserved and very rich. I found a lot of evidence not only
about the experience of Reggio Emilia, but also of other cities in the region. I became aware that I had to carry out further research including nearby cities (namely Bologna and Modena) in order to have a better understanding of this local experience.

At the same time, I conducted three individual interviews with selected former women politicians and activists involved in the creation of municipal crèches, who were active both at the local and at the national level. Two of the interviewees are now living outside Reggio Emilia, so I had to travel to nearby locations, such as Parma and Ozzano nell’Emilia (Bologna). All interviews provided me with crucial insights into my research topic. My interviewees gave me factual information, which helped me in finding and choosing the right bibliographical/archival material. Moreover, their accounts obviously consisted of their own memories of those times, which were very much influenced by their own past and present feelings about their role in the creation of childcare facilities. This was clearly something I could have never found in my sources and it stimulated my curiosity very much. I realized I wanted to dedicate part of my work also to the analysis of women politicians’ memory about their past.

Finally, I had the chance to visit the exhibition Una città, tanti bambini: memoria di una storia presente (One city, many children: memory of a present history), which had just opened at “Reggio Children“, the centre created to provide information on the pedagogical experience of Reggio Emilia and to promote international exchanges. The exhibition, which is a sort of “collective autobiography“, narrates the history of the creation of municipal crèches and preschools in Reggio Emilia, through the voices and memories of the protagonists (women activists, local politicians, educationalists, teachers, but also the children and the families) as well as the comments from historians, architects, scholars and so on. I found it particularly interesting as it provided me with a different point of view on my research topic.

In conclusion, I consider my research trip to Reggio Emilia this summer an extremely positive contribution to my academic progress. I was able to answer the research questions I had when I left, and, more importantly, it stimulated new questions and new lines of research. This is why I went back to Italy (this time not only to Reggio Emilia, but also to Bologna and Modena) in the autumn term to conduct further research on my new hypotheses.