

**Mothers with insecure immigration status:  
enacting relational belonging and sharing support in a  
hostile environment**

Rachel Natalie Benchekroun

UCL

Declaration:

I, Rachel Natalie Benchekroun, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

## Abstract

In the context of ever-more stringent and discriminatory immigration legislation in the UK, it has become increasingly difficult for individuals to obtain residency rights, especially for those from the Global South. The UK government's Hostile Environment strategy excludes people with insecure immigration status and no recourse to public funds (NRPF) from public services and mainstream welfare support. Migration scholars have begun to examine the ways in which national immigration policies constrain lives through bordering, as well as considering belonging practices in response to structural and everyday exclusions. Yet very little research has so far examined the specific impact of hostile bordering on, or responses of, women/mothers. Drawing on 20 months of ethnographic fieldwork in an inner London neighbourhood, this thesis examines how racially minoritised mothers with insecure immigration status and NRPF resist their marginalisation, particularly in the context of the Hostile Environment strategy, and how they enact relational belonging and citizenship as mothers. The thesis argues, however, that by eroding institutional trust and generating precarity and 'status anxiety', the hostile environment fundamentally undermines particularised trust, shaping interpersonal relationships, restricting access to social support and reducing individual wellbeing. Within intimate and social relationships, mothers are forced to negotiate dialectical tensions in ways which are specific to their structural position as racially minoritised women/mothers with insecure immigration status: between the need for intimacy and the need for privacy (the 'problem of trust'); between autonomy and dependency (or care and control); and between the need to access resources and their (perceived or actual) scarcity. The thesis concludes that these structural tensions (re)produce ontological insecurity, impede access to support and increase vulnerability to exploitation. The thesis shows that the UK's hostile environment renders motherhood precarious for targeted groups and exacerbates structural inequalities by denying rights of residency, citizenship and associated rights to racially minoritised mothers and their children.

## Impact statement

This thesis contributes to debates in interdisciplinary migration studies and citizenship studies by extending theories of bordering, belonging and citizenship. It furthers understandings of the ways that insecure immigration status, immigration policy and, in the UK, the condition of ‘no recourse to public funds’ intersect with other forms of structural inequalities (gender, ‘race’, class) to shape mothering practices, intimate/social relationships and access to social support.

Furthermore, the thesis makes important contributions to the sociology of the family, the sociology of friendship, the sociology of religion and the study of intimacy by demonstrating how practices, experiences and perceptions of (respectively) mothering, friendship, faith and couple relationships are shaped by government policy, its implementation and effects.

The thesis also contributes to wider debates in the social sciences, particularly in sociology and social anthropology, on the interplay between agency and structural constraints, and on the roles of gender, ‘race’<sup>1</sup> and racialisation, focusing on how these play out in practices of mothering, friendship, faith, intimate couple relationships and engagement with public and voluntary sector services.

The thesis contributes to ethnographic methods through the innovative use of participant-centred freestyle sociograms in combination with ‘deep hanging out’ and walking methods, and by incorporating elements of local activism.

Beyond academia, the thesis has the potential to contribute to practice and policy by raising awareness of the impact on racially minoritised mothers and children with insecure immigration status and NRPF of government policies (and local enactment of policies) restricting access to healthcare, childcare and education, accommodation, welfare support, employment and financial services, and of the ways policies undermine trust in institutions such as the police. The contents of the thesis have begun to contribute to public discourse by raising awareness of the impact of the government’s Hostile Environment strategy on

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<sup>1</sup> I use quotes when referring to ‘race’ to show that it is socially constructed (whilst recognising that the effects of racialization and racism are real).

individual and public wellbeing, for example through a series of blogposts (Benchekrone and Humphris 2021).

The thesis will contribute at local, national and European/international levels by building and sharing knowledge of immigration policy in the UK and its impact on women/mothers and children. I intend to produce a series of briefing papers to share key findings with frontline professionals from different fields, including early years, schools, health and social care. I will use these as the basis for blogposts and articles in online journals and websites targeted at particular professional fields, and will also run workshops, to share and discuss findings with frontline workers. I will organise public engagement activities for families with NRPF and volunteers through advocacy and advice organisations.

I will share substantive findings and conceptual contributions through peer-reviewed journal articles, blogposts and at academic conferences.

## Acknowledgements

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## Introduction

*'it is essential we break that link between temporary visas and permanent settlement'*

(David Cameron, Prime Minister, speech on immigration, 14 April 2011) (BBC 2011)

*'The aim is to create, here in Britain, a really hostile environment for illegal immigrants.'*

(Theresa May, Home Secretary, quoted in The Telegraph, 26 May 2012) (Kirkup and Winnett 2012)

*'My children, they are all I have, you know. They are the reason why I am struggling, and they are the reason why I am happy today. They are the most important people in my life. I see them every day. And they are part of me. In fact, they are me, because I am struggling to give them a future as well, because they are innocent children that came out of me, so I don't want them to be useless, I want them to be useful to themselves and to society. I wouldn't want them to be a waste to society. So, they are number one in my life.'*

(Eva, research participant, 2019)

*'The practice of mothering involves multiple relationships: between mothers and children; mothers, children and other family and friends; mothers, children and the locality; mothers, children and the state; mothers, children and ethnic communities; mothers, children and political and social movements; as well as transnational aspects of these. [...] Studying mothering, migration and citizenship together offers insights into how these different influences constitute novel articulations of citizenship between regulation and resistance.'*

(Umut Erel 2011: 707)

Increasingly stringent and discriminatory immigration legislation in the UK restricts residency rights, especially for those from the Global South, producing a growing population with 'no leave to remain' or only 'limited leave to remain', and few rights. Over the last decade, the government's Hostile Environment<sup>2</sup> strategy has sought to ostracise racially

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<sup>2</sup> In April 2018, newly appointed Home Secretary Sajid Javid rebranded the strategy as the 'Compliant Environment' (Sparrow et al. 2018), yet this is superficial and the aims and content remain the same.

minoritised individuals with insecure immigration status from mainstream society in more fundamental and far-reaching ways, largely (but not only) through the expansion of the condition of 'no recourse to public funds' (NRPF), which restricts access to public services and mainstream welfare support. This ethnography examines how mothers in this position resist their marginalisation and enact relational belonging and citizenship as women and as mothers. It also shows how government policy undermines trust in interpersonal relationships, (re)producing ontological insecurity, rendering motherhood precarious and exacerbating structural inequalities.

Immigration and citizenship policy in the UK has long been hostile towards racially minoritised citizens of the Global South. In recent decades, with more people on the move and a parallel rise in anti-immigration and xenophobic attitudes, policy has become increasingly selective and racist, denying rights of residency and citizenship and associated rights to those deemed to be 'undesirable' or 'undeserving' (El-Enany 2020). These policies have disproportionately affected women/mothers<sup>3</sup> and their children. Women, like men, migrate for a multitude of reasons, but prior to, during and post-migration are likely to be subject to gendered forms of discrimination, exploitation or abuse, which can range from gendered roles in the home and low paid work to gender-based forms of violence (Menjívar and Salcido 2002). Becoming a mother creates new needs, challenges and responsibilities which are qualitatively different to those of fatherhood: mothering often means primary (sometimes sole) responsibility for caring and providing for children. Women who have migrated face intersecting challenges in accessing support: often distant from kin networks, on becoming a mother they are less likely than men to be able to continue to do paid work and less likely than non-migrant women to be able to access mainstream forms of state support. This makes intimate and social relationships increasingly important as sources of support.

The intersection of gender, 'race' and class shapes experiences of migration, settlement and mothering (Collins 1998, Phoenix and Bauer 2012, Erel and Reynolds 2018). Racially

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<sup>3</sup> I frequently refer to 'women/mothers' in this thesis: whilst my focus is on women *as* mothers, at the same time I call attention to women's identities beyond motherhood, and recognise that personal biographies prior to becoming a mother shape subjective experiences and perspectives.

minoritised women from the Global South who have moved to the UK are often targeted by hostile immigration and citizenship policies which exclude them from basic rights, leading to their 'de-classing' (Ryan et al. 2015, Erel and Ryan 2019) and making their lives unlivable. This is particularly the case since then Prime Minister David Cameron's announcement of his coalition government's 'net migration' target in 2010 and the introduction of the Hostile Environment strategy by then Home Secretary Theresa May (discussed below). This approach has explicitly sought to deny residency rights to, and make life unbearably difficult for, those considered 'undesirable', who have been frequently and misleadingly framed by politicians and sections of the media as 'illegal immigrants'<sup>4</sup>. Immigration and settlement restrictions and internal bordering practices are gendered, racist and classed in their exclusionary effects on those unable to meet the financial requirements for visas and residency (Yuval-Davis et al. 2019: 24-28). For mothers living under this hostile regime, the joys, hopes and sense of belonging that mothering may produce are overshadowed by the constant struggle to survive, as Eva explained in the above quote. Understanding the multiple, complex and textured ways in which these hostile policies impact on women's everyday experiences, perspectives and practices of mothering, and how these produce intersecting inequalities, requires exploration of the processes of bordering and belonging within and across mothers' relationships with their children, friends, partners, wider family and other members of the community, as posited by Umut Erel (2011) above.

I first became aware of the effects of Britain's increasingly restrictive and hostile immigration and citizenship policies through my community development work in London in the early 2010s. Many of the women/mothers I knew had moved to the UK from other countries, and it was apparent that residency rights were becoming significantly more difficult to obtain for those who had migrated from non-EU countries. I witnessed how the 'No Recourse to Public Funds' (NRPF) condition was excluding growing numbers of families from access to welfare support and public services, such as childcare and health services, whilst many were also prevented from undertaking paid work. I was conscious of (and frustrated by) a contradiction between the government's laudable aim to 'close the gap between disadvantaged children and their peers' in education (DfE 2015) on the one hand

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<sup>4</sup> See discussion of terminology below.

and the Hostile Environment policies actively excluding and marginalising many children and families on the other. I wanted to understand how mothers with insecure immigration status and NRPF were managing. How were these hostile policies affecting their access to services and support, what was the role of personal networks, and what was the impact on mothers' wellbeing and that of their children? These questions became the starting point for this study, which I began in 2017.

At the macro level, over recent decades, whilst international borders have become porous to capital and to individuals privileged by their nationality and socio-economic status, increasingly restrictive visa regimes (particularly in the Global North) have constrained or denied access and residency rights to most people from the Global South (Neumayer 2006). States built on the wealth of their former empires now deny rights of residency and citizenship to their former 'subjects', selecting migrants according to their anticipated contribution to national economic prosperity. Yet despite stringent immigration regimes, people across the globe are increasingly on the move, facilitated by rapid developments in transport and communications and the support of kin and wider networks. The number of people migrating<sup>5</sup> to the UK annually has more than doubled over the last three decades. Whether moving to study or work, join families or partners, escape conflict or socio-economic oppression, seek better opportunities for themselves and their (future) children, or a combination of these, most people arrive via official channels. But the UK government's moves to tighten (and complicate) the rules on residency rights position greater numbers of individuals and their families – predominantly from the Global South – as 'irregular' migrants, excluded from public services, with limited rights, and at risk of detention and deportation. Urban neighbourhoods have therefore become 'superdiverse' in terms of not only 'race'/ethnicity, nationality, language and faith group, but also immigration status, residency rights and citizenship (Vertovec 2007). This is especially the case in London, home to 35% of the population born outside the UK (Vargas-Silva and Rienzo 2020).

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<sup>5</sup> Defining and counting 'migration', 'immigration' and 'emigration' are not straightforward. Here I draw on the ONS definition of 'migration' as intending to stay for 12 months or more (ONS 2020).

In 2010, amidst rising levels of media and political hostility towards immigration, UK prime minister David Cameron asserted his new government's commitment to the target of reducing net migration to 'the tens of thousands' by 2015. Aiming to 'break the link between immigration and settlement' (BBC 2011), Cameron capped non-EU skilled work visas, restricted student visas and introduced the minimum income requirement<sup>6</sup> for people wanting to bring their spouse or family member to join them in the UK (McNeil 2020). This led to Home Secretary Theresa May's announcement in 2012 of the 'Hostile Environment' strategy, which aimed to persuade people without residency rights in the UK to leave the country, and to deter the less advantaged from considering moving to the UK. Taking visible shape as a series of laws, rules, regulations and publicity stunts, the hostile environment represented a turning point in immigration policy in its cross-departmental scope, the internalisation of borders (delegating the role of border guard to ordinary citizens) and the instigation of opaque data-sharing processes between public institutions and the Home Office for immigration enforcement purposes (Hiam et al. 2018). It represented a shift also in its far-reaching impact, not only on individuals without leave to remain but on those with residency rights, including British citizens, especially individuals from racially minoritised groups (Jones et al. 2017, Yuval-Davis et al. 2018, Gentleman 2019). As is discussed in Chapter 3, the hostile environment strategy has, through a range of policies, sought to marginalise and exclude individuals who cannot prove they 'belong' to the UK: limiting access to public services and welfare benefits through the NRPF condition; denying access to bank accounts and accommodation; requiring public agencies to pass individuals' personal data to the Home Office for immigration enforcement purposes; significantly increasing the cost of visa and residency applications; and making the Immigration Rules bewilderingly complex (Yeo 2020). The strategy has particularly affected minoritised women/mothers and children by denying access to Child Benefit and to the welfare benefits which form a safety net for other disadvantaged families, by restricting access to healthcare and childcare, and by denying routes to safety in cases of domestic abuse<sup>7</sup>. Furthermore, immigration policies

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<sup>6</sup> The minimum income requirement to sponsor a spouse visa is currently £18,600 per household, with an additional £2,400 per child (Home Office (Appendix FM 1.7) 2021).

<sup>7</sup> As discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, insecure immigration status and the Hostile Environment strategy put women and children at increased risk of domestic abuse.

target women from the Global South and their children by making it far more difficult to achieve settlement rights through marriage or family reunion pathways due to more stringent financial requirements, relegating families to the costly and complex ten-year settlement route – which tends to be accessible only after years of accumulating sufficient evidence of the right to family life in the UK. This marginal pathway produces destitution. The Hostile Environment strategy has not succeeded in the government’s aim of reducing net migration, yet a decade later it remains in place<sup>8</sup>.

This thesis focuses on women who have become mothers after moving to the UK (with a visa, to claim asylum or having been trafficked) and making it their home, but who have been subjected to destitution, either having lost their leave to remain – following refusal of asylum or rejection of an application to renew leave to remain – or having had to wait years for a decision to be made on their asylum application, and/or having been granted only ‘limited leave to remain’ with NRPF, as a result of the policies summarised above. Before progressing, a note on terminology. Certain politicians and sections of the media use the term ‘illegal immigration’, or, worse, ‘illegal immigrants’ to describe people without leave to remain. The UN, IOM, ILO, European Commission and European Parliament, amongst others, have repeatedly called for such terminology to be avoided because it is misleading, legally incorrect, criminalising and dehumanising (UNHCR 2018). Instead, they advocate the use of the terms ‘irregular’ or ‘undocumented’. Whilst preferable, even these terms can be problematic. Firstly, they may imply entering a country not in accordance with legal requirements, whereas for the majority, pathways to irregularity occur through overstaying a visa, being refused asylum, being born to parents without residency rights, or, as in the case of many of the ‘Windrush generation’ in the UK, not having paperwork that was not required at the time of arrival but which under hostile environment policies has become necessary to prove the right to access public services, housing and employment (Walsh 2020, Gentleman 2019). Secondly, legislation, policies, their application, changes in circumstances and the passage of time can cause an individual’s immigration status to change from ‘regular’ to ‘irregular’ and back again, but this fluidity (and contingency) is not

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<sup>8</sup> Net migration was 313,000 in the year ending March 2020 (ONS 2020).



captured by these terms. Thirdly, when a person is granted 'limited leave to remain' in the UK, this is usually for 30 months at a time, and the condition of 'no recourse to public funds' usually remains in place; therefore the temporariness of this status, including the worries about finding the means to pay to renew this status multiple times as part of the 'ten year route' to indefinite leave to remain, means that it remains insecure in multiple ways. For all of these reasons, in this thesis I prefer to use the term 'insecure immigration status' to refer to the various categories covered by 'no leave to remain' and 'limited leave to remain', unless I am making a point specific to one of these categories, or when referring to specific terminology in policy or theory, where the term 'irregular' is often used. Additionally, I dislike and try to avoid the term 'migrant', which I see as othering, homogenising and not an identity that many people would relate to. Where possible, I instead use phrases such as 'people who have migrated/moved'. At times, however, I may use 'migrant' where this helps the text to flow.

Of the 9.5 million UK residents born outside the UK, it is not known how many have no leave to remain, but the best estimates range from 674,000 (GLA 2020) to between 800,000 and 1.2 million (Pew Research Center 2019). Of these, 215,000 are children (including those born in the UK), half of whom live in London (GLA 2020). Numbers of adults and children without leave to remain have risen over recent years, and are likely to increase further now that the UK has left the EU, since the thousands of EU citizens living in the UK who did not apply for 'settled status' by the deadline of 30 June 2021 will be subject to immigration control (O'Carroll and Gentleman 2021, McKinney 2021). It is therefore of crucial importance to understand the impact of government policy on individuals without leave to remain, and on those with limited leave to remain. The Windrush scandal and the Covid-19 crisis have called attention to the serious implications of excluding individuals with insecure immigration status from access to public services and denying the right to work and to live in safe accommodation (Gentleman 2019, Gardner 2021).

## Existing research and contribution of the thesis

Interdisciplinary migration literature has explored some of the major challenges for people who migrate, including processes of integration, access to services and maintaining transnational networks. Importantly, scholars have examined experiences of racism and of contesting racial discrimination (Gilroy 2002 [1987], Solomos 2003 [1989]). Others have explored the development of social networks to mobilise social capital (Boyd 1989, Haug 2008, Ryan et al. 2015), building on Bourdieu's theory of capitals (1986). In the last two decades, sociologists have notably shone a light on bordering practices and have deconstructed the political production of irregular migration (De Genova 2002, 2013a, Düvell 2011, Menjívar and Kanstroom 2013, El-Enany 2020). Dialogically, scholars have conceptualised belonging and citizenship as political projects and agentive acts (Yuval-Davis 1999, Flores 2003, Lister 2007, Isin and Nielsen 2013 [2008], Erel and Reynolds 2018). Yet there has been little focus on the specific experiences, practices and perspectives of racially minoritised women/mothers subjected to insecure immigration status (but see Abrego and Schmalzbauer 2018, Abrego and Menjívar 2011, Anitha 2010, 2011, 2015, Dudley 2017, Luibhéid et al. 2018) and very little in the UK (notable exceptions being Dennler 2018, O'Neill et al. 2019, Erel 2018, Erel and Reynolds 2018, Dickson and Rosen 2020). It is essential to develop understanding of how immigration and citizenship policies and bordering practices specifically affect mothers and mothering. I aim to understand the ways in which such practices create disadvantage for mothers and children with insecure immigration status and NRPF and (re)produce social inequalities between mothers and children in this position and mothers and children who are UK citizens (or who have indefinite leave to remain), as well as gendered inequalities in relation to men/fathers with secure (or insecure) status. I extend theoretical understanding of bordering at national and local levels by exploring mothers' experiences and encounters with representatives of the state but also with private citizens enacting bordering on behalf of the state. Deeper conceptual understanding can contribute to policy development and support the development of good practice in voluntary and public sector organisations working with mothers and children with insecure immigration status and NRPF.

Meanwhile, the turn to family practices in the sociology of families and anthropological interest in kin work have paved the way for the framing of relational belonging and motherhood in terms of practices of intimacy and care (Finch and Mason 1993, Jamieson 2011, Smart 2007, Gabb 2008) and 'mothering work' (Gillies 2007). Elsewhere, research on friendship (Pahl 2002, Spencer and Pahl 2006, Adams and Allan 1999, Small 2009, 2017) has emphasised the importance of context in patterning relationship formation and development and everyday interactions. In the field of communication theory, Leslie Baxter and William J. Rawlins have separately developed the concept of relational dialectics, highlighting the complexities of 'doing' coupledness and friendship by drawing attention to the inherent tensions which individuals must navigate in everyday interactions (Baxter 1990, Baxter and Scharp 2015, Baxter et al. 2021, Rawlins 1989, 2017 [1992]). Surprisingly, this theory does not appear to have been applied in the field of migration or integrated with concepts of belonging or precarity. There is significant scope to apply and extend the theory of relational dialectics at the intersection of migration, mothering, bordering and belonging to develop a deep understanding of relational belonging from the perspective of mothers with insecure status.

The concept of strategic mothering is particularly helpful in framing mothering work in the context of migration and insecure immigration status in order to examine the work undertaken by racially minoritised mothers to both protect and empower their children (Collins 2007, Stack 1974, Reynolds 2003, 2020, Phoenix and Husain 2007). At the intersection of the literature on migration and mothering, scholars have examined some of the challenges faced by migrant mothers, including transnational mothering (Parreñas 2001, Coe 2011), building support networks (Ryan 2007, 2011), contesting discrimination and enacting belonging and citizenship (Erel 2011, Reynolds et al. 2018, Gedalof 2009, Dyck 2018). Yet very little research has considered the specific ways in which mothers with insecure immigration status enact belonging and citizenship *as mothers* and through other forms of intimate and social relationships. It is vitally important to examine the ways such relationships are initiated and developed over time, and to deepen understanding of the contextual factors – at macro, meso and micro levels – which facilitate, constrain or otherwise shape these practices. This will contribute to conceptual understandings across

the sociological topics of motherhood, friendship practices, faith practices, intimacy practices/couple relationships, and engagement with support services.

## Aims and research questions

In light of the growing number of mothers and children with insecure immigration status in the UK, the proliferation of hostile immigration policies, the insufficiency of research literature on the impact of bordering policies and practices on women/mothers in the UK and the need for further scholarship on belonging and citizenship practices of mothers with insecure status, this study aims to examine the role of the UK government's Hostile Environment strategy and its production of insecure statuses and precarity in shaping women's experiences, perspectives and practices of mothering and relational belonging and citizenship. It addresses the following questions: How do insecure immigration status and precarity affect mothering practices? How do these intersect to shape the development of different types of intimate and social relationships and the sharing of forms of social support? How do these shape practices of belonging and what are the implications for citizenship?

The thesis explores the ways (and extent to which) mothers with insecure immigration statuses and NRPF enact relational belonging and citizenship *as mothers*. I argue that the UK government's Hostile Environment strategy erodes institutional trust by generating deportability, precarity and 'status anxiety', which undermines interpersonal trust. I demonstrate that within intimate and social relationships, mothers are forced to negotiate dialectical tensions in ways which are shaped by their structural position: between the need for intimacy or support and the need for privacy (the 'problem of trust'); between autonomy and dependency (or care and control); and between the need to access resources and their (perceived or actual) unavailability. I show that, for mothers with insecure immigration status, these structural tensions (re)produce ontological insecurity, impede access to support and increase vulnerability to exploitation.

## Overview of methodology

In conceptualising this study, my interest lay in the impact of immigration policy and statuses on individual women/mothers, the development of and engagement in personal support networks, and how care and support are shared. I was interested in what mothers *do*, in their perspectives and construction of meanings, and how these are shaped by their immigration status and socio-economic position. My decision to take an ethnographic approach was informed by my aim to understand these issues from a lived, subjective perspective and therefore by the need to spend as much time in the field as possible, interacting with mothers and their families, participating in their everyday activities, engaging in open-ended conversations and listening deeply. As such, my methodology aligned with ethnographies exploring the experiences of ‘undocumented’ individuals in the US and UK (Gomberg-Muñoz 2016a, 2019, Coutin 2007, 2016, Bloch and McKay 2017). Doing ethnographic research involved extended contact with participants in the field, allowing observation of changes over time. ‘Deep hanging out’ and ‘walking with’ participants were core methods, enabling interactions and informal conversations with a wide range of people in specific contexts (Wolcott 2016 [2010], O’Neill and Reynolds 2021) and allowing me to experience their social worlds. Open-ended in-depth conversations, supported by the process of creating sociograms, foregrounded participants’ processes of meaning-making.

Over the course of my fieldwork, I met and talked not only with mothers but with their children, partners/children’s fathers, friends and neighbours, and with volunteers, frontline workers and managers. Nevertheless, my focus throughout has been on the practices, experiences, views and narratives of women/mothers with insecure immigration status *as mothers*.

The mothers who participated in my research had migrated to the UK from a diverse range of countries. Whilst country of origin, ethnicity, ‘race’ and languages were all important to participants’ narratives and practices, these do not form the principal lens of my analysis: my main focus has been the role of immigration policy and statuses in shaping individuals’ everyday experiences of mothering and relational belonging. I do not attempt, therefore, to draw comparisons in this thesis among participants based on their cultural origins.

Whilst this was not a study *of* a neighbourhood, most of my fieldwork was conducted in and around the diverse inner London neighbourhood of 'Ryeton'<sup>9</sup>, which I now introduce.

## Ryeton: an inner London neighbourhood

Ryeton's main thoroughfare is busy and bustling at most times of the day. Double decker buses head towards central London and out to neighbouring boroughs; single-deckers weave their way through residential streets and estates. Well-loved trainers, glossy heels and school shoes tread the pavements, tugging along shopping trolleys or toddlers, pushing bikes and heaving rucksacks and plastic bags. Women congregate in Afro-Caribbean hairdressers and nail shops, men in Turkish barbers and Somali cafes. Grocers display oranges, bananas and limes sold by the bowl on pavements; inside, shelves are lined with products labelled in Polish and Romanian. Halal butchers abut Caribbean fish shops abut cab offices abut mobile phone repair shops nestling in pound shops. Independent womenswear shops display handbags and shoes, enticing customers inside with their signs proclaiming bargain prices. Betting shops and the occasional pub sprout up at intervals, their postered windows discreetly screening their patrons. McDonald's, open till late at night, is invariably abuzz with families, young people and local workers.

A multiplicity of churches and mosques can be found tucked away on or behind the main shopping street, in side streets, in community halls. Christianity and Islam are the two largest religions in the borough, and there are significant Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish and Sikh populations too (ONS 2019). Schools, nurseries and children's centres are dotted about the neighbourhood, away from the bustle of the main roads. Expansive parks with playgrounds stretch out at intervals, offering plentiful green spaces.

Upmarket new estate agencies and pricey patisseries have begun to pop up along the main shopping street, sure signs of gentrification. Behind the main road lie networks of quiet residential streets lined with Victorian terraces, modest or grand in size, many of whose homely frontages disguise their division into compact flats or single room studios. A handful of council estates, home to rows of maisonettes and high rise tower blocks, are holding on

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<sup>9</sup> Ryeton is a pseudonym to protect confidentiality of participants.

tight as pricey skyscraper developments targeting young professionals push their way in. The borough is densely populated, with a high rate of households in temporary accommodation and large numbers of HMOs<sup>10</sup> (Landlord Today 2018, Mayor of London 2019: 99) and rapid construction work on every available patch of land.

Ryeton hosts a mix of wealth and poverty, played out in stark socioeconomic, educational and health inequalities. Its population is strikingly diverse: more than one-third in the borough were born outside of the UK (GLA 2020), and over half are from Black and minority ethnic groups. London boasts more than 300 languages, and Ryeton is particularly linguistically diverse (Von Ahn et al. 2010). More than half of all primary school children in the borough where Ryeton is located speak a language other than English at home (London Datastore 2021), and more than 100 different languages are spoken by children across the borough (borough profile, anonymised). What is not apparent from these figures is the multiplicity of immigration categories, statuses and residency rights of Ryeton's residents, the structural exclusions and everyday bordering faced by many, and the ways in which those who are marginalised enact belonging.

## Structure of the thesis

In the first chapter, 'Framing Bordering, Belonging and Mothering in a Hostile Environment', I present the theoretical framework for the thesis. I first examine theories of *bordering*: I show how the legal-political production of irregular migration and the concepts of precarity and everyday bordering are central to understanding the experiences of women/mothers with insecure immigration status and NRPF in the UK. I introduce my concept of 'status anxiety', which I develop throughout the thesis. I then turn to theoretical understandings of *belonging*, focusing on relational belonging. Drawing on the concept of a feminist ethics of care, I highlight the concept of strategic mothering as a form of both active citizenship and acts of citizenship. I extend this to examine how different forms of relational belonging, so far under-theorised, can be seen as active citizenship by mothers with insecure immigration status in the context of restrictive immigration and citizenship policies. I demonstrate how work on relational dialectics, theories of friendship, faith and couple relationship practices,

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<sup>10</sup> Housing in Multiple Occupancy

and theories of social networks and social capital will be applied in my analysis. I show how the thesis innovatively brings together notions of everyday bordering and relational practices with theories of trust and my own concept of 'status anxiety' to produce new understandings of mothering and intimate and social relationships as means of enacting belonging and citizenship in a hostile environment.

In the second chapter, I outline the context of the study. I trace the changes in patterns of migration and the evolution of immigration policy from the 1940s through to the present day. I examine the implementation and impact of the UK government's Hostile Environment strategy, including the condition of 'no recourse to public funds' (NRPF), restrictions on access to public services, data-sharing between public bodies and the Home Office, Section 17 support, and the barriers to obtaining residency rights and citizenship.

The third chapter sets out my ethnographic approach. It explains the recruitment process, introduces the study's participants, and provides a definition of the field. It examines the affordances and challenges of the methods I employed, including my roles as volunteer-researcher, 'hanging out' and 'walking with' mothers in their everyday lives, engaging in open-ended conversations and using sociograms as a participatory method. I reflect on how my positionality as a researcher and my developing relationships with participants shaped the data; I then outline the analysis process. Throughout the chapter, I reflect on the diverse ethical issues emerging at various stages of my research.

This is followed by five ethnographic chapters, interspersed with ethnographic interludes illustrating the arguments developed in each chapter. While the chapters include extracts from mothers' rich narratives and my fieldnotes, this inevitably means a dismantling of individual stories; through the interludes, I hope to not only illustrate upcoming themes, but show the texture of the complex narratives and our conversations.

In 'Mothering in a hostile environment' (Chapter 4), I show that hostile policies constrain experiences and practices of mothering for mothers with insecure immigration status and NRPF. I demonstrate how policies introduced in the last decade exclude, marginalise and racialise women/mothers from the Global South, generating precarity and ontological insecurity. In the context of structural and everyday exclusions, I argue that becoming a mother can be understood as enacting belonging and as active citizenship, and can produce



*acts* of citizenship. I show that this takes place through the mother-child relationship and relationally with partners/children's fathers, other mothers, friends, faith group members and frontline advocates. Furthermore, I suggest that producing a (potentially) British child can be seen as a political project of belonging: becoming a mother creates a potential pathway to 'leave to remain' (despite significant barriers along the way). At the same time, I show that becoming a mother with insecure status not only creates new challenges and needs but leads to new forms of exclusion. I explore mothering practices – parenting together or alone, provisioning, protecting children from 'knowing too much' but also cultivating citizenship (strategic mothering), and imagining a livable future – and argue that whilst these practices are constrained by structural position, they are also forms of enacting relational belonging as a mother, for oneself and on behalf of one's children.

Maintaining the lens of practices and identities of motherhood as relational, the subsequent chapters take forward the argument that the intersection of motherhood and precarious status shapes how individuals develop and sustain their personal networks and exchange forms of social support, which impact on subjective wellbeing. Examining a different type of relationship in each chapter, I show that mothers resist marginalisation, enact belonging and share diverse forms of support through interpersonal relationships. I demonstrate how mothers navigate dialectical tensions between self-disclosure and the need for privacy (the 'problem of trust'), between care and control, between the need for support and its perceived unavailability, and between obligations and reciprocity. I consider how these processes create unequal power relations and vulnerabilities in different ways in different types of relationship.

Friendship is an under-researched field in sociology, and has received limited attention in migration studies. In Chapter 5, 'Doing Friendship', I examine how friendship practices are shaped by the intersection of motherhood, insecure immigration status and NRPF, and can be seen as forms of 'doing' belonging in the context of the hostile environment. Focusing on the practices of reaching out/holding back, sharing resources, sharing information and mutual confiding, I argue that mothers are forced to navigate tensions between sharing support needs and concealing precarious status; between the need for and the apparent scarcity of material, financial and emotional support; and between social exchange and

difficulties in reciprocating. I show that developing trust is necessary in friendship but is highly problematic for mothers with insecure status.

The literature on religion within the field of migration has focused on its role in facilitating integration, both within particular cultural communities and within wider society; yet there has been almost no attention to its specific role in experiences of belonging and exclusion from the perspective of people with precarious immigration status. In Chapter 6, 'Doing Faith', which focuses on Christian churches of various denominations, I examine practices of embedding in faith networks as modes of relational belonging within projects of political belonging for women/mothers with insecure immigration status. I show how (and to what extent) mothers embed in faith networks through diverse practices from attending services and taking an active part in groups, to exchanging scarce resources, confiding needs in pastors and church members, and claiming faith spaces through cleaning and also as a space of refuge. Finally, I consider 'doing faith' beyond the church, exploring embedding in online spaces and doing faith as a personal practice. Building on the previous chapter, I develop my theory of the 'problem of trust' by examining further the tensions between openness and privacy, between the need for resources and their limited availability, between obligation and the challenges of reciprocating, but also between the dynamics of care and control. I show that the intertwining of efforts to enact belonging as a mother with these complex tensions and experiences of bordering within faith institutions complicates the challenges of contesting exclusionary practices and marginalisation within faith networks.

The literature on precarious immigration status in the context of couple relationships is somewhat more developed, but is largely focused on the ways that insecure status (and, in the UK, the NRPF condition) exacerbates and traps women in situations of domestic violence. Whilst relevant, through deep engagement with my ethnographic data, I argue in Chapter 7, 'Doing Coupledness',<sup>11</sup> that intimate couple relationships are more complex and can simultaneously involve relations of care, control and resistance. This chapter is structured around relational practices grouped into five themes: getting together/moving in; 'holding' conflict; contesting inequalities, resisting exploitation and abuse; and sharing emotional and material support. Through examination of these practices, I argue that

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<sup>11</sup> In the thesis, I focus on heterosexual couple practices, reflecting the experiences of participants in the study.

precarious status influences the ways in which women/mothers develop and sustain (and end) couple relationships, affecting subjective belonging and wellbeing. I show that whilst couple relationships may be perceived as a haven in a hostile environment – opening the door to intimacy and emotional support, shelter and material resources, potentially a pathway to residency rights and connections to wider support networks – such relationships are nevertheless contingent, change over time<sup>12</sup> and are constrained by precarity. Moreover, becoming parents requires negotiation not only of parental roles and responsibilities, but also of children’s belonging. Thus whilst being part of a couple offers significant modes of enacting belonging and citizenship, I show that self-disclosure, precarious status, (inter)dependency and motherhood itself increase women’s vulnerability to the risk of separation, exploitation, control and abuse.

In the final ethnographic chapter, *Engaging with Advocates and Bureaucrats* (Chapter 8), I show that the inability of personal networks to sufficiently meet the new needs created by becoming a mother leads to (increased) engagement with state bureaucrats and frontline advocates, which produces experiences of bordering and belonging in particular ways. I argue that everyday bordering by agents of the state locally and nationally – acting as gatekeepers of resources and the right to remain – generates ontological insecurity for mothers with insecure status. In this context, I suggest, being a mother creates opportunities for embedding in convivial public or semi-public spaces, which can act as sites for relational belonging, not only friendships with other mothers but with voluntary sector (and hospitable public sector) advocates. I show that for women/mothers with precarious immigration statuses navigating the ‘problem of trust’, advocates play an essential role in offering recognition *as mothers* and, through recognition of and support for citizenship practices and acts, *as citizens*. When kin may not be accessible and entrusting friends or faith group members with personal information may be too risky, I argue that developing trust in identified advocates becomes an important avenue for self-disclosure, contributing to greater ontological security and a sense of belonging.

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<sup>12</sup> The same could be said of other types of relationship, although contingency may be particularly relevant in couple relationships.

Drawing together the conclusions of the ethnographic chapters in the final chapter, I conclude that immigration and citizenship policies in the UK subject women/mothers to multiple, intersecting forms of racialised and gendered bordering which generates ontological insecurity and 'status anxiety', yet women/mothers enact belonging and citizenship relationally in everyday ways *as women and mothers* – in relation with their children, and also through friendships, faith networks, couple relationships and with frontline advocates. I further conclude that, whilst mothers are agentive, their relational practices of belonging are shaped and often constrained by their structural position, requiring careful navigation of dialectical tensions and the problem of trust. I summarise how the thesis contributes to the literature on bordering, belonging, citizenship, motherhood and friendship by foregrounding the role of government immigration policy and insecure immigration statuses in making motherhood precarious and (re)producing structural and everyday inequalities.

## Chapter 1: Framing bordering, belonging and mothering in a hostile environment

'We will do everything we can to make it harder for illegal migrants to establish a settled life in the UK when they have no right to be here.'

*(Speech to House of Commons by Home Secretary Theresa May on second reading of Immigration Bill, 22 October 2013)*

'this situation brings uncertainty, confusion and probably most importantly a divisive atmosphere of suspicion and mistrust.'

*(Yuval-Davis et al., 2018: 240)*

### Introduction

Bordering, belonging and citizenship have long been major areas of interest within the interdisciplinary field of migration, particularly over the last several decades, as globalisation processes have increased international mobilities and supra-national forms of governance. In the context of the UK government's Hostile Environment strategy announced in 2012, and the broader context of hostile immigration and citizenship policies in the UK and beyond since at least the mid-twentieth century, bordering has become a major area of interest. A growing body of literature in the social sciences examines bordering practices, not only 'at the border' in the sense of conventional geo-political state borders, but through the political-legal production of irregular migration, and increasingly through internal, 'everyday' and 'everywhere' bordering. In the context of debates on integration, bordering needs to be studied in intersection with the other structural and everyday ways in which racially minoritised migrants are excluded and marginalised. In counterpoint, concepts of belonging and citizenship have long been of central interest within the social sciences and beyond. More recently, some of this work has developed in dialogue with work on bordering. Whilst spatial belonging and political citizenship have been major areas of interest, elsewhere scholarship on family practices, friendship and intimacy practices can be seen as expanding understandings of relational belonging. The vast scholarship on social networks equally has much to contribute to knowledge of belonging, trust and citizenship. In this chapter, I identify key concepts from these diverse bodies of literature and show how the thesis uniquely brings them into conversation with each other in order to address the research questions set out in the Introduction.

## Bordering

### Contextualising bordering

Bordering refers firstly to attempts by the state to control immigration, usually in the context of conflicting political agendas.<sup>13</sup> In the UK, this has produced selective, contradictory and often incoherent government policies, and complex and confusing immigration legislation (Yeo 2020). As numbers of international migrants have risen, the UK, like many other nation states, has increased restrictions for most people, drawing on a range of tools including but extending beyond tighter controls at geopolitical borders, such as a proliferation of visa types, and reducing access to residency and working rights (De Haas et al. 2020), reifying 'migrant illegality' (De Genova 2013b). Crucially, the enactment of borders has now spread into everyday spaces and interactions (discussed below).

Immigration and citizenship rules (and their application) are more or less restrictive according to the 'race'/ethnicity, nationality, class, religion or visa category of potential migrants; they are selective, discriminatory and exclusionary, creating hierarchies based on intersecting non-meritocratic attributes (Ellermann 2020). Rights of entry, work, temporary or permanent stay and citizenship are granted to individuals from groups deemed 'deserving' or desirable, following both an 'economically utilitarian logic' (De Haas et al. 2020: 268) and a racist agenda (Yeo 2020).

Moves to deny residency rights and citizenship to racialised citizens of former British colonies, juxtaposed with the privileged status of EU citizens (at least until Brexit in 2020), has had differential effects on migrants' rights and experiences of integration and settlement. As Nadine El-Enany (2020) has argued, 'race' is used as an organisational category in the state's granting of rights of entry and stay, creating racial hierarchies whereby certain groups are deemed to be deserving of legal status and the rights and opportunities this entails, whilst others are not. Additional rules and restrictions produce barriers and differentiated rights at the intersection of 'race', gender and class. The multiplicity of legal categories in relation to rights of entry and stay, and the inherent

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<sup>13</sup> Conflicting agendas may arise from economic growth-led demand for low- and high-skilled migrant labour, subsequent recession and austerity measures, political and media anti-immigration discourses, and rights-based movements supported by international conventions.

complexities and contradictions of frequently changing rules, serve the interests of the state in its efforts to control and order migration (Boswell and Geddes 2011) and frustrate non-state actors' attempts to make sense of legal requirements for entry, stay and citizenship, impeding processes of integration (Meissner 2018: 303). The proliferation of legal statuses can thus be seen as a form of bordering to legitimise the marginalisation and exclusion of groups by the state, whilst maintaining 'a facade of racial inclusion' (El-Enany 2020). It generates 'layered or fragmented forms of belonging', erasing rights, denying needs and subjecting individuals to lives of uncertainty (Menjívar 2006: 1006).

In conceptualising bordering, it is important to recognise that 'irregular migration' is socially, politically and legally constructed, rather than existing as an independent social phenomenon or an intrinsic property of individuals (De Genova 2002, Düvell 2011, Menjívar and Abrego 2012). Individual statuses change as a result of new immigration laws and rules and their application – yet categories are often presented in political and media discourses as 'natural', always in existence, and self-evident fact (De Genova 2013b). In the UK and nation-states across the EU, the introduction of visa regimes since the 1990s to restrict and outlaw many types of migration and employment of non-EU migrants has inevitably produced an increase in so-called 'irregular' or 'illegal' migration<sup>14</sup>, definitions of which vary according to the legislation in place in particular states and at different times. Despite being defined in UK law as 'illegal entry' (Immigration Act 1971), and contrary to widespread political and media discourses which draw on notions of people smuggling themselves into Britain<sup>15</sup>, irregular migration most commonly results from overstaying following legal entry, or from working in breach of immigration regulations (Düvell 2011: 280, 288). Irregular status also results from being refused asylum and the difficulties of navigating the highly complex, costly and bureaucratic process to renew residence and work permits applications, or appeal refusal of asylum applications. As Nicholas De Genova (2013a) and Cecilia Menjívar and Daniel Kanstroom (2013) have shown in the US, the concept of 'migrant

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<sup>14</sup> Düvell (2011) associates this with the progressive expansion of the EU since the 1990s and the imbalance between demand and supply of skilled and unskilled migrant labour in the context of economic growth.

<sup>15</sup> Clandestine entry to the UK is relatively rare.

illegality' is deployed by politicians and commentators to create legal vulnerability and to position some people as undeserving of state support and unentitled to basic rights.

Distinguishing between 'documented'/'legal' and 'undocumented'/'illegal' statuses is therefore not helpful. Statuses do not tell us about individuals' characteristics, but represent political categories that are created and changed by legislation and applied through discretionary practices by representatives of the state, and are open to contestation by transitory, insecure and quasi-legal subjects (Luibheid et al. 2018). Following Menjívar (2006: 1000), I therefore contend that it is more productive to focus on 'the [grey] area between these legal categories', and specifically how, through its inherent ambiguities, this "in-between" status or liminal legality shapes different spheres of life' – including mothering, relationships with family and friends, the development of support networks and access to community spaces and institutions.

### Race, racialisation and racism

As a form of bordering, racialisation – the process whereby groups are categorised according to the socially and politically constructed notion of 'race', and attributes and racial meanings are attached to these categories (Omi and Winant 2018, Solomos 2003 [1989], Phoenix and Husain 2007) – operates at multiple levels. As a concept, it has been the subject of debate across the social sciences. Racialisation is evident at macro, meso and micro levels in the regulation of immigration and access to residency rights and citizenship, and in processes of inclusion and exclusion within relationships and in individual belonging practices. In the UK, these processes cannot be separated from the state's earlier role in establishing and maintaining the institutions of slavery and Empire, in which racist ideologies were used as justification for state violence over centuries, with continuing and complex consequences. As a colonizing state, Britain's concern was to construct 'an "internal" racial homogeneity' and 'whiteness as a *national* identity', representing 'privileges and power', distinguishing the colonizer from the heterogeneous colonized (Anderson 2013: 36). The legacy of this ideology can be seen in continuing racialised structures and practices.

As discussed in the previous section, whether explicit or not in its racist intentions, immigration and citizenship legislation in the UK has been racist in its effects by excluding



people predominantly from racially minoritised groups from immigration, residency and citizenship rights. This has been the case since Parliament passed the Aliens Act 1905 to restrict Jewish immigration, and has become increasingly so as legislation has proliferated over the course of the twentieth century and in the last two decades, with the target of exclusion shifting to people of colour from the former colonies. Whilst equalities legislation and evolving social norms have led to immigration legislation becoming less explicitly racist in recent years, racism has nevertheless pervaded political discourses<sup>16</sup>, which have shaped (and been shaped by) media narratives and public attitudes and practices in various ways. Racialised discourses pathologise family and gender roles ascribed to migrant families from Black and ethnic minority backgrounds (Phoenix and Husain 2007, Erel 2018: 177). In addition to antisemitic and anti-Black racism, anti-Muslim forms of racism have long been in evidence, with increased forms of ‘Othering’ and securitisation discourses developing in the UK since the terrorist attacks of 2001 (in the US) and 2005 (in the UK) (SSAHE 2020). As well as racist discourses and practices, racial discrimination and inequalities play out at the socio-economic level, for example in the labour market, where racially minoritised groups (especially women), including those of migrant backgrounds, are at increased risk of unemployment and poverty (Erel et al. 2017, Khan 2020). Racialisation and racism must also be examined at the micro level, including the expression of racist or racialised views, discriminatory behaviours, being subjected to racism and discrimination, and the contestation of racism through practices of solidarity. Racialised views can also become internalised, shaping identities and impacting on interpersonal relationships in ways which may not be conscious.

Words are important in discussing the effects of racialisation and racism. Nadine El-Enany (2020: 232) uses the term ‘racialised’ ‘[i]n acknowledgement of Britain as a white supremacist context’ and to draw attention to *who* is oppressed by processes of racialisation. In this thesis, however, I follow Yasmin Gunaratnam and others in using the term ‘racially minoritised’ to highlight the active processes of power and domination which

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<sup>16</sup> Examples of racism in political discourses include the elision of ‘Crime and Immigration’ in New Labour’s 2010 manifesto (Goodfellow 2019: 108), Conservative Home Secretary Amber Rudd’s suggestion that people migrating to the UK were ‘taking jobs British workers could do’ (Travis 2017), Prime Minister Theresa May’s ‘Go Home’ vans, May’s claims that immigration leads to a ‘pace of change’ which is ‘too fast’, preventing a ‘cohesive society’ (Stone 2017), and Prime Minister Boris Johnson’s racist comments and apparent efforts in the Brexit campaign to ‘stoke prejudice’ against people wanting to move to the UK (Reader 2019).

are 'at work in designating certain attributes of groups in particular contexts as being in a "minority"' (Gunaratnam 2003: 17).

I will now focus on migration and the role of the state in the development of bordering practices, deportability and precarisation.

### Precarity, status anxiety and everyday bordering

Bordering practices increasingly take place within state boundaries, targeting migrants deemed 'irregular'. De Genova's concept of deportability is helpful in understanding how states use the ever-present possibility of deportation to confine individuals without regular status to 'a space of forced invisibility, exclusion, subjugation, and repression' (De Genova 2002: 427). The hidden harms caused by such bordering strategies have been conceptualised as legal or state violence (Menjívar and Abrego 2012, El-Enany 2020). This calls attention to how legal categories grant or withhold access to services, welfare benefits and rights, creating a socio-legal hierarchy which constitutes a form of stratification affecting the life chances of adults and children. Whilst less visible than other forms of violence, legal violence causes both immediate pain and long-term injury through material harm, stigmatisation and exclusion. It is structural, denying a secure income and access to housing, healthcare and food. Crucially, legal violence is also symbolic, imposing indefinite waiting on those trying to regularise their status; in this way, it is important to recognise internal bordering technologies as a form of 'slow violence' (Mayblin et al. 2020, Dickson and Rosen 2020). Shanthi Robertson's (2019: 179) concept of 'indentured temporality' in her study of temporary migration is helpful in shining a light on how institutional bordering processes are deployed to 'temporarily constrain' the desired trajectories of people who have migrated, and to contain individuals as physical beings. The indefinite denial of residency and associated rights imposes an 'enforced orientation to the present', preventing planning for the future (De Genova 2002: 427), but also, I would emphasise, preventing individuals from fully living in the present.

Deportability creates precarity, which Judith Butler (2009: ii) has defined (in relation to gender) as 'that politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury,

violence, and death'. As she has argued, the role of social and political institutions includes protecting populations from precarity by meeting their basic needs, and there is a failure to do so when, for political reasons, the needs of marginalised groups are not met, putting them at 'heightened risk of disease, poverty, starvation, displacement, and of exposure to violence without protection' from both the state and other actors. In the UK, subjecting individuals to many years of insecure immigration status and the condition of 'no recourse to public funds' (NRPF) creates precarity, not only by denying access to welfare benefits and restricting access to many public services, but by exposing them through their insecure status to exploitation and abuse, including sexual exploitation, in interpersonal relationships and in the workplace (Price and Spencer 2015: 29) and subsequently failing to provide protection and support. As Flynn and colleagues (2018: 11) have argued, the imposition and expansion of the NRPF condition and removal of rights have been deployed by the state as a deliberate strategy to create precarity and destitution as part of its immigration control policies.

In recent years, migration scholars have begun to focus attention on the precarity of having only temporary residence rights ('limited leave to remain'), showing that the production of this position can be conceptualised as a form of bordering. In the UK, this status is usually dependent on visa conditions (e.g. fiancé, marriage, student) and subject to NRPF, and as such requires renewal to avoid losing rights – a costly process with no guarantee of a positive outcome. Being granted permanent residence, or indefinite leave to remain, may first require multiple renewals of limited leave over a specified period of time (see Chapter 2). Thus for individuals with limited leave to remain, although recognised by the state as having 'regular' status, the right to remain is not secure but 'precariously conditional' (Ahmed cited in El-Enany 2020: 30; see also Ellermann 2020). Insecure forms of immigration status impose ongoing conditions of vulnerability for individuals, amounting to what De Genova has termed a 'disciplinary apprenticeship' (2002: 429): as a tool of governance, it signals both a lack of rights and minimal opportunity for social (or geographical) mobility, thus constituting a 'process of inclusion through exclusion' (De Genova 2013b: 1184).

In the UK and elsewhere, recent research has also begun to show how state bordering practices have spread into spaces *within* geopolitical state borders. Nira Yuval-Davis and

colleagues conceptualise this as ‘everyday bordering’, defining it as ‘the everyday construction of borders through ideology, cultural mediation, discourses, political institutions, attitudes and everyday forms of transnationalism’ (Yuval-Davis et al. 2018: 229). As a central feature of the UK’s Hostile Environment strategy, enacted principally through the Immigration Acts 2014 and 2016 (discussed in the following chapter), border controls are now ‘carried out by anyone anywhere – government agencies, private companies and individual citizens’ (Yuval-Davis et al. 2018: 230; Yuval-Davis et al. 2019: 102-105). Legislation, regulations and rules – and the interpretation and application of these by frontline workers, or ‘street-level bureaucrats’ (Lipsky 2010 [1980]) – restrict access for people with ‘no recourse to public funds’ to healthcare, education, welfare benefits and social housing; for some, particularly those who have lost their residency rights, it may produce additional precarity in the form of homelessness and destitution (Berg 2018, Yeo 2020, El-Enany 2020). Those who no longer have leave to remain are prevented from doing paid work, studying, volunteering, renting accommodation or opening a bank account. The new laws ‘expand and potentially criminalise failures in border-guarding as well as unsanctioned border-crossing’ (Yuval-Davis et al. 2018: 230). Employers are required to check potential employees have the ‘right to work’, whilst landlords must ascertain prospective tenants have the ‘right to rent’; all UK residents are called on to prove they have these rights. Citizenship status becomes conflated with rights and embroiled in racialised understandings of belonging and non-belonging. In the US as in the UK and elsewhere, racially minoritised individuals with insecure status are physically living in the nation state but are not seen as belonging to it, or are only partially included (Gonzales et al. 2013, Chavez 2013, Coutin 2007).

As Yuval-Davis and colleagues (2018) have indicated (quoted at the start of this chapter), these forms of bordering create uncertainty, suspicion and mistrust. Scholars have so far paid insufficient attention, however, to how the precarity associated with temporary statuses (or loss of leave to remain) and everyday forms of exclusion produce deep forms of anxiety, insecurity and ‘unbelonging’ at the micro level. Potentially enduring for years, this ‘permanent temporariness’ (Bailey et al. 2002 in Menjivar 2006) creates vulnerability not only through exclusion from resources and support services, but by placing individuals in a position of liminal legality, or ‘legal limbo’, whereby they are indefinitely trapped in

extended transitory stages, defined by uncertainty (Menjívar 2006: 1007). Temporary statuses, or lack of leave to remain, create anxiety for individuals about their status, rights, risk of deportation and, for mothers and fathers, about the implications for their children. Little is understood about how this affects subjective wellbeing, and how individuals respond and manage deep feelings of insecurity. In this thesis, I suggest this state of being can be conceptualised as *status anxiety*<sup>17</sup>. In my development of this concept throughout the thesis, I focus attention on the structural, symbolic and everyday constraints experienced by those without indefinite leave to remain in the country in which they reside, and on the pervasive and inescapable anxiety this produces; I explore the embodiment of this situated anxiety, and how it is experienced relationally, in both intimate and other forms of social relationships.

To date, little attention has been paid to how these official bordering practices shape interpersonal relationships and access to support and services. In the US, Abrego and Menjívar (2011) and Luibhéid and colleagues (2018) have shown how uncertain legal statuses impede Latina migrant mothers from fulfilling their culturally and socially defined mothering roles by preventing access to healthcare. Recognising mothers' agency, however, Abrego and Schmalzbauer (2018: 16) have argued that mothers with insecure status 'devise survival strategies' and make meaning through 'intensive mothering' and sacrifice. In terms of mothers' other types of relationships, Abrego and Schmalzbauer (2018) have demonstrated how insecure status intersects with place to shape relationships with frontline workers and friendships with other mothers, in particular how ethnic, cultural and class differences and a lack of safe spaces to gather can impede the development of trust and constrain access to services and resources. Similarly, Hondagneu-Sotelo and Ruiz (2013) have highlighted the interplay of precarious immigration status and space in the formation and sustaining of friendships: excluded from men's public gathering places, and unable to travel back to their country of origin, or to visit or invite friends because of small and crowded homes, semi-public 'spaces of sanctuary' (community gardens in their study) provide opportunities for forming connections and enacting friendship. The impact of

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<sup>17</sup> The term was originally coined by philosopher Alain de Botton (2005) to describe anxiety experienced in capitalist societies about the extent to which others perceive us as a success or failure. I employ the term but develop a different meaning.

immigration policy on couple relationships has received scholarly attention on the topic of intimate abuse: research by Menjivar and Salcido (2002), Erez and Globokar (2009) and Raj and Silverman (2002, 2014) in the US, and by Anitha (2010, 2011, 2015), Voolma (2018) and Dudley (2017) in the UK, as well as reports by third-sector women's and migrants' rights organisations, has shown the ways in which the precarity of insecure status can increase the risk of violence in intimate couple relationships, and reduce access to help and support. Research in the fields of health and education in the UK have highlighted how the undermining of trust in public services by hostile environment policies impedes individuals' engagement with frontline workers (Hiam et al. 2018, Weller et al. 2019, Papageorgiou et al. 2020, defenddigitalme.org), whilst Dennler (2018) has examined the impact of policy on interactions with social workers. No single study yet exists which addresses how the erosion of trust by state bordering affects the formation and development of all of these (and other) types of interpersonal relationships for individuals with insecure immigration status.

## Belonging

Being bordered out of a collectivity, whether as a citizen of the nation-state or at micro or meso levels, necessitates practices of belonging. Social practices emerge and evolve in response to the interplay of social conditions and individual agency, and change in specific contexts, widely understood through Bourdieu's (2005 [1977]) concept of habitus and Giddens' (1984) structuration theory. More recently, Elizabeth Shove and colleagues (2012: 19) have drawn attention to the 'elements' that lead to shifts in social practices, including 'technologies' as an aspect of material elements, which here we can relate to bordering technologies in the context of the UK government's Hostile Environment strategy. It is vitally important to understand the development of belonging practices by racially minoritised mothers in response to these racialised and gendered technologies.

