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Strategic mothering in a hostile environment: how hostile immigration policies shape mothering, belonging and citizenship in the UK

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ABSTRACT

Immigration and citizenship policies in the UK have long been