### Contextualising belonging

Belonging is widely understood to mean feeling safe and 'at home' (Yuval-Davis et al. 2018, Fenster 2005), involving emotional attachment to places, groups and cultural practices, incorporating spatial, relational and affective elements. Here, 'home' represents a familiar, comforting and secure space (hooks 2009), whether relating to physical abode, neighbourhood or city. In this way, a sense of belonging is a 'personal, intimate, and private

sentiment' (Fenster 2005: 253). In the words of Floya Anthias, belonging as finding 'a social place that we feel at home in' often comes to the fore when faced with 'uncertainty, disconnection, alienation and invisibility' (Anthias 2006: 21), or ontological insecurity. Constructing belonging thus supports the development of a sense of self and psychological wellbeing, whereas the absence of a sense of belonging risks loneliness and isolation (hooks 2009).

It is important to recognise belonging as both a process and a practice, rather than a pre-existing status (Skrbis et al. 2007) or self-evident fact (De Genova 2013b). As Floya Anthias has shown, belonging concerns 'how we feel about our location in the social world' and is something we *do*: 'we articulate our belonging through our practices and our practices give rise to our sense of belonging' (Anthias 2013: 326). For individuals who have migrated, forms of autobiographical belonging (such as childhood memories of places) may be useful in constructing and sustaining transnational belonging, but alternative modes become important to enact belonging in a new home. It has been argued that economic integration is necessary in developing attachment to place (Antonsich 2010: 648); however, this strategy may not be available to mothers with insecure immigration status who may not be permitted to do paid work or may face work restrictions (and is not itself sufficient as a means of creating belonging for those who are in paid employment). As a practice, enacting belonging involves making claims in the context of forms of socio-spatial inclusion and exclusion, where such claims may be recognised or refused; 'doing belonging' is therefore an agentive process of negotiation. In a legal context, being granted residency rights, and ultimately citizenship, can be understood as achieving political belonging, enabling feelings of safety and being in a position to manage uncertainty and risks (ibid: 648) (discussed below). This is what Fenster (2005: 253) refers to as 'a formal, official, public-oriented recognition of belonging'. Yet even this may not guarantee a sense of 'place-belonging' (Antonsich 2010: 650). Insecure immigration status and having no recourse to public funds can obstruct the development of a sense of belonging.

### 'Doing belonging': cultural citizenship and the politics of belonging

Recognising 'doing belonging' as practices of negotiation in response to both institutional and interpersonal bordering is central to the – different but connected – concepts of the

politics of belonging, active citizenship and cultural citizenship. These concepts identify belonging and citizenship as participatory practices challenging conceptualisations of citizenship as status. For individuals with insecure immigration status envisaging their future in the country where they reside, the denial of residency rights and citizenship as a legal status are experienced as a fundamental threat to a subjective sense of belonging. The legal status of citizenship formally bestows rights and responsibilities on the individual in the state and shapes their membership in society (Menjívar 2006: 1003; see also Marshall 1950). Citizenship status signifies legal recognition by the state, and as such is legitimising, framing actions as socially useful (Bosniak 2000), enabling participation at multiple levels and access to redistributed resources. Yet citizenship as a status simultaneously produces 'exclusionary processes of boundary making' (Erel and Reynolds 2018; 3; see also Ellerman 2020 and Lister 2007) which intersect with other identity markers such as gender, class and 'race' to reproduce social stratification (Yuval-Davis 2007). As I show in this thesis, the denial of citizenship status, or denial of the 'right to remain' and its associated rights, can be contested through legal channels, but equally through everyday relational practices.

Research within the fields of migration and citizenship studies has conceptualised citizenship as a continuum or a process, rather than as a binary or clearly defined legal status, drawing attention to the ongoing uncertainty and insecurity of in-between statuses (Ellermann 2020, Kubal 2013, Goldring et al. 2009) and liminal legality (Menjívar 2006, discussed above). More specifically, 'doing belonging' or 'doing citizenship' is seen as a response to state bordering processes, involving the negotiation of power relationships by members of marginalised groups with state and civil society institutions. This has been conceptualised as 'cultural citizenship', whereby members of socially and culturally marginalised groups contest legal or normative criteria of belonging by claiming space through everyday cultural practices (Ong et al. 1996, Flores 1998, 2003, Rosaldo 1994, Hondagneu-Sotelo and Ruiz 2013). In a similar vein, Ruth Lister's concept of 'inclusive citizenship' adopts the perspective of excluded groups and is based on the shared values of justice, recognition, self-determination and solidarity (Lister 2007: 50-1). Focusing on the perspectives of individuals with insecure immigration status, William V. Flores has argued that claiming space and rights is enacted not only through political and social movements but by seeking in everyday ways both to become fully part of and reshape society, to



imagine community, to find a 'distinct social space' to be free to express oneself and 'feel at home' (Flores 2003: 88-9).

Linked to this, Nira Yuval-Davis's (2006, 2007, 2011) influential work on the politics of belonging conceptualises practices of belonging as a political project mobilised when one's sense of belonging or identity feels threatened. Individuals develop strategies of making belonging claims and/or resisting forms of marginalisation and socio-spatial exclusion. Like cultural citizenship, it is multi-layered, relating to membership in multiscale collectivities as well as the nation-state. The 'participatory politics of citizenship', and the rights and status this entails, derive from imagined communities which depend on individuals' social locations, experiences, values and identities (Yuval-Davis 2006: 204). These collectivities include faith-based networks, education settings and community groups, and may unfold in physical places and spaces which are local, at a distance or online. Their boundaries are negotiated, reproduced and contested. Nevertheless, as Yuval-Davis (1999) has shown, the 'gendered, racialized, heterosexualized' and 'class differentiated' nature of nation-state citizenship shapes participation in other layers of collectivities in positive and negative ways. Motherhood, faith, class, racial/ethnic and linguistic identities can be mobilised to enact belonging to, or control the boundaries of, particular groups and spaces and make claims as a member.

It is helpful to go beyond citizenship as practice, which draws on normative 'citizenship-like' behaviours, to engage with Engin Isin and Greg Nielsen's (2013 [2008]) concept of *acts of citizenship*: political, ethical, creative acts that produce new subjects. Such acts require direct participation, finding voice, claiming rights and asserting responsibilities, in ways which potentially challenge the habitus and disrupt the existing order (ibid.). As Peter Nyers (2013) has argued, for migrants with insecure status, this may involve self-identifying as such in (semi-) public spaces and challenging the prevailing view of non-citizens as non-political which confines them to the shadows. Those without status can 'assert themselves as a visible and speaking being' by taking space as 'agents, actors, participants', speaking out when not expected to, challenging injustices and claiming rights (Nyers 2013: 164, 165). The act of migration itself can be understood as 'a strategy of becoming political' in that it constitutes a refusal of global controls on movement across borders (ibid.: 169-170). Small

acts such as walking in the street without fear can also be seen as acts of citizenship, demanding equality, recognition and respect as a human being and member of society (ibid.: 171). Similarly, within faith networks, 'acts of piety' create new forms of practice and challenge existing orders by disrupting (embodied) rituals of intimacy and exclusion (Turner 2013).

Conceptualising citizenship as claims-making draws attention to its relational nature and the role of structured agency, since it requires *recognition* of the legitimacy of those claims (drawing on normative ideas of citizenship) by state officials or civil society actors (Bloemraad 2018: 4). The legal legitimacy of citizenship status supports claims-making; yet for those it excludes, 'behaving in citizen-like ways can generate feelings of personal and collective empowerment that demand recognition in status and rights' (ibid.: 5). As Floya Anthias has shown, multiple identities are relational 'within intersubjective contexts' (Anthias 2006: 20). Embodied practices in different contexts and as part of diverse collectivities may support the dialectical process of making claims and recognition. Very little research has so far explored how racially minoritised mothers, excluded from citizenship status and residency rights, engage in acts of citizenship as mothers within different relational and spatial contexts.

### Relational belonging: mothering and other forms of intimate and social relationships

Research within and beyond migration studies exploring belonging has tended to focus on its spatial dimensions rather than belonging as an everyday relational practice. Yet it is important to recognise that belonging is generated, displayed, negotiated and contested *relationally*, both locally and at a distance, face to face and via communication technologies, through interactions within different types of intimate and social relationships. Sociologists in the US and UK have shown that frequenting particular places shapes the development of relationships, as do the spatial properties of these places (Klinenberg 2018, Small 2009), and that individuals actively embed in particular places and spaces to make connections and become part of identified groups or collectivities (Ryan and Mulholland 2015, Wessendorf and Phillimore 2018, Çağlar and Glick Schiller 2018). It is recognised that constructing belonging through identity narratives at both individual and collective levels, through emotional attachments to people as well as to places, is a human need, (re)producing

ontological security, central to psychological wellbeing (Giddens 1991: 38, Antonsich 2010: 647, Yuval-Davis 2006: 202). Developing trust in other people helps prevent existential anxiety and protect against threats, particularly when the category or space of 'home' does not provide security or permanence (Kinnvall 2004: 747). However, there is no single study to date which specifically addresses how racially minoritised women/mothers further marginalised by insecure immigration status construct and strengthen belonging *as mothers* as well as through other types of intimate and social relationships.

### *Mothering*

Whilst in the field of developmental psychology there has been substantial research on mother-child bonding, attachment and the ontogenetic development of basic trust (Erikson 1950, Bowlby 1969), there has been less research in the other social sciences on how becoming and being a mother can generate (inter)subjective belonging. Carol Gilligan's (1982) concept of the feminist ethics of care, further developed by Joan Tronto (1990, 1998), frames caregiving as a gendered activity, positing that women have a distinct approach to morality which is fundamentally relational, valorising empathy, intimacy, attentiveness and responsiveness. Caring about and for others involves 'daily and thoughtful judgments' (Tronto 1998: 15) to 'maintain, continue, and repair our "world" so that we can live in it as well as possible' (Fisher and Tronto 1990: 40). Caregiving can therefore produce a sense of relational belonging by identifying and responding to others' needs, connecting self to others. Other scholars have focused specifically on mothering as a relational activity. Sara Ruddick explored mothering 'as a kind of work involving protection, nurturance and training' (Ruddick 1989 cited in Jeremiah 2006: 23), showing that mother-child interactions shape maternal thinking. Mielle Chandler has argued that the maternal self is constituted through mothering activity, 'a set of practices in-relation with and to children' (Chandler 1998: 277). In these ways, mothering is posited as establishing ontological security and intersubjective belonging.

In Canada, Isabel Dyck has argued that in migrant families, mothers support identity development and co-construct belonging with their children and husbands through everyday mothering practices, 'the nurturing activities of home' (Dyck 2018: 100). Whilst drawing attention to mothering work as a belonging practice, this presupposes a model of the heteronormative nuclear family in which the father/husband supports the family

economically and the mother/wife cultivates belonging of family members through nurturing, largely in the private sphere of home. Calling into question the Eurocentric nuclear family model in her analysis of African-American motherhood, Patricia Hill Collins has argued that for Black women being a mother can be a base of self-actualization and status in the community: 'woman-centered "mothering" networks', incorporating extended family and 'othermothers', valorise mothering as both emotional care and economic providing, and mothering is not seen as the role of the biological mother alone (Collins 2007: 277, 278). Yet Collins has also emphasised that mothering in the context of intersecting oppressions of 'race, gender, class, sexuality, and nation' creates dialectical tensions between empowerment and oppression: for some, at times, being a mother can be stifling (Collins 2000: 176).

Focusing on Black mothering and migrant mothering in the UK, Tracey Reynolds (2003, 2020, Reynolds et al. 2018) identifies Black mothering as a 'collective and connective space' but also as a 'site of struggle and survival' (Reynolds 2020: 3). In the context of austerity, health and economic inequalities, racialising policy discourses, anti-immigration attitudes and the government's Hostile Environment strategy, Reynolds argues that Black mothering is 'a political act of resistance against intersecting inequalities' (ibid.: 3). Mothering work therefore takes place not only in the home but also in the public sphere. In this way, particularly for racially minoritised mothers and children, mothering can be seen as a form of active citizenship, whereby mothers enact belonging in diverse socio-spatial contexts in relation with their children (Kershaw 2010; see also Lister 2007, 2011). Although most caregiving takes place within the private sphere, it can be seen as political in its consequences in the public sphere. Mothering work includes the '(re)generation of cultural and/or faith practices, social values and identity', 'fostering within their children a positive, counter narrative about their own culture or faith' (Kershaw 2010: 399). As Umut Erel has argued, mothers may cultivate 'a particularized, ethnically based identity' and values in their children as a means of resisting racism (Erel 2011: 698). Mothers work with their children to enact resistance through what Paul Kershaw terms 'caregiving for identity' (ibid.: 399), facilitating access to resources and cultivating identities and social and cultural capital, often but not always by building communities of support. Thus minoritised and marginalised women/mothers can be seen to engage in active citizenship through 'the daily political

decisions we make as parents and exploring the implications for our children, ourselves, and the world' (Murad 2005 cited in Kershaw 2010: 401).

In their research with migrant mothers, including mothers with insecure status, Umut Erel and Tracey Reynolds have argued that mothers enact citizenship through their caring and cultural work within the family and in wider society. Challenging 'hegemonic narratives of racialized citizenship', they show that 'migrant mothers assert citizenship and fill it with social meaning' (Erel et al. 2018: 57). Mothers '[re-frame] notions of citizenship' by undertaking kin work in 'the cultural production of their children' to provide 'a counter-narrative to normative and hegemonic constructions of citizenship', contesting their marginalisation (Reynolds et al. 2018: 377). Specifically addressing status, Erel and Reynolds have argued powerfully that racially minoritised mothers with insecure immigration status undertake *acts* of citizenship (Isin 2013 [2008]) by claiming the 'right to remain' in the UK and seeking British citizenship, 'scandalizing the ways in which nation-states guard and perpetuate global inequalities through racist practices of attributing or withholding rights' (Erel and Reynolds 2018: 5), and 'making visible the injustices' of producing irregular statuses and denying rights (ibid.: 5). Mothering can thus be understood as enacting belonging and citizenship at multiple levels: within the mother-child relationship, the family and home, woman-centred mothering networks, and by claiming rights in relation to the nation-state.

### *Friendship*

Less attention has been paid to enacting belonging and citizenship as a mother through different types of intimate and social relationships and within different community spaces and places. It is important to understand how becoming and being a mother intersect with racial and status-based forms of oppression to shape relationships and how these affect access to support and subjective wellbeing. Friendship has been shown to be a significant site for generating a sense of belonging and sharing care and support (Roseneil and Budgeon 2004). The term 'friend' holds multiple meanings and can be used in different ways: indeed, Spencer and Pahl's (2006: 60) typology identifies eight types of friendship, from 'useful contacts' and 'fun friends' ('simple friendships') to 'helpmates' and 'confidants' ('complex friendships'). Louise Ryan and other scholars have shown that friendship practices are particularly important in the context of migration as a means of enacting belonging and

accessing support, when kin networks may be geographically distant and support needs may be greater (Ryan 2015, Bunnell et al. 2012, Killias 2018, Boyd 1989, Lynam 1985).

Friendships are initiated, developed and sustained (to varying degrees) over time, and in some cases ended, requiring 'active, ongoing and necessarily reciprocal work' (Bunnell et al. 2012: 4). Actions or 'practices' thus both constitute friendship and shape experiences and perceptions of it. Practices and perceptions of friendship are patterned by structural location and context (Pahl 2000, Allan and Adams 2006, Vincent et al. 2017): gender, 'race' and class are widely recognised as factors shaping friendship formation. However, very little attention has been paid to the role of immigration status and its intersection with motherhood, or the ways in which insecure immigration status constrain mothers' friendship practices. Mutual self-disclosure is understood to create trust, which itself supports a sense of belonging, yet self-disclosure equates with self-exposure and making oneself vulnerable (Spencer and Pahl 2006, Small 2017). Leslie Baxter and colleagues (1990, 1996, 2015, 2021) and William J. Rawlins (2008) have theorized this as a dialectical tension between privacy and openness; it is vital to understand the impact of precarious status and how mothers positioned by their insecure status navigate this tension.

Friendships are often an important source of emotional, practical, informational and/or financial support (Hruschka 2010); yet, as noted by Liz Spencer and Ray Pahl, individuals need to make judgements about 'the strength of a friendship in relation to the kind of help being requested' to gauge the availability of the friend and the resource. They may choose not to approach particular friends 'because they already have a lot of commitments, or because they have troubles of their own' (Spencer and Pahl 2006: 66). Additionally, the unspoken principle of reciprocity in friendship means that help-seeking creates obligations and expectations which may feel impossible to fulfil, and is therefore often avoided where alternatives exist (Hruschka 2010). Existing research has neglected to address these considerations from the perspective of mothers with precarious status. Very little is known about how precarity of status and related needs shape the available resources in mothers' friendship networks and their help-seeking practices. It is important to understand the inter-relation between friendship practices, access to support and engagement with frontline advocates, and specifically the ways in which differential immigration and citizenship statuses shape these practices.

Scholars from diverse fields have shown that physical proximity/distance and modalities of engagement shape practices and perceptions of friendships (Baldassar and Merla 2013, Licoppe and Smoreda 2005, Adams and Allan 1999). Yet there is an absence of research on the difficulties of sustaining 'old' friendships across borders in the context of being positioned by insecure immigration status and associated precarity; equally, no studies have so far examined the challenges of sustaining more local friendships when precarious status prompts multiple moves across or beyond the city. Mario Luis Small (2009) and Eric Klinenberg (2018) have emphasised how space and place influence the formation of friendships and community participation, including mothers' socio-spatial belonging practices in family-oriented spaces, whereby women/mothers draw on their identity as a mother, for example by accessing public services such as children's centres, parent-toddler groups, nurseries, schools, and participating in other kinds of community spaces as mothers. Motherhood may thus offer new opportunity structures and spaces for initiating and developing friendships. However, as Carol Vincent and colleagues have indicated in their research on friendship and diversity, not all family-oriented spaces produce 'meaningful' or close friendships (Vincent et al. 2017). Studies have not yet explored how precarious status affects friendship formation in such spaces, yet there is a growing need to understand how different spaces can facilitate (or impede) the development of friendships for individuals positioned (and marginalised) by the intersection of their immigration status, gender, motherhood, class, 'race'/ethnicity and faith.

#### *Faith networks*

Religion and faith networks are widely recognised as playing a key role in the development of belonging for people moving to a new country (Hirschman 2004). As argued by Durkheim (1995 [1915]), the function of religion is to bring together people with shared beliefs and practices. Joining a faith group in a new country of residence provides a social and cultural identity, may support transnational links, and facilitates embedding practices in a collectivity (Davie 2015, McAndrew and Voas 2014), a process which Nina Glick Schiller and Ayse Çağlar (2016) have conceptualised as 'sociabilities of emplacement'. In London, a wide array of churches has been established by members of African Christian groups, in particular Pentecostal churches (Fesenmyer 2016), which bring together diasporas from different African countries. Sociologists have suggested that participating in church or other faith

group communities is perceived as a route to respectability, providing 'opportunities for leadership and service that bring prestige' (Foner and Alba 2008: 362, Hirschman 2004). Foley and Hoge (2007) have argued that taking on leadership or other roles within the church shapes people's images of themselves morally, spiritually and also as part of wider society. Portes (1998, 2000) and Ager and Strang (2008) have framed engagement in shared activities as promoting civic engagement and social integration, although offering very limited consideration of how this might apply within faith groups.

Recent literature on faith groups as sanctuary spaces has emphasised traditions of 'practices of welcome toward strangers' (Boudou et al. 2021) where co-congregants can provide an invaluable source of support, whether emotional, financial or material (Chimbidzikai 2021). So far, however, there has been very little discussion of the significance of faith group communities for mothers with insecure status, and the ways in which precarious status may constrain processes of embedding within a faith community. It is vital to understand how boundaries and bordering operate within faith spaces, and how in this context mothers navigate dialectical tensions between disclosure and privacy.

### *Couple relationships*

Couple relationships have been shown to be a key source of, and space for creating, belonging. The modern couple relationship can be seen as a site for (re)producing ontological security, self-realisation and aspirations for an assured future (Giddens 1992). Anthony Giddens conceptualised the 'pure relationship' as being based on 'active, contingent love', sustained only for as long as it meets both partners' needs, and as essentially democratic, based on equality between partners. The 'pure relationship' further posits intimacy and mutual self-disclosure – an opening out of oneself to the other – as fundamental to the development of trust, both particularised trust (within the relationship) and generalised trust, protecting the individual from constant anxiety. However, as Lynn Jamieson (2011: 1) has argued, relationships may be sustained less through mutual self-disclosure and 'deep knowing' and more through a range of intimacy practices which 'enable, generate and sustain a subjective sense of closeness and being attuned and special to each other'. Such everyday practices of intimacy may include discussions and shared decision-making, practical acts of care, sexual relations, having a child together and co-parenting practices. Thus, as Duncombe and Marsden (1993: 226) suggested in their study



of marriage, rather than experiencing coupledness as a 'haven in a heartless world' with mutual articulation of feelings and 'emotional participation', women may instead choose to 'build an emotional life apart from their husbands' – or partners – 'through children, part-time [*sic*] work and relationships with other women'. Whilst the couple relationship may be experienced as supportive, mothering and friendships may indeed provide a stronger and more stable sense of self and belonging for many women.

Significant research has shown that couple relationships can also be a site of mistrust, conflict, abandonment, exploitation, control, coercion and abuse (whether financial, physical, sexual or other forms). Whilst partners often construct their relationships as equal and mutually caring, this may obscure the playing out of structural gendered inequalities within the dynamics of the couple and in the space of the home. As Lynn Jamieson has suggested, the sustaining of relationships may to an extent depend on a 'shared repertoire of cover stories, taboos and self-dishonesty' (Jamieson 1999: 487), to present an image of the couple that partners imagine or would like to be, or that their community expects them to be. However, few studies have explored inequalities in everyday couple life as not only gendered but structured by intersecting dimensions of 'race'/ethnicity and immigration status. This is important as it further complicates couple dynamics in specific ways, producing new forms of precarity for women. Whilst the couple relationship may be imagined and/or experienced by women/mothers with insecure immigration status as both a form of psychological belonging and a route to 'leave to remain' or citizenship, scholars in the US and UK have shown that inequality in citizenship status can increase the risk of the relationship becoming a site of exploitation and abuse, and may trap women in harmful relationships (Menjívar and Salcido 2002, Raj and Silverman 2002, Silverman and Raj 2014, Dudley 2017, Anitha 2015, Regan et al. 2007). The literature indicates that men with citizenship status or residency rights may exploit their partner's insecurity, deportability and economic and/or legal dependence on them via threatened or actual withholding of financial support, abandonment, or reporting their partner to the police. The trust established in intimate relationships is therefore a double-edged sword, creating vulnerability to maltreatment. Mothers with insecure immigration status and no recourse to public funds may have limited alternative options to some form of couple life. As a site of

belonging, intimate couple relationships are therefore not only contingent but potentially precarious, conflictual and risky.

### *Social networks and the concept of trust*

Turning to interpersonal relationships more broadly, the extensive literature on social networks sheds further light on the dynamics of belonging by calling attention to the influence of social structure on personal experience, the embeddedness of social relations, the development of trust, and the concept of social capital (Granovetter 1973, 1985, Portes 1998, Portes and Sensenbrenner 1993, Putnam 1995, 2000, 2002, Burt 2000, Cederberg 2012, Ryan et al. 2015). Social networks can be defined as ‘the web of social relationships that surround an individual and the characteristics of those ties’ (Berkman et al. 2000: 847). In terms of time spent together, emotional intensity, intimacy and reciprocity, ties may be ‘strong’ – understood to signify family and friends – or ‘weak’, in other words people who are not known well. Weak ties can be helpful as ‘bridges’ to other networks, enabling access to new information and other resources, facilitating social mobility and community integration (Granovetter 1973, Lin 1999). Notions of ‘bonding’ and ‘bridging’ differentiate between predominantly inward-looking networks, based on familiarity, and outward-looking connections with people from other groups, backgrounds and networks (Putnam 2000, Patulny 2004).

Putnam differentiated between ‘thick’ and ‘thin’ interpersonal trust: thick interpersonal trust tends to develop within strong ties, whilst thin interpersonal trust develops in weak ties, generated by reputation or intermediaries (Putnam 2000, Khodyakov 2007), and also examined generalised trust as a feature of social organisations (Putnam 1993). Some have further distinguished institutional (or ‘systemic’) trust, based on institutions’ perceived legitimacy, competence, efficiency, justice and fairness, and attempts have been made to explore the relationship between institutional trust and interpersonal trust in different country contexts (Spadaro et al. 2020, Domański and Pokropek 2021). There has been little research showing how the erosion of institutional trust (for example, when a state fails to protect certain groups) can undermine interpersonal trust, however. This is essential to understand in relation to the hostile environment and its implications for (inter)subjective belonging.

The theoretical lens of social networks also calls attention to the links between trust and vulnerability. As Mark Granovetter argued, 'The trust engendered by personal relations presents, by its very existence, enhanced opportunity for malfeasance'; trust within intimate relationships increases vulnerability to being hurt (Granovetter 1985: 491). Cederberg (2012) has highlighted the 'relations of power, control and internal hierarchies' found within 'dense relations of trust and reciprocity' (Cederberg 2012: 64). Networks can thus be a form of social control and constitute hidden power hierarchies (Portes 1998; Faist 2000), exploiting different forms of inequalities (gendered, racialised, classed, immigration status-related) through processes of inclusion and exclusion (Bourdieu 1984, Cederberg 2012, 2016, Erel 2016). What has been underexplored in the social networks literature are the dialectical tensions between the need to trust and the need for privacy, and between autonomy and interdependence, or care and control, from the perspective of mothers with insecure immigration status and NRPF, often limited in their options for accessing support and resources. This theoretical lens offers scope to explore how the intersection of motherhood, precarity of status and practices of intimacy, including self-disclosure and trust, increases vulnerability to dynamics of control, exploitation and abuse.

The concept of social capital implies a highly instrumental perspective of relationships, although it is recognised that processes of generating and mobilising social capital may be unconscious. Defined by Pierre Bourdieu (1986: 51) as 'the actual or potential resources in a network' linked to 'membership in a group', social capital may take material or symbolic forms. Bourdieu (ibid.) maintained that the amount of social capital an individual possesses depends on the size of their network, the amount of social, economic and cultural capital possessed by others in the network, and the degree of 'closure' of the network, as opposed to the significance of the strength of ties (Granovetter 1973) or the individual's position in a network (Burt 2000). From a Bourdieusian perspective, in which social capital is concerned with the reproduction of social advantage by the dominant class, networks require continuous work, or 'investment strategies', to develop and reproduce social relationships (consciously or not) and convert 'contingent' relations into 'lasting, useful' ones that provide access to resources and support by creating obligations and claiming rights (ibid.: 52). Exchange of resources produces mutual recognition which can generate lasting relationships. Sociability is an ongoing effort requiring time, energy, competence

(knowledge of relationships and skill at using them) and the disposition to develop and use these sociability skills (ibid.: 52). Social capital can be converted into economic capital (such as financial help or paid work) or cultural capital (such as ways of talking or behaving, knowledge, qualifications) (ibid.: 47), or various forms of support, which can be conceived of as emotional, instrumental (practical help, for example childcare or financial support), appraisal (feedback to help with decision-making) and informational (Weiss 1974, cited in Berkman et al. 2000). The social capital literature tends to pay little attention to the texture and nuances of intimate and other interpersonal relationship practices, however. Exploration of these details and layers is necessary to develop an understanding of women's/mothers' modes of enacting relational belonging, for themselves and their children, in their everyday lives.

Finally, migration studies have highlighted the dynamic and transnational nature of social networks (Basch et al. 1993) and the affordances of online modalities of communication (Ryan et al. 2015, Keles 2016, Madianou and Miller 2012). Online resources facilitate and drive migration and settlement by enabling the exchange of information and other types of resources, creating virtual communities which accumulate and exchange what Keles (2016) terms 'network capital'. As with other forms of capital, it can be both empowering/supportive and disempowering/exploitative. Whilst it can facilitate access to resources, it may be inaccessible to those with limited online access, thus reinforcing disadvantage and dependency and creating vulnerabilities to exploitation. This mode of engagement needs to be considered as a dimension of mothers' relational practices locally and transnationally, and as a practice which may change over time.

### Concluding remarks

Migration and citizenship scholars have shown that bordering is enacted through policies, laws and their implementation, creating irregular immigration statuses and precarity in ways which are racialised, gendered and classed. In recent years, attention has focused on everyday bordering practices – their spread from 'the border' to all aspects of everyday life – in ways which stratify societies and exclude and marginalise racially minoritised individuals. Yet little attention has been paid to the specific effects on women and mothers, or how bordering is enacted in interpersonal relationships, undermining particularised trust.

It is essential to understand the impact of these phenomena on women/mothers *as mothers*, in order to identify how inequalities are reproduced at micro, meso and macro levels. Furthermore, there has been very little analysis of relational belonging practices and citizenship practices across different types of interpersonal relationships by women/mothers positioned by their immigration status and its intersection with gender, 'race', motherhood and precarity. The thesis aims to address this by not only presenting and analysing rich ethnographic data in light of theories of bordering, belonging, citizenship and mothering, but also drawing on scholarship on friendship, faith networks, coupledness and social networks, and, uniquely in this context, theories of relational dialectics, in order to explain how mothers enact belonging in a hostile environment. In so doing, I aim to contribute to and extend these theoretical concepts in ways which will support further research on, and understanding of, mothering, bordering and belonging. I hope the thesis will also contribute to long-standing sociological debates on the respective roles of agency and structure, the (re)production of structural inequalities, and the interaction of micro, meso and macro spheres of action.

## Interlude: 'She just encouraged me with that word – I held really tight to it'

*June: They [mums at drop-ins] advised me, they told me stay calm, it's not easy, they've been through similarities when they came to the country. They encouraged me.*

*Rachel: So that sort of helped you to feel positive, did it?*

*June: Yeah. That gave me a hope, that it wasn't just me going through this stuff. The one that struck me was the girl that told me, 'You worry too much - if you go in the streets of London, you are gonna realise that a lot of people there don't have status, they are just managing'. [...] I'm like, wow! So that build up my mind, and I become stronger. Knowing fully well that... Every time I'm walking down the street, I became bolder. I realised that I'm not the only one in this mess, there are other people, even when it's not showing on them. That's how I started staying calm, going with the flow... She just encouraged me with that word. And ever since, I held on to it. She just told me that – I held really tight to it. Because [before] when I saw the police coming, I cross over to the other side. I just became so scared. I'm a very friendly person, I make friends so quick, so it was easy for me to make friends as well.*

*Rachel: Did that help, knowing it wasn't just you, you weren't alone, being able to manage that fear? Did it help you to be your natural self, reach out and connect with people?*

*June: Yeah. It made me loosen up a bit, realise that I am not alone, a lot of people are in the shit. Some people they have partner, their partner is okay [has leave to remain] and them they are not okay [don't have leave to remain]. And it's okay to feel free and walk on the street – no police is not going to stop you, because you haven't committed any crime. So I started taking that off my mind. I have peace.*

*Rachel: That must have made a big difference.*

*June: It did actually. Cos why would I see them and start running? I have not done anything. They have not called me up to say come. The police is not the Immigration. For some reason, that fear just cut up with me.*

## Chapter 2: Contextualising the study

*'immigration is not just about people coming to live here for a while. Some will want to settle and then join us as fellow British citizens, but it's become too easy to come to work and then to stay on. It was virtually an automatic progress between one and the other. So we are going to break the link between work and settlement. Only those who contribute the most economically will be able to stay'*

(David Cameron, Prime Minister, speech on immigration, 10 October 2010)

In this chapter, I begin by providing a brief overview of patterns of migration to the UK and the evolution of immigration policy in the second half of the twentieth century, and then take a closer look at more recent developments, including the rise in the number of people without legal leave to remain. I examine the development of the 'Hostile Environment' strategy, and consider the impact on women/mothers and children with limited or no leave to remain and no recourse to public funds (NRPF).

### A brief overview of post-war migration and immigration policy in the UK

From the 1940s to the early 1980s, immigration and emigration levels were relatively low. From the late 1940s, growing numbers of people moved from the Republic of Ireland and from the former British Empire, including India, Pakistan, the Caribbean, South Africa, Nigeria and Ghana, to take up employment opportunities in a post-war Britain in need of rebuilding and struggling with labour shortages. In the 1940s and 1950s, people sought refuge from political turmoil in Poland, Hungary and other eastern European countries. As former British colonies achieved independence, more 'old' and 'new' Commonwealth citizens (recognised as 'Citizens of the UK and Colonies' (CUKCs) by the 1948 British Nationality Act), and British citizens (born abroad or returning) moved to the UK. Britain's towns and cities were becoming more racially and ethnically diverse. Many people arriving in the UK were subjected to everyday and systemic forms of racism, however, when seeking housing, at work and in everyday interactions, as well as suffering racist attacks.

In the 1960s, the rise of anti-immigrant and racist attitudes, fanned by notorious political figures such as Enoch Powell, led to legislative moves aiming to 'defuse politically the problems of immigration' and limit 'the admission of new Commonwealth immigrants', in the words of Edward Heath's Home Secretary<sup>18</sup> (Travis 2002). New laws restricted the rights CUKCs to enter and live in the UK. The Commonwealth Immigrants Act 1962 sought to reduce immigration of Commonwealth citizens of colour by creating two categories, using the device of 'passport issuing authority' to discriminate between them: it effectively accorded automatic UK residence rights to white 'Old Commonwealth' citizens and removed these rights from non-white 'New Commonwealth' citizens, creating a system of 'second class citizenship' (Yeo 2019). The Commonwealth Immigrants Act 1968 restricted rights further, such that only individuals born in the UK or whose parent or grandparent had been born in the UK retained the right to enter and live in the UK, whereas those who did not possess such ties were subject to immigration control, again favouring people who were white. Building on this racialisation of immigration legislation, the Immigration Act 1971 established the principle of patriality, granting the right of abode only to those CUKCs with a connection to the UK, or if their husband, parent or grandparent had a connection. It thus made 'whiteness intrinsic to British identity' (El-Enany 2020: 74). Still central to UK immigration policy today, the Immigration Act 1971 required those arriving in the UK to prove they were financially self-sufficient (Dickson and Rosen 2020); it also made it a criminal offence to be knowingly unlawfully present in the UK or breaching the conditions of a visa.

Shifting 'from an imperial to a national concept of Britain' (El-Enany 2020: 96), Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government passed the British Nationality Act 1981, creating for the first time 'British citizenship', which was associated with only Britain, distinct from 'the colonies' and the Commonwealth, thereby ending links of citizenship with Commonwealth countries. This followed on from the 'Primary Purpose' rule in 1980, which required non-British citizens marrying a British citizen or resident to prove that 'the primary purpose of their marriage was not to obtain British residency' (BBC 1997); failure to do so could prevent

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<sup>18</sup> The term 'Commonwealth immigrants' was inaccurate since people arriving from Commonwealth countries at that time were 'Citizens of the UK and Colonies'.



access to the UK. This attempt by the state to define 'genuine marriage' was a means of categorising couple relationships and granting or denying residency rights and citizenship, continuing colonial practices of regulating intimate spaces (Turner 2015). Furthermore, legislation in 1977 and regulations in 1982 introduced charging of non-residents for accessing the National Health Service (NHS) (although at the time this was not systematically put into practice). As Nadine El-Enany has argued, these laws worked 'to construct racialised people as not entitled to access vital resources' and disproportionately prevent their access to 'colonially derived' health and welfare provision and place them at risk of detention and deportation (El-Enany 2020: 74). Immigration and citizenship legislation was becoming not only increasingly restrictive but racially selective.

Both immigration and emigration levels increased slowly from the mid-1980s. Net migration – a figure oddly of sustained interest to state institutions, despite its lack of value in shedding light on population flows or churn – remained low (often below zero) until the early 1990s, with emigration roughly equal to, or exceeding, immigration. From the mid-1990s to the 2010s, however, advances in information communication technologies (ICTs), cheaper travel, the spread of conflict and insecurity in many parts of the world, the effects of globalisation and greater socio-economic inequalities within and between countries drove up migration. Both emigration and immigration reached unprecedented levels; immigration increased year on year, predominantly from within the EU following expansions in 2004 and 2007. By 2010, annual immigration to the UK had reached 591,000 and emigration reached 339,000 (ONS 2016), creating significant population churn. Individual motivations to move to the UK – to work, study, join family or seek asylum (ONS 2015, Walsh 2020) – were embedded in socio-economic, geographical and historical contexts, notably the intersection of restrictive and selective immigration regimes with post-colonial links between now independent countries and the UK.

A first step of Tony Blair's New Labour government in 1997, following its election manifesto pledge, was to overturn the 'Primary Purpose' rule: according to Home Secretary Jack Straw, this was necessary because it was 'arbitrary, unfair and ineffective and has penalised genuine cases, divided families and unnecessarily increased the administrative burden on

the immigration system' (BBC 1997). Yet the New Labour government's approach to immigration rapidly became more restrictive: whilst aiming to encourage some forms of economic migration, they sought to restrict asylum-seeking and target 'irregular' migration through numerous laws, changes to the Immigration Rules and increased investment in border technologies (Somerville 2007). The Immigration and Asylum Act 1999, one of four migration-related Acts passed by Blair's government, consolidated the principle of 'no recourse to public funds' (NRPF) for people subject to immigration control<sup>19</sup>, preventing access to mainstream welfare benefits or social housing<sup>20</sup>. This particularly targeted migrant spouses in the first instance (Erel 2017): in 2002, the government introduced a minimum age of 21 and a two year 'probation' period before spouses could apply for indefinite leave to remain (Turner 2015), and in 2007 proposed a language requirement for migrant spouses, a measure which was implemented by the Coalition government in 2010 (Turner 2015). Other measures taken by the New Labour government included introducing tougher penalties for illegal entry, expanding detention facilities and increasing deportations, implementing new technologies for border control, enforcing more severe sanctions on employers for employing irregular migrants, and increased data sharing with police and Customs. Additionally, the government introduced licensing for employers and private, further and higher education institutions, requiring them to monitor attendance and report unauthorised absences of employees and students, with non-compliance being grounds for removal of sponsor licences by the Home Office (Yeo 2018). Whilst these measures can be seen as the 'precursors' of the hostile environment, they were limited in scope, and numbers of prosecutions were very low (Griffiths and Yeo 2021).

As immigration legislation multiplied, levels of 'irregular' migration increased, usually as a result of overstaying leave to remain, but also resulting from being born to parents without leave to remain, not complying with visa restrictions (such as working more hours than permitted), or (more rarely) illegal entry. The situation of irregular status often arose

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<sup>19</sup> This includes people without leave to remain and with time-limited leave to remain, such as those on a spouse visa and those granted leave under the family and private life rules ([NRPF Network](#) n.d.).

<sup>20</sup> See also Immigration Act 1971; Housing Act 1996; Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002; Immigration, Asylum and Nationality Act 2006; UK Borders Act 2007; Borders, Citizenship and Immigration Act 2009.

without individuals' intention or awareness, as a result of bureaucratic error, inefficiency or rule changes (Spencer 2011), as has been made apparent by the recent Windrush scandal (Williams 2020, Gentleman 2020).

The Conservative-led coalition government, which came to power in 2010, brought a significant intensification in the hostility of immigration policy. This will be discussed below.

## The development of the Hostile Environment

In the first two decades of the twenty-first century, annual immigration levels continued to rise, outpacing emigration, which initially increased too but at a much slower rate.

Conscious of public and political concern with growing diversity in Britain and with apparent competition for jobs and resources, David Cameron, as the new leader of the Conservative party in 2010 and then as prime minister, chose to focus on (unprecedentedly high) net migration figures, pledging to reduce levels from over 200,000 per year (as had been the case since 2004) to the 'tens of thousands' by 2015, arguing that it was necessary to protect resources in the context of financial austerity. As indicated in the quote at the beginning of this chapter, Cameron aimed to do this by 'break[ing] the link' between temporary visas and settlement. The government's 'target', widely discussed in the media at the time, focused on further restricting opportunities for non-EU workers, students and families to live in Britain<sup>21</sup>. Ultimately, the announced target led to the government's Hostile Environment strategy, discussed below. Continued anti-immigration and anti-EU agitation by largely right-wing political figures, sustained hostility in certain sections of the media and the Conservative government's desire to hold on to power precipitated the referendum on the EU in 2016, resulting in the widely unexpected vote for Brexit, and ultimately leading to the UK's traumatic 'divorce' from the EU at the end of 2020. This repositioned EU citizens living in the UK as migrants subject to immigration control. Meanwhile, annual immigration and emigration levels have remained high, creating an increasingly diverse society in the UK. The

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<sup>21</sup> This is because until Brexit EU citizens had freedom of movement. It is important to recognise, however, that even prior to Brexit access to social assistance by EU citizens was restricted (see, for example, Morgan et al. 2021: 6).

population born outside the UK almost doubled between 2004 and 2019, reaching 9.5 million; the majority were born outside the EU (Vargas-Silva and Rienzo 2020).

In parallel, increasingly restrictive and rapidly changing immigration legislation has driven up the number of people finding themselves with irregular immigration status. Most people in this situation arrived in the UK with a visa (Düvell et al. 2018), but have found themselves unable to extend their stay as a result of changes to the Immigration Rules, changes to personal circumstances, unaffordable visa fees and lawyers' fees, and/or difficulties navigating the Byzantine system. Many children and young people born in the UK inherited their irregular immigration status from their parents (or mother) who did not have indefinite leave to remain when they were born; others have been trafficked or (with family or alone) have sought asylum. Estimates of the population with irregular immigration status vary, since there is no agreement on methodology and there are gaps in the data, different definitions and high levels of uncertainty on statistics (Walsh and Sumption 2020). The Pew Research Center (2019: 33) estimated that at the end of 2017, between 800,000 and 1.2 million people were living in the UK without leave to remain (including people seeking asylum); most are thought to have overstayed their visa or been refused asylum. Half were believed to be from the 'Asia Pacific' region and one-fifth from sub-Saharan African countries (ibid.: 15). More than one-third had been living in the UK for at least ten years (ibid.: 16). The Greater London Authority (GLA) provided an estimate of 674,000 irregular migrants living in the UK (to April 2017)<sup>22</sup>, of whom 215,000 are thought to be 'undocumented' children, i.e. without leave to remain; of these, 106,000 children were born in the UK to parents with irregular status (Jolly et al. 2020). The number of children with irregular immigration status has risen significantly from Sigona and Hughes' (2012) estimated 120,000 in 2007. Approximately 397,000 individuals with irregular immigration status are believed to live in London (59% of the total), of whom about 107,000 are children (Jolly et al. 2020: 63). Furthermore, as is becoming apparent, Brexit has resulted in increased numbers of people with irregular status, since a significant proportion of those entitled to

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<sup>22</sup> The Department of Health (2019) estimated there are 580,000 people with irregular immigration status, whilst the Home Office estimated the 'demand for its immigration enforcement services' to be between 240,000 and 320,000, although this does not include all migrants with irregular status (PAC 2020: 9).

apply for 'settled status' either did not manage to do so or were not granted settled status by the government's deadline of 30 June 2021 (Gentleman 2021).

The 'Hostile Environment' approach was introduced as such two years after the government pledged to reduce net migration. Theresa May, then Home Secretary, explained her aim was to make life so difficult for migrants who did not have leave to remain that they would choose to return to their country of origin, and that this would also deter prospective migrants from moving to the UK to stay (Kirkup and Winnett 2012). This approach built on the use of 'destitution or the threat of destitution [...] as a policy tool' by the Home Office over the previous decade to 'drive [...] out of the country' people without leave to remain (Sigona and Hughes 2012: 10). In a 2007 enforcement strategy, the Home Office states that 'those not prioritised for removal [...] should be denied the benefits and privileges of life in the UK and experience an increasingly uncomfortable environment so that they elect to leave' (Home Office 2007: 17, cited in Sigona and Hughes 2012). Whilst Theresa May was not the first to use the term 'hostile environment' in an immigration policy context<sup>23</sup>, this represented 'the first systemic implementation of this strategy' (University of Portsmouth 2021).

The strategy has significantly expanded internal, everyday borders, affecting a wide range of sectors (Yuval-Davis et al. 2018). Yet the objectives of the Hostile Environment strategy have never been made explicit, and the constituent policies have not been subjected to close monitoring, political scrutiny or public debate (Griffiths and Yeo 2021: 11). Government documents suggest it aims 'to discourage people from coming to the UK, to stop them overstaying visas, to prevent irregular migrants from accessing services and drawing from the public purse, and to make it easier to remove people' (Griffiths and Yeo 2021: 10). A wide range of measures introduced predominantly by the Immigration Acts 2014 and 2016 have established a high minimum income requirement<sup>24</sup> making it difficult or impossible for many British citizens (or residents with indefinite leave to remain) to bring their non-EU spouse to the UK; dramatic increases in charges for visas and leave to remain applications;

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<sup>23</sup> The term had previously been used by Liam Byrne, former Labour immigration minister, when introducing fines for organisations which employed individuals without the right to work in the UK (Travis 2007), as well as in a Labour policy document in 2010 (UKBA 2010).

<sup>24</sup> This is currently £18,600, or more in the case of children (UKVI n.d. a), which is out of the reach of many.

tighter restrictions on access to public services, accommodation or paid work; requirements for landlords to check prospective and existing tenants' 'right to rent', employers to check employees' 'right to work' and further and higher education institutions to check international students' right to study; charging upfront for, or refusing access to, secondary healthcare; and a (perpetually increasing) Immigration Health Surcharge for individuals with limited leave to remain. The Home Office's short-lived 'Go Home' campaign in 2013 saw vans targeting ethnically diverse London boroughs with a hostile message of 'go home or face arrest', complete with a number to text, and a prominent statistic purportedly of the number of arrests in the local area (Jones et al. 2017), in the sinisterly-named Operation Vaken (Hattenstone 2018). Highly publicised immigration raids on private homes and businesses have aimed to intimidate those without leave to remain as well as the wider public through displays of hostile state power. Meanwhile, arrangements for increased data-sharing have been quietly implemented between the Home Office and public institutions, including the NHS, the police and schools, for immigration enforcement purposes. As Griffiths and Yeo (2021: 4) have argued, these diverse policies are united by the co-option of third parties for border enforcement, whereby private individuals, managers and frontline workers are positioned as border guards, with sanctions for non-compliance. Since 2012, the implementation of the Hostile Environment strategy has been overseen by the cross-departmental, high-level Hostile Environment Working Group<sup>25</sup>. Some of the key measures and their impact on women/mothers and children are detailed in the following sections.

In 2012, then Home Secretary Theresa May implemented new, more arduous and expensive routes to settlement (indefinite leave to remain) for families applying to stay in the UK on the grounds of family and private life (Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights), as well as for non-EEA partners, spouses and adult dependent relatives (Pinter et al. 2020). Families engaging Article 8 had previously been entitled to live in the UK and access state support (Dickson and Rosen 2020: 5). In a punitive move, the government imposed a more convoluted and costly route on families unable to meet the financial and other requirements for shorter settlement routes (Pinter et al. 2020). Parents in this position now

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<sup>25</sup> This was later renamed the 'Inter-Ministerial Group on Migrants' Access to Benefits and Public Services'.

have to wait to apply for limited leave to remain on the basis of their child being resident in the UK continuously for seven years<sup>26</sup>, or as the parent/carer of a British citizen child<sup>27</sup>. If granted, they are placed on the ‘ten-year route’, whereby they are required to apply for limited leave (of 30 months) four consecutive times, currently at a cost of £1033 per person each time (UKVI 2021). In addition, they are required to pay the Immigration Health Surcharge (currently £624 per person per year) (UKVI n.d. b) and usually lawyers’ fees too. After ten years, families are entitled to apply for indefinite leave to remain, currently costing £2389 per person (UKVI 2021).<sup>28</sup> As Pinter et al. (2020: 19) have highlighted, families on a low income are thus ‘perversely forced to pay a *higher* overall rate for settlement than families on higher income who can meet the income threshold’. Whilst a fee waiver policy is in place for limited leave to remain applications, the threshold is high so many families are not eligible, and, as the Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration has concluded, decisions take ‘too long’ (ICIBI 2019), putting families at risk of overstaying. The cost of this process for low-income families is likely to push families into debt, impacting on children’s welfare.

### ‘No Recourse to Public Funds’

The condition of ‘no recourse to public funds’ (NRPF) was extended in 2012 to families on the ten-year route; it also applies to those without leave to remain and those who are ‘appeal rights exhausted’ (ARE). This has mainly affected people from non-EEA countries, although since the European Union (Withdrawal Agreement) Act 2020 it also applies to EU citizens, now considered ‘subject to immigration control’. Individuals subject to the NRPF condition are not entitled to access mainstream welfare benefits, including income support, housing benefit, child benefit or universal credit, or other forms of support linked to welfare

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<sup>26</sup> Until 2008, children without leave to remain could be granted indefinite leave to remain after seven years of continuous living in the UK. In 2008, this concessionary policy was removed. Since 2012, the Immigration Rules have stated that a child who has lived continuously in the UK for 7 years may qualify for limited leave to remain if it would be unreasonable for them to leave the UK (Yeo 2018, Blackstone Law Associates, n.d.)

<sup>27</sup> A child born and living in the UK can be registered as British when they reach the age of ten.

<sup>28</sup> The significant increase in fees is due to the Home Office’s objective of achieving a ‘fully self-funded immigration system’ mainly through ‘immigration and nationality fees’, which was legislated for in the Immigration Act 2014 (ICIBI 2019).

benefits, such as free school meals<sup>29</sup>. There are also restrictions on access to free childcare in England for children aged three and four (NRPF Network n.d. b, GOV.UK n.d.), and for children aged two (NRPF Network n.d. c). For many families, years of living in destitution with no leave to remain (clocking up the years being necessary to evidence their potential Article 8 claim) are then followed by ten years (or possibly more) of impoverishment of paying application fees and having no recourse to the welfare safety net. As Eve Dickson and Rachel Rosen have shown, NRPF thus targets or ‘punishes’ racially minoritised families who cannot be easily deported, and who are framed by the state as ‘undesirable’ and ‘undeserving outsiders’ (Dickson and Rosen 2020: 9, 2), by forcing them into destitution and debt (see also Jolly 2018). As Pinter and colleagues (2020: 15) have highlighted, despite gaps in data, analyses indicate that there are ‘potentially hundreds of thousands of children and adults’ who are subjected to the NRPF condition and therefore ‘have no access to the welfare benefits lifeline [...] regardless of their needs or the poverty and deprivation they experience’. Single mothers and children from Black, Asian and ethnic minority groups are especially affected by NRPF-induced destitution (Woolley 2019, Price and Spencer 2015). The top ten applicant nationalities of grants of leave under the ten-year family route are predominantly from Africa and Asia, with most from former British colonies; these nationalities are mirrored in data from the NRPF Network on families supported by local authorities (Pinter et al. 2020: 17-18). Moreover, single parents, children, people from minority ethnic groups, children from non-EU born households and children from recent migrant families are at greater risk of poverty relative to the population as a whole (Pinter et al. 2020, Fernández-Reino 2020, Hughes and Kenway 2016, Vizard et al. 2018). The ten-year family route policy and the NRPF policy are thus highly raced and gendered in their effects (Dickson and Rosen 2020).

Whilst entitled to request the lifting of the NRPF condition in exceptional circumstances or when destitution can be proven, this is granted only rarely (Pinter et al. 2020). After successful completion of ten years of limited leave, families can apply for indefinite leave to remain. The partial inclusion of families through this route has in practice maintained their exclusion through the NRPF condition (Dickson and Rosen 2020: 13) and the precarious,

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<sup>29</sup> In 2021, in the context of the Covid-19 crisis, free school meals were temporarily extended to some groups of children with NRPF (see DfE 2021 and NRPF Network n.d. a).



time-limited nature of the route. The requirement to pay extortionate visa fees every 30 months in addition to the Immigration Health Surcharge and often necessary lawyers' fees forces families into debt. Furthermore, small delays in reapplying or minor errors in applications can lead to an 'overstay' of more than 28 days, breaking their 'continuous leave', resulting in 'illegalisation and restarting the route entirely' (ibid.: 14).

When faced with destitution, although not entitled to claim mainstream forms of state support, individuals may be eligible for help from their local authority.<sup>30</sup> Under Section 17 of the Children Act 1989, local authorities are required to provide support to children they assess as being 'in need', including children who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. When provided, support usually takes the form of subsistence funding (and sometimes accommodation), although this is often at levels significantly below the poverty line (Pinter et al. 2020).<sup>31</sup> Data from London boroughs suggest that approximately 3000 children in households with NRPF were supported through Section 17 in 2016/17 (London Councils, n.d.)<sup>32 33</sup>. Since an estimated 107,000 children in London have no leave to remain, and since many of the families accessing Section 17 support do have limited leave to remain, this suggests that many thousands of families are not accessing any form of state support (Dexter et al. 2016).

When a person seeks Section 17 support, Social Care will contact the Home Office to identify if they are eligible for support in relation to their immigration status. If the family are in an 'excluded group', for example they have overstayed their visa or are appeal rights-exhausted, Social Care are expected to carry out a human rights assessment to decide

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<sup>30</sup> Section 17(1) Children Act 1989 states that it is the general duty of local authorities '*to safeguard and promote the welfare of children **within their area** who are in need*'; interpretations vary as to whether this means the local authority where the child resides (and if so, for how long they have lived there), or a local authority with which the child has links (e.g. where they attend school). This may be the cause of disagreement between local authorities, resulting in delays in the provision of support to families.

<sup>31</sup> The Home Office is responsible for meeting the needs of families seeking asylum or appeal rights exhausted (ARE) who are destitute and still qualify for Section 95 support (NRPF Network).

<sup>32</sup> In London Councils data, most cases were described as UASC ('unaccompanied asylum-seeking children') care leavers (London Councils, n.d.).

<sup>33</sup> NRPF Network data for 62 local authorities in England and Scotland indicate that at least 16,331 children were supported between 2015 and 2019; in the majority of cases, most cases were single parent households (Pinter et al. 2020).

whether the family can be reasonably expected to leave the UK; if this is not the case and the child is also assessed as being 'in need', Social Care have a duty to provide support under section 17 of the Children Act 1989 (NRP Network, n.d. d). This positions social care practitioners as gatekeepers and results in many families being turned away (Dickson and Rosen 2020, Walsh et al. 2021, Dennler 2018).

### Access to services and impact on other aspects of everyday life

Recent legislation passed as part of the Hostile Environment approach has restricted access to secondary healthcare for individuals with insecure immigration status, particularly affecting women/mothers. NHS trusts<sup>34</sup> are required to check patients' eligibility before providing care, to note their chargeable status on their records, to charge patients upfront if they are not able to prove their eligibility, and to refuse care to those unable to pay (unless treatment is deemed urgent or 'immediately necessary', such as maternity services, in which case patients are charged retrospectively). Clinical staff are expected to take part in often complex decisions on patient eligibility with 'Overseas Visitor Managers' (a new role); this has raised concerns about the co-option of clinicians as border guards and how such bordering practices undermine principles of free and universal treatment (Uthayakumar-Cumarasamy 2020, Worthing et al. 2021, Weller and Aldridge 2019, Medact 2020). These measures have disproportionately affected women/mothers with insecure immigration status. Whilst everyone has the right to register with a GP and access certain other services regardless of immigration status, widespread confusion has led to some surgeries wrongly requesting proof of address and ID, and individuals being unaware of their right to access this type of care (MedAct 2020). Termination and antenatal services are subject to charging, impeding access by women in precarious circumstances (Russell et al. 2018). Fears of detention, deportation and debt deter many people with irregular status from seeking healthcare advice or treatment. The stress resulting from non-treatment of health needs can make physical symptoms worse. Existing conditions and opportunities for prevention are missed, leading to avoidable hospitalisations (Weller et al. 2019) and increasing the risk

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<sup>34</sup> NHS trusts and foundation trusts are responsible for delivering healthcare services to the NHS within a local area or for a specialized function (NHS 2015).

of adverse pregnancy outcomes, including low birth weight, pre-term delivery, and perinatal and maternal death (Phillimore 2016). Not seeking treatment for communicable diseases (such as Covid-19 and HIV) presents risks to individuals and the wider population<sup>35</sup>. Complex rules on eligibility and a lack of understanding of exemptions and entitlements mean that treatment is at times wrongly withheld or people are wrongly charged<sup>36</sup> (Weller et al. 2019, Nellums et al. 2018, Harris and Hardwick 2019), eroding trust in the healthcare system. Fears in relation to seeking care through the NHS may be heightened by fears of data-sharing practices between the NHS and the Home Office.<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, exclusion from healthcare impacts on psychological needs: experiences of discrimination may affect self-esteem, impede engagement with wider services and increase marginalisation (Martin 2020, Smart Richman and Leary 2009). Hostile Environment health policies thus impact on individuals, and particularly women/mothers, at multiple levels.

Beyond health, the Hostile Environment strategy pervades multiple aspects of everyday life in terms of interactions with public services. It has driven data-sharing between the police and the Home Office for immigration enforcement, impacting on individuals' ability to seek safety and report crimes. First implemented in 2012 as a joint operation between the then UK Border Agency (UKBA)<sup>38</sup> and the Metropolitan Police Service, and later rolled out across the UK, Operation Nexus purportedly aims to 'improve the management of foreign nationals and foreign national offenders (FNOs)' by improving joint working between the Home Office and the police (Home Office 2017). Under 'Nexus Custody', immigration officers are embedded in police stations in order to check the immigration status of 'foreign nationals', identify 'illegal entrants suitable for detention' and refer them for further action (ibid.); this

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<sup>35</sup> Treatment for communicable diseases is not chargeable, but people may not be aware of this, or may be fearful of the consequences of accessing services regardless (Finnerty et al. 2019).

<sup>36</sup> This has affected even those in fact eligible for treatment but without documents to prove it, as in the case of many of the so-called Windrush generation (see Gentleman 2020).

<sup>37</sup> Under a Memorandum of Understanding, NHS Digital has shared patient data with the Home Office for the purposes of immigration enforcement, often without the knowledge of migrant patients or clinicians (Papageorgiou et al. 2020). Whilst the agreement was suspended in 2018, personal data are still shared if patients owe the NHS £500 or more (Weller and Aldridge 2019), and this information may be used by the Home Office to refuse visa applications or entry at the border (Button et al. 2020).

<sup>38</sup> In 2013, UKBA became the Immigration Enforcement directorate of the Home Office.

may include victims or witnesses of a crime. These new practices<sup>39</sup> undermine trust in the police and deter victims and witnesses of crime with insecure immigration status from reporting crimes and accessing support (McIlwaine et al. 2019). Women with insecure immigration status experiencing domestic abuse or other forms of harm are not protected: immigration enforcement appears to be prioritised over victims' safety and access to justice (Step Up Migrant Women 2020).

Women with irregular immigration status are at increased risk of being subjected to abuse and violence, whether they are fleeing sexual violence, being trafficked for the purpose of sexual exploitation, or subjected to abuse in the home. Domestic abuse may take the form of coercive control, including reproductive coercion, and often starts or escalates during pregnancy (Harris and Hardwick 2019). Women experiencing violence face numerous barriers to seeking help and reporting abuse regardless of status; these barriers intersect with additional factors produced by insecure immigration status and hostile environment policies. Women whose leave to remain is dependent on a spousal visa may be trapped in an abusive relationship, since leaving will lead to them becoming undocumented. Whilst they are entitled to apply for leave to remain in their own right as a victim of domestic violence, this may be refused if they owe money to the NHS. Women who become undocumented after leaving a violent partner are often unable to repay NHS debts, since they are not allowed to work or claim mainstream benefits (ibid.). Destitution, homelessness and hunger drive some women to engage in survival sex, which may lead to pregnancy; if undocumented, giving birth in hospital will lead to an NHS bill amounting to thousands of pounds. Although being in an abusive relationship could provide exemption from charging, this may not be recognised by managers (ibid.).

Mothers with insecure immigration status and no recourse to public funds (NRPF) and their children have been further marginalised and targeted by hostile environment policies in

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<sup>39</sup> Another new practice is that of 'stop and scan', using a mobile fingerprint scanner, whereby 'anyone suspected of committing a crime or 'lying' about their identity can be stopped in the street and have their fingerprint scanned on the spot and searched in the Police and Immigration databases' (RJN 2021: 10), raising fears that migrants without leave to remain could be detained or deported for minor offences, and that individuals from BME communities may be targeted for 'stop and scan' searches.

schools. Firstly, after the first three years of school, during which free school meals are universal, children whose parents have NRPF are generally not entitled to free school meals, since these are available only to children whose parents are on qualifying benefits such as Universal Credit or income support.<sup>40</sup> Secondly, in recent years the Department for Education (DfE) has been sharing personal data of pupils with the Home Office for immigration enforcement purposes (Defend Digital Me 2016, 2017). In 2015, under a Memorandum of Understanding, the DfE agreed to pass on the personal data of up to 1500 children per month from the National Pupil Database (including, from October 2016, nationality, country of birth and English language proficiency, collated through the schools census) to help Immigration Enforcement officers trace families suspected of having no leave to remain.<sup>41</sup> Women/ mothers with insecure status and their children have therefore been made more vulnerable by accessing schools, a supposedly non-political institution.

As intended by then-Home Secretary Theresa May, Hostile Environment policies have created obstacles in all aspects of everyday life for people with irregular immigration status, from renting to personal finance, and in personal life, such as getting married. The Immigration Act 2014 introduced the principle of the 'right to rent', requiring landlords to check that current and potential tenants have leave to remain, and to refuse them tenancy, or evict them, if they do not; landlords found not to comply with the new legislation faced civil sanctions. The Immigration Act 2016 took this further by criminalising landlords if they were found to be letting a property to a person they knew (or had reasonable cause to believe) did not have the right to rent. These legislative measures increased the precarity of individuals with irregular immigration status, putting them at risk of eviction and limiting the options of finding a safe home. The effects of the legislation have a wider impact too: evidence suggests that the law leads landlords to discriminate, since they are now less likely to let properties to people from Black and ethnic minority backgrounds (Garvie 2016, Griffiths and Yeo 2021: 13). In relation to personal finance, the Immigration Act 2014 introduced a requirement for banks to carry out immigration status checks on new

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<sup>40</sup> However, under Covid-19, the government has temporarily extended eligibility criteria for free school meals (NRPF Network n.d.).

<sup>41</sup> DfE continued to deny this until August 2016 (Defend Digital Me 2017).

customers, whilst the Immigration Act 2016 went further, requiring banks to check status of existing customers when required, to notify the Secretary of State of individuals believed not to have residency rights, and to close the customer's account if instructed. The Immigration Act 2014 requires marriage registrars to report suspected 'sham' marriages or civil partnerships; the notice period increased from 15 to 28 days to facilitate Home Office oversight, and this can be extended if the Home Office doubts the validity of a relationship. A marriage being stopped or delayed could have consequences for residency rights (McKinney 2018). Thus racialised individuals with no or limited leave to remain may find themselves excluded from opening or retaining a bank account, renting a property and even getting married.

### Concluding remarks

This chapter has outlined some of the everyday bordering practices of the UK government's Hostile Environment strategy, showing how these take to new levels the already restrictive and selective immigration policies which had evolved over previous decades. I have demonstrated how hostile policies impact on multiple aspects of everyday life, affecting to a degree everyone living in the UK, but with particularly harmful effects for people who are racially minoritised and are subjected to insecure immigration statuses. I have shown how the policies and their enactment are gendered and intergenerational in their effects, (re)producing structural inequalities and undermining institutional and societal trust. This thesis will examine the impact on interpersonal relationship practices and particularised trust.

## Interlude: Creating the sociogram

*Louise: [Labels and arranges yellow squares] Those people was close, day by day. Even they don't have time to come to my place, they will phone me. [...] When I was able to go out, we call each other to meet somewhere, for them to show me around, so there was less coming in my place but more out activity, because they wanted me to go out. That was so lovely.*

*Rachel: So all these different groups that you went to, were they all part of the same church?*

*Louise: Yes, same church, same people. Same group. [...] When they come together, it's like same language, same background people, they will feel comfortable. [Adds green squares] So those people in green, they are people that just say 'hi, how are you', it's not deep conversation. Because they see you every time in their group. You just say hello, they don't come to my house, they are just friendly to me. I won't phone them, like can we meet somewhere, no. But they are just lovely to me. Even they are not close, they are just nice to me. [...] The yellow [and] the green ones, they are friends with my partner already, so I don't have no-one new that my partner didn't know. Because it's like I'm not going out from the group. It's just the people around him that I knew so far, but the ones in yellow they are the ones who come close to me and I feel comfortable to talk to about anything. The green ones are the same group but they are just there as friends. [...]*

*I wanted to learn the language. [...] People who helping me to go through that was not the people in yellow, they are the people in green! [...] They are the ones who lead me, they are the ones who show me, [...] 'it's good to go to college to learn' – and then they are the ones who help me, [...] who link me to some places, to some groups for me to go and learn English! [...] The relationship with 'yellow' is there but it's a little bit... not as useful. I learn more from 'green' people because they are born here. [...] Now, I started having connections outside of my community. I need it, it was good, it was a good mix. Because not only my community people, I started going to college, learning, meeting new people, I go to my sewing ladies group. [...] So one day they will say, okay, today we are not doing the lesson, can we just talk about ladies' matter. So it was different from my yellow people or my green community people, it was the group that I go to, I am learning different things.*

## Chapter 3: Methodology

*Seeing, listening, touching, recording can be, if done with care and sensitivity, acts of solidarity. Above all, they are the work of recognition. Not to look, not to touch, not to record can be the hostile act, an act of indifference and of turning away. [...] Observation, the anthropologist as "fearless spectator," is a passive act which positions the anthropologist above and outside human events as a "neutral" and "objective" (i.e., uncommitted) seeing I/eye. Witnessing, the anthropologist as companheira, is in the active voice, and it positions the anthropologist inside human events as a responsive, reflexive, and morally committed being, one who will "take sides" and make judgments. (Nancy Scheper-Hughes 1995: 318-319)*

Ethnography felt like the right approach for me from the start. It would allow me to be with, talk with, listen to, move around and engage in daily activities with the mothers whose experiences, stories and perspectives I wanted to understand more deeply. Ethnography offered flexibility and fluidity and, as argued by Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1995), a dialogical, responsive, morally engaged approach, rather than an overly structured, predetermined framework or adopting a 'passive' and supposedly 'neutral' position. It would also position me firmly within the research field *in relation with* participants; this would give rise to situated ethical quandaries which could not always be anticipated. In this chapter, I explore my assumptions, reflect on the affordances and challenges of my ethnographic methods, introduce the participants and consider my role(s) and our evolving relationships. Finally, I reflect on how these aspects may have shaped the ethnographic data and the analytical process.

### Ethnography as methodology

My ontological focus was on mothers' access to social support, the characteristics of their networks and practices within different kinds of relationships, in the context of insecure immigration status, NRPf and hostile environment policies. A multitude of questions emerged as I began the fieldwork. What restrictions on access to education, healthcare and 'official' forms of support did women/mothers and their children experience, and how did



these forms of exclusion and marginalisation affect them? What was the significance of becoming and being a mother, in terms of needs for, and access to, emotional and practical support? How important were personal networks? How did mothers develop and sustain these relationships? What was the significance of motherhood, friendships, neighbours, kin, faith networks, couple relationships, advocacy organisations? What kinds of relational practices and interactions did mothers engage in day to day? What kinds of support were accessed or shared? What was the impact of this support, and how was it perceived? What were the limitations of these support networks? What challenges did mothers face in accessing support, and how were these navigated? From these many questions, I eventually formulated the research questions set out in the Introduction chapter. Above all, I was interested in individuals' everyday relational practices and how these shaped, and were shaped by, their construction of meanings. Epistemologically, this meant taking an ethnographic approach grounded in mothers' everyday practices, interactions and understandings of their social world: I needed to spend as much time in the field as possible – observing and participating, building relationships, being curious, listening deeply. These ontological and epistemological assumptions led me to take an ethnographic approach.<sup>42</sup>

My axiological assumptions required some reflection too. Through my research, I wanted to raise awareness of the different ways that the precarity and status anxiety associated with insecure immigration status and NRPF impacted on mothers and children. I felt it was necessary to engage ethically and politically in my research rather than attempt to somehow stand outside of my research and remain 'neutral', which in any case did not feel possible (Scheper Hughes 1995, Clifford and Marcus 1986). Whilst this study did not take the form of action research, my commitment to social justice informed my methods. I wanted to minimize the power imbalance between participants and myself as researcher and did my utmost to prevent the research relationship being experienced as intrusive by participants. I offered practical and emotional support and information, including signposting to advice organisations, sharing resources and on occasion providing childcare,

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<sup>42</sup> Ethical approval was granted by the university ethics panel for my pilot fieldwork in spring 2018, and subsequently for the main fieldwork, which took place in 2018-2019.

where it felt appropriate to do so. I also facilitated opportunities for some participants to engage as active citizens in a variety of ways (Gomberg-Muñoz 2016b, Hale 2006). This is discussed further below.

I loosely conceptualised the inner London neighbourhood of 'Ryeton', presented in the Introduction, as my 'field'. Home to a superdiverse population as well as an array of public sector, voluntary sector and faith organisations frequented by mothers and children, it provided multiple opportunities for meeting women/mothers and many other people knowledgeable about and/or with experience of diverse immigration statuses. I was flexible in how I applied my understanding of field, however, recognising that people move – perhaps especially individuals with insecure immigration status and no recourse to public funds. Additionally, my interest in mothers' different forms of relational practices and at different scales – locally, nationally, transnationally, face to face and online – meant interacting with participants in their everyday social worlds: spending as much time with them as they were happy for me to do so, engaging in deep conversation, in order to understand their relational practices and how these were shaped by wider political and economic factors. An ethnographic approach enabled me to start on the ground and move up and out, rather than moving 'in' or 'down' from macro to micro levels. Thus the field and the context were constructed or produced both by participants in their narratives and by myself as a researcher (Atkinson 1992). This informed my fieldnotes as well as the analysis and the writing of this thesis (discussed below).

### Deep hanging out in local places

Having approached two advice organisations, a drop-in and two children's centres and explained the aims and methods of my research, I was kindly given permission in each case to spend time in these settings, either as a volunteer or more informally, and I did so fairly regularly throughout the fieldwork or more sporadically. As an ethnographer, these were invaluable opportunities for 'deep hanging out'<sup>43</sup>, whereby I could reach out to potential participants, whilst supporting and talking with parents, children, staff and co-volunteers, in

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<sup>43</sup> The term 'deep hanging out' was originally employed by Rosaldo in 1994, later borrowed by Clifford (1997), and popularized in a critique of Clifford's approach by Geertz (1998), in which he summarized it as 'localized, long-term, close-in, vernacular field research'.

ways which were (I hope) at best helpful and at worst not intrusive. As a volunteer at the advice organisations, I learnt an enormous amount about the pathways to irregular status and NRPF and the immense challenges faced by mothers and children in this position, as well as the incredibly complex and ever-changing routes to 'leave to remain', the challenges of seeking the lifting of the NRPF condition, and the tough process of seeking Section 17 support from local authority Children's Social Care teams. I learnt about structural and everyday forms of marginalisation, but also heard about micro acts of care. I listened to many heart-breaking stories of homelessness and exploitation, but also heard about many cases of friends or church members providing support in big and small ways – from a space to sleep to a ten pound note. I celebrated news of families being given somewhere to live or being granted 'leave to remain'. Volunteering or spending time in these settings provided a privileged means of meeting mothers whom I could invite to become participants in my research, as well as invaluable opportunities to get to know, and learn from, so many kind and committed workers and volunteers in what I experienced as convivial and supportive spaces.

### Recruiting participants

My involvement with the above organisations was invaluable in recruiting mothers (and professionals) – directly and indirectly – to take part in my research. With managers' approval and staff support, including putting up a poster in one setting and making introductions, I spoke with mothers about my research, explained the recruitment criteria, on occasion gave out flyers and invited women to take part if they felt it was relevant to them. This approach avoided asking anyone direct questions about their status, past or present, and thus avoided causing offence<sup>44</sup>. When mothers expressed an interest in taking part, I gave them the information sheet and consent form (see Appendices). As indicated on the flyer and poster, I informed them that they would receive a £10 voucher for a local

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<sup>44</sup> I decided not to focus on mothers from one particular country or region, as this would feel arbitrary, risk presenting a given region as homogenous and/or stigmatising individuals who had migrated from the region.

supermarket each time we met.<sup>45</sup> I was conscious, however, of the sense of obligation women might feel at being approached by me as a volunteer-researcher, and was careful not to put any pressure on anyone to agree to take part. As I began meeting with participants, further recruitment happened fortuitously through snowballing: several mothers said they could put me in touch with other mothers they knew who might be interested in taking part.

A total of 22 mothers agreed to take part in the research. Inevitably, their 'characteristics' were shaped by my recruitment methods, in particular by attendance at the groups where I volunteered and the social networks of the mothers who put me in touch with other potential participants. As shown in Table 1 on the following page, the majority had migrated from west Africa; others had moved from east and central Africa, the Caribbean, Latin America and south-east Asia. Almost all spoke English fluently. Most were in their 20s on arrival in the UK; two were under 18 and two were in their early 30s. Five had graduated in their country of origin; a further five had moved to the UK to study or enrolled at university later on. Length of time in the UK varied from three to 25 years. A small number of mothers had been granted either limited or indefinite leave to remain within a few years of their arrival; for some, it had taken two decades; many were still waiting. Three participants (two of whom took part in the pilot fieldwork) had been granted leave to remain before 2010, so the focus of our conversations was on their experiences prior to the implementation of the Hostile Environment strategy. Some mothers were granted leave to remain during the course of my research. All of those who did not have leave to remain (or who were granted it during my fieldwork) were either receiving Section 17 support from the local authority or, if seeking asylum, Section 95 support from the Home Office; this included accommodation and subsistence funding. For most, London had been their first destination on arrival in the UK, although not necessarily Ryton: many had lived in several different boroughs of London. Several had spent time living in towns or cities outside London, either to stay with relatives or because of the government's dispersal policy for asylum-seekers. All were living in Ryton for some or all of the fieldwork, or had moved away just before the fieldwork

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<sup>45</sup> I decided to do this following feedback received through the ethics approval process, in order to show appreciation for participants' contribution to the research in a way which was of practical help, given many participants' ongoing experiences of financial difficulty/destitution.

began but maintained strong links, for example by continuing to take their children to school there. Whilst I did not ask directly about sexuality, to the best of my knowledge all of the participants were or had been in heterosexual couple relationships; no participants shared that they identified as lesbian or other sexualities.

*Table 1: Mothers: demographic data*

Region of origin	West Africa	14
	Central Africa	3
	East Africa	1
	North Africa	1
	Latin America	1
	Caribbean	1
	South East Asia	1
Age on arrival	Under 20	2
	20s	18
	30s	2
Number of years living in UK	0-9 years	8
	10-19 years	10
	20+ years	4
Leave status of mothers at start of fieldwork	Indefinite leave to remain	4
	Limited leave to remain	8
	No leave to remain	10
When granted indefinite leave to remain	Before 2010 (pre-hostile environment strategy)	3
	Since 2010 (since hostile environment strategy)	1
Education level	Graduated in country of origin	5
	Attended university/FE in UK	5
	Did not attend university	13
Faith	Practising Christian (Pentecostal/Catholic/Orthodox/other)	20
	Practising Muslim	1
	Raised as Muslim but not practising	1
Number of children	1	5
	2	9
	3	5
	4	3
Number of mothers with child(ren) in each education stage	Pre-school (0-4)	13
	Primary (4-11)	16
	Secondary/further education (11-18)	6
	University (18+)	1
No. of mothers with a child with a disability or long-term health condition or illness		6
No. of mothers with a child living in country of origin		1

At my first meeting with each participant, I talked through the information sheet, making sure they understood the purpose of the research and their rights as a participant (including their right to withdraw from the research at any point), and answered any questions. I

revisited the concept of consent in subsequent meetings. When meeting one-to-one, I would ask each time if I could audio-record our conversation, where appropriate. All except two participants agreed to this; in these cases, with their permission, I took notes during our conversations. With regard to a third participant, since we usually met 'on the move' I was not able to audio-record most of our conversations, so took notes immediately after we met, which I also did following meetings with all other participants, as soon as I had found an appropriate private (or semi-private) space (discussed further below). This proved fortunate, as on two occasions I realised my audio recorder had failed to record conversations. Once home, I transcribed recordings as soon as possible, usually on the same day, which helped me to reflect on our encounters and begin to analyse data (discussed below). I handled data with extreme care: immediately after meetings took place, I transferred recordings from my audio recorder to the secure university computer drive, transcribed recordings and stored transcripts and field notes securely, using only pseudonyms.<sup>46</sup> Building and maintaining trust and taking every care to respect confidentiality were crucial, particularly since many of the mothers who took part in the research were in a precarious situation at the time of the fieldwork.

### Deep hanging out and walking with mothers

Notwithstanding my focus on Ryton and the significance of the opportunities as volunteer-researcher described above, I was keen not to be constrained by conventional 'sedentary' practices of participant observation in a limited number of places, focusing on a bounded geographical area. Instead, recognising that most individuals – not least people with insecure immigration status – are inherently mobile, and that personal networks are fluid and multi-scalar, transgressing urban geographical borders, I drew on mobile methods to explore 'connections and flows' within and across networks (Wittel 2000; see also Elliot et al. 2017). As James Clifford highlighted in his distinction between 'roots' and 'routes', the significance of the latter in (re)producing sociocultural identities requires an understanding of fieldwork as 'travel practice' (Clifford 1997, cited in Elliot et al. 2017: 5). Ethnography 'on

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<sup>46</sup> Since I do not want to reveal the country of origin of individual participants, I have used intercultural or 'Western' pseudonyms. Whilst this risks presenting the research in a Euro-centric manner, I felt this was necessary so as to avoid using pseudonyms which could indicate (or mis-represent) not only country of origin but region within a country and/or linguistic group. Moreover, using 'Christian' names as pseudonyms can be authentic practice in some cases.

the move' (Wittel 2000) has also been conceptualised as 'walking with' (Sheller and Urry 2006) and 'a sociable process of travelling alongside in dialogue' (Sinha and Back 2014: 10). I took every opportunity to 'walk with' participants, to experience their social worlds, to gain a sense of their typical everyday encounters and interactions and to reflect together as we walked. As an embodied, material and social practice, walking with participants afforded me the privilege of '[making my] way through a world-in-formation' (Vergunst and Ingold 2008: 2). As in recent research by Maggie O'Neill and Tracey Reynolds with mothers with NRPF, walking methods created space for developing 'a shared viewpoint' and 'empathic embodied learning', and also helped to 'flatten the power relationships' often apparent in conventional interviews (O'Neill and Reynolds 2021).

At the end of my first meeting with each participant, I would ask if they were willing to meet again. Usually, I would then text or WhatsApp them to arrange another date and time. As indicated in Table 2 (page 81), the number of research encounters with each mother ranged from 1 to 19. I met with most mothers at least twice. Of the 8 with whom I met only once, two participated in the pilot stage, three were recruited towards the end of the fieldwork, one had been granted leave to remain before 2010, and I was unable to arrange a second meeting with a further two.

As summarised in Table 2, 'deep hanging out' and 'walking with' individual participants involved spending time with mothers and their children in their homes; going with them to drop-ins at community centres and children's centres; sitting in parks; meeting up in cafés; picking up children from nursery or school; going to hospital or other specialist appointments, to Home Office centres to 'report', or to the tribunal for a decision on 'leave to remain'. On occasion it meant becoming part of mothers' support networks, visiting them in hospital or looking after their child while they attended an appointment at the Council or moved house, or helping them to register with a GP. By spending time with participants on a day-to-day basis, doing the things they typically did, I gained a perspective that would not have been open to me through conversations alone: I met partners, friends and neighbours, and witnessed phone calls, visits and texts. Mothers shared with me their experiences of the everyday, from banal happenings to rites of passage and life-changing events that were uplifting, affirming, frustrating, anxiety-inducing or frightening: children starting nursery or

school, birthdays, weddings, conflict with neighbours, illness, deaths in the family, moving house, or being granted leave to remain.

Whilst I approached these opportunities to ‘hang out’ and ‘walk with’ participants with an open mind and without preconceptions or hypotheses, the encounters were nevertheless purposeful, with my (evolving) research questions always at the back of my mind. For the pilot encounters, I drew on the topic guide I had developed (see Appendix F); later, I did not actively use it, preferring the conversations to be more free-flowing, but I guided the conversations in the direction of these topics and questions. ‘Hanging out’ and ‘walking with’ mothers during the 20 months of fieldwork produced deep insights into how mothers were affected by forms of bordering, how they interacted with others and developed relationships, and how they accessed and provided diverse forms of social support.

## Fieldnotes

*I'd forgotten that [participant] had told me her daughter would be there because she finished school yesterday, and of course her son was there because he hasn't been able to attend school much this term. [...] When I arrived, [daughter] gave me a big hug, and showed me [her brother] hiding under his blanket on the sofa in the living room. [...] We all sat on the carpet to play [a game] which was really good fun. I wasn't sure if I'd get to have a 'research conversation' with [participant] in the circumstances, but after the game finished [son] started playing on his iPad and [daughter] curled up under the blanket because she was tired, so I did manage to have a long chat with [mother]. However, from time to time [son] chipped in to add detail or correct his mum's version of events, so I guess he was in fact listening for all or most of the time – which again raises questions about privacy, confidentiality and protecting children (or not) from events.*

*[fieldnote following visit to participant's home, December]*

I kept field diaries, making notes as soon as possible after volunteering stints or spending time with individual participants. Fieldnotes represented my attempts to ‘order’ my impressions and observations: they were ‘the first summary of behaviour, the initial endowment of it with significance’ (Wolf 1992: 87). Emerson and colleagues emphasise the importance of ‘participat[ing] in ongoing events in an “experiential style” to maximise immersion in local activities and the experiences of others’ lives’ (Emerson et al. 2011: 359), and I was keen to do this, avoiding making notes whilst with people but instead jotting down my observations, snippets of conversations, questions and reflections as soon as I had left the setting and could find a safe space to do so (a café, a park bench, a bus stop or in my



Table 2: Number of research encounters with mothers and where we spent time

Participant (pseudonym)	No. of research encounters (& period of time)	Where we met up/spent time
Kate	19 (12 months)	3 homes, Home Office, tribunal, buses, trains, tubes, cafés, GP, walk to school, park
Amy	10 (9 months)	2 homes, drop-in, walk to school, advice centre, hospital
Sara	8 (10 months)	Hospitals, trains, tubes, buses, car, café, community centre, library, home
Eva	8 (8 months)	Journey to school, drop-in, park, café, home
Gemma	7 (9 months)	Home, drop-in, community centre
Anna	6 (9 months)	Drop-in, walk to school, home, park, library
Talia	4 (12 months)	3 homes, children's centre
June	4 (5 months)	Home, community centre, drop-in, journey to school
Beth	4 (4 months)	Home, drop-in, park
Louise	2 (19 months)	Children's centre, coffee shop
Emily	2 (1 month)	Children's centre
Lilia	2 (3 months)	Home, children's centre
Christine	2 (1 month)	Home, children's centre
Gabriela	2 (2 months)	Children's centre
Madeline	1	Children's centre
Sofia	1	Children's centre
Zoe	1	Children's centre
Ariane	1	Home
Nadia	1	Café
Erica	1	Advice centre
Rose	1	Advice centre
Clare	1	Home

car). As well as maximising immersion, this helped to avoid calling attention to my role as researcher and to prevent distrust. In my initial jottings, I focused on describing interactions and summaries of dialogue to facilitate recall. Later at home, I would revisit my notes and expand on them, including deeper reflections on encounters and reflexive thinking on my role. Reflecting on observations and positionality in parallel helped me to think analytically and reflexively, and to develop a deep and embodied knowledge (Madden 2017 [2010]) of participants' mothering practices, their interactions with others in their support networks, and my inevitable role in shaping interactions as an ethnographer. In the extract above, taken from a fieldnote written back at home expanding on notes I had scribbled down immediately after the visit to the family, I reflected on the (recurring) tension between, on the one hand, observing and learning from being with participants as they interacted with others, and on the other hand, engaging them in conversations which could veer into sensitive subjects that those 'others' might overhear. This writing process developed my awareness of my role in inadvertently producing such situations. I felt anxious at times about the risk of harm to the mother or to those overhearing parts of conversations – in this case potentially causing worry to the son on hearing about his mum's concerns (despite his cheerful demeanour).

### In-depth open-ended conversations with mothers

Engaging in a series of open-ended conversations with most of the mothers was central to my fieldwork (Hammersley and Atkinson 2019). I would start our first conversation by reminding the participant of the broad topic of the research – how immigration status and NRPF affect social networks and access to support – and invited them to tell me about when they first came to the UK. Usually, few prompts were needed beyond this, as many had stories they wanted to tell me about their experiences of moving to and settling in the UK, difficulties extending their visas, the people they had met along the way, gradually putting down roots, and becoming a mother. Some, however, were initially hesitant, not sure where to start, in which case I would ask a few more questions. Usually in the second meeting, I asked participants to create a sociogram (discussed below) and to talk me through it. This process allowed mothers to shape their narratives; it also enabled me to be responsive to their constructions and representations of their social networks, and informed my formulation of questions in the moment and in preparation for subsequent meetings.

Open-ended conversations facilitated a focus on meanings and reality as not being fixed but relational, socially constructed and multiple (Scheper-Hughes 1992). Deep listening on my part was important to develop the skills to ‘catch’ mothers’ ‘understanding of the meaning of their experiences’ (Wolf 1992: 5), and this required work on my part. Listening to recordings of early research conversations was uncomfortable at times for me, making me painfully aware of my inadequate listening skills; over time, I learned to avoid jumping in, to let my interlocutors finish their sentences before I responded, and to sit with the pauses. Trying to piece together life stories from often non-chronological narratives and across multiple conversations was frustrating at times, such as when dates did not seem to quite match, but I developed what Wolf has called ‘a tolerance for ambiguity, multiplicity, contradiction and instability’, necessary because of the ‘messiness’ of human experience (Wolf 1992: 129). Whilst looking for patterns, I sought to ‘hypothesise about apparent inconsistencies, to lay out [my] best guesses, without hiding the contradictions and the instability’ (Wolf *ibid.*).

In view of the research topic and the context, I felt it was particularly important to avoid any terminology, body language or discourse that connoted an ‘interview’: I was aware that associations with hostile experiences of Home Office or Section 17 interviews, for example, could be triggering for participants and cause discomfort. I also wanted to distance myself from wider connotations of unequal power relations, formality and procedure. Despite referring to research encounters as ‘conversations’, avoiding the word ‘interview’ and doing my best to ensure encounters felt relaxed, there were many moments where I felt positioned uncomfortably similarly to a social worker or immigration officer. The following excerpts from conversations with Talia and Emily illustrate this:

*Talia: My solicitor interview me like three hours.*

*Rachel: Three hours?! What kinds of questions?*

*Talia: Like you! Interviewing the past... how I get here, become pregnant, when I meet [my child]’s dad.*

*Rachel: But for different reasons to me! [laughs] I suppose the solicitor needs to be able to build a case [...]. I suppose the solicitor needs to know all the facts.*

Talia’s jocular remark, ‘like you!’, likening me to her solicitor who had subjected her to what sounded like an exhausting interrogation of her movements since arriving in the UK, made

me feel awkward, as was apparent in my impulse to distance myself from the solicitor's questioning of her. I wondered what Talia's comment revealed about how she perceived our research conversations. What had felt to me like relaxed conversations in her home, interspersed with frequent interactions with her young son, and with Talia always showing great hospitality, now seemed to jar with how Talia had apparently experienced my questions. I began to wonder if other mothers felt the same. I was often conscious that my interest in the development of social networks and access to support uncomfortably paralleled the 'interest' in similar topics of social workers carrying out Section 17 assessments. This was apparent, obliquely, in a conversation with Emily:

*Rachel: [responding to sociogram] When we met last time, you talked about various different types of networks, but we didn't get on to the topic of church, so it's interesting to hear about that as well. When you first moved to this area, was the church one of the first things you looked out for?*

*Emily: No, I didn't go to the church. I remember when I met with [name], my previous case worker from social services, she asked me why don't I want to go to the church for help.*

*Rachel: Did she ask you that?!*

*Emily: Yes she did – she said they can't help me so she asked why I didn't go to church for help. It sounds funny, doesn't it!*

*Rachel: It does sound funny.*

*Emily: Asking me why don't I go to the church for help, why don't I go to the kids' school for help.*

Here, my question about when and how Emily had first accessed her local church seemed to remind her of her (disliked) case worker who, in an overtly instrumental move, had tried to persuade her to seek financial and practical support from a church, which Emily had resisted and perceived as a bordering practice, denying her access to Section 17 subsistence funding. It was an uncomfortable realisation for me that my questions as a researcher had perhaps unconsciously reminded Emily of the perceived surveillance and coercion by her case worker. (Emily's discussion here is picked up in the Interlude preceding Chapter 5, 'Doing Faith'.)

My practice was shaped by my hyper-awareness of my position as a researcher, my growing sensitivity to how participants might perceive me, and my desire to protect the developing trust between us. Participants' occasional remarks drawing parallels between my role and

the various 'street-level bureaucrats' (Lipsky 2010 [1980]) in their lives, as discussed above, inevitably detracted from the original line of conversation. More often, if I felt that my (potential) questions positioned me too closely to the role of a 'gatekeeping' social worker seeking evidence of sources of support within mothers' networks, or of an immigration officer seeking evidence of misdemeanours, I held back. Additionally, I avoided probing when I felt that participants were unwilling to discuss topics that were particularly sensitive for them, not wanting to cause distress or to offend by appearing nosy. Ethically, this was important, particularly given the precarity of many participants' lives; however, it should be recognised that this shaped the data. For example, whilst several participants alluded to conflict, separation or abuse in previous couple relationships, or being treated badly by significant others such as church members who had provided accommodation in the past, very few talked directly about what these interactions entailed. Nevertheless, in view of these sensitivities and the necessary care in talking about them, on balance participants did speak openly, at length and in vivid detail about the development of their relationships with significant people in their lives, their everyday relational practices and how they felt about them.

## Sociograms

Sociograms have been used extensively in quantitative and qualitative research on social networks. Drawing on Louise Ryan's use of sociograms as a visual tool in qualitative, longitudinal research at the nexus of migration and social networks, exploring processes of 'telling network stories' (2014, 2015, 2020), I used this method to explore relational practices generating social support. Using sociograms as a visual and participatory method also helped to redress power imbalances in the researcher-participant relationship in the processes of producing data. I piloted the sociogram with a small group of practitioners, which led me to make some changes; I then trialled this and the open-ended conversation with three mothers who had prior experiences of insecure immigration status and NRPF. These conversations and the use of the sociograms led me to refine this with further adaptations of my approach<sup>47</sup>.

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<sup>47</sup> My original approach involved giving participants cut-out squares and arrows which they could label and arrange and move on the page. The pilot led me to add a set of squares in a different colour, so that participants could indicate 'older' or 'former' relationships, as distinct from more recent or current ones. This

I invited each person to draw an egocentric sociogram to represent the people that were important to them, and, as they did so, to tell me about these relationships and the nature of their interactions. Providing a sheet of A3 paper, pens and pencils, I asked participants to put themselves in the centre, then to represent the people who were important to them, placing the people to whom they felt closest nearest to them on the paper. Beyond this, I avoided giving any instructions: it was important that participants did not feel there was a right or wrong way to create their sociogram.

The process of creating a 'freestyle' sociogram, rather than presenting participants with a 'target'-style template sociogram – a series of concentric circles representing emotional closeness (Pahl and Spencer 2004) – was important. Firstly, mapping out their personal networks helped participants to grasp the topic of my research, which might otherwise have appeared abstract; secondly, it gave individuals agency in determining lines of conversation. By creating an open-ended sociogram in the context of an open-ended conversation, mothers could decide which relationships to talk about, and how. They made choices about who to include, where to place them, and how to represent their relationships with individuals (or groups of people, or organisations, past or present). This process evoked memories, stimulated deep reflection and shaped participants' narratives. The creation process also allowed me, as the researcher, to be responsive to participants' representations of their networks – to pick up on practices, processes, perceptions and changes over time. In contrast, using a template could have been experienced by participants as restrictive, confusing or uncomfortable; moreover, there would be inherent assumptions about how an individual network should be conceptualised and about the quantifiability of closeness. It would also reduce the autonomy of participants and prevent them from constructing and representing their support networks in a way that might make more sense to them.

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worked well in some cases, but it soon became apparent this was not suited to all locations (e.g. on a park bench) and made it difficult to review or add to it at a later date, so I started asking participants to draw their sociograms instead.

The dialogical process of creating a sociogram in conjunction with our conversation around it provided insights into ‘meanings attached to interpersonal relationships’ (Ryan et al. 2014) and prompted memories, stories and anecdotes. Significantly, the hopes, joys, fears, frustrations and worries surfaced by the creative process called attention to the nature of everyday interactions and practices, and the types of exchanges and forms of support shared within particular relationships. As Tubaro et al. (2016) and Ryan (2020) have highlighted, the dialogue produced through network visualization encourages not only a focus on individual stories but also systemic thinking and a deeper awareness of social contexts, facilitating a shift from description to theorisation, sometimes together with participants. This was especially evident in Louise’s construction of and narrative around her

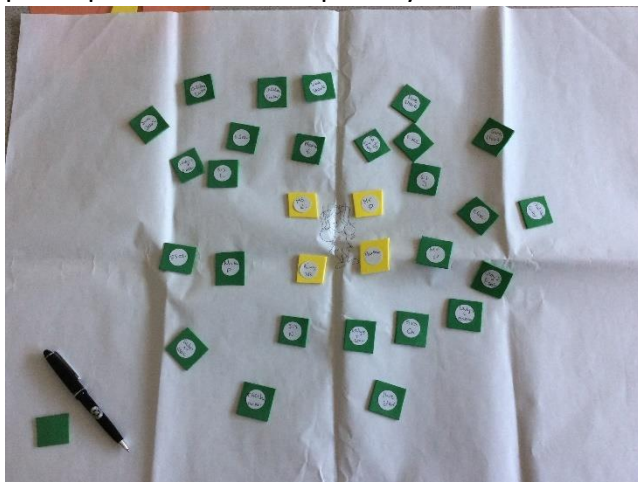


Figure 1: Louise's sociogram

sociogram (Figure 1, below), at which point I was still using the original approach described in the footnote on the previous page; an excerpt of Louise’s narrative forms the preceding Interlude. Louise used yellow squares to depict members of her early co-ethnic network in the neighbourhood who, as friends of

her partner, provided much-needed support when she first arrived; green squares to symbolise individuals also within this network but ‘not close’, such as the ‘youth’ who had grown up in the UK; and a third category of people from wider networks (also using green squares due to limited resources) with whom she became friends as she learnt English and took part in other courses. By representing people in her networks in this visual and open-ended way, Louise was able to analyse and theorise the types of relationships, practices within them and how over time they had shaped her sense of spatial and relational belonging in a wider context of state bordering processes and marginalisation.

Having abandoned the collage approach by the time I met with Emily (see footnote on previous page), I invited her in our second meeting to draw her sociogram using pens and paper (reproduced in Figure 2 below, anonymising individual names). A limitation of this iteration of the sociogram method is that it did not provide for the same degree of flexibility with regard to ‘moving’ people around if the participant changed their mind about where to locate others. Nevertheless, there was still the potential for ‘colour-coding’ with different

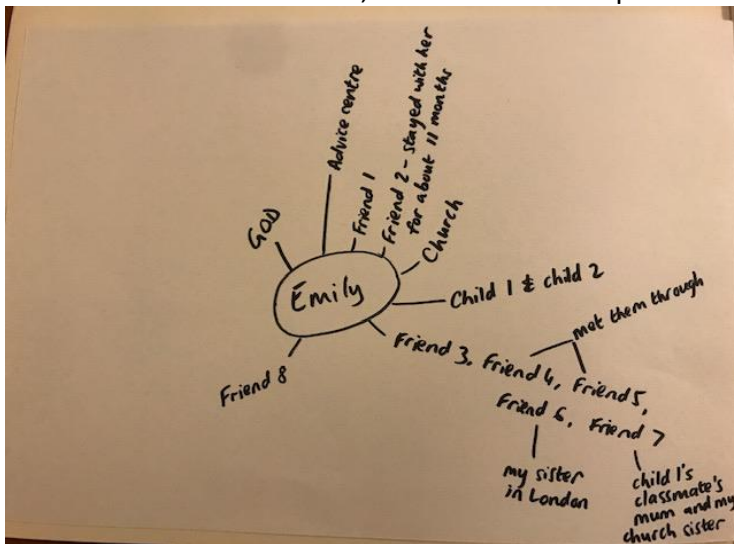


Figure 2: Reproduction of Emily’s sociogram replacing names with ‘friend 1’, ‘child 1’ etc, to protect identities

coloured pens, should participants wish to do so, and most importantly there were no ‘rules’ in how participants constructed their sociograms. This form of visual representation was crucial in shining a light on relationships which were significant to participants and in framing the conversation about everyday practices. At times this

process produced surprises which helped shift my understandings, as in the case of Emily. She first wrote down the names of her children and close friends, then added ‘church’ and ‘GOD’, explaining: ‘Though I go to church, I don’t really get any support from the church, but it is part of my life, so I will still put down church, on top. And then... I put God, of course, he’s been my main strength. And then he’s made me go through a whole lot. I could have been anything else without him in my life.’ This led to a deeply reflective narrative in which Emily contrasted the support derived from her faith in God with that provided through the material, embodied relationships with her pastor and church members. This called attention to the complexities of the processes of embedding and sharing social support, and raised important questions of trust and trustworthiness, from a position of precarious immigration status. Emily’s sociogram and her narrative around it not only helped me to understand her



own relational practices, but sensitized me to the significance of faith itself, as well as ambivalence around faith-based networks.

### Activist research

I was keen to engage in activism as part of my research. Firstly, joining a local group which campaigned for migrants' rights helped me to understand the wider context, concerns and dynamics between the local authority, third sector organisations and residents. Not only was I able to take part in awareness-raising events and workshops, but also to support some of the participants in my study to do so. Two participants took the opportunity to speak out publicly at local events, sharing their personal experiences and struggles as mothers with insecure status and NRPF. Then, through the campaign group and through one of my volunteer-researcher roles, I was introduced to two women who were keen to write about 'refugees' stories': I persuaded them instead to run a series of workshops and engage directly with parents with insecure status to support them to write their own stories. One of my participants agreed to help run the workshops, and from here she took the lead in organising and facilitating the co-writing sessions.

This approach made sense to me in terms of what I perceived to be my ethical responsibilities as a researcher. Inspired by the work of activist ethnographers, I did not feel that it was possible or desirable to always position myself as a neutral observer, but rather felt I needed to be 'politically committed and morally engaged' (Scheper Hughes 1995: 409, Hale 2006). The group, events and workshops created a 'space for action' (Kelly et al. 2003) for some of the participants and other parents I met through my volunteer role, providing opportunities for 'strategic sharing', 'using our lives and stories as a political tool for change' (Gomberg-Muñoz, 2016b: 748), although not everyone who was invited to take part felt comfortable or able to do so. Other aspects of the activist dimension of my ethnography felt both important and uncomfortable at times. Considering how to 'contribute to making the world a more just place', as suggested by Lila Abu-Lughod (2002), I felt it was important to share the resources to which I had access and which many participants in my research were short of: food, clothes, toys and books. Collecting donations from people within my networks and redistributing them to the mothers I met through my research felt like a way to 'give back', a way of engaging in activities beyond the research which could be of

practical use to those I was researching with (Sukarieh and Tannock 2012), but also at times felt uncomfortably close to re-enacting neo-colonial dynamics and a potentially misguided (self-) positioning as 'saviour' (Abu-Lughod 2002). Critical reflexivity was therefore important throughout the fieldwork to enable politically engaged ethnographic research that recognised and facilitated engagement in forms of action beyond research.

### Interviews with frontline workers

In addition to the open-ended conversations with mothers, I interviewed five<sup>48</sup> frontline voluntary and public sector workers whose role was to provide information, support and/or advice, including to women/mothers with insecure immigration status. These research encounters took place in work settings. The first two interviews, with children's centre professionals as part of the pilot, helped sensitize me to issues relating to insecure immigration status and NRPF as experienced by mothers, including needs and challenges, the development of relationships/networks, access to support, and impact on mothers and children. For these interviews, I used my topic guide (see Appendix G). The other three interviews, two with specialist advisors and one with a local authority employee working in the field of migration and settlement, took place later on in my fieldwork; their purpose was to deepen my understanding of the processes of applying for Section 17 support and leave to remain, the respective roles of advocacy organisations and state-funded services in providing support to individuals and families with insecure immigration status and no recourse to public funds, and how this function has been shaped by government policy. I recorded, transcribed and analysed these conversations.

In addition, I undertook two focus groups with frontline practitioners, in the first instance to help pilot the sociogram (described above) and in the second case, framed as a knowledge exchange workshop, to discuss some of my early data on friendship practices and to reflect together on possible meanings and interpretations.

Whilst frontline practitioners were participants in my research, in this thesis I use the term participants to refer to the mothers with direct experience of living with insecure immigration statuses and NRPF.

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<sup>48</sup> I interviewed only five people in such roles because I wanted the perspectives of mothers to be the focus of my research.

As well as reflecting on data and meanings, reflexivity was central to my research. I address this in the following section.

## Reflexive practice and building relationships

*Gemma: Sometimes I will go out, hang out with friends. Like today I was going to go to [nearby town] with [friend].*

*Rachel: Oh, you should have told me! I don't want to get in the way!*

*Gemma: I don't know how to say no!*

*Rachel: You can just tell me no! You should have just said that you can't make it, it's fine! Listen, any time, just say no!*

The ethnographer has a responsibility to engage in 'the process of a continual internal dialogue and critical self-evaluation' of her positionality, actively recognising that this position 'may affect the research process and outcome', and taking responsibility for this and its possible effects 'on the setting and people being studied, questions being asked, data being collected and its interpretation' (Berger 2013: 220). As part of this self-evaluation, it is important to reflect on particular relationships with particular participants 'in a particular time and place' (Behar 1996: 5), scrutinising 'the connection, intellectual and emotional, between the observer and the observed' (ibid.: 14), her positionality and values. The moment from a research conversation cited above, for example, caused me to reflect not only on my relationship with Gemma<sup>49</sup> but also on relationships with all of the participants. It was a stark reminder that in making arrangements to meet, I had inadvertently displaced the interactions and practices Gemma would have otherwise engaged in. Rather than creating an opportunity to observe and participate in her everyday life, I had unwittingly changed it. Moreover (and worryingly), my position as researcher had evidently made it difficult for Gemma to hold on to her original plans to go shopping with her friend by creating a sense of obligation on her part to meet with me. I had been unaware of this until the conversation had moved on to Gemma's daily activities and she mentioned in passing her prior plans for the morning. The realisation made me reflect on whether other participants felt reluctant to meet with me too (at times or generally) and

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<sup>49</sup> Gemma, a graduate, had arrived in the UK a decade previously from West Africa to join her husband, but had been unable to renew her visa. She lived with her husband and three children.

felt uncomfortable saying they were unavailable or did not want to meet. The only indication I otherwise had of any reluctance was when participants did not respond to my texts: on these occasions I gave people space and tried getting in touch at a later date. The possibility that some mothers might feel obliged to agree to meet because of their possible need for the £10 voucher was an uncomfortable thought too; unfortunately, there did not seem to be a simple solution to this.

At times, interactions with participants made me feel clumsy. In the fieldnote below, I reflected on my misstep during a conversation with Eva: whilst we sat with a cup of tea in a local café, she had been recounting the numerous mistakes made by her solicitor. Eva's anxiety about the implications was evident, which began to make me feel uncomfortable:

*After a while I tried changing the subject because I felt Eva was getting despondent and I didn't want her to get upset, so I mentioned again about her friend who had given birth. Eva gave me an odd look – I think she found this incongruous – and she quickly changed the subject back!*

My inelegant attempt to change the subject to a more cheery one, in a misguided effort to stop Eva from becoming distressed, was clearly jarring for her, and she rectified this aberration by steering the discussion back to the topic in hand. In another conversation with Eva, she had been explaining to me why she tended to avoid seeking advice from friends or other mothers at school, as she felt let down when they inevitably declined to advise her and suggested she speak to someone else: she seemed to experience this apparent unwillingness to help as a kind of rejection. As I described in the fieldnote below, I inadvertently found myself taking on a similar position:

*Eva talked a bit more about her application [for leave to remain] and asked me if I thought she should contact the dad to see if he has now got his status, as the social worker had said that would help her and the children's applications – I said I didn't know and it was best to ask at the advice centre – then we both realised I was doing exactly what she had just been complaining about – not giving any advice and suggesting she speak to someone else. It made me sound like the person she had described overhearing at the school, and we burst out laughing. I did then explain that it would be illegal for me to give immigration advice as I am not an advisor. But I saw her point... [field note]*

Eva and I simultaneously saw the humour in this, yet it also drove home her sense of frustration that people – other than official advisors – tended to be unwilling to provide support or advice as friends, hence her practice of not confiding in others. In this moment, I

realised I was 'boundarying' the research relationship, demarcating a line which in effect (re)produced a power imbalance (Finlay 2016); this felt, perhaps to both of us, uncomfortably like a form of bordering. These examples highlight the importance of situated ethics, particularly in the unpredictable context of 'deep hanging out' and open-ended conversations. Specific moments giving rise to 'some perplexity, confusion, or doubt' (Dewey 1910/2011: 12) sparked deep reflection on my part. This continuous reflective thinking as an ethnographer was vital, both '*in the moment*' to gauge my interlocutors' feelings and work out how best to respond, and later, beyond the field, '*on the moment*', to evaluate my practice. Whilst it was impossible to always 'get it right', this ongoing process of reflection helped me to learn to frame research encounters even more carefully, to listen more deeply and respond as sensitively as possible.

I have been conscious of points of convergence and connection with my participants in relation to social location, and also of points of divergence and difference, which have varied in both visibility and significance. For example, as a white woman with British nationality and with no religion, who has spent most of her life living in the UK, there were obvious differences that I brought to many of the encounters. The participants, of different nationalities, immigration statuses, racial and cultural identities and faiths, brought (and shared) experiences and ways of knowing that I did not have (Mirza 1997). These contrasting positionalities were mutually understood and formed the foundation of each of the research relationships: I was the researcher-learner; the mothers were participant-experts-by-experience. Yet these differences inevitably limited my intuitive insight, for example into everyday experiences of racism, and may have deterred participants from sharing such experiences with me. These different ways of seeing worked in other ways too. When on occasion participants used racialised language – whether in relation to people identified as being from a shared racial/cultural/national background, or conversely to people seen as being different – I felt uncomfortable, instinctively wanting to challenge it, but strove to be curious rather than judgemental. My not having a religion may have been less apparent to participants (only one mother asked me about my beliefs). The lack of shared faith was a hindrance to me in terms of not being able to provide support to mothers by responding with faith-based encouragement in times of particular difficulty. It may also

have been a subconscious factor in my reluctance to ask participants if I could join them at their church as part of my fieldwork (discussed below).

Most of the participants spoke English fluently, so language was not a barrier in these relationships. However, one participant spoke little English, so I relied on a frontline professional, known to the participant, to interpret and to help transcribe the recorded conversations afterwards. This inevitably shaped the research relationship, in that it was mediated by the professional, both in practical terms (for example, setting up meetings) and in the dynamics of research conversations, which were three-way. As sensitive as the professional was, this did affect my ability to respond to the participant and impacted on the flow of her narrative. It also raised questions for me about trust and about difference. Language also inevitably shaped the recruitment process, both in terms of my ability to communicate with potential participants and in the process of snowballing. In the settings where I volunteered, I met many eastern European and Latin American mothers with whom I was unable to connect beyond simple greetings, much as I would have liked to; I could not identify suitable candidates to act as interpreters. More than half of the participants in my study were from anglophone west African countries, which has inevitably shaped the data.

My prior experience – and identity – as a worker with families in the field of community development was relevant. For some of the participants, who may have been aware of this, it seemed to provide recognition and credibility, facilitating trust. Wanting to prevent possible anxiety about breaking confidentiality, however, I reassured participants that I no longer worked in the field and was now in the role of researcher. From my own perspective, my prior experience may have shaped my self-perception and my need to ‘help’. It was important for me to reflect on my role change from frontline worker to researcher and volunteer, how I enacted these roles, where the new boundaries lay, and the potential impact on my relationships with participants and on the construction of data. In many ways, there was more fluidity, such as being able to provide informal help (for example, childcare, giving someone a lift, sharing food, toys or clothes) which would not have been possible in my previous roles. On the other hand, reflections on how I had handled sensitive or challenging situations had to be largely managed alone, not being able to discuss research conversations or interactions with colleagues in a team.

A significant point of convergence between participants and myself was being a mother. Sharing the fact of being a mother – and in some cases sharing stories and experiences – enabled recognition which helped develop intersubjective trust and rapport in the research relationship. Whilst an ‘outsider’ to participants’ worlds in so many ways, my identity as a mother provided me with one way of sharing a tentative ‘insider’ perspective. When conversations turned to parenting practices or children themselves, they at times resembled chats between two mothers, rather than research conversations, as implied in this fieldnote:

*Gemma went to the parenting course at [community centre] yesterday. She said it was really good. The session was about how to praise your child. Instead of calling to the room next door, you should praise them face to face. You should give them daily targets and praise them when they achieve them. For Gemma, it’s about encouraging her boys to clean their teeth themselves. I said I used to have problems with this when my daughter was younger! Gemma said you should also have a timetable, either in your head or written down – you should do different activities, like reading. [fieldnote]*

My identity as a mother was generally helpful in creating connections with participants. However, at times our contrasting positions created discomfort. One Saturday, Sara and I had agreed to bring our young children to meet up at her local library:

*We met Sara and her boys in the children’s room of the library. I told her I was jealous because it is such a nice library, and the one where we live has [closed]. [I felt] a bit silly claiming to be ‘jealous’ of Sara for this – given her personal circumstances, and given the fact that the whole reason she and the boys are spending the day in the library is because they have no personal space of their own. [...] It is [her son]’s birthday next week [...]. He wasn’t sure how he was going to celebrate. [My daughter] said she has a party every year. I felt guilty about that – of course she was just saying what for her was pretty normal, but I felt bad about how this might make [Sara and her son] feel. [fieldnote]*

Here, our apparent similarities as mothers collided with the stark differences in our circumstances produced by differential citizenship statuses. Uncomfortable moments like this highlighted the extent to which everyday decisions and actions were constrained or enabled by immigration status and residency rights (or lack of them), intersecting with wider family relationships. The conversation between Sara’s son and my daughter about

celebrating their birthdays brought home how living with no recourse to public funds might also affect children's everyday lives and their sense of 'fitting in' and belonging.<sup>50</sup>

Reflecting on my relationships with participants also required scrutiny of the question of how far to go with providing practical and material support. If a participant had mentioned that their child did not have a costume for a dressing-up day at school, and through a friend I could get hold of one, would this be an appropriate action? (yes) Should I step in if a mother had no winter coat, children had few toys or the family lacked food? (yes – I ramped up mobilisation of my personal networks to redistribute resources to several families) Was it unfair to help a small number of mothers when it was apparent from my volunteer-researcher roles that there were many more families in need of resources? In other words, where were the boundaries between one-off individual acts of care for research participants and volunteering as part of an organisation whose purpose was to support all local families in need? (an ongoing dilemma... when my clothes and toys collection took over a whole room, I would fill up the car and take all the bags to the drop-in for the benefit of all – but then I felt I was neglecting the needs of individual families unable to attend the drop-in) Where were the boundaries between myself as a researcher, as a volunteer and as one mother helping another? If a mother needed to get home quickly after taking part in a research conversation with me, or if a mother had heavy bags and would struggle to get home from the drop-in by bus, should I drive them home? (yes) If a mother asked me to look after her child, should I do that? (sometimes) Did it make a difference if it was at their house or mine? (I did both) What if a mother was in real need of overnight childcare and asked me if their child could stay at my house? (in the end I didn't do this, but felt bad) Given that I was researching social networks and social support, to what extent was it appropriate to become part of participants' own support networks? These types of ethical questions arose throughout my research, requiring ongoing reflection (and frequently considerable worry) on how to resolve them.

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<sup>50</sup> Sara's story is explored further in Chapters 4 and 5.



## Data analysis

A first consideration was 'what constitutes my data?' Most obviously, my data included audio recordings of conversations, transcripts and the sociograms produced by and with participants. Field notes taken when 'in the field' (or close to it) and subsequent reflections were also an important element. Informal conversations, texts and WhatsApp messages exchanged with participants or others contributed to my developing contextual knowledge, but I did not systematically analyse, or cite, any of these, as I had not indicated to participants that I would.

When transcribing conversations, I paid attention to paralinguistic data – tone, pitch, flow and interjections – making occasional notes of these in the transcripts. I transcribed all recordings myself, usually on the day the conversations took place, so that the encounter was still fresh in my mind, enabling me to draw on my recalled observations of body language and details of the context of the encounter.

I typed up all of my field notes from my multiple fieldwork diaries and, in parallel with ongoing fieldwork, uploaded these and the interview transcripts on to Nvivo in order to organise and analyse them. In the first instance approaching them as self-contained narratives, I used open coding to identify instances of specific practices within types of relationships or networks, and conceptualisations of these, or 'situated meanings' (Hammersley and Atkinson 2019). I paid attention to how participants presented actions, norms and social 'rules'; how practices were articulated as being contextually shaped, or motivated by personal choice; and how significant words (such as 'friend') were used. I then reviewed codes as I moved back and forth between narratives of different participants, and between narratives over time of individual participants, as well as when moving between transcripts and field notes. I looked for patterns but also for outliers, or surprises. I grouped codes into categories, reviewed categories and regrouped codes within them over time. I eventually organised the categories into four overarching themes: social networks, impact of immigration status on motherhood, belonging and exclusion, and methodology. The largest theme, social networks, comprised 10 categories, including friendships, church-based networks, partners, services/frontline workers, family networks and

online/transnational networks; these were then further divided into codes and sub-codes. In total, there were 218 themes, categories, codes and sub-codes.

As I began to analyse my data, some shortcomings or 'gaps' became apparent. For example, whilst I was spending as much time as possible 'hanging out' and 'walking with' participants, I notably did not spend time in churches (or mosques). Partly, this may have been a consequence of my fieldwork taking place mainly on weekdays; partly, it may have been a subconscious avoidance on my part due to fears of not being able to 'blend in', or a worry (and/or reality) that participants might not want me to accompany them to their faith group (see below). My observations and reflections on faith network practices are therefore based on participants' narratives rather than participant observation.

Whilst the sociograms offered intriguing insights into mothers' networks, some elements were inevitably less visible: by asking participants to depict people who were important to them, sociograms did not tend to capture the 'serendipitous encounters' with passing strangers or acquaintances who provided vital support at key moments. However, I did pick up on references in participants' narratives to such individuals ('a lady', 'a friend', 'someone from my church') and probed further (often to the bemusement of participants). Thus I did not attempt to analyse the sociograms as a standalone form of data but within the context of wider narratives.

In writing up the thesis, although my focus is on relational practices, I have drawn more heavily on participants' narratives than on my fieldnotes. There are two main reasons which can help explain this. One is that the very sensitivities of 'doing' intimate or social relationships (couplehood, friendship, faith groups) in the context of insecure immigration status potentially made it difficult for me to observe interactions in certain kinds of natural setting (e.g. home, church) without my presence needing some explanation – which participants might have felt uncomfortable to do, given the likely need for privacy and discretion in relation to their status.<sup>51</sup> One-to-one conversations in participants' homes and/or at drop-ins tended to be preferred (my role as a volunteer helped with the latter). Secondly, most of the mothers were incredibly open with me about their experiences and feelings; whether we met multiple times (as in most cases) or only once or twice, their

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<sup>51</sup> On certain occasions I was introduced to others as a friend.

narratives were often eloquent and engaging, deeply reflective and rich in detail, ranging from an account of an act of care towards a friend or a conflict-ridden conversation with a neighbour earlier that day, to a hostile encounter with a social worker many months ago, to the evolution of an intimate couple relationship over a number of years. I decided therefore to focus my analysis largely on mothers' narratives.

I chose to organise the ethnographic chapters within an analytical framework focusing on types of relationships or support networks (mother-child relationships, friendships, faith networks, couple relationships, bureaucrats and advocates), interweaving motherhood throughout all of them. Had space allowed, I would have liked to include chapters on kin networks, neighbours and the 'serendipitous encounters' mentioned above. Instead, these will be explored beyond the thesis.

Care had to be taken when writing: beyond using pseudonyms, I have taken further steps to protect identities, for example by altering or withholding potentially identifying details.

## Concluding remarks

In this chapter, I have shown how my ontological, epistemological and axiological beliefs have shaped my ethnographic approach. I have given an account of the 'field' and how I immersed myself in it through 'deep hanging out' in particular places as a volunteer-researcher and with individual participants over time. I have reflected on the possibilities and challenges of my methods, showing how in-depth open-ended conversations and sociograms enabled the construction of shared understandings of participants' personal networks and interactions within intimate and social relationships. As I have shown, reflexivity has been central throughout my research, requiring ongoing reflection on my methods, specific encounters, the development of relationships with participants and my positionality, and the implications.

## Interlude: 'We're not free'

*June: It's a hard life... [At that time] the kids were really badly affected. They were saying, 'mummy I want to go swimming', all the activities they could not attend. 'Oh mummy, why is it that we are not travelling? I want to go on a plane, I haven't been on a plane before.' Some of their friends were going to France. I say, 'It's a bit difficult.' 'Why is it difficult?' They were all born here but they don't have the same life. When I get things, that makes them happy. Ipad, shoes, you know stuff – basic stuff of life – they don't have it. What does that make the children? That just make them... they are very timid, cos you know like your friend is wearing Nike trainers, you don't have it. Where your mum goes to pick up from second hand, they're not even new – you'll be shy, you wouldn't want to share with people. I couldn't afford lessons, I'm not a teacher, I'm just trying all I could to help them. They were backward at school in their study, their teachers were complaining. I'm like, I don't know what to do. Cos I can't do otherwise. Some of the stuff they bring home from school for help, I can't do. Whereas, if they have a tutor to help them... [...]. They cannot go swimming. All their friends – they're in this stage, that stage, 'what stage are you?' When they have a conversation with their friend, they feel very intimidated – 'we don't go swimming' – 'why not?!' It looks strange, people who've got a better life, they don't know what... Cos when my children were going through that stuff, they called them 'children in need'. Because I'm not entitled to school dinner, they have packed lunch. It was a concern, the school called me, 'the kind of food you give them, just biscuits', it was a problem, they said 'you have to give them good food' – I said 'I do not have the money!' I do not have the money... They [my children] know, they know very well – when they stopped coming to school, they were pretty much aware. People know what you're going through but they are unable to help you. 'What it is is what it is, go and get your status.' All right, yeah! That's what it is. Hard life.*

*2 and a half isn't good at all. [...] We don't know how the rules are going to change. [...] Cos still then, nothing else has changed. I'm still there queuing getting the food, queuing getting the clothing and shoes. Because I'm still not able to find my feet. Whereas, if we had indefinite leave, that would have made life easier, we know we're not thinking about that, we just have to face what we have to do, we're free from that. But no, we're not free, we're still being trapped by the system indirectly. Yeah, we are trapped. Still going back to the Home Office. When you have your stay, you don't need to, do you? You know it's for life, it's indefinite, you wait for a while, then you go for British. Ten years.*

*And the negative impact it's making on families. Still you're not able. You've got 2 and a half. You're saving up for the renewal. And the kids... You think you've got your status right. You want to give them a better life. [...] To be honest, we as adults, at least I have a life, a bit, but it's the children I feel very sorry for, cos they feel the pinch. [...] My son wants to go to France. He wants to go to France and explore. When his friends come back from holiday, 'I've been here, I've been here', he's just moping at them. He's never been anywhere. Not being able to make a conversation with friends.*

*Rachel: Do they ask why? Do they have any awareness of why?*

*June: He did ask. And I said because I need you to feed first, have a good life before you travel. You have a good life here. I just make up stories, I just tell them to take their brain away from travelling. They haven't been on a plane before. [...] They need to experience. Every child should have equal life. But no, it's not equal. My friend's children went to America for their holidays. Oh my god, they came back, they were showing off their watch, the kids were looking. 'Oh mum, I wish we had the same.' And I said, 'don't worry, it will happen', thinking that when my papers come it will be indefinite leave. I'm not thinking it's going to be 2 and a half, where I'm going to be renewing, renewing. So those children are like backward. Still same cycle. Still the same cycle. Yeah.*

## Chapter 4: Mothering

*You feel tired. You wonder, when am I going to get out of this? You keep thinking – a lot of things. How am I going to sort myself out? Is this how everything is going to be, for life? How am I going to get out of this? I hope this thing is not going to affect my children. You keep thinking. (Anna)*

### Introduction

In this chapter, I show that insecure immigration status, poverty and anxiety created by restrictive immigration and citizenship policies in the UK, in particular the Hostile Environment strategy in the last decade, constrain experiences and practices of mothering. The denial of residency rights to racially minoritised women/mothers from the Global South condemns them and their (UK-born) children to years in liminal statuses. Hostile environment policies prevent their access to public services, accommodation and paid work, creating exclusion and marginalisation. As indicated by Anna (above), this position generates ontological insecurity and fears for the future, both for one's children and for oneself. Having no leave to remain, or only temporary leave, coupled with having no recourse to public funds, creates an interminable sense of precarity. In the face of these structural and everyday exclusions, becoming a mother can be understood as a form of enacting belonging and as acts of citizenship. From a psychological perspective, the co-constitutive mother-child relationship creates belonging through the development of basic trust.<sup>52</sup> Produced through 'mutual somatic experiences' and communication, this trust is an 'ontological source of the self/other relation' (Markova et al. 2007: 13, Erikson 1950): in other words, you need me, therefore I exist. Sociologically speaking, motherhood can open doors to friendships with other mothers and enable connections with frontline workers in health, care and education. In parallel, producing a (potentially) British child can generate belonging claims: becoming a mother therefore engenders hope as a potential pathway to 'leave to remain' (despite restrictions rendering this an increasingly long, gruelling, costly and uncertain process). Yet motherhood simultaneously creates new needs and, particularly

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<sup>52</sup> This may not reflect the experiences of all mothers, however.

in the context of the hostile environment over the past decade, leads to new forms of exclusion.

I first consider how insecure immigration status and precarity intersect with experiences of *becoming* a mother, and how these affect subjective wellbeing. I then explore how these conditions shape practices of both shared parenting and solo mothering. From here I examine the impact of insecure immigration status, NRPF and precarity on specific forms of mothering: *providing* for one's children, *protecting* them and *imagining a livable future*.

## Becoming a mother in a hostile environment

*The hardest part of life is after you have a child, when you are no recourse to public funds – it's very hard time in life [...]. That time you really need somebody to help you. (Zoe)*

Pregnancy often triggers a mix of emotions, including joy, excitement, hope and anxiety. Being subject to insecure immigration status and no recourse to public funds intensifies the latter two. For migrant women excluded by the state in structural and everyday ways, pregnancy can symbolise 'putting down roots' and be experienced as an act of belonging. Yet it may also call attention to barriers to services and resources, prevent paid work and signify a loss of income. I met with Gabriela on several occasions in a children's centre, supported by a frontline advocate who acted as our interpreter. She had moved from Latin America to join her friend and find work in the UK a decade ago, but was relatively new to Ryetton, having moved across London when she was expecting her second child. When she became pregnant with her first child, Gabriela recalled that she had felt 'hopeful and happy that the baby was okay', but also 'very worried', wondering how she could continue to work to pay the rent since her partner had left her. June, whom I met up with in the community and at her home, had been doing skilled work in West Africa before migrating to Britain over a decade earlier; she told me she had felt 'excited' when she was expecting her first child – 'a British child', she added, signalling a belonging claim for her child and for herself through her child's future citizenship status. Yet she reflected ruefully that it was 'hard work when you don't have status', recollecting the cramped single room that her young family lived in at the time, her lack of nearby kin networks to provide support, and her exclusion from welfare support. Zoe, quoted above, who had sought asylum from her country in East Africa more than a decade ago, expressed similar sadness about the distance from family. When I

met with her in a children's centre, she recalled having struggled as a new mother with fragile support networks and no recourse to public funds. Becoming a mother produces new kinds of needs; for migrant mothers who may be distant from close kin and old friends, motherhood often exacerbates feelings of loneliness and isolation.

Pregnancy and motherhood increase precarity for women with insecure immigration status. Participants dependent on the goodwill of friends or acquaintances for accommodation often found that pregnancy and/or giving birth precipitated the loss of temporary homes, speeding up the cycle of 'sofa-surfing'. One mother recounted being asked to move on by the friend who had been sheltering her once he realised she was pregnant: 'He said it's not going to work. [...] He said there's nothing I can do, you have to look for a way out.' Additionally, pregnancy often exacerbated dynamics of dependency and unequal power relations in couple or kin relationships, producing tensions or sparking conflict. Pregnancy and early motherhood have been shown to increase the risk of being subjected to violence in intimate relationships, creating particular vulnerabilities for women with insecure immigration status (Harris and Hardwick 2019, Menjívar and Salcido 2002) (discussed below). The intersection of *becoming* a mother and the condition of insecure immigration status thus increases different forms of precarity within different types of relationship.

Pregnancy brings women into contact with healthcare services, sometimes for the first time. At this most vulnerable time, interactions with healthcare staff, as well as intimate or other social relationships, often felt risky or unsafe. In the context of the hostile environment, participants' experiences of accessing healthcare were often shaped by worries about unaffordable bills for care, and fears that their details would be passed on to the Home Office, as Amy's story shows. Amy had moved from West Africa to London over a decade ago to study, but her plans had gone awry when she became pregnant: her kin, both in her country of origin and in the UK, strongly disapproved of her partner and the relationship, and had ostracized her, ceasing all financial support. Her visa then expired and she was unable to renew it. Amy's only option was to move in with her partner's relatives, but this was a highly precarious arrangement. Perched on the edge of the bed in the tiny room that was her home when we first met, Amy recalled feeling overwhelmed by multi-layered



worries and being unable to talk as she lay in the hospital bed following the difficult birth of her son:

*I can't speak there – I kept thinking, if I speak they will deport me. I can't speak there – I was really scared of speaking. I nearly go mad. [...] It was because of the stress with what was happening in the house.*

Amy's acute sense of deportability and the risks of disclosing her situation to doctors or nurses were overlaid by ongoing tensions in relationships with members of her partner's kin networks who had been accommodating her, generating unbearable feelings of anxiety before, during and after giving birth. Amy recalled clinical staff's concern at her high blood pressure as they repeatedly asked her what was wrong. Yet she had felt powerless and silenced by her fear. Relationships both with kin and with frontline professionals did not provide security but reproduced precarity and risks. The erosion of institutional trust by hostile environment policies undermined trust in Amy's relationships with those around her.

For mothers in this study, the joy and hopes of pregnancy had been overshadowed by the precarity and anxiety surrounding their immigration status and the demands of seeking the right to remain in the face of structural and everyday exclusions. Moreover, pregnancy created new vulnerabilities, placing mothers-to-be and their unborn children at risk of new forms of violence and exclusion, whether from agents of the state, employers or intimates. Lilia had moved to the UK from North Africa a decade ago, initially to study to pave the way to her dream of a career with opportunities for international travel. In London, she had met her husband-to-be; on her second stay in the UK they married, she applied to renew her leave to remain, and later became pregnant. Yet Lilia's encounters with the hostile state had disrupted and overshadowed this experience of pregnancy and early motherhood. Offering me tea, fruit and biscuits in the comfort of her living room, and in between her toddler daughter's efforts to talk with me and engage me in play, Lilia recounted her experience of her first pregnancy. The Home Office had rejected her visa renewal application following their refusal to accept her marriage as genuine; as such, she was required to 'go and sign' at an immigration centre every fortnight. Suffering sickness during her pregnancy, she had taken a certificate from her GP to request permission to report less frequently, yet on her subsequent visit, she was detained by immigration officers suspicious of her account:

*She didn't believe I was pregnant. She was checking me with her hands like that [touches her stomach, chest] to see if I was pregnant. My husband was going to jump from the bridge. 'You've got my wife and my baby there.' He was miserable. My legs were swelling up. The stress they were giving me. That's when he [baby] stopped moving for two days - when I was in that jail. I was really feeling down, upset, alone.*

The 'culture of disbelief' widely associated with Home Office staff (Yeo 2020, Williams 2020) was enacted in a brutally intrusive manner as a corporeal performance of power by immigration officers, who objectified Lilia as a mother-to-be and used her insecure immigration status to justify her temporary imprisonment whilst her fate was decided. Lilia associated the intrusive encounter and her detention with subsequent medical concerns about her pregnancy and fears for her unborn baby, and, later, a highly traumatic labour. The intersection of new motherhood, insecure status and the hostile environment create new forms of precarity for women and their unborn children.

For mothers-to-be coping alone and supporting themselves through paid work, motherhood poses significant additional challenges. Gabriela was forced to stop working as a non-domestic cleaner when she gave birth in order to arrange childcare for her newborn. But her precarious immigration status made her replaceable at work: Gabriela lost her job, and, as a solo mother with no recourse to public funds, this meant having to find work elsewhere. She started working night shifts, again as a cleaner, while a neighbour in her HMO looked after her baby – 'but not for free,' she told me. 'I had to pay her what I was earning. No-one gives anything for free. I couldn't be in arrears.' Gabriela's immigration status denied her the safety net of official channels of support and left her 'stuck', working under the radar in an ongoing effort to earn enough money for her child and herself to survive. As a mother with insecure immigration status, Gabriela's labour was a 'disposable commodity' (De Genova 2002: 438), maintaining her vulnerability to exploitation (Bloch and McKay 2017) and constraining her experiences of motherhood.

Becoming a mother when constrained by insecure immigration status and no recourse to public funds in the UK thus creates hope and possibilities for future citizenship, but this new life stage also generates new needs and vulnerabilities. These place new demands on intimate and social relationships and create new forms of exclusion.

## Parenting together or alone

Being in a couple relationship, whether living together or apart, often engenders some form of shared parenting practices by mothers and fathers. For mothers with insecure immigration status, sharing aspects of parenting can be an important source of material, financial and emotional support. Whether still in a relationship with their child's father or not, many mothers identified various forms of fathering practices and support provided. Some fathers paid the rent, bought food or clothing, shared in decision-making as co-parents, took their children out, played with them or supported with school work, or did the school run. Many fathers continued to be involved in their children's lives following the breakdown of couple relationships, providing elements of material support, particularly if they were doing paid work and/or were entitled to child benefit. Christine, who had been trafficked to the UK from West Africa some years earlier, had relatively precarious support networks when she became a mother; she reflected that her former partner was happy to support his child, particularly when Christine had had no local authority support ('When I need anything, he got it for me. [...] He's the one that provided everything for me.'). June identified her husband as a key source of different forms of support, as 'somebody I can go to'. Similarly, Louise, who had sought and been granted asylum from her Central African country of origin two decades previously, described her husband as 'a good man and a good dad'. When material or financial support was inconsistent or insufficient, however, mothers were compelled to negotiate support, which at times created tensions.

One of the most significant forms of fathering – from the perspective of mothers with insecure immigration status – was acknowledging paternity by registering their child's birth. Recognition of paternity by fathers with British citizenship represented a pathway to British citizenship for the child.<sup>53</sup> In turn, this strengthened the mother's claims to residency rights.<sup>54</sup> Persuading partners to put their name on their child's birth certificate and to support mothers' 'leave to remain' applications can be seen as acts of citizenship. Some

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<sup>53</sup> Additionally, until Brexit in 2020, a parent with EU citizenship could provide a pathway to EU citizenship for their child, who could then apply for settled status in the UK post-Brexit.

<sup>54</sup> See Chapter 2 on the ten-year settlement route.

fathers were reluctant, however, to formally acknowledge paternity, and/or to support their child and partner/child's mother along this bureaucratic pathway. As discussed in Chapter 2, increasingly restrictive immigration legislation, highly complex rules, unaffordable application fees and legal fees posed a major obstacle to the process and to a successful outcome (Yeo 2020). The process placed significant pressure on couple relationships, contributing in some cases to relationship breakdown, separation and the father's withdrawal from family life. Anna, for example, had left her West African country reluctantly over a decade earlier to start a new life in the UK; after leading a precarious existence for a number of years, she had met and married her husband, and they had a child. When we met in a small side room at a busy family drop-in, Anna recounted the stressful and ultimately fruitless process of applying to extend her leave to remain as the mother of the child of her British citizen husband:

*The application was not granted. It was refused again. [...] I felt let down. And my husband turned it against me. He keeps submitting his passport, he can't travel. [...] I think that's it – what make us to go our separate ways. Because you know, he was tired – 'I can't be doing this.' So we broke up. We lost contact. I can't see him again. So he just left... Even the child, he didn't do the passport for her.*

The demands of the regularisation process were perceived by Anna as the main cause of her husband leaving her and the consequent breakdown of their co-parenting practices, loss of contact and the denial of British citizenship to her child. Hostile environment policies can be seen to exert a damaging, even destructive, impact on intimate couple relationships, indirectly eroding fathering practices.

The reluctance or refusal of some fathers to claim citizenship for their children or support their partner's application for leave to remain placed mothers and children in a highly precarious position. In such cases, couple/co-parent relationships functioned as a site not only for claiming rights but of experiences of dispossession (Luibheid et al. 2018). Mothers were left to navigate the intersecting challenges of parenting, deportability and poverty alone. Chatting with me in her family's tiny room crammed full with a double bed, upended mattress, small fridge, boxes and cases, Amy encapsulated the sense of loss: 'Sometimes if I look at this situation that surrounds the children, I will just be sad. It's not only one person that is supposed to be going through the stress of children. It's two people that have children – why is it only me doing the whole thing? I feel sad, I feel sad, I feel sad.' As we

later walked through the quiet residential streets to pick up her daughter from nursery, Amy explained to me that there were two types of situation: mothers who have a partner, and those who are on their own. 'When you have a partner, he can share things with you, like taking the children to school, picking up, going to the market. You can also discuss things together.' Conversely, parenting alone can be draining, she told me. Towards the end of my fieldwork, by which point the family had, after a years-long process, been granted leave to remain and moved to a two-bedroom flat, Amy emphasised the impact of the combined challenges of insecure immigration status and parenting alone:

*If you don't have [leave to remain], there is a look, a worried look of your situation that will stick on your face, that will be written all over you. [...] Because the stress from head to toe will be on you. The people that don't have partners, it will really speak out. People that have partners, they have a companion, someone to communicate at home. Someone that don't have no-one, she is the only one going through stress with children, it will be all over [her face], then you will really see it.*

Amy's powerful description revealed a deep sensitivity to the embodied stress and anxiety experienced by mothers with insecure status parenting alone. Although poverty was rarely mentioned explicitly by participants, it was understood as an inherent part of their immigration status and NRPF condition. Everyday life as a solo mother with no leave to remain involved dealing with multiple and interconnected structural and everyday challenges, from the logistics of 'signing on' at the Home Office, to negotiating access to essential services, and contending with feelings of powerlessness as a woman and as a mother. Fathers were often mobile: fathers with British citizenship or leave to remain had the right to work and in some cases were entitled to state support; fathers without leave to remain could find cash-in-hand work. Yet mothers without leave to remain who were parenting alone rarely had this flexibility: caregiving became their *raison d'être*. In many of our conversations, Anna reflected on this, expressing her desperation to work, study and volunteer, and her frustration that none of these possibilities was open to her: 'I'm not allowed to do anything. Can't do anything. We are just stuck. Thinking what is going to happen to you, how are you going to be.' Her status confined her to an endless present as a mother without rights, not knowing if or when her circumstances would change. For many mothers, mothering alone with insecure status exacerbated precarity, isolation and structural 'stuckness'.

Fathers' insecure immigration status often constrained fathering practices and placed additional demands on mothers. The precarity of fathers' statuses also contributed to the breakdown of relationships. Eva, who had qualified as a healthcare professional in her West African country before moving to the UK a decade ago, had felt supported by her partner, until one day he left, ceasing contact. As Eva recounted to me during one of our conversations in the park, she later heard via an intermediary that his departure was due to his sense of shame at no longer being able to provide materially for the family following a change to his immigration status. Eva sympathised, but felt frustrated by his sudden departure and deeply disappointed that he was no longer involved in their children's lives:

*Before, he was actually there for us. He was renting, paying, he was treating [the children] very well, giving them treats, he was really there. [...] I was really upset, because even if something happened, he should let us know, instead of disappearing like that. He should at least say, oh look, my situation has changed, [...] we will understand, you know. You have been there. You can't just... Even if you can't provide money to provide for them, we will understand. At least come and check on them! Maybe help in so many other ways that don't require money. But he feels, what is the need when he can't provide. You know how kids behave when they say they want this, and he can't – he will feel embarrassed. That is the situation, I think. [...] If he had explained everything... After he has been there [for us], helping us, doing everything, I don't mind. Because it's not his wish. I don't know what happened. Whatever has happened, [we] understand. At least, we are going through this, he will go through it with us. Because disappearing like that, without a word, it's not good. [...] When everything is fine, he will come.*

Eva emphasised the role of restrictive immigration policies in constraining her partner's role as provider, to the extent that he felt unable to continue as an engaged and involved father. She maintained that he would return to the family to resume his fatherly role once he had sorted out his immigration status and was again able to provide for the family materially and financially. Carol Stack's argument (1974), in her ethnography of Black families from a disadvantaged neighbourhood in the US, that unemployment and poverty contribute to couple relationship breakdown since fathers cannot meet their socially-defined obligations to provide for their families, is all the more pertinent in the context of insecure immigration status in the UK's hostile environment. As suggested in Eva's account, fathers with no right to work, no right to rent and little chance of regularising their status may feel frustrated and humiliated by their inability to provide. Yet whereas the mothers in Stack's study instead relied on kin networks for support, few mothers in my research had family members to turn

to. Couple relationship breakdown therefore had a significant impact on co-parenting practices and on financial, material and emotional support for mothers and children.

Some women/mothers were (or had been) dependent on their husband or partner for their right to remain in the UK, which created (or contributed to) structural inequality in the partnership. In certain cases, the situation had been exploited by male partners, trapping women/mothers in an abusive relationship. Women not only faced the psychological and practical barriers to help-seeking or leaving shared by most women and mothers in abusive relationships, but were prevented from accessing state support or accommodation and feared losing their residency rights<sup>55</sup> (Anitha 2010, 2015, Dudley 2017). Co-parenting in this context caused harm to children and mothers. Sofia had arrived in the UK in the 1990s as a child with her mother seeking asylum from their central African country; when their asylum applications were rejected, Sofia – encouraged strongly by her mother – married the young man who had been showing interest in her (see Interlude, ‘At least you’re in that bubble’, prior to Chapter 7), and, whilst still a teenager, Sofia became a mother of two. In an extended conversation in a small room of a children’s centre, she explained to me that she had been dependent on her husband for her right to remain in the UK, and, in her words, he had been ‘taking advantage’ of this. His abusive behaviour led her to seek help several times from the local authority where she had then lived, but they had (wrongly) denied her help on the grounds that she had no recourse to public funds; she could not afford to rent a room herself. Sofia avoided talking about the abuse, but did recount its profound effects on her mental and physical health. She summarised this period as feeling trapped in a bubble:

*I was living in this bubble, where I... I can't really recall how I coped. All I know is that we had two kids, and the time just went by, time went past. To me, I was married, I was home, and I had no choice but to be there, because if I was to step out, I would get nothing. I was dependent on him. Even if I worked, I wouldn't be able to afford private housing, especially with children... So, just stay here, stay quiet, just be there, because no-one will help you.*

Sofia had felt stuck in a kind of limbo produced by the intersection of domestic abuse and her insecure immigration status, where her leave to remain, and therefore her ability to

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<sup>55</sup> Despite legislation intended to protect women in this position, many are not aware of this (Maternity Action 2019: 17).

mother, was contingent on her marriage and the continuation of the relationship. Following their later separation, she struggled to support their children through sporadic financial contributions from her former husband, occasional cash-in-hand work and her mother helping out in any small ways she could. When her spouse visa expired, Sofia was unable to renew her right to remain in the UK. In addition to solo motherhood and insecurity, Sofia now had to contend with destitution and deportability. It was some years later that she was granted leave to remain.

Shared parenting practices are therefore dependent on fathers' involvement and support, and can be regular and reliable, sporadic or non-existent. Providing, or 'provisioning', is seen as a central role of motherhood (Collins 2007, Clarke 2013), and particularly so for women with insecure status who are mothering without a co-parent. The intersection of precarious immigration status, lack of state support, poverty, deportability, often the absence of local kinship networks and/or being in a controlling and abusive couple relationship can make provisioning a colossal task. Mothers have to navigate tensions within relationships between the need for resources and their unavailability, as I discuss in the following section.

## Mothering as provisioning

*If you want to rent a place you will rent with panic, because you will be afraid that Immigration will come one day, and they will take you. And even because of that, some landlords they behave so bad when they know you don't have your status. If you don't give them stuff, like a deposit, they might be doing all kind of things for them to be frustrating your life. Having no support, where you are supposed to get support, because the government won't help you if you don't have your status. They even want to frustrate you to leave the country. (Amy)*

Providing shelter, food, and material and cultural resources are essential forms of provisioning as a mother; all are constrained by hostile environment policies. As recognised by Amy and discussed in Chapter 2, one aim of the hostile environment is to squeeze people without the 'right to rent' out of the housing market. This severely limits access to accommodation for mothers and children with insecure immigration status, and increases vulnerability to exploitation as a result. Landlords prepared to let a room without undertaking the required checks on a tenant's immigration status may exploit the power imbalance, putting vulnerable tenants at risk of abuse, as Amy indicated. Shared parenthood



within a couple relationship offers a degree of security if one partner has the right (and the means) to rent accommodation. If a mother is managing alone, however, or if both parents have insecure immigration status and NRPF, renting can be risky or impossible, even when earning an income. As June recalled with evident frustration, 'No-one wants to take you, no-one wants to risk it anyway. It was so difficult. You go to the agency and they need to see your passport – I do not have any passport to show.' This form of bordering is a major barrier to providing shelter, marginalising mothers and children and creating significant anxiety.

When participants with insecure immigration status were faced with homelessness, often following the breakdown of a couple relationship, the few who had them turned to local kin networks; more often, mothers turned to church members, friends or acquaintances to seek shelter. Networks were sometimes sparse, or spare rooms non-existent. Arrangements, contingent on the relationship, usually held out for a few weeks or months. Since those providing hospitality tended to live in modest circumstances themselves, sofa-surfing increased pressure on limited resources in these households. Sleeping in a communal space denied privacy and disrupted routines for both hosts and guests. Staying in someone else's home created a sense of obligation. Different immigration statuses produced differential access to resources and hence unequal power dynamics. Individual resentments, frustrations and competing claims on shared spaces were often difficult to navigate and made home a hostile environment. This was the case for Sara: she and her children were living with her parents and sister during most of my fieldwork. Sara had moved to the UK two decades previously to study and work, joining her parents and siblings who all had (or had quickly acquired) British citizenship or indefinite leave to remain. Yet Sara had only been granted limited leave to remain with NRPF, which, coupled with relationship breakdown, and despite working full-time, had left her and her children unable to afford market rents and ineligible for social housing or welfare support. Sara's father would express his irritation at his grandsons' exuberance, toys and television-watching. Sara strove to maintain equilibrium in the home and avoid tensions by shutting herself and her boys away in her sister's bedroom until her parents had gone to bed each evening, at which point they could bed down on the living room sofas. The need to provide shelter as a mother puts pressure on existing relationships, since resources tend to be limited, generating tensions

which must be navigated by mothers on a daily basis, experienced at times as exhausting emotion work (Hochschild 1979).

Emily had arrived in the UK over a decade ago on a spouse visa; she started working and had two children, but when her marriage broke down she had lost her leave to remain, and struggled to provide for her family. On being made homeless, they had managed to find shelter with a friend who was renting a small studio flat. But Emily had been conscious of the infringement on their host's limited space, and attempted to reciprocate her hospitality. As she recalled, 'If I had money, I would make sure I would get what is not there. Even if everything is there, I make sure I get rice, toiletries. [...] I just get egg or tuna flakes, just make food.' Such gestures could help smooth relationships; however, a limited ability to reciprocate, coupled with pressure on space, could induce hosts' resentment and produce tensions which infused everyday interactions.

Amy recounted how initial hospitality from friends and church members had receded over time. After two months of living with one friend, 'you know how people are, she started doing things bad to me'. Amy then moved in with a church member who was 'nice' but 'I just had to bring myself down, very low, all kinds of things I do, you make yourself to be like a slave, so I don't get kick out with the child, because I don't have nowhere to go.' Similarly, Eva explained to me that, 'Initially, some people are very happy to help, but when you stay more than they expected, they will get not happy, try to get rid of you. Any little thing, they will be picking, they will be aggressive. It's not really easy to be living with people. You will be like a parasite. They will feel you are a parasite, disturbing their lives.' After two or three weeks living with friends, Eva suggested, goodwill was used up, and 'it's time to go your own way'. Moving in with kin, friends or church members required mobilising social capital which, for women/mothers with no recourse to public funds, often could not be adequately reciprocated. This reproduced immigration status-based inequalities in relationships, led to processes of bordering or boundary-making by hosts, and created tensions in everyday lives.

Accepting a room or shared space when homeless often meant relocating to a neighbourhood in another part of (or even beyond) the city, at a distance from other support networks and from the children's nursery or school. Children found themselves in strange surroundings, in someone else's home, at a distance from their friends and without

familiar routines. Many mothers and children had experienced long periods of ‘sofa-surfing’, moving from one person’s home to another. The impact on children’s wellbeing – specifically the impact of the lack of space and privacy, and the insecurity and instability – was a constant concern to mothers. Amy commented on ‘the worryiness’, explaining: ‘The children, because they don’t have no space to move around, they will be stressing you.’ Trying to meet children’s needs to play and express themselves whilst also trying to ‘contain’ their energy to avoid their hosts’ displeasure was a constant struggle. Yet, faced with solo mothering and homelessness, if friends and church members could not provide shelter, and fear or lack of knowledge prevented seeking help from advocates or state bureaucrats, there were very few options left.

When there was nowhere left to turn, mothers with insecure immigration status and NRPF were compelled to seek ‘Section 17’ support from social care.<sup>56</sup> Often experienced as a hostile and gruelling process by participants, this engagement – discussed in more detail in Chapter 8 – had ultimately provided a route to shelter (typically a single room in an HMO) and subsistence support for many of the participants in this study. June’s narrative illustrated the stages mothers tended to go through in following this route, beginning with the initial encounter:

*Someone advised me to go to the social worker. It was horrible. Before the social workers are going to help you, they need to interview you, they call Immigration. ‘Because you are illegal, we’re not supposed to help you. Go and look for something to do.’*

Examples of ‘anti-migrant gatekeeping by social workers’ (Dennler 2018: 83) were not unusual; such practices whereby local authority practitioners used discretion to interpret policy, often going beyond it, served to restrict access to support and avoid meeting individuals’ needs (discussed in Chapter 8). As Kathryn Dennler has argued, ‘A hostile stance delegitimizes people—their existence, their presence, and their needs—and denies their rights’ (ibid.: 84). Obtaining the right to be assessed for Section 17 support often required persistence and determination on the part of mothers.

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<sup>56</sup> As discussed in Chapter 2, under Section 17 of the Children Act 1989, local authorities have a duty to carry out an assessment of any child who may be in need of additional support, and to provide support as necessary.

For participants, insecure immigration status and NRPf were, previously or ongoingly, closely associated with precarious accommodation and food insecurity. For example, accessing subsistence funding and accommodation via Section 17 was in practice often contingent on having an application for leave to remain under consideration by the Home Office, as in June's experience. Following the submission of her application – demanded by social care as a prerequisite to undertaking an assessment – June and her children were temporarily housed – until, as she recalled, a social worker came to evict them, informing her that the Home Office had rejected her application: 'You need to move because of your status. They've rejected your state, so you need to move.' June recounted her family's rapid and brutal eviction from the room in the HMO and their eventual placement in a hostel ('My little girl suffered so much. [...] We carry our stuff there in bags, in the buggy.'). June's priority was feeding her children: since cooking in hostels was not permitted, they would go to McDonalds or stop by at friends' homes to make noodles: 'Once they feed, automatically [...] I just feel it's in my tummy, so I'm fine. People look at me and say you are stressed, [but] once my children are fine, I'm fine.' Routines were disrupted: 'The children were unstable. I stopped them going to school, cos where is the uniform, where are the shoes? How are they going to have breakfast in the morning? Nothing. So I stopped the school.' For a period of time, the family's destitution and loss of a home – resulting from the Home Office's rejection of June's latest application to leave to remain - severely limited their access to food, the children's attendance at school and their access to friendship networks, to the detriment of their physical and mental wellbeing.

Similarly, Amy recollected how, prior to finding free legal advice at a local voluntary sector organisation, she had been struggling to 'pay the solicitor, out of no money', which at times meant not being able to feed her children adequately: 'It [was] killing me, the pain of that money. It contributed to my illness before. Because I just be thinking, "how am I going to get the money?" – I will just be starving my children.' When I later visited the family in their new home, towards the end of the fieldwork, Amy reflected on the impact of their recent change in immigration status; her son, playing computer games on the sofa, added his thoughts too:

*Amy: I feel relief, I feel happiness, I feel joy, my children are happy. They can move from one room to the other.*

*Michael: I eat [?]*

*Amy: They can eat what they want. Before we have to be, like, we have to ration, ration, sometimes they don't eat three meals a day. But now we can eat morning, three meals...*

*Michael: ...morning, afternoon and night! [giggles]*

*Amy: There are a lot of changes. You have courage. You have your confidence back.*

*Michael: To eat!*

For many participants, the immense pressure of trying to save money out of a negligible subsistence income for the next visa application, and sometimes lawyers' fees too, was (or had been) the constant backdrop to the task of feeding and sheltering their children. For all mothers in the study, the ability to provide food and accommodation for their children was significantly shaped by their immigration status and constrained by hostile government policies.

'Provisioning' as a mother extends beyond shelter and food to include clothing, toys and other material objects. In this sense, provisioning, and being provided for, signifies 'fitting in', as Val Gillies (2007) has argued in her study of working class mothers and Tess Ridge (2002) has shown in her examination of childhood poverty. Mothering practices, including 'parental consumption on behalf of their children', are 'classed' but at the same time 'universalised' (Vincent 2010: 114, 113). For mothers 'de-classed' by their immigration status (Erel and Ryan 2019), helping their children to 'fit in' with their peers becomes not only an economic challenge, but part of the personal project of enacting belonging. June described how her children had become 'timid' and 'shy' as they became conscious of material differences between their Nike-clad friends and their second-hand-clothes-attired selves. For young people, style is a 'vehicle of status and self-expression' (Croghan et al. 2006: 464) and important to develop self-esteem and to avoid bullying and exclusion (Ridge 2002: 67). Having the 'right' clothes and possessions are understood as necessary to fit in, earn social credibility and be popular. As Rosaleen Croghan and colleagues have shown, economic barriers to maintaining style identity bear a significant social cost (Croghan et al. 2006). Children and young people with NRPF, unable to afford to 'consume' style in ways their peers can, risk marginalisation and social exclusion in social as well as practical ways, potentially producing tensions within families.

What has not been explored by scholars is how class, socioeconomic and racial differences mediating the challenges of provisioning and consumerism as a mother are overlaid by legal status differences. For families with NRPF denied the safety net of free school meals, for example, providing packed lunches on a meagre budget is a significant challenge. When the school called her to question the contents of her children's packed lunches, June was upset ('they said you have to give them good food – I said I do not have the money!'). She noted that suffering such effects of their immigration status was making her children more conscious of it. Amy pointed out that providing toys for her children was possible only thanks to the local voluntary sector drop-in she sometimes visited: 'It make them to feel they are important, they have life in a way.' Providing toys was experienced as a means of enacting love. The question of 'What must I (and what *can* I) do and have and buy in order to properly love, nurture, provide for, raise – in a word, *mother* – my child(ren)?' (Taylor 2004: 12, original italics) therefore takes on a particular poignancy and urgency. In this sense, provisioning is closely linked to protecting, explored in the following section.

## Contesting marginalisation: Protecting children from 'knowing too much' versus cultivating citizenship

*Emily: I didn't want anything that was going to affect the children, that's going to make the children feel less, that someone is more superior than they are. I wanted them to feel equally, so I didn't want to bring it out to so many people. [...]*

*Rachel: You wanted to protect them?*

*Emily: That's the thing, from knowing too much, or their friends' mum knowing too much. Let me go through it alone.*

Mothering involves navigating the tension between protection and participation: between on the one hand protecting one's children from perceived threats, and, on the other, equipping them to engage in the world as social actors with agency, enabling them to participate fully as citizens in their communities and within wider society. Mothering as a migrant involves particular work to cultivate and preserve family identities (Dyck 2018), which may be constructed through co-ethnic, linguistic and/or faith networks. Furthermore, experiences of racialisation and discrimination, and the need to protect children from these, produce specific mothering practices bridging the private and public spheres: minoritised mothers may engage in 'strategic mothering' to contest racial stereotypes and racial

oppression (Collins 1994, Reynolds et al. 2018, Kershaw 2010, Gedalof 2009). Little attention has been given to the specific position of racially minoritised migrant mothers with insecure immigration status and NRPF, however. For women/mothers in this context, strategic mothering incorporates information management, both in the micro-spaces of (tiny, temporary, non-private) 'home' and the semi-/public spaces beyond, to protect children – in Emily's words – 'from knowing too much' about how their status differs from that of their peers – with fewer rights, inadequate resources and no home of their own. Emily strove to protect her young children from any awareness of their precarious immigration status. Conscious of how quickly such information could spread, she had decided not to share her situation with anyone, to avoid any risk that other parents 'discuss about you' at home in front of their children, who might then talk about it or ask questions. For Emily and other participants, mothering required daily efforts to resolve the ongoing tension between wanting to protect their children from too much knowledge and needing to provide answers to their questions as they became more aware of their family's precarity and (im)mobility relative to their peers. I suggest that protecting children from this kind of knowledge is a form of mothering work undertaken to protect children and self from non-belonging and to contest their marginalisation in the context of everyday bordering.

Strategic mothering is thus protective. It requires careful withholding of information as well as particular discursive practices: deliberate vagueness yet reassurance in response to children's habitual questions about why they cannot go on holiday or have swimming lessons like their friends. Eva described typical conversations with her primary-school-aged daughter Carly:

*I tell her that she will travel but not now, because we don't have what we need to travel. Soon we will be travelling, when we get it [leave to remain]. She asks me, when are we going to get it? I say don't worry, very soon we will get it, and then you can travel, anywhere you want to travel.*

In these repeated conversations, Eva's insecure immigration status made it impossible for her to give her daughter the kind of answers she sought. In her responses, Eva was forced to navigate the tension between the need to offer reassurance and the risk of overburdening Carly with too much information. She indicated to her that their family lacked the necessary documentation to travel abroad, without giving details of the wider ramifications of their

undocumented status. 'Soon' was how Eva chose to resolve such dialogues, keen to protect Carly from feeling different or marginalised from her friends. Imagining a livable future (discussed further below) in which her daughter had equal rights to her peers, and equal opportunities to mobilise them, was a means of enacting belonging through strategic mothering.

Similarly, Kate, struggling to survive on Section 17 subsistence funding, was highly attentive to her young son's participation and sense of 'fitting in' at school. Kate had moved to the UK two decades earlier as a teenager where she initially lived with her step-sister. She had studied and begun to develop a career, but when her visa expired, despite multiple applications she had been unable to renew it, and had lost her leave to remain. Life with NRPF and no right to work was intensely difficult; on becoming a mother some years later, she managed to escape an abusive relationship, and when we met, it was evident that Kate was keen to be a strong role model for her son Sam. Despite her efforts to provide for him, and despite his very young age, Kate noticed that Sam was conscious they did not have the material things his peers had, or the means to provide them. Pyjama day at school was not a problem; the animal-themed day was manageable too; but dressing as a super-hero for World Book Day posed a challenge. Kate mentioned this to me in passing, and I managed to source a second-hand Spiderman costume from a friend. Kate later recounted a revealing exchange with Sam:

*He said, 'Mummy, I'll tell Mrs Jones you bought it, okay?' I was just like... I couldn't understand why he was saying that. I told him Rachel's bringing in his costume. That's what he said to me. I was thinking, Sam, why would you say that? [...] He's very intelligent. That's why I want to work – I'll make him be involved in a lot more activities.*

Sam recognised that his mum did not find it easy to provide for him, but was keen to conceal this uncomfortable reality from his peers and his teacher. His decision to tell his teacher that his mum had bought his costume can be understood as an agentive act of belonging, whereby Sam sought to protect both himself and Kate from being marginalised, and to make belonging claims of – or fit in with – his teacher and his peers.

Strategic mothering included cultivating personal growth for children through extracurricular activities which were, on the whole, financially inaccessible to families with



NRPF. Exclusion from such activities was experienced as markers of non-belonging and non-citizenship. Finding ways to enable one's children to participate required significant mothering work. Like other participants, Kate found her son's early consciousness of difference troubling, and was intensely frustrated at not having the means to pay for swimming lessons or other extracurricular activities, 'something else for him to do, so he's not just home 24/7. There's so much activities out there that I could provide for him, there's things he could be doing.' Kate added, 'It really burns my heart.' Being able to pay for activities for Sam felt necessary for his personal development as well as a means of demonstrating his right to participate in – to belong to – groups alongside his peers. Additionally, providing books affirming the cultural identity of her son and his peers was for Kate an important (but challenging) strategic mothering practice in order to challenge pervasive racial stereotypes and contest her son's marginalisation (Reynolds 2003): this was a topic of conversation we often returned to.

For some participants, having grown up in middle-class families but now living in poverty produced by their precarious immigration status, the gap between the desire to promote their children's cultural and academic development and the elusiveness of making it a reality created frustration. Eva was keen to support her children's learning and development through extracurricular activities, but, as for Kate, most were financially impossible. She sent her daughter to the free P.E. club at school, but, at £50 a term each, could not afford to pay for the science or art and craft clubs:

*Eva: Kids need extra help, you know, it impacts on their future – you need to help them. But I can't do it because I don't have the money to do that.*

*Rachel: When you get your situation sorted out...*

*Eva: Then I will do everything for her, to make sure that she's outstanding. [...] She says she wants to be a doctor or nurse.*

*Rachel: You must be proud!*

*Eva: She needs extra help to do that. Before you do that, you need extra help.*

Having been brought up by professional parents, and university-educated herself, Eva was keen to cultivate a range of skills and interests in her children, and to encourage their career aspirations, as her parents had done for her, yet for now tangible ways of doing this felt utterly out of reach. Supporting her children to develop their skills was perceived by Eva as

an important aspect of (strategic) mothering: she talked of her role in enabling them to contribute to society as citizens, as per her words at the start of the Introduction chapter, and in socially useful roles. Having no recourse to public funds and no right to work prevented her from engaging in the mothering practices she valued.

Insecure immigration status excluded mothers from cultivating their children's cultural capital and enacting citizenship together in other ways too: exclusion from the labour market and from volunteering prevented mothers from being the role models they wanted to be and from participating actively in school life. Anna felt frustrated that even one-off events as a parent volunteer required a DBS (police check) – not an option for her, given her precarious immigration status – which prevented her from accompanying her daughters on school trips, as she recounted during one research conversation:

*Anna: I'm not working, I cannot do anything. The environment is not friendly for us. You can't buy something for your daughter. You feel down. [...] Like now my daughter is going on a trip with school: 'I want you to go with me.' I can't go because I don't have a DBS. Yeah, it's very strict. I can't go. Because of that, I have to stay back.*

*Rachel: You're being excluded from everything.*

*Anna: [My daughter] was asking me this yesterday.*

*Rachel: What did you say?*

*Anna: I said I have appointment. [laughs] Because she may go to the teacher and tell her. It's not easy.*

Having had to contrive reasons to field her daughters' questions about why she was not working to earn money, Anna then had to come up with a teacher-proof pretext as to why she could not take part in the school trip. Her precarious status prevented her from engaging in her daughters' everyday lives at school and from playing an active part in the school community.

Once June had been granted leave to remain (and, unusually, recourse to public funds), paying for maths tuition, swimming lessons and creative activities was a top priority for her. She did not want her children to feel intimidated by friends' conversations comparing what 'stage' they were at in swimming: she wanted them to be able to fully participate in such discussions and to feel confident that they belonged. She was keen to make up for what she saw as lost time: 'I feel because of what happened to me, my status and all that, it has really

affected the children. What in my head I wanted to do for my children, I couldn't do because of finance. So, it's late, right, but whatever time you start, they say whatever time you wake up, it's your morning, isn't it? So it looks like it's my morning and I'm trying to see which one is the best. Don't waste your time, because the time has been wasted already for years.'

Now that her leave to remain gave her the means, June was taking steps to cultivate cultural capital in her children by proactively creating the circumstances to enable the full development of their 'intellectual, physical and creative skills' (Vincent 2010: 113, Lareau 2002). Supporting her children to participate alongside their peers through clubs and activities was a form of enacting belonging as a mother.

Despite frequent experiences of exclusion, mothers marginalised by immigration status and NRPF continued to engage in activities and conversations in their homes and neighbourhoods, in 'a complex dynamic of creating and remaking of subjectivities, home and place' seeking 'economic and social inclusion' (Dyck 2018: 99) for their children and themselves.

## Imagining a livable future

*Rachel: When you're with your children, how do you feel?*

*Anna: I feel happy, and I talk to them a lot. I tell them, you have to study hard. I want you to become a good leader. What do you want to become? My older daughter says, 'I want to become a doctor.' By working hard, I will give you the support you need at home. [...] Positivity. So, by telling them this I'm a bit relieved.*

Despite the pervasive effects of the structural constraints in their everyday lives, participants with insecure immigration statuses and NRPF encouraged their children to have high aspirations for their futures, and sought to help them achieve their goals in ways they could, through emotional and practical support, from motivational talk to supporting them with their schoolwork. Co-constructing a shared vision of their children's (and their own) futures as 'livable lives' (Butler 2004) was a form of active citizenship, contesting their precarity and resisting experiences of everyday bordering. Framing the daily forms of oppression through the lens of struggling for belonging for their children helped some mothers to motivate themselves and manage feelings of anxiety and depression.

*It's just to think positive, that's how I get myself through – just think tomorrow is a*

*better day. Just keep going. The children are there, they will become what I will wish myself to be. Don't do that. Keep thinking, thinking. (Anna)*

*I am struggling to give [my children] a future as well, because they are innocent children that came out of me, so I don't want them to be useless, I want them to be useful to themselves and to society. I wouldn't want them to be a waste to society. (Eva)*

Imagining a livable future for their children was an important means of enacting belonging. Regardless of mothers' and children's current immigration status, and despite the immense obstacles to indefinite leave to remain and citizenship, mothers focused on their hopes and beliefs that their children would eventually be granted British citizenship and would contribute to society, achieving things mothers felt they would not have the means to achieve themselves. For Eva, quoted above (and also in the Introduction to this thesis) her children were her reason for her belonging work ('struggling'): she was determined to cultivate them as 'useful' citizens. For Anna, 'thinking positive' about what her children would become was not only a means of enacting belonging but of coping on a daily basis, fighting against the feelings of despair caused by her family's precarious circumstances.

Strategic mothering for a livable future required finding the strength to reassure and co-create this with one's children. Emily navigated her young daughters' questions, wishes and prayers by endeavouring to balance openness, reassurance and optimism, and striving to conceal her own anxieties ('One time [my daughter] said to me, 'Mummy, I prayed when I was sleeping'; she said she wished when she gets her passport we can all travel together. And I said yes, we will one day when it all falls in place. Sometimes they get confused and they ask questions about it. I break it down to how best for them to understand it.').

Similarly, Anna strove to create excitement and aspirations for the future with her daughters, whilst protecting them from their precarious lives:

*My older daughter said, 'I told you I would become a doctor, don't worry, I will try.' And I asked my younger daughter, 'What do you want to become? Let Mummy know.' That one is still... [laughs]: 'Are you a teacher? Are you a nurse?' They keep asking me. It's not that I want to be at home. They don't understand. 'Can't you buy a car? Why?' [laughs] I said, 'It's only God that gives cars! I'm not working – it's only when I might go to work that I will be able to buy you things.' [...] So I just make them be positive, so they will be happy, they will not know we have problems. I just pretend along with them – I say everything is fine. Not easy. [My daughter said] 'My*

*friend's mum's a doctor.' I said, 'Okay, I'm a teacher! I can do your hair, I'm a hairdresser!' [both laugh] My daughter says, 'My mum can do many things.'*

Anna mobilised the family's faith practices and her beliefs to explain the challenges they faced (and material objects they lacked) and to offer hope for a livable future. She also resisted her exclusion from the world of paid work (and volunteering at school) by offering her young daughters an alternative narrative, presenting herself as a capable and powerful role model in their family world.

Being hopeful for the future as an aspect of strategic mothering constituted emotion work; in a small number of cases, where mothers in similarly precarious situations sustained each other through mutual emotional support, they engaged in this work together. Gemma recounted her efforts to encourage her friend, who was feeling low about not being able to seek paid work or plan for the future, through their chats on the phone:

*I said when you get your papers you can still get a job. Let's get our papers first, and let's pray to get it when we are healthy. [...] We should just be thankful for the day. As long as we are life there is hope. [...] I said don't give room for depression because if anything happens to you, who will take care of your son? You need to think about your son before you start thinking, 'what am I going to do tomorrow?' Let's think about today. God will take care of tomorrow for us. We don't have anybody to run to – except that if we believe in prayers, we will be praying to God to help us.*

Like Anna, Gemma drew on the faith she and her friend shared to provide an alternative narrative to their shared status anxiety. When thinking positively about the future became impossible, Gemma advised, it was important for mothers to place their faith in God and focus on the present to address the short-term needs of their children, and to recognise that the question of being granted leave to remain and the right to work was out of their hands. The significance of faith practices and belief itself for mothers with insecure immigration status is discussed further in Chapter 6.

Close relationships with children were often a significant source of emotional support and provided meaning for mothers overwhelmed at times by the heaviness of their status anxiety. For Emily, her relationship with her daughters was based on mutual caring practices (Tronto 1998): being attentive to each other's needs, reading bodily cues and responding sensitively.

*Emily: It is just me and my God, and my children. They know about it. [...] They have been so helpful. They've been such great friends, to know when you are in the mood and how to take care of you. So I really thank god for them. Sometimes we fall out [but] the love is there. [...] I talk to them a lot. Literally, I wouldn't be able to get this far without them. [...] They help me with everything. [...] They have been my strength, seriously, they have. The moment one person sees you in tears or sees your eyes red, 'Mummy, what's wrong with you?', 'Mummy's crying'. And before you realise it, they have come. Sometimes it gets too extreme that you can't hold it, you just have to let those tears flow. You would not want them to see it but sometimes being emotional it just happens anyway.*

*Rachel: Sometimes it has to come out...*

*Emily: It has to come out - you can't hold it any longer.*

*Rachel: They sound like amazing girls!*

*Emily: Yeah. I can't do without them.*

Hostile encounters with an array of public sector officials and private sector agents produced anxiety and at times distress; Emily shared multiple examples of her daughters recognising her emotions and responding through micro-acts of care. Identifying her children as 'great friends' is poignant in the context of Emily's wider narrative suggesting she withheld personal information from conventional friends. In these and in other participants' accounts, the mother-child relationship was in some ways perceived as a haven from the multiply hostile environment outside. Yet, as shown in this chapter, mother-child relationships were also pervaded by feelings of frustration, worry and guilt.

## Concluding remarks

In this chapter, I have shown that becoming a mother can be conceptualised as a means of enacting belonging in response to, or in spite of, both structural exclusions resulting from hostile environment policies and everyday forms of marginalisation. Becoming a mother creates belonging at an ontological level through the self-constituting mother-child relationship but also, as will be discussed in the subsequent chapters, through friendships and other types of relationship enacted in convivial (semi-)public spaces with and/or as mothers. Furthermore, I have argued that becoming the mother of a child identified as British (or British-to-be) is a significant step on the route to 'leave to remain', and as such can be seen as an act of citizenship, contesting non-belonging by making a claim on the

state for recognition. I have also shown that becoming a mother creates new needs, and that motherhood intersects with insecure immigration status and financial precarity, shaping mothering practices. I have explored the impact on mothering practices in terms of shared or solo parenting; providing shelter, food and material resources; strategic mothering by protecting children from knowing too much but also cultivating them as citizens, striving to help them 'fit in' but also to flourish, such as through engagement in extracurricular activities; and imagining together a livable future, holding on to hope and nurturing aspirations. Through participants' narratives, I have demonstrated some of the challenges and tensions that mothers must navigate in caring for and about their children in the hostile environment, when identifying care and support to meet their own needs requires careful work and significant mental strength.

## Interlude: 'No-one wants to get stuck with you and your issue'

*June: I mean people just... come and go. Some of them I still have a relationship with them, but, what I realised is, when people see you are going through that stuff, they don't really come close to you, cos it might be too demanding. You might not be demanding too much but not everyone is able to offer you what you are demanding. It's difficult. People don't want to be your friend that much. I remember when I was sick, I was by myself, my husband travelled, and I had a severe cold, and I called a friend, I thought it was my friend, at that time, I said to her I am very, very sick. She said, 'June, I cannot help you – this is London, I am going to work, do you expect me to leave my work? Don't be a baby!' Yeah, she said that to me. And we are still friends! Surprisingly. [...] I decided to forgive her. I think she was desperate as well. She was like me as well, no status, nothing, she needed to work to pay rent. [...]*

*Rachel: Did you have friends through the church?*

*June: We do. But you know most times in church, people just speak to you when they see you, and then they're gone. People are so busy, everyone is so busy with life. No-one wants to get stuck with you and your issue. When you talk about a particular thing too much, people get a bit fed up of same, same, same, same. They have their own issue as well. We try to stay with our problem. [...]*

*Rachel: Did you meet other mums at drop-ins? [paraphrased]*

*June: Not really. I think then I wasn't really that friendly with people – because I was going through a lot. But I wish I did. I wish I did. But I know the mums by face. [...] My friendships with the ladies [from children's centre] are still on! Some of them moved, to [X borough], but we still talk on the phone. Not every time. Sometimes we play catch up. [...] Especially those, I would encourage new mums. Sometimes they are 'oh I don't want to bother myself, it's cold'. 'Just come out, it will help you, cos you are gonna make friends, you will see the children grow. It's very good!'*

*Rachel: Would you say you are a connector? [...] That's the impression I have of you!*

*June: Hmmmm! Yeah... somehow... if my eyes open to see good stuff, I tell others. And I'm gonna persuade you, making sure... yeah. I pull people along. That's why, I don't know, sometimes I say to myself, that's why I find it difficult to get good stuff. Cos if I find good stuff, I drag a lot of people. [...] I share. I'm not greedy, I share. I just want people around me to be happy like I am happy. [...]*

*Rachel: What about through school, have you met other mums that way?*

*June: Through school run, where they attend now? Yeah, obviously, I've made friends. Some people they move out of London [...]. Yeah, I've still got some bits, that, not classic friends, but people you can just say hello to, and you meet them every day, obviously. Maybe in your children's class or something. To be honest, not really my friends but we just talk – if I'm*



*early we just stay and talk. Then we go to our houses. [Rachel: You visit people at home?]  
No, I don't. We go back to our own houses.*

*Rachel: Do you sometimes meet up?*

*June: No! [...] I am with my children 24/7. When they come home now from swimming, we are gonna start cooking, everything just goes quick – before you know it, it's time for bed. I never go out, I never hang out with friends, except when they are at school, I can hook up with friends, probably go shopping. Other than that, nothing. Nothing.*

## Chapter 5: Doing friendship

Friendship is a chosen and contingent form of intimacy, not recognised in law. In the context of increasing levels of mobility, distance from family networks and possible feelings of isolation, friendships may take on a central role in individuals' personal communities. For women/mothers with insecure immigration status and no recourse to public funds, friendships are often particularly significant as a source of social support. As Tim Bunnell and colleagues (2012) have pointed out, friendships 'do not simply exist', but require 'active, ongoing and necessarily reciprocal work'. I take this further and suggest it is this 'work' or 'practices' that bring friendships into existence and shape individuals' perceptions of their friendships and their sense of self. I argue that 'doing friendship' as a range of relational practices which produce (to a degree) a sense of safety and self can thus be conceptualised as a means of enacting belonging. Yet although voluntary in nature, friendship is patterned by structural location and context at the levels of the personal environment, social networks, community and wider society (Adams and Allan 1999). I argue in this chapter that state policies play a role in patterning friendship practices. Building on the previous chapter on mothering, I show that insecure immigration status and precarity, produced by hostile immigration and citizenship policies, intersect with being a mother and other aspects of identity to shape practices, experiences and perceptions of friendship, influencing access to social support and relational belonging. I explore four types of friendship practices which I observed to be significant for the participants in my research: reaching out/holding back, sharing resources, sharing information and mutual confiding. Drawing on work on relational dialectics by Leslie Baxter and colleagues (1990, 1996, 2015, 2021) and on similar theoretical work in the context of friendship by William Rawlins (1989, 2017 [1992]), across the four sections of this chapter I explore dialectical tensions in friendships and how these are managed by minoritised mothers constrained by insecure immigration status and the condition of no recourse to public funds. I highlight tensions between the need for self-disclosure and the need for privacy and between autonomy and connectedness, which have been examined by both Baxter and Rawlins. I also identify tensions between the need for support and its perceived scarcity; and between social exchange as a basis of friendship and the difficulty of reciprocity. I show how these dialectical tensions interact and are overlaid

by the 'problem of trust': I argue that the development of trust necessary in friendship is constrained by the state's hostile bordering policies which engender suspicion of possible signs of difference or non-belonging.

## Reaching out/holding back

Engaging in friendship practices first requires an opportunity to meet, a perception of shared interests and a sense of mutual attraction and empathy, as well as a positive decision to reach out (Willmott 1987). 'Sociability' necessitates an ongoing effort demanding time, energy, competence and skills (Bourdieu 1986). In Ryetown, schools, nurseries, children's centres, drop-ins and places of worship provided potentially convivial spaces producing regular encounters amongst mothers with diverse migration experiences; however, these encounters did not necessarily lead to friendships. Constrained by their social location, mothers participating in my study with insecure immigration status and no recourse to public funds were less likely to reach out and more likely to 'hold back' in conversations with others. This section considers the dialectical tensions between the needs for autonomy and connectedness (or independence and interdependence), and between the needs for self-disclosure and privacy, and explores how mothers deployed strategies of 'reaching out' and 'holding back' to different degrees in specific contexts and interactions to manage these tensions. I examine the ways in which structural position shapes individuals' efforts in making tentative connections ('People that just say hi, hello'), the role of space and place ('Sociability in safe spaces?') and the significance of online spaces.

### 'People that just say hi, hello'

Early connections were usually made through family members, a partner or an acquaintance, and were often with individuals from the same country of origin or faith community. However, to borrow the categories offered by June in the preceding 'Interlude', the 'people you can just say hello to' do not necessarily become 'classic friends'. Reflecting on her arrival in the UK two decades ago, Louise took a similar view, explaining the distinction between convivial encounters and close friendships:

*They are people that just say 'hi, how are you' – it's not deep conversation. Because they see you every time in their group. You just say hello; they don't come to my house, they are just friendly to me. I won't phone them, like 'can we meet*

*somewhere', no. But they are just lovely to me. Even [though] they are not close, they are just nice to me. They knew I'm new in the country, they care because they say, 'are you okay?' Maybe I will find it difficult to ask my partner something, or to talk – they will say, 'we are here to help'. [...] I will say 'oh thank you', but I know I am not comfortable to talk about any issue. [...] They are just friendly, greeting, 'how are you'. If by chance I meet them at one of the groups, then we talk, but it's not deep talk.*

Recalling interactions in the first months and years following her arrival in the UK from central Africa, Louise indicated that women from the established co-ethnic community who belonged to her church offered her what could be seen as specialised support based on the types of knowledge they possessed. The women's group at the church provided a space where people spoke her language (which was important when she was unfamiliar with English), with similar experiences of migration and who displayed care. Whilst these women would not all become close friends, their role as an 'insider' community was significant in offering a 'common basis of understanding' based on shared needs and experiences, providing the first steps on what Judith Lynam has described as a 'pathway of support', ultimately paving the way to the 'outsider' community (Lynam 1985: 329). Their friendly behaviour, reaching out and offering help, was valued by Louise, yet she was careful not to engage in 'deep talk' or invite them into her home. Reciprocating with friendly talk was important in the process of embedding in this network, but Louise was conscious of its limits. As a woman with precarious immigration status, it was important to exercise caution and avoid divulging details of her personal circumstances. Thus whilst racial or ethnic similarity within convivial contexts could be a site for friendly interactions, potential differences in citizenship status, and, relatedly, status anxiety, limited the progression of these interactions towards deeper friendship practices.

The constraints of insecure immigration status on reaching out in friendship may be experienced indirectly too, intersecting with practices in other types of relationship with multiplicative effects. As identified in the previous chapter (and discussed further in Chapter 7), hostile environment policies can entrap women in abusive couple relationships, which in turn can impede friendship formation. Having arrived in the UK two decades earlier as a young teenager to seek asylum, Sofia had felt deeply alone and isolated at school; she quickly married and became pregnant, but found herself confined to the domestic

environment: 'I didn't have friends. It was just mainly, let's say one or two family members. But that's it. But it wasn't even friends. My life literally was very much home. [...] I was just going [to shopping centre], coming back home, cook, clean, kids. It was just that environment.' Sofia's daily routine was patterned by the insecurity of her immigration status (and the anxiety this caused), her financial and legal dependence on her husband, who increasingly exploited his privileged position, and her role as a mother: these conditions limited Sofia's opportunities to meet and befriend other people. Even when her children started school – potentially a convivial space to meet other mothers – Sofia's 'friends circle was very small': other mums tended to be 'people I just said hi, hello'. Whilst one mother did become 'a close friend' during that period (as someone with understanding of Sofia's situation and who showed sensitivity in their conversations, Sofia felt she could trust her and 'be myself'), this friendship was an exception. Her status anxiety and limited autonomy significantly constrained Sofia's ability to trust other people as friends, reducing her capacity to reach out. This led to feelings of deep isolation and low wellbeing.

Being subjected to insecure immigration status and no recourse to public funds can last for years, even decades, and can thus be an enduring constraint on friendship practices; it may intersect not only with mothering and being in a couple relationship but also with other aspects of precarity, such as eviction and everyday spatio-temporal demands. With only limited leave to remain and no recourse to public funds when her couple relationship broke down, Sara found herself sofa-surfing, solo mothering and working full-time to support herself and her two young sons. Her exhausting daily routine limited her interactions with others, as I observed in the series of fieldnotes I recorded over many months of meeting up and travelling to hospital appointments together:

*Sara doesn't know any of the mums at school or nursery because she drops [older son] off to breakfast club and usually it is the childminder who takes [younger son] and picks them both up.*

*Sara doesn't see or talk to friends – she doesn't seem to be in regular contact with any friends at present.*

*[Sara's son] is doing okay at school. Sara says she doesn't know his friends. Sometimes he mentions friends by name, but she hasn't met them.*

Sara's routine meant she almost never had the opportunity to meet other parents at school or nursery. There was a family play session at a local community centre on Saturdays, but she rarely managed to attend, as by the weekend she wanted to rest. When they did attend, Sara had to constantly keep an eye on her younger son, an avid explorer, which made interacting with other parents almost impossible. She told me that she kept herself to herself at work. Sara wanted to reduce her working hours, which would give her more opportunities to attend drop-ins and meet other people, but felt unable to in case this jeopardized the renewal of her leave to remain. Whether she and her boys were staying with church members or in her parents' living room, it was impossible to invite friends round. Her family being unable or reluctant to help with childcare, Sara rarely had the chance to go out socially; in the evenings, she would usually feel too tired to call friends or connect with them online. Sara's precarious status, and its effects on her everyday life, meant there was very little time or space for 'doing friendship'.

Women mothering without support from a (former) partner or kin, with no leave to remain and no right to work, appeared to have more time to access convivial spaces, but experienced greater levels of destitution and status anxiety. These conditions affected friendship formation and maintenance. Amy explained that her mind was always on three or four things simultaneously: 'You don't have no-one to help you – you just have to be strong by yourself.' Similarly, when I asked Eva if she had anyone to help her with her daughter's health needs, she responded, 'Nobody is helping me. It's only me. Nobody.' There was a heaviness amongst the mothers who explained the loneliness of managing alone and not being able to talk openly with others about their status and its impact on their everyday life and wellbeing.

### Sociability in safe spaces?

*The mothers began forming a line outside the community hall just after 9 o'clock, straight after dropping their children at school – or even earlier if they had only preschoolers. Folded bags in the baskets of their buggies anticipated the clothes and toys they hoped to be taking home. Most of the women were from west Africa; a few were from north Africa or eastern Europe. They waved and chatted a little in twos or small clusters, asking after each other's children. At 10 o'clock on the dot, the doors were opened; the mums made a beeline for the entrance lobby, signing in, depositing buggies and babies at the side of the hall, then heading for the clothes-laden tables. No more talking during the first ten-minute trawl: this was an unspoken rule amongst*

*the women. Each mother then relocated to her buggy to sort through her findings, inevitably resulting in a rejection of a proportion of the catch, which was returned to the tables. The process culminated in a careful folding and bagging of the items retained. Staff and volunteers kept a watchful eye on proceedings, ensuring everyone complied with the (official) rules, and encouraged mums to let their children out of buggies to play in the other half of the hall. Having packed their bags, many of the mums headed home, however, apparently not inclined to join the other families who had turned up for the play and singing session. [based on field notes]*

Organised by a local charity, the weekly drop-in was open to all families with young children, but was largely attended by mothers and children with insecure immigration status. As such, it was experienced as a 'safe' space, where there was an unspoken understanding of each other's circumstances, and discretion was expected. Given the constraints on inviting friends home (many lived in single rooms in HMOs), the drop-in offered valued opportunities for sociability. There was a notable spatial separation between these mothers on the one hand and the smaller number of families who attended only for the play activities and singing sessions on the other, creating a sense of 'familiarity and quiet indifference' (Berg et al. 2019: 2733). But sociability was important amongst the mothers attending the drop-in primarily for the clothes bank. For Anna, attending the drop-in provided respite from the loneliness and status anxiety that awaited her at home: 'We are there to... just to free our minds. When you see other people, you think it's not only you. When you are at home, you feel alone. [...] When you come out, you see people, you feel happy. [At home] you feel tired.' Attending the drop-in reminded Anna that other mothers were in a similar position to her and she was not alone; interacting with them made her feel connected.

Likewise, Amy perceived the drop-in as a convivial space facilitating interactions with other mothers who shared similar struggles:

*Amy: [The drop-in] is a really good place to go, because you meet a lot of parents like you. We talk with them, but it's not your status you talk about. People that are down like you, you see a lot like that who don't have their status. You sit with them, you talk. The pain is inside of you. They also have some things they want to talk about, where they are living, what they are going through, they want to buy stuff but there is not enough money. She may say she is managing, I will say I am managing, but since there is no money coming in, from the government or anywhere, because you can't work... [The drop-in] is a good place to go because you find people in your*

*category that you can just, like, okay, let's keep hoping because things will turn around.*

*Rachel: Are you saying that even if you don't explicitly share what your situation is, you kind of have a feeling that other people are in the same situation?*

*Amy: Yeah. They are looking. If you don't have your stuff [leave to remain], there is a look, a worried look of your situation that will stick on your face, that will be written all over you. [...] The stress from head to toe will be on you. The people that don't have partners, it will really speak out. Although people that have partners, they have a companion, someone to communicate at home. Someone that don't have no-one, she is the only one going through stress with children, it will be all over, then you will really see it.*

For Amy, the context of the drop-in enabled mothers there to 'read' each other and be sensitive and responsive to presumed needs produced by their (presumed) insecure immigration status. Amy's narrative suggested that whilst there was a degree of surface acting (Hochschild 1983) to communicate an ability to cope ('She may say she is managing, I will say I am managing'), the context or 'focus' of the interactions (Feld and Carter 1998, Small 2017) enabled this 'reading' of each other. Knowing that other mothers at the drop-in were experiencing similar hardship made Amy feel less alone and encouraged her to 'keep hoping'. Even if these encounters did not always lead to deep or enduring friendship, the sociability facilitated by the intersection of their shared structural positions helped relieve mothers' stress and anxiety. In addition to perceived immigration status, shared cultural backgrounds appeared to act as a site for such sociabilities: mothers soon identified who was from their country and region, and who spoke the same language(s), which shaped (fluid) groupings and interactions before and during the drop-in.

However, not all spaces that might be expected to be safe and welcoming were experienced as such. At church, Amy had felt excluded by her church members at times because she did not have leave to remain. She did not experience her church, or to an extent her children's school, as convivial or supportive spaces, conducive to forming friendships. (This is discussed in the following chapter.) Whilst schools and churches are spaces of 'habitual contact' (Rzepnikowska 2013, cited in Vincent et al. 2017), such encounters, as Carol Vincent and colleagues noted in their study of friendship (2017: 1976) do not necessarily 'develop any lasting challenge to embedded prejudices and stereotypes' relating to ethnicity or social group or, as in my study, immigration status. As they observed, daily encounters may be



shaped by 'socially accepted forms of public civility', but these do not always 'equate with an ethics of care and mutual respect for difference' (ibid: 1976). Thus 'reaching out' is necessary but not sufficient in 'doing friendship', and is often problematic for mothers with insecure immigration status who are racially minoritised. Other practices are essential in constructing friendship.

### Doing friendship in online spaces

Unlike local places, online spaces are flexible and autonomous. For some participants, they were equally important in offering convivial and supportive spaces for 'doing friendship'. Gemma participated actively in several online forums aimed at mothers, some of which were through Facebook, connecting with women from around the world:

*In that network, you share your problems, then you ask for suggestions on what to do. Or you can even ask a question, like advice, and people will comment in the comments section and give you their advice. You will be reading the comments and from there you will get tips.*

By seeking and sharing advice, Gemma reached out to and connected with mothers transnationally. Their discursive engagement as mothers signalled their right to belong to this online space. Gemma explained to me that in another forum, mothers would remind each other of the importance of 'helping children with their assignments' and discuss how to 'encourage them [and] make them feel special'; they would share advice on parenting practices, being attentive to their children's concerns and helping them to deal with bullying. Mothers would discuss 'how to manage your finances' and advise on what to do 'if you're having a problem in your home, like if you're having a problem with your partner or something'; they would also share material or financial help through the forum. Gemma had responded through this forum to a mother in her country of origin asking for 'baby things': she called one of her sisters-in-law, asked her to buy liquid soap and cream, and arranged for the mother on the forum to collect it from her house. In another example, discussed further in the following chapter, Gemma had formed a deep, long-distance friendship with a woman she had met online who shared her Christian faith; they had shared similar experiences of losing someone close to them that had sparked a connection. Feeling 'isolated' at times as the mother of boys and seeking 'someone to share your feelings with' had shaped the development of a friendship with a woman she perceived as 'like a sister'

but whom she advised 'like a mother'. Gemma embedded in convivial online spaces not only as a mother of children, but also by creating a 'mother-like' relationship with a female friend.

Kate spoke about a transatlantic friendship with a mother she had met through an online forum who was experiencing domestic abuse, a situation Kate could relate to:

*I said if you needed a friend, I'm here, just for you to talk. And we would sometimes talk about stuff, and she'd sometimes open up about stuff, and it was just, wow, so much. And then there were times where we weren't in contact because she couldn't be on the phone. We were texting. There were times when she went silent because she wasn't allowed to be on her phone. And sometimes he'd be home, or... And when she told me some of the stuff, and I'm like, 'you gotta go, you gotta leave!' And she was like, 'no, I'll just try and have a better day tomorrow', and stuff like that. I knew what she was going through was a lot.*

Kate, like Gemma, was able to build trust with and offer care to her friend online, despite having never met face to face. In online spaces, mothers engaged in caring practices as mothers and as friends: reaching out, listening, empathising and offering emotional support. Online practices of friendship and care fostered a sense of belonging to a community, albeit at a distance, through practices of care and practices of citizenship, in connection with women/mothers with shared experiences, and from shared or different cultural backgrounds. In these borderless online spaces, immigration status could be forgotten, disregarded or unknown.

## Sharing resources

Social exchange is a fundamental form of 'doing friendship': material resources, information and emotional support are shared, and the act is later reciprocated (Blau 1964, Willmott 1987). Friendships could therefore be seen as instrumental, whereby the continuous work of doing friendship ('investment strategies') is necessary to convert 'contingent' relations into 'lasting, useful' ones that provide access to 'actual or potential resources' (social capital) by creating obligations (Bourdieu 1986: 52, 49; see also Coleman 1988). As Adams and Allan (1999: 9) have pointed out, friendship is particularly important in 'economies of scarcity'. For mothers with insecure immigration status living in precarious circumstances, social exchange as a friendship practice is often a vital means of accessing essential material

resources, from shelter and money to childcare and food (explored below). The dialectical tension between instrumentality and affection, common in friendships (Rawlins 2008) and in interpersonal relationships generally (Baxter and Scharp 2015), tended to be framed in participants' narratives as tensions between support *needs* and the perceived *unavailability* of resources within their support networks, and, relatedly, between the principle of reciprocity (Allan 1999) and the inability to fulfil this obligation. Perceiving friends as being in a similarly precarious position and therefore unable to provide what is needed becomes a factor in the 'subtle calculations' individuals make about friendships before requesting help (Spencer and Pahl 2006: 66). As Patricia Fernandez Kelly (1998: 218) has pointed out, being embedded in networks does not necessarily engender social capital, or 'access to benefits'. The dialectical tension between openness and the need for discretion, as discussed above, interacted with the tension between resource needs and unavailability, or between instrumentality and care. To avoid these dilemmas, mothers sometimes sought support from other people in their networks who were not necessarily considered 'friends'. However, there were limits to the resources that other people – friends or otherwise – were able or willing to share (explored below). At times, networks operated to exclude 'outsiders', limiting or denying access to resources (Bourdieu 1986, Ryan 2011).

### Friendships providing access to essential resources

Following separation from her husband, Emily had been unable to renew her visa; when her subsequent relationship broke down, she and her two girls found themselves in a highly precarious situation. Creating a sociogram and talking me through it as she drew, Emily identified eight friends to whom she turned at various times for different forms of support; she had not disclosed her immigration status to any of them. Although she had set up an informal business to generate income, Emily was reliant on friends for material support. Her close friend Jean would give her clothes that her own daughter had grown out of, and Emily was usually happy to accept, although this was on the basis of friends exchanging items as equals, not as an act of charity ('And then I give out stuff as well'); she pointed out that Jean 'don't tend to give only me', but gave clothes to other friends too. Being able to 'reciprocate and sustain a balance of material and symbolic exchange' (Allan 1999: 77) was important to Emily as a key principle of their friendship.

Borrowing money was more sensitive, so Emily would borrow only from certain friends:

*Sometimes when I am broke, I take money. Like in terms of borrowing, I would borrow from Bev [...] and I would give it [back] to her. Jean – I have not borrowed from Jean before... I don't know why... [pauses] I could be walking with Jean, maybe we go shopping, and I don't have enough, I would take money from Jean, she would pay for it, but I would give it to her the next time I see her – make sure I get the money and then meet her in the children's school.*

Emily felt it was essential to repay any money borrowed from Bev or Jean, and she would borrow from Jean only in a very specific context. Borrowing money worked differently with Mike, a friend who had been a neighbour where she lived previously, as he did not expect her to repay the money ('Sometimes I get broke, and I will be like, 'Brother, I've got no money'. He will just help me out.'). Emily was keen to point out that 'in return' she would 'make sure when I cook, I just give him a plate', demonstrating reciprocity. Through these practices of social exchange, Mike 'became a friend', and Emily appreciated him all the more for his positive relationship with her children. A fourth friend was Sam: he provided emotional support as well as practical support, helping the girls with their schoolwork and reading to them. In these friendships, social exchange was a central dynamic but, importantly, trust led to the development of a social bond and a strong element of attachment through *micro acts of care*: small yet significant everyday acts which make up the texture of caring practices.

However, when Emily and her girls were evicted and had nowhere to go, she did not turn to Jean, Mike, Sam, or any of her other identified friends, but to Lisa. Lisa had lived in Emily's neighbourhood in her country of origin; they had bumped into each other at a cultural event in London and had since stayed in touch. Emily had then borrowed money from Lisa on one occasion, and was still repaying it when she was evicted. With nowhere to go, Emily called Lisa and explained her situation, and, despite living in a single room, Lisa agreed to take the family in. Emily was destitute, but, as mentioned in the previous chapter, reciprocated when she could by stocking up the food cupboard. Here, there was arguably an imbalance in the exchange, yet for eleven months Lisa continued to support Emily and her daughters. Emily's explanation of the ways she approached different friends for support with specific everyday needs illustrates the interplay of the dialectical tensions between needs and availability of

resources (which could be conceived of as a tension between instrumentality and care), between self-disclosure and discretion, and between the principle of social exchange and the challenge of reciprocating.

When faced with destitution, navigating these tensions when seeking support from friends was a common practice amongst participants. The disappearance of her partner rendered Anna and her young daughter homeless; too afraid to approach the authorities for help, she turned to Tessa, whom she had met previously at a children's centre – at the time not a close friend – and asked her to take in her daughter at night. Tessa, who had limited space in her flat, agreed, and Anna would spend the night on 24-hour buses. Tessa provided support by sharing what she could, but Anna was conscious of her limited resources:

*My friend, if I need anything, I go to her house, she will give me whatever I want. If I am thin like this she will cook, I will eat. I will go to the kitchen. [She would say] 'Go and do whatever you want.' I will just eat something. We are just like a family. At times I will say, maybe we will sleep there. She will say okay. We will just stay there. But I can't move in, because I don't want to feel like it's too much, you understand? She's the one who at times will give me food, everything. But I think it's too much for her.*

During this period of crisis, Anna had to weigh up her own needs against her friend's limited resources but also her acts of care. She resolved this on a daily basis by accepting food when she was hungry ('if I am thin'), and by joining her daughter to spend the night there 'at times', but, knowing that fully moving in would be 'too much', usually only leaving her daughter there overnight and returning in the morning to collect her. Anna had to continually make calculations (Spencer and Pahl 2006) to balance meeting her (and her child's) needs against the availability of the support, navigating also the tension between instrumentality and care ('She's the one who at times will give me food, everything. But I think it's too much for her.'). By successfully managing these tensions, Anna was able to protect the friendship, even to strengthen it. Tessa's acts of care shaped Anna's perception of their friendship as close, even as family-like. Caring about, caring for and receiving care (Fisher and Tronto 1990) created a sense of belonging. When Anna's situation eventually stabilised, they remained close friends, even after Tessa moved out of London, when they continued to visit each other and talk on the phone.

As for Emily, the principle of reciprocity was important to Anna in her friendships. When her daughter started school, on the daily walk there Anna got to know Jane, the mother of her daughter's new classmate and friend. Although not from the same country, they were of the same faith and had had similar experiences of the immigration system. Visiting each other's homes and sharing food, Anna emphasised the reciprocal acts of care which constituted their friendship:

*At times when I can't do things, maybe financially I am not okay, I have to do something, and it's really weighing me down, I will call her, I will tell her, 'I don't know if you can help me – if you can help me, I will give it back to you.' And she will give me when I need help. At times when they ask the children to wear costumes to school, I don't have – she will say, 'Don't worry, don't worry, I have one.' I will take it. So we are there for one another. She is there for me and I for her. Everything she asks me to do, if I can do it – why not?*

Anna perceived their friendship as reciprocal and mutually supportive, not only materially but emotionally. They had a shared understanding of the hostility of the immigration system and shared experiences of marginalisation as mothers through their insecure statuses and NRPF, and readily supported each other micro acts of care and emotional support. For many participants, however, there was a clear separation between what Spencer and Pahl (2006: 66) identified as 'help mates' and 'confidants': social exchange tended to be limited to material support of various kinds, and did not stretch to self-disclosure.

### 'They don't want to hear'

Whilst friends were an important source of material support, many participants were reluctant to turn to them. Friends were often perceived as unable to help due to a lack of resources or knowledge. As Eva explained to me one day on the way to the drop-in, in response to my questions about access to support through friends and church members, she perceived that people were generally preoccupied with 'their own difficulties':

*On the way to the drop-in, I asked Eva if church members help her. She said they do if she asks. 'I ask people if I think they can help me.' Generally, she prefers not to tell people about her situation. 'People might not want to hear about my problems when they've got their own difficulties.' I asked Eva about friends outside of church. She seemed to take a similar view. 'I don't really have friends. I don't want to talk about my things. I prefer to deal with my situation.' [field note]*

As a researcher, a part of me was finding it difficult to let go of my former professional role in family work: I wanted to reassure myself that Eva (and other participants) had people in

their networks to whom they could turn for different forms of support. But Eva was clear that she did not turn to friends for emotional support – in fact (to my initial concern) she refused the notion of friends at all ('I don't really have friends'). It appeared that Eva had resolved the dialectical tensions between autonomy and connectedness and between privacy and openness by rejecting friendship (and wider family) as a source of emotional connection. Instead, she took a pragmatic view, focusing on practical and informational support needs, and evaluating her options in terms of who was best placed to provide support based on their perceived specialist knowledge (and found emotional connectedness through her relationship with her children). In a subsequent (recorded) conversation following attendance at a drop-in session, Eva expanded on her decision-making process when in need of help, in response to my probing about whether she talked to any friends about her child's health needs:

*They don't know, because we don't really have relationship. You know friends that you see and chat and go, you don't need to start telling them your problems... They are not really close friends. The people we met there [at drop-in], we just meet there and they take what they want for their kids and go home. I don't need to start bothering them with my personal issues. It's only somebody that is close to you that you can disclose something to, isn't it? You can't see somebody and start telling them... they will say you are disturbing them with your problems. They have got their own problems as well. Since they can't help you, so why am I telling them my problems? [...] It's just like bothering them with my family problems. They've all got their own problems as well. If I start telling [a school mum], what is she going to do? She cannot give me any advice or help me in any way. The only way she is helping me is by picking [my daughter up from school]. You know some people, when you start telling them your problems, they will be upset with you. Because they don't want to hear. They have their own problems. They will tell you they can't help you, so why are you telling them?*

Eva's reflection on the valued practical help provided by another mother yet the limited forms of support ('she cannot give me any advice') also revealed how she navigated the tensions between instrumentality and care and between the principle of social exchange and the difficulty of reciprocating. It was important to Eva to seek help from 'the right person that can support me': to this end, she had identified several organisations and professionals to whom she would turn for specialised advice. Seeking a friend for emotional support (discussed below) served no purpose; it would feel like 'disturbing them' and their probable negative reaction would feel like a rejection. Whilst she might ask another mother

for information about an organisation, the help-seeking ended there: 'That's the only thing. In terms of health or your household, no. Because nobody will solve the problem.' Eva's perceptions of the challenges faced by the women/mothers in her network (and the lack of resources at their disposal), together with her own immigration status, precarity and specific needs in relation to her child, constrained her ability to ask for help.

Existing friends' limited ability to provide practical support sometimes led to mothers taking a risk by taking up support from newer friends, and/or friends who were less intimate and who lived at a distance. On her sociogram, Gabriela identified five people from her 'home town' in her country of origin who became friends of hers when she first arrived in London, in a different neighbourhood, and who, at that time, would sometimes provide practical and material support. But when Gabriela became pregnant and her situation became precarious, they did not have the means to offer financial support, accommodation or consistent emotional support, being busy with their own lives ('they have their dramas'). When a newer friend offered to help her, Gabriela therefore decided to take the risk of moving to Ryeton on the other side of London. Becoming tearful as she reflected on these friendships which were now conducted predominantly 'through a screen' (Benckekroun 2021), Gabriela noted that she was able to confide in these trusted friends about her situation, but the relationships were not 'constant'. Her friends being unable to provide the resources she needed, they had apparently stepped back: 'They know more or less about my life, about my issues, but they keep their distance because they know they can't help me.' Gabriela's perception, or idea, of them as friends was important to her sense of self and belonging, yet she recognised that they were not able to provide the consistent material help or emotional support that she needed as a new mother with insecure status.

Friends' reluctance or inability to provide continued emotional support was understood by participants to relate to a sense of powerlessness to fix problems caused by precarious immigration status and hostile policies, as well as by what was presumed in some cases to be their own insecure positions. In the interlude preceding this chapter, June recalled that friends had proved scarce on one particular occasion when she needed them. Although hurt by one friend's response at the time, June recognised the limits of her capacity to help. Friends at church were similarly unavailable much of the time: 'No-one wants to get stuck



with you and your issue. When you talk about a particular thing too much, people get a bit fed up of same, same, same, same. They have their own issue as well.’ Like Eva and Gabriela, June felt that friends’ preoccupation with similar challenges of insecure immigration status and precarity limited their willingness to listen and ability to provide material or emotional support. Turning to friends could create a burden for them, and was often not a viable option when in need of support.

### Turning to other people for material support

When friends were unable to provide material or financial support, or before friendships had developed, participants sought support from acquaintances, neighbours, church members<sup>57</sup> or even strangers through serendipitous encounters in public or semi-public spaces. Exchanging material support, including providing shelter, sometimes contributed to the formation of friendships. Yet these were contingent: over time, available resources and goodwill became depleted, and conflicting expectations or misunderstandings emerged in relation to reciprocating, often precipitating withdrawal of support and even the end of the relationship.

On arrival in the UK, Anna was introduced to the woman who would accommodate her: ‘In the long run we became friends, that’s why I said she’s my ‘friend’. That’s how I met her.’ The act of providing shelter produced a sense of friendship. However, Anna identified the point at which her host’s goodwill expired:

*She said you cannot just be staying here without anything, that I need to contribute. [But] I don’t know where to go. I was just like – what will I do? I’m scared, because I don’t know anybody here. I don’t know how to do anything. [...] [I just did] the housework. I wash the clothes, I wash the toilet. Make sure the house is neat. I don’t know what came over her. She start thinking, ‘You have to do something.’ [...] So when I leave there and I go to another place, it was then that someone tell me, I can be doing some things – ‘nobody can be taking you for that – you can’t be staying with someone and not be giving them anything for light [electricity].’*

Until it was later pointed out to her, Anna had been uncertain how to reciprocate, which had made her feel deeply uncomfortable. As suggested by Small (2017: 83), ‘the deepest form of obligation is to know that one is indebted while being unsure exactly how the debt

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<sup>57</sup> In some cases there was overlap between ‘church members’ and ‘friends’, in other cases church members were not necessarily perceived as ‘friends’ but as members of a wider support network.

must be repaid' – what he terms 'reciprocal ambiguity'. This contrasts with reciprocity as a principle of friendship, whereby friends can choose when and how to reciprocate: this practice is possible when shared understandings and trust have developed between friends. Similarly, when June arrived in the UK and was 'linked to a lady' from her country who 'took [her] for free', she initially felt a closeness to her because of their shared country of origin ('it just makes you feel like we're siblings even'), but then tensions developed: 'She started giving me attitude, obviously. Someone sitting at home, not doing anything. She started getting pissed off – without me realising I was pissing her off with the lights on. You know, staying at home obviously costs money. She started telling me she's got bills to pay. 'You have to leave.'" June understood the expectations, but without leave to remain at the time, she was unable legitimately to seek work, placing her in a precarious position. Not yet a mother at this stage, she was eventually able to find casual domestic and care work, which eased the pressure on the relationship. Both Anna and June became aware that the relationships with their respective hosts were primarily instrumental, rather than based on established friendships, and there were expectations of repayment after an initial 'grace period'. Despite their precarious positions, both women were eventually able to find casual paid work to reciprocate their hosts' provision of accommodation (or subsequent host, in Anna's case), since they were not yet mothers and were therefore relatively mobile and without caring responsibilities.

Seeking shelter from others as a mother was much more difficult. When Eva and her children became homeless, a member of her church took them in, but relations became strained ('they got irritated with us') and they were asked to leave after a couple of weeks. Pressure on space and resources had begun to erode their hosts' initial goodwill. Eva was advised by a support worker in a voluntary sector organisation to ask her host for a letter confirming he was unable to continue to accommodate her family, in order to prove to the local authority that they were homeless, but he was unwilling to do this, being fearful that he would 'get into trouble' as a council tenant for having housed the family. Eva reflected:

*Initially, some people are very happy to help, but when you stay more than they expected, they will get not happy, try to get rid of you. Any little thing, they will be picking, they will be aggressive. It's not really easy to be living with people. You will be like a parasite. They will feel you are a parasite, disturbing their lives. [...] Some people they will be very nice, extremely nice; but when you stay with them one*

*month or three weeks, they will start withdrawal. Their attitude, behaviour will slightly change. Then I know... [laughs]*

When unable to turn to friends for help, and compelled to turn to church members or strangers, mothers and children were at their most vulnerable, as these relationships were tenuous and not based on friendship. Pressure on resources meant the help provided was liable to be withdrawn abruptly when goodwill expired and relations soured.

## Sharing information

For mothers with insecure immigration status in precarious situations, sharing information is a crucial friendship practice, notably instrumental knowledge of how to access essential services such as food banks, specialist immigration advice or healthcare. Friends (or acquaintances) do not simply share but ‘channel, filter, and interpret information’ and, in so doing, ‘allocate resources’ and shape behaviour (Fernandez Kelly 1998: 219). Decisions to share significant information (re)produce friendship; decisions to withhold it may prevent or undermine it. Thus, choices about information-sharing both shape and are shaped by the development of interpersonal trust. Moreover, mothers’ information-sharing may happen as a result of, and/or constitute, moves to ‘bridge’ distinct networks (what Burt (2000) terms ‘bridging structural holes’); in the process, they develop new friendships with individuals from more diverse cultural backgrounds. This section will firstly examine the process of bridging networks to access new opportunity structures, and secondly consider how mothers manage tensions that arise between their different networks.

### Bridging networks

Reflecting on her early support network within her co-ethnic faith community as she constructed her sociogram (as discussed in Chapter 3), Louise depicted as yellow icons those to whom she initially felt close, whilst green icons represented those who were friendly but not close (including the second generation ‘youth’ from her church). In the network analysis literature, these might be referred to as ‘strong ties’ and ‘weak ties’ respectively (Granovetter 1973). Keen to learn English on arrival in the UK, Louise recalled that it was not the ‘people in yellow’ who helped her to enrol at college, but ‘the people in green [...] those youth I was scared of’: their preference for speaking English, which had initially made Louise

wary of them, became an asset. Significantly, Louise's 'green people', as weak ties, enabled her to 'bridge' to new networks beyond her co-ethnic community. Attending English classes in turn became a bridge to other classes and groups at the college. Louise met women from diverse cultural backgrounds who had been through immigration processes: they were a valuable source of knowledge not previously available to her through her 'community' (co-ethnic) group.

*And then from there, because I'm meeting different groups, you learn different things. Because what my community group does maybe is not what ESOL group does. I start learning new things more. My community group is just close, it just run same stuff, week by week. [...] When the [ESOL teacher] was talking, it was very comfortable. You are not talking to only your people, and then you are not talking only your language, but you are talking in English. And then you get different ideas, you are meeting different people. Because someone will say, 'The same situation as you, oh I came here, I joined my husband, I don't like the way I'm living with my husband.' And then you hear story by story, you say, 'oh, okay... so if this happened, that means it's not right.' [...] The more you meet different people, you learn something new. And then it's like it opens your eyes. You think, 'Maybe I was doing it the wrong way. Or that person was doing that wrong to me.' And then yeah, you find yourself.*

Teachers, students and occasional invited speakers shared vital information about the practicalities of living in the UK, how to find paid work, applying for citizenship, women's rights, and the ins and outs of intimate couple relationships and mother-child relationships. They contrasted cultural norms in their countries of origin with those in the UK, including what were considered acceptable or unacceptable practices ('the right way to do it'), both in the domestic arena and in the wider community. For Louise, this was 'small advice, but it's big, it make a big impact in your life', and was 'the kind of advice that I can't get from 'yellow' group or youth, but in the ladies' ESOL only'. Bridging to these new networks provided access to new forms of knowledge unavailable in her relatively bounded co-ethnic community, and accelerated the possibility of living differently, contesting traditionally gendered family roles, as well as developing new skills and finding paid work<sup>58</sup>. Whilst being part of a closed network makes certain kinds of information or knowledge easily accessible (Coleman 1988), bridging the gaps between networks provides access to a much wider

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<sup>58</sup> It is worth noting that Louise arrived in the UK before 2010. Since then, austerity measures and immigration policies have restricted free access to ESOL and other college courses; there are complex rules governing eligibility. Many adults currently living with insecure immigration status struggle to access free education.

range of information and knowledge, producing 'more rewarding opportunities' (Burt 2000). Friendships developed beyond the immediate network produce 'lived spatialities' that open up new 'freedoms, fears and possibilities' (Bunnell et al. 2012).

### Navigating tensions between networks

Being part of a dense and bounded early network can present challenges to forming friendships with individuals from outside of the network; conversely, developing new friendships may be experienced as threatening by intimate others or members of established networks, who may be unwilling to incorporate new information or adopt new practices. Louise's husband was wary of some of the information and advice she brought home from the ladies in her ESOL group, and would discourage her from disclosing too much or listening to them: this made Louise feel uncomfortable ('Oh my god, it's like I'm in the middle! Things I'm hearing here, is that right or not? Is that something I can bring home or can't share it? It was just a new experience for me.'). Similarly, offering new information to friends of her generation from her co-ethnic community sometimes created the potential for conflict if not handled sensitively: 'I have to be wise, I have to have a nice strategy how to do it. They may not be ready to accept it. They may be, "oh no, Louise". Maybe they won't be my friend no more. I may destroy the relationship. It was a very different relationship I had.' Louise had to navigate the dialectical tension between novelty and stability (Baxter 1990) within her relationships and across her networks.

The second-generation young people in her community, perhaps 'experts by experience' in managing tensions between networks, encouraged Louise to manage new and potentially unwelcome information by keeping some things to herself ('you need privacy') rather than sharing everything with her husband. In this way, the tension between novelty and stability interacted with tensions between openness and privacy and between autonomy and connectedness. This led to a shift in how Louise chose to manage information across her networks:

*It was hard to believe that, to practise that. It did take me time. Like I say, I'm a butterfly now! Whatever I do, wherever I go, it's up to me. I meet people from other countries. I go to meetings, workshops. It was like a big step for me. I don't regret nothing. It helped me in a good way. Maybe it helped me to be the person I am today.*

Over time, Louise developed strategies to navigate tensions across networks to build friendships with women in different settings and from different cultural backgrounds. Exposure to diverse and often conflicting perspectives produced new forms of knowledge as well as new ways of being and doing. Louise drew several times on the metaphor of a butterfly to describe the transformative effect of becoming part of new networks and forming friendships with women from diverse ethnic backgrounds.

The scarcity of resources could also produce tensions between networks. June often shared information with other mums, inviting them to join her at drop-ins offering material support, yet at times this generated dissonance between the desire to share opportunities and the worry this would deplete available resources ('Sometimes I say to myself, that's why I find it difficult to get good stuff. Cos if I find good stuff I drag a lot of people.'). Bringing new people into existing networks could also produce interpersonal tensions:

*Recently where we get clothes, I saw a lady, because she's [from the same country], I just start telling her this is not the only place where you can get clothes [and I told her about the drop-in]. She goes, wow, where is that? She start asking me. I gave her my number. I said call me. So I brought her there. [...] [Now] she's always there. I brought her. Someone was telling me, she had a little bit of an argument with a friend of mine. The friend was like, 'June, you are the one who brought her, look at how she's messing about, doing stuff like... Why did you tell her?' I'm like, 'Why shouldn't I?' I can't keep it, it's like holding on to something I was meant to tell others. It's a free place! It's like, don't tell people where you feed from, just keep it secret, go and come. Don't tell anyone. But in as much as you need it, somebody else need it as well. So you might as well share. [...] I am happy that I did share. May I see more good things, and I will share.*

June had to negotiate tensions – both internally and with her friends – around decisions to include or exclude based on social closure (Cederberg 2012: 61) which shaped access to resources. She justified her decisions to share strategic information on the basis of her perception of the women's needs, recognising that they were in a similar position to herself in relation to immigration status and NRPF, and therefore deserved to know about sources of material resources.

Likewise, Amy identified instrumental information-sharing as an ethical issue which needed to be navigated carefully. Furnishing her narrative with examples, she juxtaposed 'good

people' who take you to 'places like the children's centres to help people overcome their situations', and 'bad people' who 'even when they know, they will not want to take you there'. Amy insisted that it was important to help others, even if it was not followed up with reciprocal acts of friendship:

*We have to help each other. There is no point that we cannot help. But there are still some people that you try to help and they do bad to you. That is the problem. Some [people] are good, [but others] even when you try to do all kinds of things to make some other people happy, they will still be doing bad to you. That is the fear they have, [so] they don't want to help sometimes. So I don't really blame them.*

Sharing an example of a woman who had avoided telling her neighbour about an advice centre until her own situation had been resolved, Amy recognised that not only an inability to reciprocate but also a reluctance to share what is perceived as a limited resource (in the form of specialist advice) may prevent some people from providing support. Nevertheless, sharing information to help others was seen as 'good', whilst withholding it was seen as 'bad'.

## Confiding

*How we are sustaining in the community and living... If we don't have people around us, depression can kill, can make you go mad. There are people around you that make you happy – you have to be aware. You have people around you, then you don't have problems. You have to share your problems. And then they will advise you, you can forget about it. I don't have anything, but I know people will call me. When they call me, and talk to me, then I will be fine. If I have problem, I share it: 'This is what is going on with me.' 'It's going to be fine, don't worry about it.' (Anna)*

Anna was emphatic about the importance of having a support network of people in whom to confide, in order to exchange emotional support, reduce anxiety and protect subjective wellbeing. However, for mothers with insecure immigration status, confiding in friends poses a significant problem of whom to trust, because of the high stakes of trust being broken. Additionally, as explored in the earlier section on sharing resources, participants in my study were less likely to turn to friends because they were felt to be emotionally or physically unavailable, being in similarly precarious situations, without the resources being sought, or too 'busy'. Whilst there is an assumption in much of the literature that people confide only in close friends, and that confiding is mutual, this is not always the case:

emotional support is at times sought from other people perceived to have specialist knowledge, or who are simply more available (Small 2013, 2017). This section will examine confiding as a practice of friendship, the problem of trust, and the alternative strategy of confiding in 'weak ties'.

### Confiding in close friends

Exchanging resources and sharing information, explored above, can create trust, paving the way for women to confide in each other and support each other emotionally, a practice which may constitute close friendships. Friends in a (presumed) similar position of insecure immigration status and precarity may be considered suitable confidants because of perceived empathy and trustworthiness. Conversely, they may be considered unsuitable due to perceived lack of capacity to provide emotional (or practical) support. Friends who have been granted leave to remain (and potentially recourse to public funds) relatively recently may be perceived as more stable, more emotionally available, with relevant knowledge and likely to empathise with their situation. The immigration status of a potential confidant may not be evident, however (as discussed earlier). Sitting together on a bench in the local park one sunny spring morning (our third research meet-up), Anna explained to me that to establish the suitability of a friend before confiding in them, it was necessary to get to know them a little, then to test them with a problem and evaluate their response:

*Before I can share my problems with you, I know you. I know you a little bit [so that] I can say one or two things about you. Before I share my problems with you, I will know the type of person you are. If I can talk to you for the first time, you will advise me, I will know who you are. This one, I will not share my problems [both laugh]. I will not tell you that you have done something wrong with me [but] I will just know you are not in my channel. Uh-uh. You are not connected with me. I will not share my problems with you. I will share my problems with people, they share their problems with me, because they are my friends. They advise me, I advise them. Gradually, our friendships grow.*

It was, as Anna explained, essential to exercise caution and take one's time in identifying whom to confide in. People who could be trusted gradually became regular, mutual confidants and were perceived as friends. Mutual confiding constituted the friendship.

When friends were granted leave to remain, Anna hinted at the risk of this creating a structural inequality, potentially disrupting the basis of friendship as a tie of equals (Hess



1972, Allan and Adams 2006, Rawlins 2008, Allan 1999). Yet she maintained this had not affected her friendships; instead, her friends had continued to provide emotional support and were able to offer hope and encouragement from their new vantage point: 'They have their papers – when they have it, that does not mean they are not my friends because our levels are not... No, they are still my friends. I believe we are still the same. When my time comes, my time will come.' She explained that her friends call her, encourage her when her morale is low and help her to be hopeful about the future ('That makes me happy; at least we are at same level. [They tell me] "God that changed my own story, he will change yours. We are in it together, we will get out of it, don't worry."') Anna's friends' empathy and care led her to confide in them, even when she did not feel like talking about her problems. Anna explained that she had a moral responsibility to herself and to her friends to confide in them when she needed emotional support:

*I do talk to my friends. It's not when I die that they will say, 'This person did not tell me anything.' Sometimes you have to tell. Why not? It's only God. I trust you, I am connecting with you, there is something special about you, then I will talk to you. It's not when I die that [friends will say] 'She did not say anything, we don't even know what happened to her.' It's not nice. When you see someone and you have a problem, you have to talk. Because if you don't talk, you are just killing yourself, you will just die. [...] So no matter how heavy my heart is, I always remember I have somebody behind me that I have to support. So I am like a warrior. I have to stand. It's like this tree – you see all the things it is carrying - if you cut it, all the branches will die. I will not do that.*

Having established which friends she could trust, Anna had resolved the dialectical tensions between privacy and openness and between autonomy and connectedness by framing confiding as an obligation of friendship.

A close friendship in which confiding was a normal practice enabled mutual emotional support. Gemma (sitting on the bed with her baby, whilst I sat – still somewhat self-consciously – on the one chair, in one of the family's two small rooms), explained how important it was for her to be able to motivate her close friends when they became demoralised about their immigration situations, even though her own position was similarly precarious. She spoke frequently on the phone with Bella, who, although not from the same part of the world, was similarly racially minoritised, and Gemma described her as being 'like

a family to me'. She recounted how Bella had recently turned to her for support, overcome by anxiety about her status:

*Last week, [Bella] said one of her friends got a job and [is earning good money]. I said, 'When you get your papers you can still get a job. Let's get our papers first, and let's pray to get it when we are healthy. Some people they will have the paperwork but they are not able to work. So we should just be thankful for the day. As long as we are life there is hope.' So we was just saying like she was even becoming depressed. I said, 'Don't give room for depression because if anything happens to you, who will take care of your son? You need to think about your son before you start thinking, 'What am I going to do tomorrow?' Let's think about today. God will take care of tomorrow for us. We don't have anybody to run to – except that if we believe in prayers, we will be praying to God to help us.' So that's what we were talking about last week. We talk quite a lot.*

Drawing on their shared position as mothers and on their shared faith-based view of the world, Gemma had sought to rebuild Bella's sense of hope for a livable future (as discussed in the previous chapter). Confiding in close friends in similar situations, or in those who had experienced similarly difficult trajectories, was therefore important to some mothers with insecure immigration status, as a means of accessing and/or sharing emotional support and care.

### The problem of trust

The problem of trust exists in any incipient or established friendship (and, as discussed in Chapter 7, in couple relationships), since '[e]xposure and vulnerability lie in the pursuit of support' (Small 2017: 104). For mothers with insecure immigration status, managing the 'dialectic of expressiveness and protectiveness' (Rawlins 2008: 3) – the need to disclose entwined with the need for privacy – is particularly salient. The constant fear of being deported, as well as the risk of exploitation by others, deters women from confiding in friends about their status.

During one of our conversations in a small room at a children's centre, Emily emphasised the risk of trust being betrayed, and explained the conflict between the need to confide and the need to protect herself and her children (as discussed in the previous chapter on mothering):

*There's so much, in that short time, that can break anyone. It can put you through a lot. I got to the time when I was not speaking to any friend, not that I didn't have one, but they couldn't help me. What are you going to talk to them about? And they*

*will listen, and then it will be on everyone's lips, what is going on with you. You do not want your children to feel that or have that. Cos you know, children can hear what their parents are talking about, and then it will start getting on the children.*

The decision not to confide created significant stress, but for Emily this was necessary because of her previous experience of trust in friends being broken:

*Other people from my country will know your business and go round singing it. They go round telling people! And then that person they tell, your best friend has got a best friend. I think you're my best friend, but you have also got a best friend, and that person has got a best friend. So then one person, and then in circles in the same community, someone will tend to know you, or not know you, but they will pass you by and they will point the finger. Now it's like, everybody knows the story about you.*

For Emily, confiding in friends who were from the same country as her posed particular threats to confidentiality: the closeness of the community maximised the channels for 'gossip' to be passed along.

I asked Emily whether she trusted her close friend Jean with 'more personal things'. Whilst they 'do most things together' and spend time at each other's houses, Emily reflected, she made no exception, even for Jean, to her rule of not confiding: 'I never, for one day, not for a few years did I let her into my story and everything about me. Up till now, we go out together, she never knows anything about it. [...] I tell her what I want to tell her.' Emily was clear that their friendship was firmly based on social exchange and mutual respect, without expectations of confiding on either side. There was an unspoken understanding of the risks of sharing sensitive information:

*Emily: She never digged into anything that I don't want her to dig into. There's a borderline you won't be able to cross. When I call her, [if] she doesn't pick up, I let go. She sees the message, or she sees the missed call – if she's in the mood to talk, she will talk. If she's got issues, or she's got her own problems she's facing at that point... The other time she started writing posts and stuff [on Facebook] - I was like, 'Do you want to talk about it?' She's like, 'No I'll be fine.' I didn't push it further. Two days later, we met [and] she started telling me what she was going through. So at that time she has overcome [her reluctance to talk] and now she wanted someone to talk to, she was ready to talk and she started talking about it. So it comes back to, 'I will let you know what you need to know, but not let you in so much' – so then I will become so vulnerable, my weakness will be hit against me.*

*Rachel: What do you mean by that?*

*Emily: Your weakness is like... I am scared of what I went through in [town A] to repeat back again, so I am very careful and cautious about what I say to people. Even*

*though me and you are close, me and you are in church, I still hold back. [Enumerates friends.] That is literally it. That is my circle of friends.*

Emily's earlier experience of having been betrayed by friends had made her not only highly guarded about disclosing personal information relating to her immigration status, but also acutely sensitive to her friend's need to do the same. Recognition of the vulnerability created by self-disclosure for mothers with insecure immigration status, even between friends, generated discretion between the two of them. The development of interpersonal trust over time did not (and would not) equate with being fully open about status.

Emily's decision not to confide in friends was shared by other mothers. Louise explained why it was crucial not to divulge one's immigration status to friends:

*Louise: They think that it's shame[ful] to share, but it's not. For you to not have paper, it's like, ah, okay you are not legal. It's a little bit shy zone. You don't... we are friends, we come along, but I don't know if you have paper or not.*

*Rachel: It's not something you talk about?*

*Louise: Yeah, it's like it's not your business. Let's keep it private. Because I don't know what I say to you, it can affect my case. It's like a secret. I keep my business.*

*Rachel: So people talk about a lot of things but not that?*

*Louise: No, no, not that. [...] Maybe you know what I've been through, and then when I tell you what I did say to Immigration, maybe you will be like, oh, it didn't happen that way! I don't want to share with you because I don't want it to affect my case. You don't want them to send you back to Africa. It's like, be careful, they will share it, they will send you back! You come here for better life, and sending you back, worse than anything in your life. Because family know you are there no more. Some people can even suicide, can harm themselves. It's like misery. It's like a private situation. We never put it on the table – 'oh you know [my case], I'm waiting, I have appointment with my solicitor' – no!*

A pervasive sense of deportability in a hostile environment for those without leave to remain was thus the main factor in withholding information about immigration status from friends. Gabriela had a limited number of trusted friends from her country of origin in whom she had confided, but they now lived at a distance and had their 'own issues'. Since moving to Ryeton, she had been cautious about getting too close to people she met, because 'the first thing Latinos ask each other is "what papers have you got?"' At church, she kept conversations to the level of small talk: 'Sometimes it's good, but sometimes it's bad – they

ask too many questions.’ She was reluctant to share information with church members because she felt that people could be too inquisitive and judgemental:

*That makes me uncomfortable. I can get very abrupt. So we greet each other but I don't want to get too involved. Perhaps I'm getting a complex. I don't know. Perhaps it's just pressure. I might get to feel more comfortable. [...] My story is not very good, I didn't make wise decisions, but I don't like people questioning those decisions because it's my story. People always ask me... but I don't give them an explanation.*

Unable to count on discretion from members of her co-ethnic community, Gabriela avoided revealing her immigration status. When people asked if she had her papers, she told me, ‘Sometimes I won't say anything, sometimes I will just say yes.’ Self-disclosure would evidently make Gabriela vulnerable on multiple levels. The unavailability of her few trusted friends and her need to limit what she shared with others in her community constrained Gabriela's opportunities for confiding; as a solo mother of young children, this left her relatively isolated.

Christine was equally cautious about sharing personal information, having had her trust in certain individuals broken when they passed on things she had shared with them in confidence. However, her reluctance to be open with others was attenuated when she perceived sufficient shared experiences to warrant trust:

*If people are in the same situation as me – ah-hah! This morning at [the food bank], I met a lady there. She talked to me, she invited me to her house. She lives [nearby]. She heard me talking in [my language] to [my daughter]. I just like her - there is a connection. She said, ‘You look familiar’. I think maybe we saw each other at the advice centre. She took me to her house – I stayed just for 5, 10 minutes. She has a one-bedroom flat! I told her I just have one room. She told me she came from [neighbouring borough]; they placed her here. I said maybe sometimes if I get bored, I can come round. I took her number. She has two children [similar age to mine]. I said our kids can play together. Some people hide things, but she told me things. That's why I told her too.*

Christine's decision to confide in the mother she encountered at the food bank was motivated by perceived similarities in language, culture and country of origin (what Small (2017: 99) refers to as ‘attribute similarity’), shared conditions of precarity and cramped accommodation and living in the same neighbourhood (‘situational similarity’) and shared identities as mothers of young children with insecure immigration status (‘structural similarity’). The context of the food bank as the site of their encounter made these

similarities visible and provided an opportunity to reach out, quickly moving to sharing a small amount of personal information in the context of the other mother's home.

### Confiding in 'weak ties'

The perceived unavailability of friends and their inability to help, along with the risks of sharing highly sensitive personal information, even with those who are otherwise trusted, mean that women with insecure immigration status may be more likely to confide in people they are not emotionally close to ('weak ties'). This may be a deliberate strategy, motivated by the other person's perceived specialist knowledge or ability to help, or spontaneous, 'because they were there'. In either case, the 'organizational embeddedness' of the networks (Small 2017: 126) and the 'space for social interaction' (ibid:127) are significant.

At a playgroup, June had met other women who were in a similarly precarious situation in relation to immigration status. Divulging her status to them opened up the opportunity to access reassurance and support: the women encouraged her by pointing out that many people in the neighbourhood do not have leave to remain (see the Interlude preceding this chapter). June recollected: 'I become stronger [...]. I became bolder. I realised that I'm not the only one in this mess [...] It made me loosen up a bit, realise that I am not alone. [...] And it's okay to feel free and walk on the street [...]. I started taking that off my mind. I have peace.' The convivial encounter with other mothers in a similar situation reduced June's anxiety and had a long-term positive effect on her sense of her right to belong.

Specialised settings also provided opportunities for openness, self-disclosure and potentially friendship, such as support groups for mothers who had experienced domestic violence, parenting courses or drop-ins for children with disabilities. Confiding in women with shared experiences did not always lead to friendship, however. Another important context for confiding was when seeking specialist advice from professionals: this is discussed in Chapter 8.

### Concluding remarks

For mothers with insecure immigration status living in precarious circumstances, friendship practices are not only important ways of sharing emotional, material and informational

forms of social support, but they 'provide a basis for intimacy and attachment' (Berkman et al. 2000: 848). Belonging is therefore not simply about a relationship to the majority culture, as is often implied in the literature, but is something that is nurtured in intimate, often fragile networks. The practices that I have explored here – reaching out, exchanging material resources, sharing information and confiding – often produce and sustain friendships, albeit with varying degrees of closeness. Yet as I have highlighted, these practices are both constrained and facilitated in complex ways by the intersection of precarious immigration status and motherhood, as well as migration trajectories, cultural identity and faith (discussed further in the following chapter). In seeking resources and support to meet their needs, mothers must make judgements about whom, when and how to approach, ever mindful that other mothers' resources are often limited too. Moreover, in their everyday interactions with friends, mothers must negotiate dialectical tensions between confiding and privacy, and between autonomy and connectedness: when precarious status puts too much at stake to risk opening up, mothers limit the amount and type of personal information they share with friends. Support may be shared through other friendship practices instead, whilst self-disclosure may be reserved for interactions with frontline advocates (as discussed in Chapter 8). Friendship has been described as a form of 'social glue' (Spencer and Pahl 2006). As I have shown, friendship practices are indeed significant in articulating belonging, producing perceptions of friendships which shape individuals' sense of self (Rubin 1985). Yet precarious status complicates the ways women/mothers do friendship.

## Interlude: 'Not letting people in my life... it saves a lot'

*Emily: She [case worker from Children's Social Care] asked me if I go to church, why don't I go to the church for help [...] – 'cos some people in the church offer a room to mothers in need, in the same category like you who need help.' So I was like, 'Okay, I don't want to go to church, the reason being, everyone would know my issue – you would not be treated the same. Cos African church, it's like you are just giving them a plateau of gossip, something to gossip about. I do not want to be labelled like that.' She was like, 'Yeah, but you need it, so you just have to put your ego to one side, to ask people for help.' I was like, 'okay'. And that was it.*

*[...] You know, that little gossip that goes around, it will be labelled to you. You can imagine it being labelled to you, and then parents go home and in their living room they discuss about you, with children around, and they will not care about children around, children will also start discussing with you, in the presence of your child. [...] I've seen everyone to be vulnerable. If people know more about you, they will use your vulnerability to crucify you, as I would say. If they know less about you, they're not going to have the upper hand to crucify you.*

*Rachel: In what ways might that happen?*

*Emily: If I learn more things about you, I know if I say this to you, it's gonna hurt you, if I say this to you, it's gonna make you... But if I know less about you, what am I gonna say that's gonna affect [you]? So it's about the mindset, it's literally the mindset, it is what is there. If you talk too much and people know your stuff, they're gonna stand on all stuff that they know about you to just destroy you. But if they know less things about you, they can't.*

*Rachel: Have you seen that happen to people?*

*Emily: I have seen that happen to people. I have heard so many stories. Literally, when I was in [town A] in the same church, people were being crucified, stuff like that. So when I came to London, though I go to church I don't really get myself involved in church, because of what went on in [town A], it was my life experience, it was not a story being told. I got so comfortable with the people in church. Because when you go to church, why do you go to church? That is the most important thing. My explanation of what I went to church for, it made me so comfortable with church. But, it's different from the environment back home, and it's different for the network down here. You go to church, you get relieved, to have a free life, to feel free, to lay down your burdens and your trouble to God and anyone you think is a believer that would understand you. So then they get to know more of your business and then they take your weakness to be your [?] and that was it. I learnt a lot when I was in [town A] and then I was like okay, what I went through in [town A], I am not ready to go through it. [...] I can go to church, talk to anyone, but not letting people in my life, in my story, it saves a lot, it saves a lot. So... it made me kind of hold back. It helped. It did help.*



## Chapter 6: Doing faith

In the previous chapter, I showed that mothers engage in particular practices which constitute friendship, and that these practices are shaped by insecure immigration status and NRPF, but also create a sense of belonging through access to emotional and practical support. I argued, moreover, that in 'doing friendship', mothers must navigate the dialectical tensions between privacy and openness, between autonomy and connectedness and between instrumentality and care, in light of their structural position. In this chapter, I build on this argument by examining participants' experiences of bordering and practices of belonging within faith-based networks, focusing on Christian churches<sup>59</sup>. Drawing on my ethnographic data and bringing together literature on migration, sociology of religion, social networks and belonging, I show the role of relational practices within faith networks (and faith itself) in (re)producing social identity and belonging in the context of the everyday bordering of the hostile environment.

Embedding practices can create feelings of belonging to a community (Ryan and Mulholland 2015, Wessendorf and Phillimore 2018, Glick Schiller and Çağlar 2016) in the sense of emotional attachment to a group and 'feeling at home' (Yuval-Davis 2006), especially when moving to a new city or country. As a 'moral community' bringing together people with shared beliefs and practices (Durkheim 1995 [1915]), faith institutions can be an important site for embedding, offering 'continuity with the past' as well as a means of 'coping with the problems of the present' (Hirschman 2004: 1225). Despite the context of increasing secularity in the UK, for many migrants joining a faith group offers opportunities for developing attachments and connections within a (often co-ethnic) community, as well as to wider 'mainstream' society (Davie 2015, McAndrew and Voas 2014). As such, it can also be seen as a political project of belonging (Yuval-Davis 2011), (re)producing norms of reciprocity, cooperative action and social trust (Putnam 1995, 2000).

In this chapter, I argue that for women/mothers excluded by their immigration status from paid employment, studying and/or volunteering, faith institutions can be important sites for

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<sup>59</sup> I focus on Christian churches (including Catholic, Orthodox, Pentecostal, Seventh Day Adventist and Anglican churches) since all but two of the participants identified as Christian (see Chapter 3).

enacting belonging and citizenship. In the context of Christian churches, I explore relational (and spatial) belonging through the practices of *joining a church and attending services; active participation in church groups; sharing (scarce) resources; confiding in church leaders and members; claiming (physical and virtual) faith spaces; and finally, faith as a personal practice*. Drawing on Portes and Sensenbrenner (1993: 1324), I examine how the sense of a 'higher group morality' and the 'bounded solidarity' of faith communities can generate social capital, which can be mobilised and converted into diverse forms of material, financial, informational and emotional support (Hirschman 2004); yet building on the previous chapter I also reflect on the limitations of inconsistencies of such resources. Whilst there may be some overlap with friendships, I suggest that the context of faith networks produces specific relational practices and constructions of relationships. Revisiting the dialectical tensions explored in the previous chapter between the privacy and openness and between autonomy and connectedness, I reflect on the 'problem of trust' within faith-based networks – identified by Emily in the preceding Interlude. Linked to this, I briefly consider what has elsewhere been termed the 'dark side' of social capital (Portes and Sensenbrenner 1993), and suggest that relationships with church leaders and members are shaped by power imbalances, which can produce dynamics of social control and exclusionary practices (Portes 1998). As such, these relationships are distinct from friendships, which, as I have shown, tend to be characterised by underlying principles of equality and reciprocity.

## Joining a church and attending services

*We was born in a family that there was faith already. They are believer people already, believer parents already. You just carry on, you don't have a choice. You just grow up, join the club! We believe, we believe, we believe. [...] We go to church, we read the Bible, we practise what is in the Bible. It's like a must-do, must-be. Because to be a Christian, for us, it's not only religion, it's a life. it is something that is in you. It's not only because you go [on] Sunday then you practise to be Christian only on a Sunday, no - it's every day of your life. It's like you take care of your soul out of scene.*  
(Louise)

Meeting up for a second time, this time sitting together in a coffee shop over hot chocolate, Louise explained the centrality of her faith to her sense of self as well as to her sense of belonging to her co-ethnic community in Ryeton. She emphasised both shared beliefs and everyday relational practices as prerequisites for being part of her faith group. Practising

faith can be a means of nurturing a sense of ethnic identity (Foner and Alba 2008) and ‘reinforc[ing] traditional cultural identities and provid[ing] comfort’ in the face of the challenges of adapting to a new environment (Hirschman 2004:1217). It can also be seen as a response to the hostility of the host society, providing ‘a sense of internal cohesion and status’ (ibid:1223). Joining a church – in most cases, Black-led churches – was an essential step for the many participants in my research for whom Christianity was an unquestionable and integral part of their identity. Practising one’s religion, in everyday private life as well as in public ways, was seen by many as a duty, as explained by Louise in the above quote. It was also a means of laying claim to being part of the local community and wider society. In the face of multiple forms of exclusion as a racially minoritised woman with insecure immigration status, practising one’s faith was a means of asserting religious-ethnic identity as a social identity and therefore as a form of belonging both in the UK and to the country of origin. In the absence of extended family, for many it was also a way of feeling connected to kin networks.

‘Dispersed’ from London on her arrival over a decade ago to a city where she knew no-one, Zoe, seeking asylum, first came across an ‘English church, Church of England’ and decided to attend weekly services there because it was accessible. Perceiving this church as part of the broader Christian church, Zoe found it sufficiently comfortable as a place where she could practise her faith and ‘belong’, at least temporarily (‘even if it’s not the same religion, it’s same religion, it’s faith of God’). Some weeks later, however, in the city centre she encountered a woman from her country of origin who explained how to get to the nearest Orthodox church, and started attending services there instead. She was able both to connect with her compatriots and to make bridges into the wider community by learning English at classes provided by this church:

*It was really very important, because when you stay in this country for the first time, the culture is different. It’s safe place, very nice place, but sometimes I think to know the culture and everything, it’s very difficult. At least when you see your community, you can talk [with] some of them who lived here longer, they can explain to you the culture, and what is the benefit of the country, what is everything, what I’m going to do. Sometimes we don’t know what we gonna do - it is very important [to] connect with the community. It makes feeling happy, and sometimes you find the traditional*

*culture, food. A little bit I was lonely when I was in [city] but when I start to come there, I start course also there, ESOL course, that keep me busy.*

As well as providing familiarity through the services and rituals, Zoe's church facilitated mutually supportive networks in her co-ethnic community, providing 'opportunities for fellowship and friendship' and creating a 'psychological ballast' to help adjust to life in the UK and cope with experiences of exclusion and discrimination (Foner and Alba 2008: 362). Participating in church activities was 'a source of solace and shelter from the stresses, setbacks, and difficulties of coming to terms with life in a new country' (ibid: 362). Accessing English classes hosted by the church helped Zoe develop skills and confidence to facilitate her active participation in the wider community.

For many of my interlocutors, as mothers they felt required to raise their children as members of the church and instil Christian values in them to maintain this social identity. Brought up in the Pentecostal church in her West African country of origin, Beth, whose two young children had been born since her arrival in London a few years previously, felt strongly that regular attendance at church was a priority. 'The Bible says train your child the way you want them to grow,' Beth explained to me, sitting on the edge of her bed in the family's single room, whilst I sat cross-legged on the floor (retrieving her young daughter's toy cat every time she dropped it, giggling, from her high chair). 'I'm just trying to make my son understand. I know he's young, but I'm trying to... put that culture into him. That's how I was brought up. [...] He's getting the foundation.' As well as wanting to ensure her children's membership in her faith group as a 'moral community' (Durkheim 1964 [1915]), Beth was conscious that their participation was a source of respectability in her cultural community, when her position as a lone mother, as well as her precarity and her immigration status (if suspected) could cause others to disparage her: 'I have to be smart, because I hear a lot of stories [...] about boys growing up to join gangs. I don't have a partner here. If I make any mistake, people will say, oh it's because she's a single mum. So I have to be smart.'

Similarly, Ariane had taken a series of steps to ensure that her children actively participated in the life of the church, not only to actively 'transmit religiosity' to them (McAndrew and Voas 2014: 4) but to firmly embed the family within the local faith community. Ariane had sought asylum from her West African country two decades previously, had been placed in

Ryeton after living for three years in another part of London, and was then granted refugee status, which paved the way to British citizenship. On arrival in Ryeton, Ariane wasted no time in finding a Catholic church ('I saw that church, my heart went straightaway – I said this is my church'). When she became a mother, she appointed local church-going friends and acquaintances as their godparents, and made sure that her children sang in the church choir and attended Catholic schools. This created a sense of stability, respectability and attachment to both church and neighbourhood, facilitated by her citizenship status. For mothers with insecure immigration status subjected to hyper-mobility, however, joining a church did not provide such stability or facilitate attachment to the neighbourhood. Frequent house moves mean repeatedly leaving and joining churches, making it difficult to form friendships with church members or to access support. 'Sometimes people feel that, well, you've been here for two months, we don't really know you,' observed Beth. 'So I just go to church and pray, and that's it. Sometimes I make friends, but when you have to leave them behind...' It takes time to build trust, I responded. Beth agreed: 'To build trust, yes. It takes a long time to build trust.'

Conversely, when women/mothers experienced leaders or members of a faith organisation as excluding or hostile, they resisted such 'bordering' practices by reducing their attendance at services and/or moving to a different faith group. Reflecting on a church she had attended some years previously when living in a town outside London, Kate recalled examples of exploitation of individuals' legal and economic precarity, which ultimately drove her to leave the church for a different, more accommodating one:

*Kate: They kind of branded [my friend] as a... not kind of, they did brand her as a witch. Cos Church is controlling just as a human person is. They're trying to tell me, 'We think this person is a witch, we have to excommunicate ourselves from her.' [...] That's what they're like, if you're not conforming to what they want. And being open with your situation, they use that. 'You come to church, you pay your tithe, God will see you through.' [...] After that, they were trying to control me as well, even more. There was a lady at my house, she suffered depression really bad. Sometimes she wants to go to church, and she goes to a different church, and so to encourage her I would go with her. And apparently, you're not allowed to go to other people's churches. Missing church for somebody who is sick is not a good excuse, because you know, the angel of the god is waiting for you at church. So the fact that you [are not there] is not a good representation. [...] I was also branded a witch as well, everyone else was trying to excommunicate themselves from me.*

*Rachel: Were people not talking to you?*

*Kate: Something like that. Or if they did talk to me, it would be a very short, abrupt conversation, like 'hello, oh I've got to go now.' So I went to a different church after that. [...] They weren't so demanding.*

Kate felt that leaders at the first church had been using their symbolic power to exploit her vulnerability to attempt to control her behaviour and punish her for 'not conforming' by ostracising her from the church community, as they had done to her friend. Kate's account illustrates the dialectical tension between privacy and openness in faith networks in the particular context of vulnerability (of Kate and her friend) and social control (by church leaders and members). Her response had been to withdraw from that church, choosing to attend a different one instead, where leaders 'weren't so demanding' and did not display these severe exclusionary practices.

Gemma had also been subjected to practices of socio-spatial exclusion at her (Catholic) church, seemingly shaped by the priest's and church members' (at best) misunderstandings of, or (at worst) prejudice in relation to, her son Adam's special educational needs. Her family continued to attend weekly services, but such experiences had led her family to physically position themselves at the margins of the church. Gemma recalled how, at the end of a service when a new priest at their church had wanted to shake hands with every congregant, she had spent several minutes encouraging Adam to stand in line, but the priest, growing impatient, had moved past them without acknowledging Adam. She recounted another painful incident:

*Last week or so, as soon as we went inside the church, Adam started crying. We don't really go inside the church, we just stand outside the door, we see what the priest is doing and we're hearing him. We stand outside. As soon as he started crying, people were there, saying [speaks in cross tone], 'You have to take this boy outside, hey, hey!' I said to him [adopts soothing tone], 'No, no, no, you don't cry when we are inside the church, we pray; when we are in the church you don't make a noise.' I keep on talking to him, talking to him, until... Then I finally just hugged him, I was holding him. We stayed like that until the mass finished. Then we left.*

Whilst her church represented an institution which was integral to her social identity and to which she felt a certain emotional attachment and belonging, Gemma experienced it also as a space which – literally – marginalised her son, herself and the other members of her family, embodied through multiple categories of difference (Silvey 2005), including

(dis)ability and immigration status. Gemma dealt with these micro acts of rejection from church members and leaders by focusing on creating belonging for her family as a mother through her bond with her children and husband: they continued to attend services but were positioned in the margins.

## Active participation in church groups

Participating in Bible study groups, and for a small number of participants taking part in women's groups or teaching at Sunday school, offered ways of embedding more deeply in faith networks. Following her recent move from Ryeton to a nearby neighbourhood, Kate had identified a local church and started attending weekly services there with her son; from here she joined a weekly Bible study group held at a church member's house. Kate liked the intimacy of the group, the caring nature of members and the lack of hierarchy. In the absence of supportive kinship networks, she valued what she described as the 'sense of family' created in the church and at the Bible study group. She took her turn in preparing meals for the group, despite her limited resources.

For Louise, active participation in groups within her church was a means of embedding within the local co-ethnic community, which was important not only on arrival in the UK but as she negotiated immigration processes. Her church continued to be central in her life once she was granted leave to remain. The church services and various groups were 'similar to back home', providing continuity: 'it was just similar, my country people, it's like a comfort zone for me.' Louise developed roles for herself within the church: she taught 'the little ones', got to know 'the youth', bonded with 'the ladies' and took part in activities and big events: 'When people come together, you talk about back home, you talk about your community, you talk about your country, you talk about people there. We share stuff, we talk about what's going on there. It's just fun! It's amazing.' These regular cultural practices helped Louise to feel 'at home' and develop an identity narrative through her emotional attachment to her faith community (Yuval-Davis 2006).

Directly or indirectly, through participation in activities and groups, faith spaces can provide opportunities for leadership and for transformative dialogue. In the early years of her involvement in her church, Louise told me, in response to mounting frustration from some

women that church leaders were 'not open' and were preventing access to information, as well as the desire of the younger members growing up in the UK for mothers to 'know our rights', the leaders eventually agreed to requests for a 'group for the ladies'. The group would also come together with the young people, providing opportunities for sharing information and discussing concerns about parenting practices and intergenerational relationships ('the things children don't like that the parents do'), and inviting outside speakers. Within this gendered and intergenerational space, discussion topics included family roles and couple relationships, allowing critiques of cultural norms in the community:

*The more we started to share, to come together youth and us ladies, we start to see we are doing things the wrong way. [...] The youth are amazing, like light in our life! Then they started to talk to us, and then we did like a debate, [...] doing workshops, us together. It was quite helpful. It was needed. [...] When we started inviting [the young people] to our ladies' meeting, even our way to look become different now – our way to wear clothes become cool now! 'Oh, mum looks cool now! They can wear trousers!' [...] It was a big step for us. And it was needed. People have to feel free in their own skin. For them to know you can talk about things. And then I can get your advice to change my way as well. [...] From there too we started calling people from organisations to come and talk to us. Our youth are there to translate, for us to take the information properly [increasing awareness of women's rights]. [...] They want us to be confident, they want us to do our thing, they want us to find our space, they want us to go out there to explore. Because there was so much to do, and there was so much in us that we didn't know. [...] I was feeling that they was seeing stuff in the family that they was thinking that is not right. So for those people, visitors to come and talk to us, it was for our all good. [It was] a big step. It was for us to know, like no, you are a lady, you are our mum, you are a wife, but you can be someone else as well. [...] That's why from there you can see families [from the community] start to break down in pieces, like a puzzle. Because the ladies now are okay, the ladies now have wings. The ladies think that 'I can fly'.*

With the support of the young people, the ladies' group claimed space within the church to facilitate intergenerational communication and to find out about their rights within wider British society. This proved to be transformational for many of the women in their personal lives, leading to traditional gender roles being contested and resisted, adopting new ways of dressing, and in some cases, women seeking divorces, in bids to achieve independence and relinquish oppressive couple relationships. The group provided a space in which to navigate the dialectical tension between novelty and stability. For those like Louise with insecure



immigration status, being part of the group was a form of 'cultural citizenship', struggling for 'a distinct social space' in which as racialised women/mothers with diverse migration paths, they were 'free to express themselves and feel at home' (Flores 2003: 88).

## Sharing (scarce) resources

*'A lot of things [are] killing people inside. The status... If you don't have status, doors are closed. It really make people [feel] really bad.'* (Amy)

Being part of a community with shared moral values created opportunities for accessing much-needed resources. The 'flip side' of being able to access often scarce resources was the expectation to help other individuals, or the church as an institution, by contributing one's own scarce resources. These two aspects of enacting belonging are discussed below.

### Accessing (scarce) resources: faith communities as a source of social capital

Kate formed connections relatively easily with members of her new church, and they were quick to offer material support as they became aware of her financial precarity, if not of her immigration status. The pastor let her know that '[i]f I'm ever stuck for bus fare, I should tell him. I have told him on a few occasions.' Additionally, Kate had made friends with two people, 'so if I'm ever stuck, I can borrow £10, £20, never more than that, in case I have to pay it back!' Kate reflected, 'It's those two people I can rely on. They've always been consistent. "If you need a lift to church, we'll come and get you." They know I go to food bank. [...] They went and got me some stuff.' Through these early relationships with members of her new church, Kate was able to access the resources she needed to relieve the pressure of living with no right to work and no recourse to public funds. Many participants shared stories of church members providing money or food.

In times of crisis, mothers identifying as Christian often turned to their church for material support, or even to a church with which they had only tenuous links. Explaining the precarity of their situation to the pastor would sometimes lead to calls on the congregation to help by offering money or a room in their home. When Christine and her children became homeless, having moved from one friend to another until the last friend moved abroad, she returned to the co-ethnic church she had attended some years previously and asked them for help. Not only did church members provide food and clothes for the children, but one

couple invited Christine and her children to move into a room in their flat in Ryeton: 'They let us use the living room too. They made us part of the family.' It was not unusual for mothers and children to move amongst various church members' homes, often all sharing one bedroom or the living room.

As Hirschman has argued, local (often but not exclusively co-ethnic) faith organisations play an important role as 'a major source of social and economic assistance for those in need' (2004: 1207). Whilst Hirschman's focus was on providing information and support to find paid employment, their function as a source of more immediate financial and material support is significant for mothers with no recourse to public funds and especially for those with no right to work. As such, participation in faith communities can be perceived as generating social capital (Foley and Hoge 2007: 5), understood as 'the ability of actors to secure benefits by virtue of membership in social networks or other social structures' (Portes 1998: 6; Bourdieu 1986). In this context, social capital originates in the 'bounded solidarity' of church members as a group of people 'faced with common adversities', leading to 'the observance of norms of mutual support, appropriable by individuals as a resource in their own pursuits' (Portes and Sensenbrenner 1993: 1324). This analysis fits particularly with co-ethnic (largely Pentecostal) churches, whose members have diverse migration trajectories but may share common experiences of racialisation and discrimination. Motivations of donors, whether church members or pastors, may be multiple (Portes 1998), as may the motivations of individuals embedding in faith communities who seek support. Small has argued (in his study of students' core discussant networks) that individuals 'specifically seek those in their network who possess a relevant resource' and that the prime motivation is the 'utility of the tie, rather than its affective character' (2013: 472). However, as Susanne Wessendorf and Jenny Phillimore have shown, the 'boundaries between instrumental and affective functions' are 'fuzzy', and social relations formed as part of practices of embedding in a new community often 'combine both' (2018: 3). Irrespective of the degree of instrumentality, it remains that the social capital developed through relations within faith networks can often be converted into material, financial and practical resources, without expectations of repayment in specified forms or timeframes.

Nevertheless, resources are limited and mothers' support needs often cannot be met, which challenges the view that participation in faith groups is primarily instrumental. Eva appreciated the help provided by individual church members whilst pointing out its sporadic nature: 'There is somebody that was helping us, giving us £10, £20. At that time, he was really helpful. Every week when he sees us in the church, he would give us money. But now he is travelling abroad.' Given the irregularity of financial support through church, and being aware of other 'ways of getting help'<sup>60</sup>, Eva had decided 'to not bother myself too much' with seeking help in this way. Similarly, June observed:

*Church doesn't really support, but even if they do it's just the one-off. How would they continue? You've got every minute, second of the day to live, isn't it, and they support you once. I think in their head they think you're okay. But there's so much you need to do. You've got bills to pay, you've got your kids. You don't go to people and begin to bother them. Every now and then, 'excuse me, you gave me £10 yesterday, can I get another one today?' It's weird, I wouldn't want to do that [...] I'd rather go to [a] charity.*

For June, the occasional help provided by church members was symbolic, rather than a sustainable means of paying bills or feeding the family. For some, the scarcity of practical resources within their faith community could feel dispiriting. After many months spent sofa surfing amongst friends and having been asked to move on, Sara had turned to church members for support with accommodation, but was deeply disappointed to find that 'none of them was able to come out and help with that', leaving Sara and her children with the only option of moving in to her parents' living room.

Accommodation provided by congregants was often a lifeline. Nevertheless, moving in with a church member created a host-guest relationship which could lead to tensions and reproduce unequal power relations. Identified as a problematic dynamic in the previous chapter on friendship, this was all the more pertinent when the relationship was not based on friendship or its underlying principle of equality, but rather was based on obligation or duty (whether faith-based or civic), reproducing dynamics of dependency and inequality in (immigration) status and needs. When Amy's parents cut off financial support to her, preventing her from renewing her visa, and her relationship broke down, her church

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<sup>60</sup> Eva was referring to various professionals/advisors in her network (see Chapter 8).

members stepped in to support her with accommodation, but at times these arrangements produced tensions:

*After two months, you know how people are, she started doing things bad to me. I just had to move from her to another church member. That one was really nice. We stayed in the house for two years. She was nice but [...] I just had to bring myself down, very low, all kinds of things I do, you make yourself to be like a slave so I don't get kick out with the child, because I don't have nowhere to go.*

Many mothers like Amy, recounting how they found shelter with church members when homeless, pointed out the limitations of members' willingness or ability to provide it, and the impact on relationships when this goodwill was used up. The contingency of this form of social capital emphasizes the precarity produced by insecure immigration status and mothers' vulnerability to ill treatment by those on whom they depend for day-to-day survival. Unequal power relations and practices of inclusion and exclusion were reproduced and embodied in the private spaces of church members' homes.

The social support of church leaders and members in the form of caring acts and emotional support was valued too. Amy appreciated the support of her 'church people' during the many stressful months of her son's illness: despite the demands of work, they would call her on the phone and would visit the family at home or at the hospital when they had the time. It reassured Amy that 'I have some people that care about my son': this was 'lessening the stress on me'. She told me: 'They are so lovely. They are like my family. It is really, really important, with their prayers and everything. That is what is keeping us moving. If not, things around us can make someone go mad.'

### Contributing scarce resources

Participating in a faith community is a two-way process: whilst mothers could ask for material and other forms of support, they were expected to contribute in various ways too. Expectations of conformity to such norms as a prerequisite for participation in the community were communicated by church leaders in the form of moral guidance. Mothers in precarious situations often accepted these expectations and participated in ways they could, such as Kate joining the cooking rota for her Bible study group. Alternatively, mothers without the means to contribute felt marginalised and at times resisted what they saw as church leaders' unreasonable expectations, for example by reducing their attendance at

services or moving to another church, or combining both strategies, as discussed earlier. Anna experienced her Pentecostal church as excessively demanding of congregants in terms of both money and time. Sitting on the sofa in her tiny studio flat, she reflected: 'I don't feel comfortable, because – number one, the mass is three to four hours... It's tiring.' She explained with a wry smile: 'They pray, they pray continuously, even if you don't want to pray now.' Anna, conversely, saw prayer as a personal practice, a conversation with God in quiet moments: 'If I want to pray now, God sees my mind.' Praying at the church seemed to her to be about 'showing off', a performance. She imitated the pastor dramatically announcing the various groups they had to pray for, and laughed self-consciously. 'It's good, but in my own view, they can be doing it once in a while, but not all the time. You might have to go to work or you want to do something. They want to consume everything from you for that day. This is my Sunday, it's for church. God is not as hard as that!' She elaborated on the practice of tithing:

*Anna: So they drag, drag, drag, pay, pay, pay. [...] They say you need to pay 10%.*

*Rachel: What do you do then?*

*Anna: That's why I don't go [often]. You have to show it.*

*Rachel: You have to show everybody?*

*Anna: You have to do it like this. It will be in envelope. And you come out and put it. The pastor will be standing...*

*Rachel: You could put a very small amount?*

*Anna: If you put, they will say, [imperiously] 'Some people is putting £2, £5!'*

*Rachel: But if that's all people can afford...*

*Anna: One time I was going, and I don't have money. That day I put I think £2. [Shouts] 'Some people are putting coins! 10%!'* [laughs] *You know what, that day, I was very upset, inside me, and I have that connection with God. This [£2] is what I have and I know it's very big. These people when they see it, they will think it's low, but that is what I have.*

Anna's account demonstrated the quandary faced by mothers with no recourse to public funds. Membership in a faith community is not a given: paying a weekly tithe may be a group norm and social obligation, enforced by shaming discourses, as a form of bordering within the church. Those without the means to contribute, at least at the rates expected by some church leaders, may be marginalised within or excluded from the church. Anna

offered a critique of such practices in the Pentecostal church she attended, troubled by church leaders' efforts to coerce church members to donate in a very public way, as well as what she felt were unreasonable demands on congregants' personal time. Ultimately, she resisted by reducing her attendance there and attending an Anglican church on other days.

Amy's church did not require congregants to pay a tithe, but without leave to remain she had felt excluded by her precarity and inability to contribute financially to her church:

*Even there, you can't have a sense of belonging. If you don't have... People will be bringing you down if you are not like them. There are some places, if you don't have [leave to remain], you don't have a say there. They are like, 'oh, what are you talking about?', if you are talking of money. It's when you belong, you will be able to work, you have money to contribute [that you can join in]. But if you cannot contribute, where other people are contributing, when you want to have a say, they will close short: 'What is she talking about? Can you contribute to what we are talking about?' [...] When you are in the midst of people who have their stuff [leave to remain], when they are talking, I don't even get to talk. We are discussing about things to improve that involve money. I'm not working. I don't have any benefits stuff coming that will make me be able to have some stuff. [...] That kind of thing, I always dodge myself. I don't feel able to talk. And it's led me to feel sad inside of me. Since I don't have no money, let me just keep my mouth. Some people, they might not feel like me. In the school I don't really talk like that. People might know you, but if you are not too close to them it's better. If you share your situation, people might use it against you. In the church, people might know my circumstances, but when they are talking, I just keep my mouth. [...] [If I were to] do things that are not right, that's when people are like, 'she does not have her status', and they want to use it.*

Amy felt that not having leave to remain and therefore not having money to contribute to church projects had marked her out as different, as 'not like them'. Church members had been dismissive of her when she attempted to contribute to discussions: with no money to contribute to church causes at that time, Amy felt bordered out of the inner church community, not seen as being worthy of sharing her views. The strong message communicated through church members' marginalisation of her led Amy to 'dodge myself' and 'just keep my mouth', embodying their silencing of her. Moreover, Amy was conscious that others could 'use' her status against her, which made her vulnerable. This became another reason to hold back from participating in discussions or plans: it was often safer to remain in the shadows.

Once she was granted residency rights, and was able to contribute to collections, Amy felt a much stronger sense of belonging to (and right to participate in) her church: 'Before, sometimes if I want to go to church if I don't have anything to give, I will have a guilty conscience, why will I go to church if I can't give an offering for God? So, now I have the confidence that if I want to go, I can give things for God, so it give me more confidence and joy and make me more happy – if I'm going, I'm happy.' She also perceived a difference in how church members interacted with her, which shaped her sense of self:

*Before, if you don't have stuff [residency rights/financial resources], you will be left out of stuff. But now they are inviting, they want you to be among. But before, sometimes, because I will pull myself away... it's not that they are the ones that will pull me away. Because when they meet in the church, people will contribute to make things to be all right, I don't have no money. But now I will be able to do a little bit to contribute. [...] I have confidence that okay, I belong there. Before I am putting myself aside. Now, at least the little I have, I contribute and so I have my confidence with them.*

Amy was conscious of how acquiring leave to remain, recourse to public funds and the right to earn an income were giving her the confidence to participate more actively in her faith network. Her change in status gave her permission to belong, in contrast to feeling excluded from discussions and decision-making when she had no leave to remain. Amy's ability to contribute financially to the church community strengthened her sense of belonging, and as a result she felt more accepted and respected by her church members. The social boundaries and "'community" politics' at play within the church were 'cross-cut by gender, race, religion, and class' (Silvey 2005: 144), but also, significantly, by immigration status. The embodiment of power relations enabled belonging but also created exclusions.

## Confiding in church leaders and church members

*[At church] If I don't really know you, I am a bit... guarded. I don't really like sharing personal things with people I don't really know that well. Because I don't know how they are going to judge me because of what I tell them. [...] Like, the new priest in this place, he is a bit strict! [...] I feel a bit scared of him, I don't know why. So I have not really opened up to him. Because there are some people, they don't really know what you are talking about, because they don't have experience of your needs. (Gemma)*

As discussed in previous chapters, disclosing needs is usually a prerequisite to accessing support, yet disclosing details of one's immigration status presents a risk. The tension between self-disclosure and privacy within relationships with church members not seen as

friends parallels the tension at work in friendships. Yet without the basis of social exchange present in friendships, there may be more need to be explicit about needs to justify a request for support. Trust may also be less established. Gemma's experiences of church members and leaders as insensitive to – and judgemental of – her son's special educational needs, coupled with anxiety around her family's deportability, meant that she tended not to confide in them, instead turning to one of a small number of trusted friends from outside of her church when she needed to talk.

Zoe confided in the priests at her church but avoided disclosing details of her private life to congregants, concerned that they may pass judgement. 'With the priests, it's very easy, they are listening to you, they are very, very helpful, they are kind,' Zoe told me, describing how they would call her regularly when she was going through a particularly difficult time, offering reassurance and support: "Don't worry, tomorrow is another day, be faithful, just pray." Conversely, confiding in church members about the breakdown of her marriage, for example, would 'be a little bit shame in our culture': 'It's no good to say to people [from church community], but you tell to only close, somebody who's very strong religiously, who's mature enough for that.' Whilst Zoe found the priests empathetic and supportive in relation to the challenges she faced as a solo mother with insecure immigration status, she was conscious that cultural notions of 'shame' could lead to her marginalisation by other congregants. Like other participants, Zoe found that her immigration status, intersecting with other dimensions of her life, constrained the development of trust within her faith network.

Similarly, Beth was cautious about getting close to other members of her co-ethnic Pentecostal church: 'After church I just go home. [...] There are some nice people, a lot of nice people, but – I don't know! You have to be careful as well. Somebody that goes to church might not be a good person. You have to be careful who you talk to, be careful who you disclose your personal issues to, who you trust your children with.' As discussed above, Beth and her children had moved house numerous times, each time joining a new church, which had affected the development of trusted support networks. She chose not to tell church members about her immigration status and NRPF condition:



*Because sometimes, you know, some people came in on a plateau of gold. They don't understand why you are suffering. Some people came here with their marriage partners, they got their NI number immediately, they can work, they've got proper houses, they are driving cars. And they don't understand why you've got kids and you're suffering. They'll be like, 'Is something wrong, are you a bad person?' [...] Some people just feel that if you have not got all those things, you are not really important, or maybe you are from a poor background. They will just think anything.*

Beth felt that her church members perceived physical signs of wealth and success as reflections of an individual's morally upstanding character, and a lack of such status symbols as indicative of poor character. This reflects the 'prosperity teaching' of some Pentecostal churches, which 'links faith and prayer with the expectation of material prosperity and success' (Burgess 2009: 257-8). Although university-educated herself, and from a well-off family, Beth was conscious of the current precarity of her situation resulting from her immigration status, and was anxious to avoid disclosing personal information that might generate negative judgements within her faith community about her character. Beth's perception of her co-congregants' relatively easy journey to residency rights, citizenship and success seemed to emphasize her own struggles and the apparent disparity between their status and her own, further problematising the development of interpersonal trust.

Emily was similarly wary of other church members. In the 'Interlude' preceding this chapter, she recounted efforts by a support worker from the local authority to persuade her to ask her church for material support, and explained her resistance to this: 'I don't want to go to church, the reason being, everyone would know my issue - you would not be treated the same.' Were she to share her immigration status with church members, Emily informed me, it would be passed on to others, resulting in her being 'labelled' and ostracised. Withholding personal information was necessary for Emily to protect her family not only from such 'gossip' but from potential exploitation of personal information to hurt or harm her or her children. Like Amy, quoted in the previous section, she was aware that sensitive information could be used against her. Emily's past experience of betrayal – to which she only alluded – had reduced her trust in others; she had resolved to withhold her immigration status from any other person, and had not told any friend or associate about it since moving to London. For women/mothers with insecure immigration status, social capital, when mobilised in the

form of social control within specific networks, could have negative consequences (Portes 1998) which undermine the development of trust and feelings of belonging.

## Claiming (physical and virtual) faith spaces

Faith groups can play an important role as physical or virtual spaces for enacting belonging. This was apparent through practices such as cleaning the church, turning to a church as a refuge from homelessness, and embedding in online faith spaces.

### Cleaning the church

Volunteering to clean the church was a particularly gendered form of embedding in faith networks, notably in Catholic churches. Alongside another female congregant, Gemma used to 'sweep and tidy' her church once a week, keen to maintain a practice she had been brought up with in her country of origin, although her pregnancy had brought an end to this act of belonging. Likewise, inspired by a fellow church member she had observed cleaning her church after mass one day, Ariane, who had been granted leave to remain some years previously, had decided to adopt this practice, making time every week to 'wash and mop', 'because I believe! The Lord touch me. Because I clean his house, he cleans my house.' She expressed her admiration for her co-volunteer, proclaiming: 'She's there every – single – day!' Through her narrative, Ariane let me know that for both women, it was a way of giving thanks for good fortune. 'She has been doing that more than ten years, every single day. She cleans the toilet, she cleans the chewing gum from the floor, she does everything.' Regularly cleaning the church as a volunteer can be read not only as a continuation of an established (gendered) cultural practice in the country of origin (Hirschman 2004), but also as performativity, signalling a high degree of religiosity (Bell 1999). It was also a means of claiming space to participate in community life and create belonging when opportunities for other forms of volunteering or paid employment were, for some mothers, closed or limited.

### Claiming faith spaces as a refuge

Worship communities have been recognised as 'a place of refuge, a "haven in a heartless world"', where individuals who have migrated, and their children, can 'find cultural as well as spiritual sustenance' (Foley and Hoge 2007: 11). However, there has been little recognition of the spatiality of faith organisations and their role as a more literal form of refuge. Some years previously, after months of sofa-surfing ('six weeks here, three months

there'), and having been told by social workers and housing officers that she was ineligible for housing support, Sofia and her young sons had made a room in a church their home:

*It was tiny, it was cold. [...] [it] was like a storage room. My son has asthma; now he's okay but at the time when he was younger it was very bad. So throughout the winter he was coughing, it was hospitals and so on. [Previously, after dropping children off at school] I used to go to the church. That's why after, the church helped me. That's where we found a bit of stability, with the church, to be honest. They helped us with food, clothing. It wasn't just myself in that position – other people as well didn't have their papers.*

As Sofia explained, she first formed a connection with the church when, after dropping her older boys at school, which was at a distance from where they were then staying, she and her preschooler used to pass the time at the church near the school. When they found themselves homeless, it was the church that Sofia turned to. The family transformed the unlikely space of the storage room into a space of sanctuary in 'an otherwise hostile territory' (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Ruiz 2013: 253), a 'place of refuge' (Foley and Hoge 2007) and temporary 'source of shelter from the stresses' (Foner and Alba 2008) of what their life in the UK had become. The church was a last-resort abode, a tiny and cold space which led to health problems for Sofia's son. It became the family's home for a year.

For Anna, attending night vigils at churches in the vicinity had become part of her survival strategy when she and her then two-year-old daughter became homeless. Looking back on this gruelling period before she had felt able to approach the local authority for support, Anna explained to me that churches hosting night vigils would be kept warm and were therefore a safe space to sleep. 'You will pray, pray, pray, pray, pray.' Sometimes she would leave her daughter at her friend's flat; at other times she would take her with her. When her daughter fell asleep, Anna would 'put something down' on the floor to make her comfortable. At 6 o'clock, it was time to be on the move. She avoided sharing anything of her situation with people at the church. For Anna, as for Sofia, finding shelter in churches emerged less from the conversion of social capital realised through faith-based relationships than from being resourceful, identifying safe spaces in the local landscape and reclaiming them to survive.

## Embedding in online faith spaces

With a young baby who did not enjoy going outside, Gemma spent much of her time in the family's two small rooms in a shared house. Over the course of our many conversations, mostly in their small home (Gemma perched on her bed, me on the only chair, baby Joe cradled in Gemma's arms, playing with toys or taking his first tentative footsteps holding on to the bed) I learned that Gemma nevertheless maintained strong friendships with close friends and was deeply embedded in faith networks, achieved primarily through her use of Facebook, WhatsApp and other online networks. As she showed me, faith communities are created not only in physical spaces but also in online spaces. Gemma countered her family's marginalisation in physical faith spaces through her active participation in online faith communities, exchanging not only emotional but at times material support with individuals in her country of origin and other parts of the world. In these forums, sometimes numbering many thousands of members, Gemma explained, individuals could disclose their situations, make 'prayer requests' and seek financial or material support. The latter were managed through an administrator, and people asking for help could shield their identities. Alternatively, people could become 'friends' online and communicate directly with each other.

*There's a lady, I've not met her in person, but she is like a sister to me. Her mum is dying [...]. There are people who pray for her. She is becoming depressed. I sent her a friendship request. [...] We became very, very close. That was just like, 'whenever you need someone to talk to, just [contact me]'. Even at midnight, I will just talk to her. Three days ago, I spoke to her – I was asking about her mum. I lost somebody very close to me, so when I see somebody [in that situation], I will just feel their pain, that connection of losing someone close to you. [...] So I was just telling her that there is nothing God cannot do. We can pray and God will answer our prayer. We've been praying together [on the phone]. [...] Me and her, we are a bit close somehow. Whenever she is online, she will send me a message. Whenever I am online, I will send her a message, we will talk.*

Developing supportive faith networks online was important to Gemma: she felt able to communicate openly with other women for whom, like herself, their faith was part of their identity and signalled shared values. 'Caring through a screen' about and for members of online faith networks provided flexibility in developing connections and negotiating ways of sharing material resources and emotional support. Online forums (based on faith,

mothering or both) provided valued spaces for mutual confiding for mothers with precarious status and access to the internet.

### Faith as a personal practice

*Music helps me. The worries coming, the music calms me down. The aspiration of Christian music – the hoping songs – God is still there, God can help you, just calm down. Do not fear, do not worry. This music is really good. (Amy)*

The first time I arrived at Amy's home, majestic singing emanated from a gospel choir on the TV. She explained that 'the hoping songs' were one of the ways in which her faith brought her comfort and allayed her status anxiety. Whilst attending faith groups was important to many women/mothers as a means of enacting relational belonging and accessing diverse forms of support, 'doing faith' was often seen as a fundamentally personal practice and a relationship with a higher being. The intimacy of the direct relationship provided a sense of hope and contributed to personal resilience in the context of extreme precarity and sometimes limited material support from church members.

Pondering as she created her sociogram, Emily reflected, 'Though I go to church, I don't really get any support from the church, but it is part of my life, so I will still put down church, on top. I put God, of course, he's been my main strength.' Although Emily felt that 'he's made me go through a whole lot', she emphasised that she would be 'lost in the world' without him. Her faith gave her hope that her immigration status would be resolved:

*Emily: I know he said, when we believe that we will be able to achieve and work towards it, we will be able to get what we want. Where I am now, I've been through it [applying for 'leave to remain'] three times and it didn't work in my life. If I had lost hope, I wouldn't still get what I'm getting now [accommodation through Section 17 support]. When I saw [local authority support worker] several times, she's turning me back... If I had still believed I did not deserve it, do I have to go again for the fourth time? But I still believed.*

*Rachel: So your faith has given you hope and determination to keep going?*

*Emily: And then I went and I did get help. Though I have spoken to so many people they put me through to go there, but... it was the favour of God that got me where I am. [...] I think it's the faith and the belief that has got me where I am.*

Emily's belief was not only in God but in her own 'deservingness' (Berg and Fiddian Qasmiyeh 2018, Wernesjö 2020), giving her the determination to make repeated applications to the Home Office for leave to remain and requests for local authority support,

despite experiencing multiple rejections and hostility from certain frontline workers as a result of the government's 'hostile environment' strategy. Emily reflected that her belief had made her stronger: it had not helped her 'in physical items', but it had helped her 'build up'. Emily avoided confiding in church members, instead 'telling God my troubles and my burdens.' Whilst she felt that communal worship was important to '[make] your faith work for you', her faith remained a strongly personal practice, in that her dialogues were with God rather than with 'human beings':

*Emily: Any time you come out from church you feel relieved, you feel less burden, you feel like you've given your burden to someone who is able to carry it for you. But when you tell human beings your burdens, would they be able to carry it for you? Cos they've all got their own burdens.*

*Rachel: So it feels like a safe place to take your burdens, and let go of them.*

*Emily: Yes. Although you go, you don't tell the head pastor, 'oh this is what I am going through', cos [pastor cannot provide financial support]. But when you tell God about your problems, that problem can be solved one way or the other. It will not come straightforward, though it's gonna come bit by bit, but it will still make a difference.*

The church mattered to Emily as a shared physical faith space for the act of prayer. As a source of support, church leaders or members were less significant. Greater emotional support was to be found in communal prayer, which provided temporary relief from 'all your worries'.

Likewise, Amy focused on faith as a personal connection with God; this was crucial to her as a source of hope for the future in a context of extreme precarity. Attending services was not in itself evidence of religiosity or a productive practice, Amy explained:

*People that really believe in God, will believe that all things are possible, no matter how tough the situation will be, you still have God. As God has said, weeping will last a long time, but joy comes in the morning. That morning is what I always hope for. So, I will be praying that joy will locate me! Some people in the church are just going to church to warm the bench. They may be in the church, but their mind is far away. When your spirit is connected with God, that is when solution can come to any problem. I so much believe in God. A lot of things that look impossible become possible. [...] So God is really good. No matter how hard the situation, God is really good.*

Amy cited recent events in her life that were, for her, evidence that genuine faith would be repaid. Like Emily, she felt that support emanated less from pastors or church members and more from personal faith, which was a crucial source of hope in a hostile environment.

Eva took this even further, presenting God as the 'person' she 'can run to' in times of crisis. Unable to confide in (and therefore seek support from) friends, family or church members about her immigration status or other personal needs, Eva told me that God was her confidant and source of emotional support:

*So far, God has been our comforter, because he has been the only person we can run to in times like this. He is the number one person we can go to, and hand everything on to him before we go to seek for help from any other person. I believe he will touch those people to help us, and they will do that. Instead of telling human being who will go and gossip us, that wouldn't add any value, that wouldn't change the situation, it's better you talk to God.*

As Eva explained, talking to God felt safer since there was no risk of personal information being shared with others. God-as-confidant was thus a means of resolving the problem of trust. Eva, Amy and Emily, like other participants, perceived their faith as an essentially personal practice, and as such was more significant to their sense of hope and wellbeing than the rituals associated with church attendance or the power-inflected (or resource-poor) relationships with church members or pastors. For these women, 'doing faith' took place 'within the smallest and intimate circles, in personal human situations, in pianissimo' (Weber 1958: 134).

## Concluding remarks

For most of the mothers with insecure immigration status and no recourse to public funds in this study, faith itself and faith-based networks played a central role in developing a sense of belonging and accessing forms of social support. Focusing on the role of diverse Christian churches in mothers' support networks in Ryetown, this chapter has shown some of the dynamics of, and motivations for, 'doing faith'. Joining and actively participating in a church can be a vital means for mothers to strengthen their sense of social identity in an often hostile environment. In the context of multiple forms of exclusion, practices of 'embedding' constitute forms of enacting relational and spatial belonging, from attending services to taking part in groups and cleaning the church. Yet, as I have also shown, online faith spaces

can offer alternative opportunities for 'doing faith' relationally, especially when feeling marginalised in physical faith spaces.

Faith networks can play an essential role as a source of social capital and hence access to essential resources: church members may provide accommodation, money or food when mothers are destitute, in situations of crisis and face homelessness. Mothers may also turn to churches as physical places to reclaim faith spaces as refuges when they have nowhere else to shelter. This chapter has also shown the specificity of the dialectical tensions that mothers must navigate within faith-based networks – between privacy and openness, and between autonomy and connectedness – by highlighting the contingency of these networks as a source of social capital, the problem of trust and the context of unequal power, presenting the risk of social control and exclusionary practices. As I have argued, 'doing faith' also generates support and belonging as an intimate space, a personal practice and a vital source of hope.



## Interlude: 'At least you're in that bubble'

*Everything went [in] his name. Literally I depended on him for everything – which also took a toll on our relationship, because he took advantage of that. So, we then got married, because of the documents, and all of that. [...] He still was taking advantage, because my status was 'no recourse to public funds', so that still, I had the right to be here but still made it difficult. I could work but I had a young child, so in reality it was very difficult, and I was going through problems in my relationship, but still I had to stay [with him]. I did approach the council a few times, anonymously, and they refused to help me because I had no access to public funds.*

*So it was very difficult because even though I had residence here, because of having no access to public funds, I had to rent a room but I couldn't afford it, so it was always that barrier. Even though at that time I had residence because of him, still I had that barrier. It was very difficult and depressing in a way. My life was always very... just home – and him. And in terms of work, I could have worked, and I did a few times but – childcare, it wasn't easy. It was always that barrier. [...]*

*It was difficult, at least in my case he took advantage, not only verbally. In terms of making me feel inadequate in this country. 'You're here because of me.' [...] It's those barriers. In terms of going to the kids' school, when you have to register at the kids' school, he would have to do it, I would have to be the second parent. Even housing, the house was only [in] his name, I was portrayed as a child. So as an adult, it's not a great feeling, to be quite honest, to be going through those difficulties.*

*But I actually felt more, when I separated, and my residence had expired, that's when everything... [Until then] I had a home, ex-partner worked, it wasn't perfect, but at least you're in that bubble, so you have that tiny bit of protection. I felt it when I separated, and by then my residence expired. So I couldn't re-apply through my partner, which is what everyone does. I had to do it by myself. So that's when problems started. [...]*

*[Until then] He was working, hence why I said I was living in a bubble before the separation. Even though it wasn't great, but it was okay, because I still had food, I had a husband, I had a home. Even though everything was in his name. It made him feel very powerful. I remember once or twice, he even threw me out, saying 'this is my house'. [...] So you do feel, 'what am I doing?' – you do question yourself. It has all to do with the legal part as well. [...] I don't know [how] I coped with it! As I said, I was living in this bubble, where I... I can't really recall how I coped. All I know is that we had three kids, and the time just went by, time went past. To me, I was married, I was home, and I had no choice but to be there, because if I was to step out, I would get nothing. [...] I was dependent on him. Even if I worked, I wouldn't be able to afford private housing, especially with children... So, just stay here, stay quiet, just be there, because no-one will help you.*

*[...] Having children, it's not just the fact of having children but being so young, and knowing that I could have done more with my life and I didn't. But I think I had barriers there, so I just*

*thought 'let me just be a wife'. [...] I saw myself as just a mum and a wife, and I didn't like it. But I felt like, it's not that I had a choice or no choice, but I thought what else could I do? What else can I do? I had no documents in this country, I would not be able to get a job. Because when my residence finished, I am not with him, because my asylum was refused anyway. So I better just stay with him.*

*(Sofia)*

## Chapter 7: Doing coupledness

Becoming part of a (caring) couple relationship may be a reason to move to, or make one's home in, a new country. For women with insecure status and NRPF in the UK and without (supportive) kin networks nearby, a couple relationship may be valued as a source of emotional and financial security – a 'haven' in a hostile environment. Whilst the instrumental dimension should be acknowledged, as in any type of relationship, and irrespective of immigration status, utility may not be a conscious motivation for embarking on a relationship. Nevertheless, forming and nurturing a couple relationship may be experienced as necessary 'work' to sustain access to essential resources. An intimate partner may also facilitate the development of early networks (Charsley et al. 2016), supporting embedding practices at multiple levels. 'Doing coupledness', particularly in the form of marriage, can be understood as a means of 'doing citizenship' by exercising belonging in collectivities at different levels. Within faith institutions and local co-ethnic communities, for example, marriage as a heteronormative institution may engender social acceptance.

'Doing coupledness' may also be necessary to provide evidence that a relationship is 'genuine and subsisting' in the eyes of the state, in order to satisfy increasingly exigent immigration laws and rules when applying for a fiancé or spouse visa or to renew leave to remain (Carter Thomas 2020). A couple relationship can thus be significant as a route to acquiring 'leave to remain', whether in and of itself or by becoming a mother, and ultimately to British citizenship as a legal status (Levy and Lieber 2011). As noted in Chapter 2, since having a parent with British or (until Brexit) EU citizenship (or indefinite leave to remain) can be a route to citizenship for a child, becoming the mother of a child with a British father may help pave the way to 'leave to remain'. Beyond questions of legal status, coupledness as a route to becoming a mother is significant in opening up possibilities of belonging: mothering and shared or solo parenting practices – often within the context of some form and stage of couple relationship – can be understood as forms of enacting belonging, as discussed in Chapter 4.

Couple relationships usually foster trust, at least initially: practices of intimacy and acts of care encourage mutual self-disclosure and deep 'knowing' (Jamieson 1999, 2011, Gabb

2008, Giddens 1992). The sense of closeness generated by intimacy can contribute to ontological security and strengthen an individual's sense of self. Yet self-disclosure produces vulnerability, blurring the line between care and control. Couple relationships are contingent (Giddens 1992): women/mothers with no or limited residency rights and NRPF are at increased risk of coercive control and abuse (Menjívar and Salcido 2002, Raj and Silverman 2002, Silverman and Raj 2014, Dudley 2017, Anitha 2015, Regan et al. 2007). Regulations relating to fiancé and marriage visas may increase dependency and gender inequality, as Fernandez (2013: 280) has argued in relation to similar legislation in Denmark, as does the loss of leave to remain. Women/mothers with insecure immigration status may be coerced into a relationship, abused within a relationship, forced to become pregnant, abandoned, or prevented from leaving a relationship.

Building on the arguments of the preceding chapters, I examine how power can play out in the context of intimacy intersecting with gendered and immigration status-based inequalities. I show that the structural constraints of insecure immigration status and NRPF exacerbate inherent dialectical tensions in couple relationships between self-disclosure and vulnerability, and also between care/protection and control. I argue that insecure immigration status and NRPF in the context of hostile environment policies shape couple formation and intimacy practices, putting women at increased risk of, as well as greater vulnerability to, abuse. Furthermore, I show that whilst separation may lead to safety from abusive partners/fathers for women/mothers and children with NRPF, it can also exacerbate financial, material and legal precarity. I explore how women/mothers navigate the above tensions through the following types of intimate practices: getting together/moving in; 'holding' conflict; contesting inequalities, resisting exploitation and abuse; and sharing emotional and material support.

## Getting together/moving in

Insecure immigration status shapes couple formation, and in some cases accelerates commitment, as Shanthi Robertson (2019) has shown in her work on the 'intimate chronomobilities' of young migrants in Australia. Getting together with a partner with leave to remain or British citizenship promises the possibility of emotional and financial security and a potential pathway to regular status and permanent residency. Conversely, the

inherently unequal immigration status of partners creates vulnerability. This creates (or intensifies) the 'rationality dialectic' between affection and instrumentality, or 'romance' and 'rationality' (Baxter and Scharp 2015) which, I argue, produces a tension between dynamics of care and control.

This was apparent in the case of Sofia, quoted in the Interlude above. The rejection of her asylum application as a young teenager in the 1990s, her consequent homelessness and deportability, the language barrier and her experiences of racism and bullying at school made Sofia feel isolated, depressed and anxious about the future. She found solace in Tomas, whom she'd met through relatives and who quickly became her boyfriend. Despite having 'nothing in common', Sofia felt he was the only person she could talk to. Five years older than her, he would pick her up from school and show her around London: she recalled that 'he would make me feel good, make me laugh', and she would forget about the problems she was going through at school and home. Sofia felt safe with Tomas: he understood her immigration situation so she did not feel a need to hide who she was or where she was from. They became a couple, 'not because I loved him, or anything – it was just because he was there, in the right place at the right time.' Tomas provided a haven from everyday forms of exclusion and marginalisation. He spoke her language, and sympathized with her sense of dislocation as a teenager who was new to the country and spoke little English: he provided much-needed emotional support. Sofia became pregnant, and, with the encouragement of her mum, keen that she regularise her status, moved in with Tomas, and they got married. As an EU citizen, he was entitled to support from the state which Sofia, in her own right, was not. He provided shelter, domestic space and a means to belong – as a couple, as a mother and as part of wider society. Yet Tomas's caring behaviours changed as he became increasingly controlling, exploiting Sofia's dependency on him (discussed later in this chapter). 'I don't want to say he took advantage, of course,' reflected Sofia, then added, 'but I think he preyed on that situation.' As Sofia's account illustrates, not only can insecure immigration status accelerate the formation of the couple relationship, but also this can generate a pervasive tension between care and control. 'Doing coupledness' in relationships characterised by the intersection of gendered and status-based inequalities requires women to find ways of managing this unsafe tension.

Women/mothers without leave to remain have very limited scope for action, and may embark on a couple relationship reluctantly as a last resort measure. Dynamics of care and control may become blurred and autonomy lost as the relationship progresses. When Kate's visa expired and her application to extend it was rejected, the need to regularise her status became a constant concern. Friends and family members encouraged her to 'sort [her] papers out' by finding a partner with UK citizenship or at least indefinite leave to remain, but Kate was determined to avoid going 'down that route'. She did not want to 'get involved with a man' as a means of obtaining leave to remain, being mindful of the 'horror stories' she had heard 'of women being with men just for papers, and how the men treat them', making them 'do demeaning stuff'. Kate valued her independence and did not want to get into a relationship based on unequal immigration statuses and rights. However, as the years went by, with the implementation of the government's hostile environment policies in the 2010s, Kate felt increasingly vulnerable. After further unsuccessful attempts to regularise her status, she was now forced to report monthly to her local police station. After years of sofa-surfing amongst friends and relatives, she returned to live in her sister's household, but felt exploited by both her sister and her cash-in-hand employer. Being subjected to violence at the hands of other members of the family, Kate's situation began to feel 'desperate'. She now felt compelled to consider alternative routes to regularise her status. Seeking advice led to introductions to potential partners, and ultimately to Terence:

*We started talking on the phone, he knew about my situation, he understood everything. [...] I figured, 'Oh God, maybe this is the person you've sent to rescue me, to help me.' And for the first time in my life, I just wanted to not think; I would love somebody to think for me. [...] I was always constantly stressed, on edge. [...] I just needed a place to escape, and [...] he had his own place. He said to me he understood everything. I opened up to him about so many things on so many levels. He said, 'Why don't you just come and move in?' And I'm like, 'Are you sure?' Usually I would question it, cos I'm always an independent person. I didn't question it, I just said, 'Are you sure?' He said, 'yeah, yeah, yeah'. So I felt like, this is going somewhere. I don't know, I just needed rescuing. I just needed a place to lie down and there wouldn't be arguments 24/7. [...] And he knew everything. So I moved in.*

Kate's decision to move in with Terence, an EU citizen from West Africa, created a tension for her between autonomy and dependence. Given the deterioration in her personal circumstances, the relationship offered a means of escape as well as an opportunity to resolve her insecure immigration status. Terence at first behaved in caring ways: he wanted

her 'to relax', would cook for her, and would listen as she opened up about the problems she faced. Yet as she had anticipated, this would be a relationship of dependence, based on her relative powerlessness in the face of her immigration status. Whilst moving in with Terence had felt like a step forward in her journey to acceptance and belonging, the protection and care he appeared to offer, and the apparent trust between them, were not to endure. The relationship developed into one of control based on unequal legal statuses and rights and, from Terence's perspective, gendered cultural norms. The ideal of the 'pure relationship' of mutual self-disclosure and equality (Giddens 1992) did not reflect Kate's reality: his early disclosures now seemed to have been 'calculated' and inauthentic, designed to create dependency and gain control. This will be further discussed later on.

For some participants, couple formation was precipitated or obstructed by racialisation, racism or other forms of prejudice. Sofia identified her experiences of racism at school, combined with her mother's racialised if pragmatic views ('my mum said it's best for you to get married because he's European'), as factors accelerating her relationship with Tomas. Others experienced prejudice within the family as a barrier to couple formation. Kate's sister was against her relationship with Terence, who, although Black, was of a different cultural background to their family. Amy's family, strongly opposed to her relationship with her former partner because of his different faith and national background, ostracised her when she became pregnant. Some participants had internalised racialised views of gender roles, which they critiqued. Louise described 'African men' – although 'not all of them' – as 'so bossy, they are so demanding', doing 'ladies' stuff in the way like it's not right', and suggested that 'most of African ladies they don't know that they have a voice, they don't know that they have the right to say no!' Anna expressed a desire to meet and marry a white man, 'because they are caring. They are treating their woman like a woman! That is great!', contrasting this (idealised) perception with what she described as the culture in her country of origin whereby men were likely to have several wives or partners, creating emotional distress and depression amongst women.

Whilst most of the participants in my study formed couple relationships once in the UK, a small number had met their partners previously; the couple relationship had therefore shaped their migration trajectory and immigration status before moving to the UK.

Simultaneously, the couple relationship was *shaped by* individuals' migration journeys and status: partners' unequal statuses affected couple dynamics and everyday interactions. Emily had met her partner, an EU citizen living in the UK, in her country of origin and had been granted a fiancé visa; after their marriage this was extended to five years, allowing her to work. Over time, the relationship became rocky. Not realising she was pregnant, they separated, and Emily moved in with a friend in London and found a new job. The pregnancy took them both by surprise. Emily's ex-husband was uninvolved as a father from the start, and refused to support his daughter's application for a passport. Parenting alone, Emily later became ill; temporarily unable to work and therefore struggling to support herself and her child, she found she was not entitled to state support because of the conditions of her visa. Meeting her new partner John was a lifeline: he was happy to co-parent Emily's daughter; they rented a flat together and later had a baby. However, the combination of Emily's visa expiring and her later separation from John created a highly precarious situation. In the context of the government's hostile environment strategy, Emily's attempts to renew her leave to remain were rejected, which meant she was not allowed to work or access mainstream state support. Unable to pay the rent, Emily and her children were evicted and became homeless. The stringency of the hostile policies, intersecting with her dependency on, and the breakdown of, the couple relationships, created indefinite precarity for Emily and her children.

Hostile environment policies have made marriage in the UK increasingly subject to suspicion from the Home Office. Lilia met Karim during her second stay in the UK as a student, and knew she wanted to commit to a life together: 'He was ready to take responsibilities. He was working, he got his indefinite [leave to remain], everything.' Karim was from a similar cultural background; he represented stability and offered a caring partnership, and was a British citizen. Marriage appeared to present a relatively straightforward pathway to 'indefinite leave to remain' for Lilia, and ultimately British citizenship. Yet this was not to be the case, as their marriage was deemed by the authorities not to be genuine. Having married under Islamic law, they later married under UK civil law, but when it came to renewing Lilia's residency permit, the Home Office 'wouldn't believe it was a love marriage – [they thought it was] just for papers'. Incensed by the Home Office's refusal to accept that their marriage was genuine, Lilia was keen to impress on me how wrong the authorities had



been in their judgement, showing me through her anecdotes how strong and mutually supportive their relationship was, and had been since the start. The Home Office's rejection of Lilia's application to renew her leave to remain meant she was required to 'report' every fortnight whilst the legal process unfolded.

## 'Holding' conflict

Insecure immigration status and hostile policies intersect with gendered roles to shape couple relationships and intimate practices and communication. Participants in my study described having to 'hold' tensions and conflict as they arose, in efforts to resolve them and protect the relationship. After several years of struggling to survive with minimal support networks and no leave to remain, scraping together a living through cash-in-hand work, Anna met Michael, originally from her country of origin. After 'courting' for six months, Anna moved in with him, and they later married. As an EU citizen, he sponsored her application for leave to remain, but, as tough new legislation took effect under the hostile environment strategy, her application was rejected: 'The Home Office said they didn't believe the marriage,' Anna explained. She became pregnant and they had a daughter. But the expense and stress of the process and the impact of further rejections of 'leave to remain' renewal applications put pressure on the relationship. Michael started drinking and would become verbally abusive. Conscious of her precarious immigration status and her dependency on him, Anna would remain stoical, striving to cope with his abusive behaviour: 'Anything he does, I will just try to hold it, keep calm, so that I can continue with the relationship.' Michael informed her that he would be working on a contract outside of London, which she accepted, keen to construct a shared image of their marriage as being based on trust (Duncombe and Marsden 1993). When he stopped coming home, she tried to persuade him to return, but then he stopped answering his phone, leaving Anna with no way of finding him. Her situation became increasingly urgent: with no income, Anna and their baby daughter would have nowhere to live and no means to survive. Michael's abandonment of them signified losing the basis of her belonging claims as part of a couple, both emotionally and as a still-hoped-for route to legal 'leave to remain' (Yuval-Davis 2006, Lister 2011). 'So he just left... Even the child, he didn't do the passport for her,' Anna reflected. Any hopes of being granted leave to remain for herself through UK citizenship for

her daughter were lost when she realised Michael would not be coming back. Sustained emotion work (Hochschild 1979) in 'holding' conflict had not been enough to save the relationship; Anna was left in a highly precarious position and with full responsibility for parenting.

For Talia, in a vulnerable situation when she met Dan, the couple relationship had promised security and support, but their unequal statuses created (inter)dependencies which exacerbated Talia's vulnerability. They became a couple quickly and Dan asked Talia to move in with him. When she became pregnant, however, he retreated from the couple relationship and told her she had to move out, claiming the neighbours would complain about the noise of a new baby. Talia stayed with a friend temporarily, but when this was no longer possible, Dan agreed she could return. He claimed to be happy to become a father, but after the birth of their son, his behaviour became erratic and hostile at times. Talia developed ways of protecting herself and their son from Dan's verbally abusive and rejecting behaviours: she and the baby would go out for walks in the park when he became angry, to 'let him forget what he's saying'. When Dan again told Talia she had to leave his home, she managed to find an acquaintance to stay with, taking their son with her: 'I say I have to do it my way. I can't rely on this man. At least he's a father, that's fine. For the future of [our son], I leave his dad.' Talia found cash-in-hand work, saved money and sought legal advice to regularise her immigration status. She continued to communicate with Dan, ensuring he maintained regular contact with their son to build a relationship. Whenever Dan failed to make the agreed financial contributions for their son, Talia would call or text him to make sure he fulfilled his responsibilities. In the context of Dan's volatile behaviour, Talia navigated the dialectical tension between autonomy and connectedness within and beyond the couple relationship by accepting it was over but maintaining communication with him (despite the challenges of this at times) to protect the father-son relationship and to ensure Dan continued to support them financially, as well as by finding connection and support through other members of her support network.

Although she was granted 'indefinite leave to remain' prior to the implementation of the Hostile Environment strategy, Louise's experiences illustrate how insecure immigration status shapes 'doing coupledness'. Having to sofa-surf amongst friends when she and her

husband were evicted, whilst still awaiting news of their asylum application, Louise discovered she was pregnant. This led to tensions in their relationship: Nathaniel was unenthusiastic and started 'acting funny', and arguments and 'misunderstandings' became frequent. Louise was worried that he would not be supportive when the baby arrived. Their shared space of home had been disrupted, and Louise was taking more of a decision-making role as her networks widened. Feeling that their relationship was going 'to pieces, like a puzzle', she suggested they needed 'a break'. The couple relationship remained important as a means of securing leave to remain in the UK, and there were simultaneous pressures from their co-ethnic faith community to stay together. Yet despite these structural and cultural constraints, Louise felt their de facto separation was necessary. They decided to continue to perform the role of the 'perfect' couple and family to avoid the disapproval of their community and to maintain their belonging claims, and went on to have another child.

*So I say, 'Okay, people won't know what's going on, let's just be a couple for outside.' Even till now, people don't know, people go, 'ah, that couple, that family is perfect', but it's like an on-and-off relationship. When we are fine, good; when we are not fine, good. You know what, [...] let me be there with my children, let me be there, let me raise them. But he is there, he is around there, more often he come in the house with present, food and stuff. Yeah, he's a good dad, he's a good man, he take care of his children, he's good dad. Now I am on my two feet, I have my document, I have my passport. For me to be in the training, learning, doing volunteering, it make me feel like it get me ready for me, then I can do something in my life.*

For Louise, her relationship with Nathaniel continued to be significant as both a route to legal citizenship and a 'political project' to construct belonging to her local co-ethnic and church community (Yuval-Davis 2006). She negotiated conflict in the couple relationship in the context of the precarity of insecure immigration status to enact belonging at multiple levels. Coupleness as both the act of marriage and the ongoing performance of the role of the ideal couple and family – a shared 'cover story' (Jamieson 1999: 487) – enabled recognition and social acceptance. Working to resolve their differences and find a new way of 'doing' coupledness which worked for both of them was important to Louise. She perceived Nathaniel as a 'good man', recognising that he continued to provide emotional and material support and to play his part as a 'good dad'.

## Contesting inequalities, resisting exploitation and abuse

Women with insecure immigration status are at particular risk of exploitation and abuse in couple relationships where they are dependent on their partner financially, for shelter and potentially for their immigration status. Even if leave to remain is not contingent on, or hoped for via, the couple relationship, insecure immigration status can render women vulnerable, since partners may exploit their deportability to control and abuse them for their own ends, coercing them to stay in the relationship by making threats to report them to the authorities, or claiming they would not be entitled to any help or support from organisations (Anitha 2010, 2011, 2015, Dudley 2017, Menjívar and Salcido 2002). Women encounter multiple barriers to seeking help and to exiting an abusive relationship, all the more so if they have insecure status. Participants in my study who had been subjected to abuse demonstrated resistance and resilience in their everyday actions within and following the ending of their couple relationships.

Reflecting on the early days of living with Terence, Kate identified early signs of his controlling behaviours, from wanting her 'to be there 24/7', expecting her to ask permission to go to the shop, and calling her to demand an explanation if she was late home from work. He then began to coerce her into sexual activity against her will. 'There were times when I didn't want to be intimate with him, and he would make me feel guilty,' Kate recalled, sitting on the bed she now shared with her young son in their tiny room in the HMO. 'He would tell me [that] where he's from, women don't refuse their men. And stuff like that. Sometimes you just have to give in...' This led to Kate becoming pregnant; Terence displayed indifference to her pregnancy. 'He was like, "If you wanna keep it, keep it; if you don't want to keep it, just get rid of it,"' Kate told me, adding, 'His attitude wasn't too overwhelming.' She was worried by his disregard for their future baby, and his increasing hostility and lack of care towards her when she was pregnant. When Kate went into labour, and following the birth of their son, the emotional abuse escalated, with Terence using every opportunity to belittle and humiliate her.

As well as controlling her movements, checking her phone and cutting her off from her friends, Terence criticised Kate's everyday practices, from cooking and cleaning to washing

their baby, undermining her identity as a woman, partner, friend and mother. In his eyes, Kate reflected, 'my food was a problem, sex was a problem, my cleaning was a problem. So everything as a woman that you think as a woman, you could... okay, if he wasn't enjoying himself in the bedroom, I know I could cook; if cleaning up, no, I couldn't do that either. So I was not good at anything. So being a woman, you can't sex, you can't cook, you can't clean, you can't look after the baby... it's like, where do you fit as a woman?' Targeting every aspect of Kate's identity as a woman and mother in his mission for control, Terence eroded her sense of self, devastated her self-confidence and ultimately increased her dependency on him. Simultaneously, insisting they needed a bigger flat, he pressurised Kate to mobilise her new position as a mother to seek accommodation from the Council, a prospect she found alarming, given her precarious immigration status. 'All I was thinking was, "I don't qualify. I don't have papers."' I was really stressed out about that, and hormones were going crazy,' Kate recalled. 'I remember constantly crying, cos I don't know what to do. I mean, I knew people in my position, they don't have any [standing], they can't get property, they can't get anything, so what am I going to do?' The pressure from Terence to capitalize on her status as a mother made Kate all the more aware of her vulnerability as a woman and mother without leave to remain.

Terence used Kate's identity as a mother coupled with her insecure immigration status to further his abuse of her, making threats to take away their son if she failed to meet his requirements. Picking up a cushion, Kate explained, 'Say for instance [...] I didn't arrange this properly, [...] he used it, he was like, "If you don't look after my child, I will take my child away from you."' Terence's controlling behaviours extended to all aspects of Kate's day-to-day life. He controlled her exercise regime; when and what she ate; where in the flat she could be and when; how she cared for their son, Sam; how much money she had and how she spent it; when she saw friends; what and how she cooked; when she had to take a shower; their sex life and use of contraception. On one occasion, his abusive behaviour culminated in physical violence. Kate's immigration status intensified her vulnerability to his abuse and its consequences, creating additional barriers to seeking help and leaving very limited alternatives to continuing to live with him, a reality which Terence exploited, leaving Kate feeling 'trapped' and afraid. Kate recollected, 'For me in my head at that time, my immigration wasn't sorted out, I was feeling trapped and I was scared. He's constantly

reminding me that he's got his papers. The more fear he put in me, the more fear is in my head.' Kate reflected: 'I lost me in the whole thing. I think I lost me anyway, years ago. I just lost whatever image I had of myself.' Terence had eroded her autonomy and sense of self.

Nevertheless, Kate found small but significant ways to resist his controlling behaviour. She came up with a plan in order to escape from the house, finding out about local places where she could take Sam, such as children's centres or friends' houses, to make their day-to-day lives more bearable: 'I thought, I can't deal with that anymore. [...] We would come out when daddy was awake [...]. So every day I'm out of the house, every single day me and Sam were on the road doing something.' Becoming aware of the situation, Kate's sister offered to pay her to clean her house every week, which provided her with money to 'do things with Sam': 'So we moved away from going to people's houses, to... finding activities that we could do within £20 for the week, and inviting other mums to go and do these activities with us, so Sam could... Cos it's better, it's more fun when you have somebody there.' Whilst Terence's attempts to control and intimidate Kate made her feel at times that she was losing herself, she found ways to resist and contest his behaviour, reaching out to other mothers to develop friendships, seeking support and finding convivial spaces outside of the home now that it was no longer a haven.

Accessing baby groups at children's centres was 'a bit acceptable' to Terence, although he warned Kate against 'speaking to other women', concerned that it was 'influencing' her and 'making me stronger'. His warnings made her cautious about how much she shared with mothers and staff: 'He would tell me, "You can't say nothing to nobody, no-one will listen to you, you don't have papers." He would drill that in [my] head. "They will take away your child." He would drill all these things in my head.' When she began to speak up, staff at a children's centre identified her situation as domestic abuse, and advised her they would need to inform Children's Social Care, but Kate was afraid of their involvement, which she felt would place her at greater risk from Terence:

*I realised that I wasn't going to get any help, cos I didn't have any status, any nothing. Even when he threatened that he would kill me, and they said that they would come and everything... Cos I actually had a chance to get out. But it was scary. It was scary because I knew I didn't have papers, I didn't know what legs I was standing on. I didn't know what to do. So when social services called, I had to water it down. 'He didn't mean it, he was just joking, [...]' I took it wrong.' So I had to water all*

*of it down. They were like, 'Is there a danger to the child?' 'No, no, no, no, no, there's no danger to the child – no, no, no, no, no danger to the child, he loves his child. It's just me.' Thank god, it got watered down, because if they came... they were suggesting to come in, and assess the whole thing, but leave. You do not leave me with this man – you take me with you!*

The opportunity to leave her abusive partner was lost because of her fears both of further abuse and of her deportability. Kate's status and the NRPF condition had prevented her from accessing help and refuge. It was months later, following an incident which increased her fears of escalation, that Kate, with the help of a close friend, was able to seek help, articulate the dynamics of the relationship, leave Terence, and access support for herself and Sam through Social Care. Kate continued to suffer from the long-term impact of Terence's abuse, however, for example worrying that she would not be able to cope as a mother on her own, having been made to feel 'so inadequate' during the time she had lived with him.

Similarly, Sofia's insecure status had shaped the foundations of her marriage, producing dependency and unequal power and facilitating the emergence of a dynamic of control. Sofia felt ambivalent about the years she had spent living with Tomas. She recounted how he had exploited her vulnerability, his initial displays of care and protection shifting to control and abuse. Yet, compared with the 'turmoil' that followed their separation which left Sofia and her children homeless, the years with Tomas now seemed like living in a 'bubble': despite his abusive behaviours, the marriage had provided a degree of protection from a hostile society, in the form of shelter, food, money and the (temporary) right to remain in the country. Sofia's analogy of the bubble, as described in the Interlude before this chapter, also indicated the contingency of the relationship and the overall fragility of her situation. Sofia felt lonely, unfulfilled and trapped in the marriage, and in this context felt ambivalent about being a mother. She felt vulnerable within the relationship but felt even more vulnerable to what lay outside of it. Her options for leaving were severely constrained because of her immigration status: she therefore felt compelled to carry on. The eventual end of the marriage left Sofia and her children destitute and Sofia unable to renew her leave to remain. With 'no documents', she was told by local authority representatives that she and her children were not entitled to any state support. In these ways, marriage, and couple relationships more generally, enable limited and contingent

opportunities to enact belonging by providing temporary residency rights, shelter and material support, but may also create 'unbelonging' through isolation, control and abuse, and ultimately separation or abandonment.

Louise highlighted some of the ways husbands used their wives' insecure immigration statuses to control and isolate them. Whilst she perceived her husband as 'a good guy' who supported her to develop her English language and other skills, she was concerned that other women in her co-ethnic group ('my community people') were oppressed and exploited through the intersection of traditional gendered roles in the home and their insecure statuses which positioned them as dependent on their spouses. She imagined scenarios where these power dynamics might play out:

*Maybe if my voice can't be heard, so what's the point to say something. [...] It can make maybe even the situation worse. 'You, I paid for your ticket, I brought you here, and then you come and boss me?' It's like you put your life in the risk. Because they have that power – 'I can send you back home.' No – you can't! [...] For them to work so hard, and then you are abroad. There are girls here they can go with, but they didn't look at them, they think of you. They spent money, brought you here. 'Then you come here, be a man?! No, you are a lady!' Second position.*

In this double process of subjectification, Louise called my attention to the ways in which some women were silenced and made to feel obligated to their partner for the opportunity to live in the UK. She identified inequality between partners as being inherent in many relationships as a result of the intersection of women's deportability and gendered cultural practices. Women with insecure status oppressed by controlling relationships were often prevented from accessing English classes, Louise suggested, because of their husbands' fears of their increased access to knowledge and desire for more autonomy and equal rights ('because you will learn too much, you will know the truth. You will find out things that then you was thinking that is allowed, then ah no, that's the wrong way. It's like you will see light!'). A similar point has been made by Menjivar and Salcido (2002: 903): 'Language can break barriers for immigrant women in domestic violence situations since women's language proficiency can reduce the batterer's [sic] ability to reinforce his power to control.'

Women are also exploited in more casual or fluid couple relationships. Evicted with nowhere to go when her husband left, Anna would sleep on night buses or at all-night



church vigils, entrusting her daughter to a friend. An encounter with Alex, showing concern for Anna's wellbeing, led to an invitation to his house. As she explained to me, her extreme precarity at the time shaped her response: 'When you meet someone, you have to study them. But because I don't have anybody, I don't have house...' Her circumstances meant she did not have the option to be cautious. She started visiting Alex and they would 'talk and talk'; on one occasion, things took a different turn, against her will, and she later discovered she was pregnant. Anna had wanted to avoid getting into a situation where a man could be 'using her problem', but recognised that her precarity had patterned this encounter: 'I know if I'm okay, I know I will not do that. I know I don't need it – how will I do that if I'm okay? I don't need this – I know what I want, but because I don't have anything, I don't have choice. [...] So it's just like, "What can I do?" When you have a problem, you will see a lot of things coming, and you don't know which ones will be positive or negative. You just think, you just have to get out of this problem.' Reflecting on the encounter, Anna recognised how her extreme precarity had severely constrained her options and made her vulnerable to exploitation; she was forced to make a decision that in other circumstances she would not have done. Although Anna did not see Alex as being like other men who 'are not nice' and 'just want to use you', she had felt an obligation to comply, 'because I'm in problems'. A relationship which she had initially perceived as a haven in hostile and precarious circumstances – or at least as a means of survival – became exploitative, with significant consequences for Anna. Whilst it has been recognised in the literature that women with insecure status are at increased risk of abuse within marital relationships (Raj and Silverman 2002, Menjívar and Salcido 2002), there has been less recognition of the potential for sexual exploitation within more fluid relationships.

## Sharing emotional and material support

Intimate partners can be important sources of both emotional and material support, as partners and as co-parents. A small number of participants had been married or in the same relationship since their arrival in the UK, or soon after, which they experienced as supportive on multiple levels, having weathered together the Home Office's rejections of applications for leave to remain and other everyday forms of exclusion. As I saw during my

fieldwork, Gemma's husband liked 'doing the school run'; as a family, they attended church together and went to the park; at home, he would care for the children upstairs in their shared room whilst Gemma would cook downstairs in the communal kitchen. They shared in decision-making and caring for their children. Similarly, Lilia and Karim presented themselves as being strongly united. For Lilia, the couple relationship was a vital source of emotional support, providing ontological security and a site for jointly resisting and challenging rejections by the state. When Lilia was eventually granted 'limited leave to remain', and soon after found a job, she credited Karim with the positive outcomes of their strenuous journey: 'Thank god for my husband – he's powerful,' she told me. 'I get knowledge from him. We've been through a lot of things, we've got knowledge, legal advice, papers, we know a lot of things. From that came my papers. From there I started working.' She added, 'He's got good friends, good manager; a lot of people like him; he's got experience; he works hard. All the support was from him.' Lilia identified her husband as a significant source of knowledge, influence and emotional support. She was proud of Karim's supportive social and professional networks, and his connections and skills in making use of them (Bourdieu 1986). For Lilia, marriage to Karim represented love, care and support. Whilst the hoped-for stability and smooth road to citizenship proved to be far rockier than she had imagined, with multiple barriers, intrusions and accusations thrust at them by the state, Lilia represented herself and Karim as a team who would continue to resist, maintain their right to belong and enact belonging and citizenship through friendships and in the workplace.

For many participants, emotional and material support within the couple relationship had become erratic, stopped or had never been available, following separation. Some mothers had to remind their ex-partner to send money to support their child. Several participants recounted how their partner had left them unexpectedly, cutting off contact, which had resulted in homelessness and destitution. Mothers were upset at being left to cope alone, and saddened by the impact on their children of losing contact with their fathers. Anna recounted, 'It's very sad. I have to do everything myself. To do the father side, the mother side, I have to take to school, I have to rush here, go there, now I have to pick up at 12, I have to run back. I don't have rest. I have to go to social services. I have to go to school. I have to be the hairdresser.' Eva's negative feelings about her partner leaving and ceasing

contact were attenuated by her recognition of his supportiveness until then, and her understanding of his reasons for leaving, as discussed in Chapter 4, yet she noted the pressure on herself caused by his absence and subsequent lack of support.

## Concluding remarks

As I have shown in this chapter, migration trajectories and immigration status shape and are shaped by couple relationships. In the context of hostile immigration policies in the UK, a couple relationship can constitute a haven of support: 'doing coupledness' can provide access to emotional and financial security, friendship and faith networks, social acceptance and potentially leave to remain in the UK. 'Doing coupledness' may lead to parenthood, which may include experiences of shared parenting as well as solo mothering if the relationship breaks down. Parenthood may provide a more likely route to leave to remain, although this may be fraught with tensions and not lead to citizenship for children or residency rights for women/mothers. In all of these ways, doing coupledness provides opportunities for enacting belonging and citizenship. But the couple relationship is also a site for dialectical tensions in ways which are qualitatively different to tensions in other types of relationship. The couple relationship is seen as a space for trust and intimacy, yet self-disclosure necessitates vulnerability; for women/mothers with insecure leave to remain, this can produce a deep power imbalance, rendering the relationship a site of legal status dependency as well as gendered inequality. Women's deportability and status anxiety increases the risk of exploitation and abuse within the relationship, as well as the potential impact on them and their children of abandonment by their partner or separation. Women/mothers are forced to navigate tensions between care/protection and control, and between self-disclosure and vulnerability, through intimate practices, including meeting and moving in, holding conflict, sharing support, resisting exploitation and separating. Insecure immigration status and the NRPF condition intersect to shape ways of 'doing coupledness', ultimately influencing access to support and practices of mothering.

## Interlude: 'You're moving with fear'

*If you don't have your status in this place, you're moving with fear. And you have the fear within that you might be arrested and put in a deportation camp. So, it really lets people to be... be indoors, instead of really moving like people who have their status are moving. And again, if you want to do some certain things, you will be having the panic of 'I don't have my status'.*

*If you are a person who like to study, you can't do that, because they ask for your status in this place. That kind of things happen to you. If you want to rent a place you will rent with panic, because you will be afraid that Immigration will come one day, and they will take you. And even because of that, some landlords they behave so bad when they know you don't have your status. If you don't give them stuff, like a deposit, they might be doing all kind of things for them to be frustrating your life. Having no support, where you are supposed to get support, because the government won't help you if you don't have your status. They even want to frustrate you to leave the country.*

*If you have someone that can take you to the right place... It depends on the people you meet at that point. So moving [around outside] is good, but it, someone who don't have [leave to remain], it creates panic for them. It's good for them to go out. If you are not with the rightful people – having negative people around you, they will not want you to move. Because they will be creating some panic stuff – 'if you move, they are going to arrest you, if you don't have an application'. But if you have someone who will take you to the right place, advice centre, if you have people to take you to places like that, you have your confidence, because you know they will fight for you to get your stuff [leave to remain]. They're the ones that helped me.*

*(Amy)*

## Chapter 8: Engaging with advocates and bureaucrats

As discussed in Chapter 4, becoming a mother is often a turning point for women with insecure immigration status and no recourse to public funds, producing new needs for social support and advice, yet being subjected to multi-layered forms of rejection, exclusions and everyday bordering, which generates new and deeper questions around belonging and rights. Motherhood as a dimension of identity also opens up new opportunities for embedding in local places, enacting belonging by connecting with other mothers and developing new friendships, as discussed in Chapter 5. Conversely, existing personal networks – friendships, faith groups or couple relationships – may no longer be able to meet evolving needs, precipitating engagement with public and voluntary sector services.

Engagement with public services occurs at both local and national levels. Local healthcare services – including midwives, health visitors and GPs or walk-in clinics – are often the first point of contact for new mothers with insecure immigration status, soon followed by children’s centres, nurseries and, later, schools. Convivial voluntary and public sector spaces may offer sites for embedding and interacting *as mothers*, whilst also offering access to advice and practical support via frontline advocates. These interactions and connections are significant when the intersection of becoming a mother and precarious status makes it difficult or impossible to earn an income and stretches the ability of informal networks to provide accommodation. As Amy explained in the preceding Interlude, having been rejected and marginalised through often hostile encounters with Home Office bureaucrats, lawyers and landlords, having exhausted the practical support provided through personal networks, and facing destitution, mothers may be signposted, even accompanied, by friends or acquaintances to voluntary sector advice centres or particular types of ‘hospitable’ public sector settings in order to seek support and claim their rights to belong at the state level. In the context of mothers’ ineligibility for mainstream housing or welfare support, frontline advocates may not only provide practical support or advice but also play a role in referring families to Social Care and/or to more specialist advisors, as a first step in the pathway to accessing Section 17 support (discussed in Chapter 2) and/or (re)applying for leave to remain.

In this chapter, I firstly outline how interactions with representatives of the state, as agents of everyday bordering practices, are often experienced as hostile and exclusionary, from Home Office bureaucrats to local authority workers implementing hostile policies and engaging in gatekeeping processes. I then show how mothers enact belonging and citizenship by embedding *as mothers* in convivial spaces *created for and by* women, mothers and families, drawing on Nina Glick Schiller and Ayşe Çağlar's (2016) concept of 'sociabilities of emplacement' and Susanne Wessendorf and Jenny Phillimore's (2018) notion of embedding practices. Finally, I show that by actively claiming rights through their interactions with trusted frontline advocates within convivial (semi-)public spaces, mothers enact relational belonging and citizenship (Flores 2003: 87; see also Bloemraad 2018 and Lister 2011). I consider claims-making as citizenship-in-action in the journey towards achieving 'leave to remain', with citizenship-as-status an ultimate goal. I show that within these spaces, advocates' normative understandings of citizenship (or, more specifically, residency rights) in relation to motherhood position them as more likely to *recognise* such claims, demonstrating the importance of recognition in claims-making processes (Bloemraad 2018).

## Navigating hostile encounters in a hostile environment

*She [advocate] said, 'What do you want me to do? Do you want me to refer to you to social services? It looks like that's your only option.' So she called social services to get me an appointment. But they said on the phone point blank, 'We cannot help because she's not got any application in the Home Office'. [...] So there's nothing else I could do. [...] I had to do an application to the Home Office, knowing fully well it was going to be refused. [...] You would need a Home Office fee, about £1500. And about £1000 for a lawyer fee. So we're talking about £2500 to just go down the drain. [...] I started going round looking for the money, that is how desperate it was. (Emily)*

### The Home Office

Overstaying a visa or remaining in the UK following the refusal of asylum can lead to life 'on the margins' (Bloch and McKay 2017), living fluid lives on the move, surviving through cash-in-hand work whilst trying to avoid the hostile attentions of the authorities. Becoming a mother presents new challenges, making this position difficult to sustain: on becoming a mother, women need to engage with public services and are eventually compelled to submit an(other) application for 'leave to remain' to the Home Office. For many participants

in my research, as in the case of Emily above, this action was presented by social care workers as a condition of being assessed for Section 17 support. As discussed in Chapter 2, successive immigration legislation has rendered applying for leave to remain a highly complex, long and costly process, with no guarantee of a positive outcome. Myriad rules, processes and entitlements apply, depending on multiple individual factors and Home Office categories, creating significant barriers to obtaining indefinite leave to remain (Yeo 2020). Having a child born in the UK does not in itself entitle a parent to leave to remain<sup>61</sup>. The rules on leave to remain and citizenship for children and parents are complex and subject to change – as are individuals’ statuses, and the ten-year route to indefinite leave to remain has placed citizenship out of reach for many (Dickson and Rosen 2020). As Dana, an advisor, reflected:

*It’s really confusing, and I think part of the problem is the way the Home Office creates these categories. [The different categories and entitlements are] a different way of excluding people. [...] It’s tricky, I think the way that the Home Office creates these categories is very divisive, and ultimately just tries to pit people against each other, and create categories about who is deserving and who is undeserving.*

Refusal of asylum, rejection of applications for leave to remain, or denial of recourse to public funds were experienced by participants as incompatible with their status as mother of a child born in the UK. They felt strongly that their children had a right to belong, even if this had not been recognised by the state; they also felt a strong sense of their own right to belong as mothers and long-term residents. Rejection by the Home Office represented not only the start of a long bureaucratic journey, but the continuation of a process of negotiating belonging, both at structural levels and in everyday ways.

For mothers engaging Article 8, leave to remain, if granted, is limited to 30 months; before the end of this period, the whole application process must be restarted, repeatedly, as part of the ten-year route to indefinite leave to remain, as discussed in Chapter 2 (see in particular p.62). In most cases, when limited leave to remain is granted, it is with the condition of ‘no recourse to public funds’ (NRPF): mothers are expected to be entirely self-sufficient and support their family through paid work. Joanne, another advisor, pointed out the financial impact on families:

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<sup>61</sup> Moreover, being a child born in the UK does not automatically entitle the child to leave to remain.

*It's one step forward, two steps back. Are we really helping people, when somebody gets leave to remain for 30 months, and then they struggle to get the NRPF [condition] lifted? And then it's time for the next 30 months, and they put it back on! If they don't have a solicitor who makes representations strongly enough, they might place it back on again. [According to another organisation] for a family of 4 it costs well over £40,000 to get completely all the way to citizenship.*

Regularisation requirements together with slow decision-making processes at the Home Office mean that families often have to wait for many years before being granted even limited leave to remain, producing destitution and creating status anxiety. The seemingly endless condition of uncertainty, waiting for institutional recognition of the right to reside in the UK, renders 'time out of control' (Rosen 2021), disrupting emotional wellbeing and preventing the development of ontological security. A child born in the UK, whose parents do not have British citizenship and did not have leave to remain in the UK when the child was born, becomes eligible for residency at the age of ten, and can apply to register as a British citizen (Home Office 2020), but this can be a complex and prohibitively costly process (Citizens Advice 2021). June recounted the protracted and debt-laden process of obtaining limited leave to remain ('two and a half' years):

*[My partner] needs to pay so much back, all the money he's borrowed from friends in the UK. Then we were like, we will pay money for the visa [...], they refuse it, thousands gone; you go again, you pay again, thousands gone. All the solicitors taking money off you. [...] Though it was given to us, two and a half [years], it's still not... There's still the renewal – the whole family's gonna cost us about 8 thousand, with the NHS surcharge. My child's 10 [...] and we couldn't afford to put it, cos any child turns 10, you just have to apply [for citizenship]; they don't make [my child] British but you have to apply. It's a thousand something - we don't have that money at the moment.*

Being granted 'limited leave to remain' is a significant milestone, but also a painful reminder to mothers that their belonging is temporary and contingent. Citizenship status often remains a distant prospect, with many other important and difficult milestones to be achieved first: getting the 'no recourse to public funds' condition lifted and/or finding secure employment, a child turning ten and qualifying for registration as a British citizen, applying for indefinite leave to remain (on completion of ten years of limited leave). As Bloemraad (2018) has argued, formal citizenship is powerful in that it creates legal legitimacy, demanding recognition and enabling claims-making. The above milestones present *marginal* forms of legal legitimacy, increasing structural opportunities for claims-



making and recognition by degrees, and experienced by participants as partial recognition of their right to belong. Mothers facing destitution at points on this protracted journey are likely to have (often challenging) interactions with workers from Children's Social Care, discussed in the following section.

### Children's Social Care

Children's rights to protection and provision of services (UNCRC 1989, Children Acts 1989 and 2004) are in tension with denial of indefinite leave to remain and associated rejections and exclusions enacted by government and third parties at national and local levels as part of the Hostile Environment strategy, creating or exacerbating marginalisation and economic precarity. As discussed in Chapter 2, local authorities in the UK have a duty under Section 17 of the Children Act 1989 to assess the needs of children who may be in need of services to achieve a reasonable standard of health or development (Children Act 1989, NRPF Network n.d. d). Thus, parents with no recourse to public funds who fall into destitution can request a Section 17 'child in need' assessment from Children's Social Care in their local area in order to access vital support. Drawing on Bloemraad's (2018) framework, for mothers with insecure immigration status this can be understood as a practice of claims-making (as a mother, on behalf of her child/ren, and as local residents), requiring *recognition* from workers. However, interactions were experienced by my interlocutors as a hostile process of 'very strong gatekeeping' (in the words of one advocate) by social care practitioners acting as what Lipsky (2010 [1980]: 11) has termed 'agents of social control' in determining eligibility even for an assessment. It appeared that, under the pressure of increasing demand and reduced resources (London Councils 2021, Berg et al. 2019, Walsh et al. 2021), practitioners resisted recognising the legitimacy of many mothers' claims, identifying them as ineligible for a Section 17 assessment and/or support. Participants reported being offered financial help to return to their country of origin, or, like Emily (above), were told that they needed to submit an/other application for leave to remain to the Home Office before their request for an assessment could be considered.

When assessments *were* carried out, mothers' accounts were often strongly challenged and discredited. Joanne, an advisor, described her experiences of the hostile and intimidating encounters with Social Care:

*They'll do a first 'child in need' assessment, and that can take a full 45 days, and then they transfer them to another team, and all the while they might not have provided support in the interim. [In some boroughs those teams are] really quite nasty, hostile to us. Sort of... in their correspondence. It's not like when we correspond with solicitors or other organisations. It's cold, and it's sort of suspicious. [...] Quite a few times, [parents] have said to me, 'do you know what' – and it's a face that I recognise – 'I don't want social services involved anymore.' They just can't take the pressure, the attacks on their credibility. I mean, they have to do their investigations, of course they do, but it's the set-up of a team with a case worker and a fraud officer, threatening to contact the Home Office.*

Julie Walsh and colleagues (2021) have termed these practices 'process driven everyday bordering'. As Joanne indicated, such encounters pushed some mothers to withdraw from the process of seeking Section 17 support and instead to continue to seek help through personal networks. Joanne shared examples of support workers challenging mothers' accounts of where they were living and with whom, drawing inaccurate conclusions from limited observations. Providing evidence of homelessness was often problematic: friends or church members no longer able to provide shelter were often reluctant to put this into writing, fearing sanctions from landlords. For support workers completing Section 17 assessments, this 'lack of evidence' cast doubt on mothers' accounts. Gatekeeping practices further intensified when 'sofa-surfing' by homeless families involved crossing local authority boundaries: this often led to stand-offs between councils denying responsibility for providing support, meanwhile neglecting children's needs.

Participants experienced the assessment process as intimidating. In some local authorities, at certain times, this had included an embedded immigration officer and/or a fraud officer in addition to the support worker or social worker, as described by Joanne:

*If the first thing they're saying is we're going to call the Home Office, which they do, it's scary anyway. Then there's the fraud officer – I don't know if they're in uniform or not. It's a weird way of couching a Child in Need assessment. [...] So, the starting point is the credibility of the parents, not the child's welfare.*

Mothers' finances were often scrutinised, with any income or evidence of savings challenged. As Joanne observed, 'Social services are constantly on your case, wanting to know where money's coming from.' June described being scrutinised and challenged by a support worker on the basis of her appearance during a Section 17 assessment: 'All my things, my trainers come from charity [...] – and when I wear them, she goes, "Oh, you are

wearing new trainers.” I said, “No, I got it from somewhere.” She said, “Give me the name of the person who gave them to you, cos if you are destitute, you are not meant to wear such good trainers.” Yes, that happened. Then they called Immigration. Immigration was like, “When did you come to the country? We are going to offer you money to go back.” It was a lot of mess. She frustrated me.’ June’s account indicated the humiliation of being disbelieved on the basis of her self-presentation not aligning with her destitution claims, in the eyes of the support worker. The indignity of being subjected to this visual appraisal was exacerbated by the subsequent arrival of an immigration officer and their attempts to persuade June to ‘go back’, recalling the government’s discredited 2013 ‘Go Home’ campaign (Jones et al. 2017).

For mothers, status anxiety and a sense of deportability may be coupled with a fear that seeking help from Children’s Social Care could paradoxically lead to the removal of their child/ren on the basis that they cannot meet their child/ren’s needs. Whilst no participant had experienced their child being removed, or recounted this having happened to anyone they knew, some had been threatened with it. When Sofia had sought help from two local authorities, she was told that she was ineligible for support, despite her children having EU citizenship and therefore the right to reside in the UK, and was advised that if she was unable to meet her children’s needs, she should ‘leave’ them. ‘They said leave the children and come back when you have documents,’ Sofia told me. When I asked what she thought they had meant by that, she replied, ‘In foster care, I suppose.’ Since the cost to the local authority of taking children into care would be significant, such threats might be considered as examples of exceptionally hostile bordering intended to deter mothers from seeking support, rather than strategies likely to be enacted.

Participants’ accounts indicated that stories of such experiences did indeed make mothers extremely reluctant to seek help from Social Care. Emily recalled sharing her fears with an advocate when a housing officer, unable to house her family, referred her to Children’s Social Care. ‘[I said] “I don’t know what’s going to happen to me, but I’ve heard things. It’s the first time I’ve been involved with social services. I have heard about social services, they will look into your case, you know that thing that social services will take your child from you?”’ Emily explained to me that she had felt ‘nervous’ and ‘scared’: ‘Most people do not

want social services to get involved with their family life. Cos when they're coming, you know it's getting to the worst. But my situation, you know what, I was ready for anything that comes by, but at the same time I was scared.' Emily's account illustrated how the pervasive tension between self-disclosure and privacy, discussed in previous chapters, played out in relationships with advocates and frontline bureaucrats. Status anxiety produced a deep ambivalence within Emily about her imminent encounter with Children's Social Care. When they eventually agreed to carry out an assessment, a support worker and fraud officer jointly scrutinized Emily's bank statements seeking evidence of destitution; the support worker then visited her children at home to 'interview' them. Emily recalled the support worker repeatedly asking her young daughters in the adjacent room about their relationship and her parenting practices ('what happens to you when mummy gets lots of complaints about you at school, what does mummy do to you?' She was like, "mummy doesn't do anything, she just not talk to me, or just not in a happy mood with me." It was the same question, and then all I could hear was, one of the girls said, "do you want us to lie to you?", like, you want to hear something that is not there.'). In the context of her deep anxieties about her family's precarious situation, her worries that her request for support would not be recognised, and the pervasive fear that her children could be removed from her care, Emily experienced the support worker's interviewing of her children as a hostile attempt by the authorities to cast doubt on her mothering practices.

Participants' accounts – detailing the demands to make further (costly) applications to the Home Office in order to be entitled to a Section 17 assessment, the multiple frustrations and anxiety caused by being disbelieved, the intrusiveness of the scrutiny of personal finances, the perceived threats to take children into care, and the intimidation of children in interrogations about how they are parented – illustrate the power relations that pervade the processes of claims-making, gatekeeping, recognising 'deservingness' and determining eligibility for assessment and support. As Lipsky (2010 [1980]: 6) observed, precarity makes people more vulnerable to the influence of street-level bureaucrats. Engaging in these processes often produced a sense of 'unbelonging' for mothers and their children. Instead, mothers had to enact belonging in alternative spaces, through intimate and social relationships.

## Embedding in convivial spaces

Citizenship can be understood as informal, everyday practices, 'a micro-politics of daily life', whereby 'seeing oneself as a citizen or acting like one, irrespective of legal status' can produce shared social identities, create changes to daily life and increase wellbeing (Bloemraad 2018: 12, 13). Mothers with insecure status enact citizenship and belonging by embedding – making connections and building relationships through frequent interactions – in local (and online) spaces. Nando Sigona (2012: 53) has suggested that for many migrants, 'there are no social and economic spaces to meet people from other groups'; whilst this may not be entirely accurate, safe social spaces are certainly limited for individuals with precarious status. Small, shared or distant homes are not conducive to visiting or inviting friends. Access to certain types of 'family spaces' or other venues for sociability (pricey antenatal groups, leisure centres, coffee shops) may be constrained (directly or indirectly) by (racialised) immigration status, class and income. Particularly important, then, are safe, open-access, family-oriented spaces in local (semi-)public places, such as children's centres and voluntary-sector-led organisations. As Nan Lin (2001) has shown, social ties develop within, and are shaped by, particular spaces. The nature of local 'gathering places', or 'social infrastructure', can be conducive or otherwise to this process (Klinenberg 2018).

Through their concept of 'sociabilities of emplacement', Nina Glick Schiller and Ayşe Çağlar (2016: 18) suggest that 'proximal, workplace, and institutional' sites are important for 'migrant newcomers' in developing supportive and positive relationships with people 'seen as local'. In this section, I show that for participants with insecure status and NRPF, whilst the notion of the workplace was not associated with sociabilities, or did not feature at all as a social space in the lives of mothers prevented from working, local organisations providing services for parents and young children offered convivial, accessible spaces for gathering which were experienced as welcoming. In hospitable spaces such as these, mothers not only tended to develop trusting relationships with frontline advocates (discussed later), but could reach out to and connect with other mothers, drawing on their embodied identities as mothers. This section offers examples of relational-spatial belonging practices within such spaces. Furthermore, building on the argument developed in the preceding chapters, I show how these spatial dynamics are overlaid by a dialectical tension between self-disclosure and

privacy, intersecting with precarity, complicating the formation and sustaining of relationships with others.

### Children's centres

Many participants accessed (or had previously accessed) groups at children's centres across Ryeton (or their precursors, Sure Start local programmes). These are publicly funded spaces (managed by local authorities, schools or voluntary sector organisations) providing groups and services for children under 5 and their parents and carers (in practice accessed predominantly by mothers). Children's centres have been constructed through policy discourses as spaces promoting 'positive' parenting practices (DfES 2007), understood perhaps in practice as 'good mothering' (Hays 1996) or even 'intensive mothering' (Vincent 2010). In such spaces, therefore, mothers (of very young children) are recognised and valued primarily *as mothers*.

Participants experienced children's centres as convivial spaces<sup>62</sup> where they could make connections with other mothers, frontline workers and volunteers from shared or different cultural backgrounds, some with shared experiences of migration. Accessing a children's centre for the first time was often precipitated by the advice of a health visitor or the recommendation of a 'mum-friend', thus drawing on the embodied identity of mother. Mutual recognition amongst mothers facilitated friendship practices (see Chapter 5). Zoe started attending groups when her daughter was a newborn: 'Health visitor advised me to go there [...]. I start going there, I met community, I met friends, I start attending there regularly and I become friends with people.' In contrast to more specialised spaces accessed predominantly by mothers with insecure immigration status (see below), the children's centre provided a space where Zoe could make friends with other mothers *as a mother*. The context or focus of the space provided the basis for connection (Small 2009, Feld and Carter 1998). It was also a means of making connections with workers-as-advocates who could provide support and information during times of need (discussed later in this chapter).

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<sup>62</sup> As discussed in Chapter 3, it is important to point out that some participants' awareness of my previous roles in children's centres may have shaped their narratives, for example filtering experiences.

Several participants recalled a former group for francophone families<sup>63</sup> that they had attended as new mothers whilst trying to regularise their status. One described the group as ‘somewhere that mums need to know and to go, for them to enjoy their moment’ where ‘mums and children’ could access ‘free childcare’ and ‘discuss about anything, [...] about housing matter, about children matter’ and ‘find out how the system in this country [works]’. The group was seen as a supportive space for mothers to connect with other women as ‘mums’ with a shared language and in some cases shared cultural background. On the other hand, children’s centre playgroups open to all offered opportunities to meet mothers from more diverse cultural backgrounds. Louise, for example, valued children’s centre groups as a source of information and advice that were not necessarily available from her ‘community people’, and as a space to develop new friendships. Such groups were experienced as offering temporary relief from everyday problems and an antidote to isolation: as Louise remarked, ‘When you meet with some mums, you forget about your worries.’ They were also an open space for participation. Gemma became involved in the ‘Parents’ Forum’, where she helped organise local outings and activities for families. Having groups to participate in, aware that other mums she had got to know would be expecting her, encouraged Gemma to go out when she sometimes felt disinclined to do so. Moreover, children’s centres were often seen as a safe space: as a new mum seeking respite from an abusive couple relationship, Kate saw children’s centre groups as a safe haven from the tensions at home (as discussed in the previous chapter).

Finally, although such groups were open to all local children under five and their parents, some mothers reached out to each other on realising they were from the same country of origin, shared a language, and/or had children with a similar disability or developmental need. This sometimes became the basis for the development of friendships over time. Mothers with shared social locations often shared useful knowledge, such as signposting to specialist advice centres, and provided valuable support in other ways too. Gemma had become friends with a mum at a children’s centre group who had a son with a similar condition to her own son:

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<sup>63</sup> The group was attended by francophone mothers and children predominantly from African countries.

*She has been really, really nice to me. She was the person who connected me to [another friend]. She said there is another person who is from [our country and region of origin] who speaks [same language]. She has been very, very helpful. Sometimes she will even cook food for us. For me and the kids. I think last week she cooked food for us. She says she knows what we are going through – she is just trying to help. [...] She just got her paper 5 months ago.*

Children's centres thus offered safe spaces in which mothers could reach out, respond, share information and, over time, confide in each other, 'doing friendship', as discussed in Chapter 5. Several participants identified close friendships which had begun at children's centre groups and still endured. I suggest, therefore, that mothers with insecure immigration status derive ontological security from such institutional recognition as mothers: in these family spaces, they are welcomed and valued first and foremost as mothers, producing a sense of belonging, which in turn facilitates friendship practices. Immigration status and precarity need not be foregrounded as elements of identities, but can be shared, selectively, over time. Children's centres, like family-oriented voluntary sector spaces, are significant as part of the social infrastructure (Klinenberg 2018), shaping interactions and creating opportunities for building relationships and belonging.

### Schools and nurseries

Schools and nurseries are incidental spaces for sociability. Some participants looked forward to catching up with other mothers at the school gates, especially since visiting each other's homes was often not an option. Gemma explained, 'Sometimes we just meet up in front of [school]. We will talk there. [...] We don't really go to each other's house.' Yet opportunities for socialising at school were limited, with no designated spaces, and excluded mothers who worked. Nadia, whose accountancy qualification from her country of origin was not recognised in the UK, worked twelve-hour shifts as a healthcare assistant in a hospital, so usually had to rely on a friend to take her son to nursery or to pick him up. Sara, who worked full-time and whose commute took an hour each way, had to pay a childminder to take her children to school and pick them up. Both mothers wanted to reduce their working hours to spend more time with their children, but, mothering alone with no recourse to public funds, each needed to earn enough to support their family; furthermore, being on the ten-year route to remain, they were concerned that reducing their income could



jeopardize this. This meant they did not get to meet or socialise with other mothers at nursery or school.

For mothers who did do the 'school run', this practice did not automatically lead to the development of friendships with other mothers.<sup>64</sup> Interactions with other parents were often no more than a polite nod of acknowledgement or brief greeting, as I saw on the occasions that I accompanied participants to pick up their children. Pondering interactions with mothers at her son's new school, Beth contrasted these with the friendships she had developed at his previous school:

*I know a few mums. But I don't know... Umm, I'm not really close to anyone. We just say hi. I feel like there's a lot of competition! [laughs] Some people have difficulty with their kids, and they don't want to get too close to you so you don't find out. I don't know - I'm just guessing! You know when he was in [the previous school] I was seeing a lot of friends, I still call them. We're still in touch. That was a really nice group. I don't know. It's different. You go to a school where you don't make any friends, you go to a school where you make friends, you go to a school where you make a few friends. [Mothers at this school] keep to themselves. They don't talk much. It's just... I don't know. I just say hi to them.*

As Beth explained, it could be difficult to develop meaningful friendships in the transitory spaces of schools. In contrast to children's centres, schools seemed to be experienced as functional spaces that were regulated and even surveilled, rather than hospitable spaces where parents could just 'be'. This emerged as a challenge for families forced to move away from the local area and whose long (and costly) journeys to and from school prevented parents from returning home before pick-up time. Mothers and preschoolers were often compelled to find temporary spaces to while away the hours until the end of the nursery session or the school day. Recalling the summer when, faced with homelessness, she had had to move to a different part of London to stay with a friend, Christine recounted the challenges of getting her daughter to her nursery class back in Ryeton, a journey of over an hour. For three months, she and her son had to find spaces to spend the three hours until pick-up time, usually waiting in McDonalds or the local park: the school nursery did not offer a welcoming space for mothers and younger children to wait and socialise with each other.

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<sup>64</sup> An additional factor for mothers whose children attended special schools was that their children were taken to and from school by bus, precluding parental sociabilities.

Schools and nurseries sometimes presented opportunities to develop friendships with mothers through their children's own friendships – several participants spoke of close friendships which had grown in parallel over time. However, in such cases schools served as convivial spaces for the development of children's friendships, rather than as spaces in which mothers could embed and build their own friendships. Mothers' parallel friendships evolved in incidental, peripheral spaces: on the walk to school, or outside the school gates.

### Other convivial local spaces

Other local settings served as convivial spaces for mothers and children. Several participants attended drop-ins or parenting courses at DC, a voluntary sector organisation based in a large community centre for children with disabilities and their families. Gemma described the centre as a space where her son felt 'so comfortable', where people 'have a connection' and 'treat people equally'. The parenting course she attended there was an opportunity to get to know other mothers who, like Gemma, had a child with a disability, and who quickly became a valued source of information and support. Sara, who also accessed the centre, appeared to feel less connected. Working full-time, she was less able to attend regularly; when there, keeping an eye on her son required her full attention, making it difficult to get to know other parents. Like children's centres, such spaces could be inclusive and welcoming, but paradoxically embedding could also be constrained by the caring mothering practices that brought people together.

The drop-in run by HC, a local charity, discussed in Chapter 4, was attended by mothers and their young children, many of whom had no recourse to public funds. As such, the drop-in was a space where mothers would be recognised, and recognise each other, first and foremost *as* mothers, but also with the tacit understanding that many were in a shared position of having insecure immigration status and no recourse to public funds. For Amy, the drop-in was a 'good place to go' where 'you find people in your category' who would understand the difficulties of managing as a mother with precarious status (as discussed also in Chapter 5). Mothers felt safe there; they were able to engage with each other and with staff members and volunteers in a space of discretion and mutual understanding. It was a caring space, where children could play and where mothers (and advocates) were attentive to each other's needs. Information or advice could be sought, but probing questions about immigration status or related matters would not be asked. Mothers would

chat; they would ask after each other but could read between the lines when told 'I'm managing'. They would not be judgemental but would try to offer each other hope. The drop-in provided a space where mothers could connect with other mothers with similar status, yet were not reduced to that status.

AC<sup>65</sup> was a voluntary sector organisation providing immigration advice; it was highly valued and respected by clients within and beyond the borough, and its services were in high demand. Each week on the day of the advice drop-in, long queues would form outside the building, hours before the doors opened. A sizeable team of committed volunteers managed the flows of clients, moving them from one waiting area to another, before accompanying them to meet with one of a team of equally committed advisors in a classroom-sized room partitioned into four or five areas. Specialist advisors assessed individuals' circumstances and provided legal advice; volunteers gave out food bank vouchers, distributed hot meals, made phone calls and referred clients on to other local organisations according to their needs. Conversations sometimes arose between clients sitting on a row of chairs, waiting to be seen. More often, people waited quietly and anxiously, clutching essential papers, avoiding sharing personal information with others in potentially similar situations, preferring to wait until they could share the details of their circumstances with one of the team of advisors. For women/mothers, AC was a safe and valued space as a place to find legal advice and support, but not especially conducive to reaching out and connecting with other women/mothers.

Children's centres and family-based voluntary sector organisations were therefore significant in developing supportive, pleasurable and meaningful connections: these spaces enabled frequent, regular interactions and a 'focus' for conversations. Places of worship (discussed in Chapter 6 in the wider context of faith networks), whether local or located at a distance, were similarly significant for mothers with insecure immigration status as spaces to develop a sense of belonging, but could also be spaces of unbelonging when mothers experienced marginalisation based on the intersection of insecure immigration status and precarity, and at times other aspects of their identity. Moreover, online spaces (discussed in

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<sup>65</sup> AC is a composite of several organisations to protect identities.

Chapters 5 and 6) were important to some mothers in sharing advice and information and enacting belonging.

## Engaging with frontline advocates

Engaging with frontline workers – recognised as advocates by mothers – within specialist organisations providing legal advice, health services, education or family support was a crucial form of enacting relational belonging, enabling rights-claiming as mothers and as residents. Relationships with frontline advocates developed on the basis of mutual recognition of mothers *as mothers* who deserved and needed empathy, support and care. Most participants recounted how a friend, acquaintance or passing stranger had signposted or accompanied them to such an organisation, in some cases introducing them to a worker, facilitating the development of trust<sup>66</sup> in the context of precarious immigration status.

For some, language barriers intersected with tensions between the need to trust and the fear of disclosure (discussed in previous chapters). As one children’s centre advocate explained, mothers with fluent English were more easily able to access services and would ‘confidently come and ask the worker about x, y, z services’; those with less English (or facing other barriers) would ‘share their concern or have that discussion [with] the one playing the chaperone role who will be the bridge’:

*You see [mothers’] confidence growing. The first thing is to feel that you are accepted in that group, despite the fact that language was initially a barrier. When they feel at ease with the group, you see them as well playing that chaperone role [...]; usually when they come, they see each other, they then easily link to people, mothers speaking other languages. So I think at various stages they become chaperones themselves. It’s like the wave effect. Some of them become volunteers as well. [...] We encourage them to support other families and they become volunteers. (Clover)*

Acquaintances or friends created a ‘bridge’ to advocates, facilitating trust. Advocacy organisations were then able to bridge the trust gap with Children’s Social Care and the Home Office, enabling support claims to be enacted. Beginning to feel more comfortable in children’s centre spaces, developing trust with frontline advocates, and in some cases feeling more confident speaking English, many mothers enacted belonging in deeper ways,

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<sup>66</sup> This could be described as a blend of personal and institutional trust (see Marokova, Linell and Gillespie 2007: 20).

advocating for other mothers by bringing them to the centre and in some cases taking on a volunteer role.

### Advice Centre (AC)

*I think a lot of people survive for quite a long time. [...] I imagine for most families they could get through primary school and no-one realises they are undocumented, if they have networks that support, that sustain them. I think what we see is more when people exhaust their support networks. That seems to be the point at which they have to come into contact with services. (Dana)*

Many participants recalled serendipitous encounters with other women which had led them to AC in their moments of crisis. When Eva and her children were suddenly made homeless, it was another mother in a similarly precarious situation with whom she regularly crossed paths on the school run who signposted her to AC. Anna recalled sitting in the park when she became homeless, until an acquaintance reached out to her, asked her what was wrong and told her about the advice centre. When Christine and her children found themselves in the street with nowhere to go, a stranger responded to her distress and explained how to get to AC, giving her money for the bus fare. Individuals tended to approach AC when faced with destitution or homelessness and needing specialist advice related to their immigration status. Wary of disclosing sensitive information to friends, mothers were often connected by strangers or acquaintances with experience of precarious status to advisors seen as trustworthy and able to provide a pathway to longer-term support. Mothers enacted relational belonging by interacting with an advisor, as well as political belonging by engaging in bureaucratic and legal processes on the pathway to leave to remain, and potentially citizenship.

Highly cautious about disclosing any information about her immigration status or homelessness to people who were part of her everyday network, Eva had opened up to the advisor at AC, who had then referred her to the local authority and to another support organisation. Once her circumstances had stabilised, she still avoided confiding in anyone outside of AC: advisors there were 'the only people I can talk to about my situation'. When I met with Eva, she was accessing Section 17 funding. When she needed help, Eva would avoid calling the Children's Social Care support worker 'because I don't want their trouble'; instead, she preferred to call the worker at AC, who would 'talk to them on my behalf'. Eva felt safe confiding in an advisor, and, as discussed in Chapter 5, continued to avoid sharing

any details of her personal situation with people in her everyday network. Participants' sense of deportability made it difficult to trust others with information about their immigration status. Meeting with a frontline advocate was often the only context in which they felt able to be open. Encounters between mothers and advocates could therefore be an emotional process, as Joanne, an advisor, observed: 'It does strike me how often women break down and it's quite apparent that they're feeling that they are the only ones in this situation. I do try to say, 'we do see people every week in your situation'. [...] The idea that women think that they are on their own with it is hard.'

Participants experienced AC advocates as providing practical support, advice and advocacy with care, which contrasted with their accounts of hostile encounters with certain public sector services and of poor treatment from private lawyers or landlords. AC advocates supported families to get assessed under Section 17, leading to housing and financial support; to apply to the Home Office for leave to remain; to challenge local authority refusals to provide help, or Home Office rejections of leave to remain; to get NRPF conditions lifted; to challenge NHS bills for maternity care, or negotiate repayment plans; to resolve problems with accommodation; and to access baby equipment, clothes and food bank vouchers. Equally importantly, AC advocates provided moral support and motivation to claim rights. Anna reflected on the importance of this emotional support at a time when she was struggling in deeply precarious circumstances:

*I had to ask for my status, I had to go to Home Office, I had to go and sign there, and take the children to school. It was very, very, very difficult for me. [...] it's too much for me to carry... At AC they advised that you are going to get your rights, all you have to do is to stand there and you have to fight until you get there. I met other women and they told me what their experiences were. That really gave me the courage to stand and fight on. And now my application is at the Home Office.*

Whilst Anna's situation remained in limbo, with no right to work or study, she felt 'stuck', yet feeling supported by AC she tried to 'see a bit of sunshine' and 'feed good things out'. Meeting other women at AC and hearing their accounts made her aware that she was not alone, which emboldened her. Similarly, when Amy found out about AC, she had been struggling to pay unaffordable Home Office fees and her lawyer's fees to apply for leave to remain. Engaging with a specialist at AC contrasted sharply with these hostile interactions: 'she was really lovely lady' who 'quickly helped me without collecting 1p', which made Amy

feel 'relieved, happy'. Her application was submitted and was ultimately successful. Amy reflected, 'If you have someone who will take you to the right place [like] AC [...] you have your confidence, because you know they will fight for you to get your stuff [leave to remain]'. The development of supportive relationships with frontline advocates through visits to AC, a local space experienced as welcoming and safe, helped mothers to cultivate a sense of belonging. The practical advice and advocacy such relationships produced also facilitated progression of mothers' claims on bureaucrats for the right to belong.

### Healthcare professionals

Participants engaged with frontline healthcare professionals in hospitals not only in maternity services but in certain cases if they had a child with an illness, developmental condition or disability. In these contexts, mothers were recognised *as mothers*. There was a mutual understanding of child and mother as having a right and need to access appropriate services and support. Any challenges to this relationship of solidarity, for example through attempts to demand payment if mothers did not have leave to remain, were dealt with through separate channels by Overseas Visitor Managers. Concerns about families' welfare led to additional support and advocacy within hospital settings.

Engaging with a range of medical professionals was part of Eva's everyday life because of her child's serious condition. She valued these relationships, not only because the team provided specialised medical advice whenever it was needed, but also because members of the team (including the hospital's social worker) would advocate for her family's wider needs, such as when a decision by the local authority to relocate the family outside of London was perceived as a health risk. Eva described the significance of these relationships when she created a sociogram and talked me through it:

*Without the hospital, I don't think [my child] would be here today. So they are really important, they are. Especially the [specialist medical] team – they have been wonderful. There are a lot of people you see. They are very, very good. They touch a lot of people's lives. When we see the team, it's made up of so many branches. When we go to the hospital now, I see other people like [named roles]; if there is something that is bothering you, the social worker, doctors will come – so many people will come and see you. [...] They are calling us up – how [my child] is going. They are wonderful.*

Universal health services, such as health visitors and GPs (general practitioners), provided

opportunities for support and advocacy for all mothers. Health visitors visit mothers at home at intervals from birth until their child is two years of age, to monitor children's development and mothers' wellbeing, identify needs and facilitate access to information, advice or support. Kate described the crucial and 'influential' role her health visitor played in recognising that she was experiencing domestic abuse: 'She was the first one to recognise that I was going through domestic violence. She said she can see. I was like, oh my god, finally, someone believes me.' The health visitor helped Kate to frame her partner's behaviour as abuse, which was a turning point, enabling her to consider her options and ultimately leave the relationship. Kate's health visitor also provided practical help over time, such as clothes and shoes for her young son.

GPs are another universal service who can play an important role in identifying and responding to needs, although not all mothers with insecure immigration status were aware of their right to access a GP, in part due to confusion and conflicting messages from some GP practices (Papageorgiou et al. 2020). During my fieldwork, when faced with homelessness Sara reached out to her GP as a potential advocate, who had agreed to write a letter to the local authority about the potential impact of withholding financial support; Sara remained doubtful about the GP's ability to influence decision-makers, however, as her problem remained unresolved. Whilst Sara had felt able to approach her GP for advice and advocacy regarding her personal circumstances, Kate, on the other hand, was not registered with a local GP, and was fearful about attempting to register, not believing she was entitled to do so. As shown by national and local migrants' rights campaign groups, staff at many GP practices did not know that proof of residency was not required to register with a GP (Doctors of the World 2019). This reflects findings by Mette Berg (2018) that 'confusion and lack of knowledge among both health service providers and migrants around entitlements mean that migrants are not always able to access the care they need', particularly for 'migrants with uncertain legal status' (Berg 2018: 198).

Interactions with health professionals were experienced by participants as caring, supportive and protective, in some cases as sustaining life. For some, health professionals formed a specialist network around the family, and also facilitated connections with advocates beyond the health setting who could provide other types of specialised support.



Equally, there were examples of participants (and people they knew) feeling bordered out of interactions with healthcare staff.

### Advocates at children's centres and women's groups

*When things are going wrong, I went to speak to the manager of the centre [...] she said to me what is your plan now, where are you now? She come to visit me, to my property, she see what I need. For basic thing we don't have anything at all, on that moment nothing, nothing, we just have only bed. [...] She contact different kind of charity organisation, to get basic thing at home, for my daughter bed, basic stuff for eating and for cooking stuff. [...] I put my daughter in nursery, and I start to do volunteering children's centre to get a solution, and also apply for different kind of job. (Zoe)*

Frontline workers in children's centres were trusted and perceived as brokers of knowledge and resources. They were recognised as being able to 'bridge the trust gap' with less accessible local authority services. Mothers with insecure immigration status, either signposted by a friend or having attended playgroups or English classes, felt they could turn to workers for information, advocacy and support. Madeline recalled Sure Start groups as 'the best moment' during a very difficult period of precarity:

*At that time I didn't have my stay [leave to remain], and I was down, you know, and when you meet people, you start talking to people, people are in the same situation with you, and you know how to get help, where to go – that makes you very happy. [...] They was telling us, 'even if you don't have your stay, you can get this'. But I think without the group I would not know all those things.*

For Kate, who had been in an abusive relationship, gradually building trust in children's centre frontline workers had helped her to feel safe enough to disclose small amounts of information, and from there to understand what her options were.

*I remember telling one of the ladies and she said to me, 'You can't take this lightly, you can't.' [...] She said, 'Even if you don't want to go to the authorities to make people come in, you still need to let somebody outside know what is happening.' And bit by bit, I was talking.*

Over time, Kate was able to open up to children's centre workers and access specialist support. Other participants spoke of children's centre staff who wrote letters to support Home Office 'leave to remain' applications, or who phoned Children's Social Care to advocate for families in need requesting Section 17 assessments. Workers' recognition of

needs and validation of women as mothers, and the development of mutual trust, gradually produced relational security and a sense of belonging.

Nevertheless, Clover, a children's centre advocate, recognised that some mothers felt safer accessing support through voluntary sector organisations or faith groups than with local authority funded services, potentially associated with Children's Social Care and the fear of children being taken away:

*It will be much easier for them to go to those places than to come to places that are run by the local authority. Because sometimes people just don't know. [...] Because it's local authority, sometimes people can be intimidated, they think that 'they will go into my business', and then they think about social services, they think about the negative side of what can happen to them. Even sometimes families come to us, and then when we are working with them and they know that it's local authority, it will take you a long, long, long, long time to get the trust before you get to the core of the issue. So that local authority label can be quite intimidating. So it's easier for them to go to those voluntary sector places where they don't feel like the authority will be on my back, it's a place where I can go, I can see things. [...] The local authority is there like a weapon on top of them.*

Clover stressed the importance of building trust with mothers with insecure status through a welcoming, non-judgemental approach and a readiness to help, pointing out the significance of supportive relationships with frontline advocates for women who may be feeling distant from kin, oppressed in their couple relationship and struggling to meet co-ethnic community expectations:

*you don't want to feel like people knowing, because it's so intimate, it's not something that you will discuss with everybody. So you will suffer in silence. You don't want to be judged by the people around you. [...] Sometimes when the woman does want to even speak out, you will have people in the community who will say that, you shouldn't be saying that, you know, you have to do it, if you have children, because of the children, or your husband is the [head] of the family, you know there are all sorts of things. And then back home, because they think you are in heaven here in Europe, probably they are relying on you to sort out certain financial situations, for the money you don't even have, so it's even more difficult for you to speak out. So your family could not be there, so you can't explain things to them, you don't have friends here because you don't know where to go, and when you do come to groups and sessions that we run, it will take them a long, long, long time to feel like they can trust you. [...] I think it's even harder to share with friends. But with a professional, when you know there is confidentiality there, they feel safer.*

Clover articulated some of the multiple dilemmas mothers faced in navigating couple relationships, friendships, kin networks and local co-ethnic communities when constrained by the precarity of their immigration status and NRPF. As has been explored in previous chapters, support networks may be sparse, confiding in friends may be risky, and co-ethnic communities may be perceived as judgemental. Whilst it may take time to build sufficient trust in frontline professionals in convivial spaces such as children's centres in order to disclose personal needs, these relationships may feel 'safer' as a site for self-disclosure and seeking support.

Women's groups, women-only English classes, church-based women's groups, and support groups for women who have experienced domestic abuse also offered safe spaces to make connections with other women, as well as opportunities to engage with advocates, often with specialist knowledge. Kate met two influential advocates through a local women's group she had attended for some months, which had been critical to her as a means of forming relationships with advocates who helped her through difficult times. Sal had approached Kate in the street to invite her along to the group, where talks were given on 'domestic violence, stuff like that'. When Kate opened up to Sal about her immigration status, Sal told her about the advice centre. Through the group, Kate also met Margo, an advocate and activist who helped raise money online for Kate's leave to remain application and supported her to safely leave the abusive relationship she was in at the time.

Interacting with others through discussion and debate at groups such as this – created as safe spaces for women – can be seen as a form of enacting everyday citizenship, generating 'a sense of solidarity and critical analysis among participants', where 'personal challenges are reinterpreted as part of structural or shared problems, necessitating collective action' (Bloemraad 2018: 13).

The perceived capacity of (potential) advocates to provide support was a factor too. Many participants felt ambivalent about relationships with school staff, for example, noting that they were limited in their ability to provide practical support or advocate for families around needs related to immigration status. Eva, who had no recourse to public funds and whose children were therefore not entitled to free school meals, was struggling to pay: 'The school cannot do nothing really. They can't. They can't support us in any way.' For other mothers, it

was only when they were unable to get their children to school (such as following a sudden move out of the area) that a school staff member made contact and started to understand more about the family's circumstances and identify their needs. Examples were given of school staff signposting to legal advice or making referrals for Section 17 assessments. Mothers' perceptions of the roles of frontline workers in different types of organisation therefore shaped their interactions and expectations and the development (or not) of supportive relationships.

## Concluding remarks

In this final ethnographic chapter, I have shown that motherhood creates new needs which personal networks may no longer be able to meet, and the ways in which mothers' experiences of everyday bordering and hostile gatekeeping by agents of the state at national and local levels produce ontological insecurity. I have also demonstrated that motherhood as a dimension of identity creates new opportunities for embedding in convivial spaces as a mother, enabling friendships to be forged with other mothers, and creating simultaneous opportunities for engaging with voluntary sector (and hospitable public sector) advocates. I have argued that in the context of the 'problem of trust' for women/mothers with precarious immigration statuses, advocates play an essential role in providing support, advice, information and resources. I have demonstrated that in these settings, advocates recognise women/mothers as mothers, affording recognition of their acts of citizenship and of their claims. In the absence of (supportive) kin networks, and given the difficulties of trusting friends or co-ethnic community or church members with sensitive personal information, mothers' gradual development of trust in identified advocates – often accessed via friends or acquaintances as 'bridges' or 'chaperones' – facilitates self-disclosure and access to support, contributing to greater ontological security and a sense of belonging.

## Conclusion

*Amy: A lot of things killing people inside. The status... If you don't have status, doors are closed. It really make people to [feel] really bad.*

*Rachel: The way it affects people's wellbeing or mental health...*

*Amy: The mental health is really bad. It creates a sorrow inside of you. The way you are reasoning will be different from other people. It will kill your good self. Your ability of thinking will die if you don't have your status. If you want to think, you will be like, oh, there is a barrier. You can't move more than this. It is really good for once to be free from this status – it is really good to be free.*

This thesis has examined the ways in which insecure immigration status and the condition of 'no recourse to public funds' (NRPF) both exemplify and produce bordering practices and shape mothering and relational belonging in the context of the UK's hostile environment policies. Over 20 months, I engaged deeply with 22 mothers and 5 frontline advocates, and met with many more people whilst volunteering and spending time in drop-ins, advice centres, children's centres and a community centre in the London neighbourhood of 'Ryeton'. Through extensive analysis of the rich ethnographic data in dialogue with my eclectic theoretical framework, which brings together concepts from scholarship on migration, motherhood, belonging, citizenship, communications theory and specific forms of relational practices, I have sought to answer these questions: How do insecure immigration status and precarity affect mothering practices? How do these intersect to shape the development of different types of intimate and social relationships and the sharing of forms of social support? In what ways do all of these shape practices of belonging and citizenship? In this thesis, I have developed a theoretical understanding of the specific ways in which racially minoritised mothers with precarious statuses and NRPF enact relational belonging and citizenship *as women and mothers*. In so doing, the thesis extends conceptual understanding of everyday bordering and relational belonging, specifically in the context of mothering, which has so far been insufficiently examined in the UK and beyond. I summarise the main conclusions and key conceptual contributions of the thesis below.

## Everyday bordering and status anxiety

As shown in the Introduction and Chapters 1 and 2, irregular migration and insecure immigration statuses are politically, legally and socially constructed: they are not fixed but are contingent on laws, policies, the implementation of these and the passage of time. Immigration policies in Britain have become increasingly restrictive and selective in recent years, not only restricting access to the UK but selecting who can make it their home. Building on work by Nira Yuval-Davis and other scholars in the UK, I have demonstrated at the micro level how, in the context of the Hostile Environment strategy over the last decade, everyday bordering and hostile gatekeeping by agents of the state at national and local levels undermines trust in interpersonal relationships and (re)produces ontological insecurity for mothers with insecure status. As Amy indicated in the quote above, the endless experiences of 'barriers' and 'closed doors' in everyday life not only create marginalisation but psychological insecurity generated by preoccupation with immigration status and residency rights. I have conceptualised this phenomenon as 'status anxiety', a significant theoretical contribution of this thesis to migration studies. The ethnographic chapters of this thesis have shown that status anxiety arises from being confined to indefinite waiting in liminal legal positions with minimal rights and no recourse to public funds. It emerges from the associated conditions of having no flexibility in decision-making, limited ability to respond to changing needs, and minimal scope to plan for the future. It is generated by living precarious lives of forced mobilities and immobilities. Status anxiety is pervasive for mothers who do not feel safe accessing public (or private) institutions as a result of government policies. It is inescapable when lack of trust filters into intimate and social relationships in everyday life. It shapes interpersonal relationship practices and in so doing constrains access to, and sharing of, material, financial and emotional forms of support. Whilst status anxiety can be alleviated to an extent by being granted limited leave to remain, it is not resolved: it lingers in everyday interactions which are reminders of the contingency of temporary statuses.

## Mothering in a hostile environment

The thesis has shown how becoming a mother subjected to insecure immigration status and financial precarity creates new needs intersectionally, and in diverse ways constrains mothering practices, from practices of shared or solo parenting, to providing for and

protecting one's children. Yet, building on work by Umut Erel, Tracey Reynolds and other scholars, the thesis has demonstrated how becoming a mother can be understood as a form of enacting belonging and contesting marginalisation when faced with structural and everyday forms of exclusion in the context of the hostile environment. Specifically, through deep analysis of my ethnographic data, I have shown firstly how the interdependency of the mother-child relationship may produce a sense of belonging and trust. Secondly, I have argued that becoming the mother of a 'British child' (or British-to-be) can be seen as an act of citizenship, whereby mothers make a legal claim for recognition and residency rights, challenging their marginalisation and the unbelonging imposed on them by the state. Thirdly, I have shown that mothers are agentic and may engage in strategic mothering, navigating a careful path between protecting their children from knowledge of their legal position in the hostile environment on the one hand and cultivating them as active citizens on the other, supporting their children to negotiate and resist racialised forms of oppression pertaining to their immigration status. I have argued that, despite the multiple and intersecting contextual constraints, mothers seek to help their children not only to 'fit in' with their peers but to flourish. Through my ethnographic data, I have shown how mothers do so in and for the present, for example by embedding within faith networks, community groups, education and care settings and extracurricular activities, when and where opportunities emerge, as well as looking to the future, co-creating aspirations with their children to contribute as citizens to society.

The thesis thereby makes a significant contribution to the literature in the social sciences in the individual and intersecting fields of motherhood, migration and citizenship by extending understandings of mothering as enacting belonging and citizenship.

### Enacting relational belonging and accessing support in a hostile environment

Throughout this thesis, I have shown that, for women/mothers with insecure immigration status bordered out of national belonging by the hostile state, and distant from (supportive) kin networks, being a mother provides opportunities for, and shapes, modes of enacting belonging not only within but beyond the mother-child relationship. Uniquely, this thesis has shown how the intersection of racialisation, gender, insecure status, status anxiety and motherhood shapes the ways that mothers enact (inter)subjective belonging through

carefully selected forms of care and support in the development of friendships, embedding in faith networks and engaging with frontline advocates in convivial (semi-) public spaces as women and as mothers. Such practices constitute the relationships and produce (inter)subjective understandings of them. As such, I have argued that intimate and social relational practices may contribute to ontological security and allay status anxiety. The thesis has illuminated how, as a potential basis of social and cultural identity, becoming a mother creates possibilities for new social relationships with other mothers and frontline workers, and opens up new convivial spaces for mutual recognition, where the identity of 'mother' eclipses labels associated with insecure immigration status. This has implications for 'bordered' motherhood, showing the significance of intimate and social relationships in enacting belonging and citizenship by sharing care and claiming rights.

Specifically, Chapter 5 showed how, through reaching out and responding, sharing information, exchanging resources and (under certain conditions and in circumscribed ways) mutual confiding, women/mothers cautiously develop and nurture friendships over time, locally, transnationally and online, their friendship practices constantly constrained by precarious statuses and status anxiety. Drawing on relational dialectics theory, I have argued that friendship practices are shaped by dialectical tensions in very specific ways, shaping access to different forms of support (discussed below). The thesis therefore contributes to the sociological literature on friendship, which has so far not addressed the specific context of insecure immigration status.

Chapter 6 demonstrated that faith-based networks, often but not always overlapping to varying degrees with friendships, are central to sharing support and developing a sense of belonging. Focusing on participation in Christian churches, I showed how, for those who are socially marginalised by hostile policies and precarious status, faith-based embedding practices – from attending services to actively participating in specific groups – can strengthen a sense of social and/or cultural identity as part of a community with shared beliefs. I showed how mothers navigate dialectical tensions within faith networks in sometimes similar ways to friendships, but taking account of the additional dimension of power hierarchies and, at times, dynamics of social control. I argued that faith groups can be sites of exclusion as well as inclusion, showing that whilst faith groups may provide sites for



active citizenship, mothers may also experience bordering practices at the micro level. Building on theories of integration in the field of migration and religion, but, significantly, applying these to the context of mothers with insecure status, I argued in this chapter that faith networks can (often but not always) be mobilised as social capital to access accommodation, financial or material support in times of crisis, in many cases irrespective of depth of friendship or length of connection with church members or leaders. In this context, I suggested, (symmetrical) reciprocity may not be expected (although ambiguities in expectations may cause tensions). Through this chapter, the thesis contributes to the sociology of religion and, more broadly, to theories of belonging in the fields of citizenship studies and migration studies.

The thesis has illuminated the very particular role played by couple relationships as a site for enacting relational belonging for women/mothers with precarious status. In Chapter 7, I have demonstrated that intimate partner relationships can be a motivation for migrating to and/or staying in the UK, but also that, for single women subjected to hostile policies and practices, the promise of a close couple relationship may offer a haven of support. I have shown that the couple relationship can be seen as a space for trust, intimacy and mutual self-disclosure, and whether recognised explicitly or not, 'doing coupledness' can provide access to emotional and financial security, to friendship and faith networks, to social acceptance and potentially to residency rights. Analysis of my ethnographic data has focused on everyday ways of 'doing coupledness' and belonging in the context of parenthood. I have shown how being part of a couple may engender shared parenting (whether supportive or oppressive, living together or apart), engaged fathering or absence and non-engagement, sustained or sporadic financial and material support or no support at all, solo mothering, or combinations of these over time. I have also explored how becoming parents may be perceived as a more likely route to leave to remain for women, although this may be fraught with tensions and fail to lead to citizenship for children or residency rights for women/mothers. Applying relational dialectics theory to my ethnographic data on couple relationships, I have shown how 'doing coupledness' requires navigating tensions between self-disclosure and privacy, and between autonomy and (inter)dependence, or care and control (discussed below).

The thesis (particularly in Chapter 8) has explained how motherhood creates new opportunities for enacting belonging in convivial family-oriented (semi-) public spaces as a mother. I have argued that mothers may not only foster friendships with other mothers, but also build trusting relationships over time with frontline advocates in voluntary sector and particular public sector settings. I have shown how women may select these relationships as suitable sites for confiding the unsayable, when status anxiety prevents disclosure of full precarity to those who are too close. In the context of limited accessible or supportive kin networks, needing to withhold status-related problems from friends and faith group members, and/or potentially being at risk in couple relationships or coping alone, women/mothers may choose to confide in carefully selected frontline advocates, who may play an essential role in providing practical support or advice and in recognising mothering and claims-making as enacting citizenship.

### Navigating dialectical tensions as a mother in intimate and social relationships

This thesis is innovative in demonstrating that within all types of intimate and social relationships, mothers with precarious status negotiate dialectical tensions in the context of their specific structural positions: between care and control; between the need to access resources and their (perceived and/or actual) unavailability; between obligation and impossibility of reciprocating; and, fundamentally, between the need for intimacy and the need for privacy – what I have conceptualised as the ‘problem of trust’. To different degrees within different types of relationship, and in intersection with other factors, these structural tensions (re)produce ontological insecurity and unequal power relations, constrain access to support and increase vulnerability to exploitation and abuse. Negotiating these tensions inevitably shapes mothers’ everyday relational practices.

Throughout the thesis, I have shown that, when in need of resources or support, mothers are compelled to consider carefully whom to approach. The knowledge (or belief) that friends or acquaintances have limited resources or ability to support affects such decisions, in turn shaping practices and perceptions of friendships. Similarly, whilst faith networks can be resource-rich in terms of people willing to help, in practice material resources and spare

rooms are often in short supply, resulting in short-term solutions, requiring sustained 'work' to find alternative sources of support.

Crucially, the thesis has illuminated how mothers are forced to weigh up the potential risks and benefits of confiding their precarious status to others, and balance this against the need for privacy. Resolving this often means choosing not to confide sensitive personal information to friends or faith group members, instead emphasising alternative forms of 'doing friendship' or 'doing faith'. Confiding in friends or church members may increase the precarity of status. The problem of trust is further complicated in faith spaces by unequal power relations, where bordering by faith group leaders or members may reproduce socio-economic, racialised and/or citizenship status-based forms of exclusion and social control. Chapter 8 contributes to the key arguments of the thesis by deepening understandings of hostile bordering practices at the local level through analysis of mothers' narrative accounts of encounters with Home Office officials and Social Care workers, before showing the significance in this context of mothers' spatial belonging practices in convivial (semi-) public places. Critically, building on work by Small (2009) and Klinenberg (2018), this chapter shows how the development of interpersonal trust, friendship practices and engagement with frontline advocates are patterned by spatial context.

Building on scholarship identifying the increased risk of domestic abuse for women with insecure immigration status (Menjívar and Salcido 2002, Erez and Globokar 2009, Raj and Silverman 2002, 2014, Anitha 2010, 2011, 2015, Voolma 2018, Dudley 2017), I have highlighted how self-disclosure as an intimacy practice (seen as necessary to create trust), along with financial and/or legal dependency resulting from insecure status, increase vulnerability to exploitation and abuse and the potential impact of separation or abandonment. An original contribution of the thesis, particularly Chapter 7, is to draw attention to the everyday ways in which women/mothers precariously positioned by their status 'hold' conflict and tensions, manage risk, find ways to resist exploitation and abuse, seek safe spaces, protect their children, and seek help and support. A further contribution of the thesis is to place this dynamic within the wider context of tensions between trust and vulnerability in different types of interpersonal relationships for women/mothers with insecure statuses. Additionally, beyond examples of abusive relationships, I have shown that

in all aspects of 'doing coupledness', women navigate tensions between care and control and between self-disclosure and privacy. Chapters 4 and 7 in particular have demonstrated how, in intersection with precarious statuses and NRPF, everyday resolutions of these tensions produce ways of 'doing coupledness', which in turn shape access to support and mothering practices.

More broadly, this thesis has demonstrated that belonging is not only about citizenship status or belonging to a polity (although these are important), but crucially is about practices of care and acts of resistance through interactions in diverse types of relationships, from mothering, intimate couple relationships and friendships to faith networks and engagement with frontline advocates. Whilst insecure immigration statuses and NRPF constrain belonging practices intersectionally with gender, 'race' and class, women/mothers are agentic in enacting belonging and citizenship relationally in their everyday lives. Intersecting dimensions of identity, including motherhood, can facilitate the beginning and sustaining of intimate and social relationships and practices of care, both intra- and intergenerationally, in particular spaces and places, creating possibilities for ontological security.

### Methodological contribution

In this study of mothering in a hostile environment, the thesis has demonstrated the significance of 'deep hanging out', firstly within frontline organisations, as a means of developing deep contextual knowledge and understanding the perspectives and relational practices of mothers and advocates, and secondly one-to-one with mothers, spending time engaging with them in daily activities, in homes and on the move, witnessing everyday interactions and reflecting together. The thesis has shown the importance of engagement over time in order to develop trusting relationships and deepen mutual understandings. The rich ethnographic data in this thesis indicate how this approach produced the space for deep reflection and sharing, allowing me to 'catch' participants' meanings and nuances. Equally, the data reflect how engagement over time enabled mothers to construct narratives which covered many years of their lives and explored diverse relationships. Significantly, mothers' long-term participation also allowed me to witness changes to their immigration statuses in real time, and to understand the impact of these.

An important contribution of this research has been the use of participant-led, 'freestyle' sociograms in conjunction with open-ended conversations as a participatory method. Chapter 3 shows how this method helped participants to understand my research interest, allowed them to decide what to focus on and enabled them to shape the conversation. The process, as part of an open-ended conversation in one of the first research encounters with each participant, stimulated deep reflection by participants, and helped me to be responsive to individual representations of support networks both in the moment and later on, and to identify practices, processes, perceptions and changes over time. It also led in some cases to the co-construction of theoretical explanations of these. The research process and the resulting ethnographic data are unlikely to have been so rich and exploratory had I used a pre-formatted 'target' sociogram. Social scientists researching relational practices may find this method helpful (see also Benchekroun 2020).

### Relevance to policy and practice

The conclusions of the thesis illuminate ways in which the UK government's Hostile Environment strategy marginalises and creates precarity for families with insecure statuses and NRPF. This exacerbates social inequalities and heightens the risk of the intergenerational transmission of precarity. Subjecting families to insecure statuses, unbelonging and financial precarity has implications for children's and parents' health and wellbeing, access to education and future employment opportunities, as well as for children's learning and development. It is therefore hoped that the thesis will influence future policy on immigration and citizenship. Specific policy changes would include: reduction of visa application and renewal fees; removal or reduction of the minimum income requirement for spouse/fiancé visas and family reunion visas; removal of the healthcare surcharge; reduction of waiting times for Home Office decisions on visa applications and appeals; removal of the NRPF condition from mothers/main carers living in the UK; reduction and simplification of the ten-year route to indefinite leave to remain; simplification of the Immigration Rules; reinstatement of legal aid for immigration-related cases; establishing a firewall to prevent data-sharing between the Home Office and public institutions for immigration enforcement purposes; ensuring all children with NRPF whose families meet the existing low income criteria are entitled to free school meals; ensuring all

parents with NRPF who meet the existing income criteria are eligible for free childcare; ensuring all children/young people resident in the UK are entitled to access Higher Education as 'home' students rather than being subjected to international fees and are entitled to access student finance; and allowing individuals awaiting decisions on visa applications to volunteer and study.

In relation to practice, Chapter 8 in particular has highlighted contrasting experiences of encounters with agents of the state (at national and local levels) and with frontline advocates, and has shown how these interactions impact on individuals not only materially but in terms of ontological security, wellbeing and a sense of belonging. It is hoped that the thesis will lead to opportunities for public engagement – with families and with practitioners in health, social care and education, for example – to raise awareness of the impact of the Hostile Environment strategy on the everyday lives of mothers and children with insecure statuses, and to ultimately inform practice. An ideal outcome of the thesis would be to contribute to the reduction of bureaucratic practices which may be experienced as hostile, excluding or marginalising, and the adoption instead of practices which seek to build trust and create opportunities to promote a sense of belonging and inclusion and provide support. These would include adequate accommodation, financial support and legal support to minimise delays in regularising immigration status and being granted indefinite leave to remain.

### Questions for further research

I write the conclusion to this 4-and-a-half-year study in the midst of a global pandemic, the uncertain outcomes of the UK's departure from the EU and a new Immigration Bill. This necessitates further research into the intersections of precarious motherhood and the hostile environment in the face of emerging contexts and a deepening of existing inequalities.

As with every study, decisions had to be made about what is kept in and what is left out. I remain fascinated by the role of kinship networks, as well as the serendipitous encounters I witnessed during my fieldwork and the ways they affect and interact with the relationships I focus on in this thesis.

In short, while pointing to the significance of relational belonging practices in response to the questions I began with, I am left with many more questions for future work and the conviction of the importance of learning more about precarious motherhood in the hopes that this research can contribute to changing its conditions of production.

Appendix A: Poster/flyer

**Do you have  
(or did you previously have)  
'no recourse to public funds'  
(NRPF)?**

I am carrying out some research looking at the barriers faced by mums with NRPF in accessing services, support and resources, and in what ways mums' social networks might help.

If you are interested in talking to me about your experiences, please speak to [names] to find out more.

Participants will be given a £10 [supermarket] voucher.

(Identities will be anonymised.)

Thank you!

Rachel





## Appendix B: Information sheet for mothers

### **Do you have (or have you had) no recourse to public funds?**

#### **Research project on social networks - information sheet for mothers**

You are invited to take part in a research project. Please:

- take time to read the following information carefully
- ask me if there is anything that is not clear
- take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.

*What is the purpose of this research? Why have I been asked to take part?*

This research is for my PhD. I would like to find out about how mothers with no recourse to public funds (NRPF) develop social networks, and how these influence access to support and services.

*How could I be involved?*

- Focus group – this would be a group discussion and would last for about an hour.
- One-to-one conversation – this would last for about an hour.
- ‘Following alongside’ – I would spend time with you on a typical day, going to the places you and your child/ren usually go, and doing the things you do! This would last for as long as you are happy with – it could be for a couple of hours, or it could be several times over the course of a few months. During this time, I may ask if you would like to keep a diary or take photographs in relation to your social networks.

*Do I have to take part?*

It is completely up to you whether to take part in some, all or none of this research. If you decide to take part, I will give you a copy of this information sheet and will ask you to sign a consent form.

*What if I change my mind?*

You can decide to withdraw up until 31 December 2019. If you decide to withdraw, I will ask you what you would like me to do with the data you have provided.

*Will I be recorded, and how will the recording be used? What about confidentiality?*

I will record interviews (and some conversations while ‘following alongside’) using a voice recorder, and will transcribe them. I will store recordings and transcripts securely (and delete recordings from the voice recorder). I will ask you if you would like to help me analyse the conversations. I may quote from our discussions in my thesis, and possibly in other documents or articles; if so, I will anonymise any quotations from interviews (I won’t use anyone’s real names). Any personal data will be kept strictly confidential and will be stored securely.

*What are the possible disadvantages of taking part?*

You may find some of the questions sensitive or difficult to answer. You don’t have to answer any questions that you aren’t comfortable with.

*What are the potential benefits of taking part?*

There are no immediate benefits for those people taking part in this research. However, I hope that my research will contribute to a deeper understanding of the role of social networks for mothers with NRPF and their children living in the UK. This may help influence policy on migration and access to support and services for families.

Mums who take part on a one-to-one basis will receive a £10 voucher for [supermarket names]. Refreshments will be provided at focus groups.

*Limitations to confidentiality*

I will maintain confidentiality as far as possible. However, if during our conversation you share anything which makes me worried that someone might be in danger of harm, I will have to follow relevant safeguarding procedures, which may involve passing on this information to my supervisor or another agency.

*What if something goes wrong?*

If you wish to discuss any aspect of this research, or to make a complaint about it, please contact me at [contact details].

If you feel that your complaint has not been dealt with sufficiently, please contact one of my supervisors: [contact details], or the Chair of the UCL Research Ethics Committee at [contact details].

*Data protection privacy notice*

The data controller for this project is University College London (UCL). The UCL Data Protection Office provides oversight of UCL activities involving the processing of personal data, and can be contacted at [contact details]. UCL's Data Protection Officer is [name] [contact details].

Your personal data will be processed for the purposes outlined above, on the basis that you have provided your consent. Your personal data will be anonymised in any publications or reports.

If you are concerned about how your personal data is being processed, please contact UCL in the first instance at [contact details]. If you remain unsatisfied, you may wish to contact the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO). Contact details, and details of data subject rights, are available on the ICO website at: <https://ico.org.uk/for-organisations/data-protection-reform/overview-of-the-gdpr/individuals-rights/>

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet and for considering taking part in this research. Please let me know if you have any questions.

Rachel Benckroun

UCL Institute of Education  
[contact details]

This study has been approved by the UCL Research Ethics Committee:

Project ID number: [ref]

UCL Data Protection Officer: [name]



Appendix C: Consent form for mothers

**Social networks of mothers with NRPF**

**Consent Form (mothers)**

If you are happy to participate in this research, please complete this consent form and return to Rachel Benchekroun in person or at the address below.

Yes No

I have read and understood the information leaflet about the research.

I agree to take part in:

a) a focus group

b) a one-to-one conversation

c) Rachel spending time with me on a 'typical day(s)'

I agree for conversations to be audio recorded.

I understand that if any of my words are used in reports or presentations, they will not be attributed to me. They will also not be described in a way that means others could work out that I said them.

I understand that if I disclose anything that suggests someone may be at risk of harm, this information will need to be shared with relevant agencies in accordance with safeguarding procedures.

I understand that I can decide to withdraw from the project by 31/12/19. I will not need to provide a reason. If I do so, I can choose to have any data I have provided immediately destroyed.

I understand that I can contact Rachel Benchekroun by 31/12/19 and request for my data to be removed from the project database (contact details below).

I understand that any data collected from interviews will be anonymised (e.g. using a different name) and may be used and published in Rachel's PhD thesis, in research publications and/or presentations. I will not be identified or identifiable in any way in any reports, publications or presentations.

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Signed \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

[contact details]

This study has been approved by the UCL Research Ethics Committee:

Project ID number: [ref]

UCL Data Protection Officer: [name]

## Appendix D: Information sheet for professionals

### Social networks of mothers with NRPF

#### Information Sheet for Professionals

You are invited to take part in a research project. Please:

- take time to read the following information carefully
- ask me if there is anything that is not clear
- take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.

*What is the purpose of this research? Why have I been asked to take part?*

This research is for my PhD. It explores the role of social networks for mothers with no recourse to public funds (NRPF). As well as talking with mothers who have (or previously had) NRPF, I would like to interview professionals working for voluntary sector organisations or public sector services whose clients include mothers with NRPF.

*Do I have to take part?*

It is completely up to you whether or not to take part in this research. If you decide to take part, I will give you a copy of this information sheet and will ask you to sign a consent form.

*What if I change my mind?*

You can decide to withdraw up until 31 December 2019. If you decide to withdraw, I will ask you what you would like me to do with the data you have provided.

*Will I be recorded, and how will the recording be used? What about confidentiality?*

If you are happy for me to do so, I will record our conversation using a voice recorder, and will transcribe them. I will store recordings and transcripts securely (and delete recordings from the voice recorder). I may quote from our conversation in my thesis, and possibly in other documents or articles; if so, I will anonymise any quotations from the conversation (I won't use anyone's real names). Any personal data will be kept strictly confidential and will be stored securely. Your identity, organisation and role will be anonymised in any reports or publications.

*What are the possible disadvantages of taking part?*

You may find some of the questions sensitive or difficult to answer. You do not have to answer any questions that you are not comfortable with.

### *What are the potential benefits of taking part?*

Whilst there are no immediate benefits for those people taking part in this study, I hope the findings of this research will contribute to a deeper understanding of the role of social networks for mothers with NRPF and their children living in the UK, and will influence policy on migration and access to support and services for families.

### *Will my taking part in this project be kept confidential?*

I will not inform anyone that you have taken part in this research.

I will not be evaluating your practice as a professional; my aim is to deepen my own understanding of the challenges faced by mothers with NRPF and the ways in which they may develop their social networks to access support, services and resources.

### *Limitations to confidentiality*

Confidentiality will be maintained as far as possible. However, if during our conversation I hear anything which makes me worried that someone might be in danger of harm, I will have to follow relevant safeguarding procedures, which may involve passing on this information to my supervisor or another agency.

### *What if something goes wrong?*

If you wish to discuss any aspect of this research, or to make a complaint about it, please contact me at [email].

If you feel that your complaint has not been dealt with sufficiently, please contact one of my supervisors: [email] or the Chair of the UCL Research Ethics Committee at [email].

## **Privacy notice**

University College London (UCL) aims to conduct research to the highest standards of research integrity. My research is underpinned by policies and procedures that ensure I comply with regulations and legislation that govern the conduct of research; this includes data protection legislation such as the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the UK Data Protection Act 2018 (DPA).

**Data controller:** I will ensure your personal information is created, collected, used, shared, stored and deleted (processed) in line with the objectives of the research. I will collect only what is appropriate and necessary. I will inform you of what I am collecting.

**Data protection officer:** If you have any questions about how your personal information is used, please consult the University's data protection webpages. If you need further assistance, please contact the University's Data Protection Officer. You can contact UCL by [contact details].

**The purposes for which data will be collected and used:** As a university we use personal data to conduct research to improve health, care and services. As a publicly-funded organisation incorporated under a Royal Charter, we ensure that it is in the public interest when we use personal data from people who have agreed to take part in research. This means that when you agree to take part in a

research study, we will use your personal data in the ways needed to conduct and analyse the research study.

**How data will be used and disclosed:** Your personal information used in research will be pseudonymised before sharing more widely or publishing the research outcomes.

**How long data will be kept:** The data I collect from you will be kept for 10 years, following UCL retention protocols. Identifiable personal data (name, contact details) will be destroyed immediately following the end of the research (2021). Audio files will also be destroyed after they have been analysed.

**The controller's legal basis for processing:** Data protection legislation requires me to have a valid legal reason to process and use personal data about you. This is often called a 'legal basis'. GDPR requires us to be explicit with you about the legal basis upon which we rely in order to process information about you. In the context of research, the lawful basis upon which we will process your personal information is usually where "Processing is necessary for the performance of a task carried out in the public interest or in the exercise of official authority vested in the controller" (Article 6 of GDPR).

You can find further information on this privacy notice here: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/legal-services/privacy/participants-health-and-care-researchprivacy-notice>

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet and for considering taking part in this research. Please let me know if you have any questions.

Rachel Benchekroun

UCL Institute of Education

[contact details]

Project ID number: [ref]

UCL Data Protection Officer: [name]



Appendix E: Consent form for professionals

**Social networks of mothers with NRPF**

**Consent Form (professionals)**

If you are happy to participate in this research, please complete this consent form and return to Rachel Benchekroun in person or at the address below.

	Yes	No
I have read and understood the information leaflet about the research.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I agree to be interviewed for the research.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I agree for the interview to be audio recorded.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I understand that if any of my words are used in reports or presentations they will not be attributed to me. They will also not be described in a way that means others could work out that I said them.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I understand that if I disclose anything that suggests someone may be at risk of harm, this information will need to be shared with relevant agencies in accordance with safeguarding procedures.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I understand that I can decide to withdraw from the project by 31/12/19. I will not need to provide a reason. If I do so, I can choose to have any data I have provided immediately destroyed.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I understand that I can contact Rachel Benchekroun by 31/12/19 and request for my data to be removed from the project database (contact details below).	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I understand that any data collected from interviews will be anonymised (using names or initials which are not mine) and may be used and published in Rachel's PhD thesis, in research publications and/or presentations. I will not be identified or identifiable in any way in any reports, publications or presentations.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

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Name \_\_\_\_\_ Signed \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Rachel Benchekroun  
 UCL Institute of Education  
 [contact details]

This study has been approved by the UCL Research Ethics Committee:  
 Project ID number: [ref]  
 UCL Data Protection Officer: [name]

## Appendix F: Topic guide for conversations with mothers

- When arrived in UK, type of visa on arrival, current immigration status, marital status, number and ages of children, where children were born/live now, accommodation type, employment status.
- Motivations for migrating to UK; how/at what point they met their partner/husband; how they migrated to UK.
- Pre-existing social networks in UK, in country of origin and elsewhere at time of migrating:
  - o relationships;
  - o where;
  - o expectations;
  - o support provided;
  - o frequency and nature of contact.
- Needs (of mother and of children in UK/country of origin):
  - o what were/are needs?
  - o what were/are barriers?
  - o how were/are needs met?
- Forming/developing/sustaining social networks since arrival in UK:
  - o First/early networks?
  - o Current networks?
  - o Who – husband/partner, family, friends, acquaintances, neighbours, colleagues, parents of children’s friends, cultural associations, faith organisations, school/nursery, other?
  - o From shared/different cultural/ethnic/national/language/faith groups?
  - o How – face to face, phone, text, social media, other?
  - o Where – friends’ homes, own home, workplace, public space?
  - o How far do they travel? How often?
- How do these relationships/networks help/hinder access to resources, services, support for self and children?
  - o Trust, confidentiality, reciprocity, social exchange, obligations.
  - o Do friends/family introduce them to new people?
- Emotional wellbeing:
  - o How well-supported do mothers feel by their various networks?
  - o How do people in their networks help them/help their children in relation to/how do they feel about – relationships, safety, physical health, emotional wellbeing, financial situation, housing, community, educational achievement, employment opportunities, feeling included/excluded, experiences of discrimination, feeling happy, feeling fulfilled.)
- Place, space, mobility:
  - o How long have they lived in the local area?
  - o How often have they moved (house/area) since arriving in UK?
  - o How far away are their friends/support networks?
  - o What do they think about the local area?



- How does it compare to other places they have lived (or know of) in London/UK?
- How does it compare to where they lived before coming to UK? What do they like/not like about it? Where do they meet with friends? Are there places where they sometimes meet new people? How easy/difficult is it to travel to see friends outside of the local area? (How) do they maintain links with friends in pre-migration networks? What makes this easy/difficult?
- Intergenerational influences on networks:
  - What are the features and characteristics of their children's friendships?
  - How did they form those friendships?
  - Do their children's friends come round to play?
  - Do their children go to play at their friends' homes? – specifically those who were not already 'family friends'?
  - To what extent have their children's friendships shaped their own networks?
  - To what extent have their friendships shaped those of their children? What are the features of their networks that have been influenced by their children? *[Here I will ask mothers to use sociograms to depict their children's social networks, showing any connections to their own.]*

## Appendix G: Topic guide for interviews with professionals

- Type/purpose of organisation; client groups and characteristics.

*In terms of general patterns with regard to mothers with NRPF and their children, and without identifying any specific mothers or families:*

- What are some of the ways that women/mothers arrive in the UK? What types of visas seem to be most common?
- Do the women/mothers you support/work with have children in their country of origin/have they brought their children with them/have they given birth in the UK/a combination?
- What pre-existing support networks do women/mothers have on arrival?
- How do mothers form/develop networks on arrival?
- What kinds of needs do women/mothers (and their children) have? What kinds of things do they ask you for support with/access to?
- What are some of the difficulties/challenges mothers face?
- Do mothers with NRPF have difficulties accessing some kinds of services/resources? (which?)
- What is the impact on their children? What is the impact on mothers?
- Are there differences in how/how easily mothers can access support from voluntary agencies (*like yours – if applicable*) as opposed to statutory services (*like yours – if applicable*)?
- What kinds of services/resources are not available to mothers with NRPF? How does this impact on them? How does it impact on their children?
- How transient are the families you see who have NRPF? How often do families move house/move out of the area? What kinds of problems do families have with housing? What is the impact?
- Do mothers and children influence each other's friendships/networks? If so, how?
- What have you noticed about how mothers form/access support networks – do they tend to be within or bridging (crossing) ethnic, cultural, faith, national groups?
- Are you aware of mothers' experiences of discrimination? What are the kinds of experiences you are aware of?
- On the subject of marriages/intimate relationships – are there any patterns in terms of how supportive, limiting, exploitative or controlling these might be?
- Do mothers and children have particular (physical/mental) health needs? (How) do they access services and support in relation to these? What are some of the barriers?

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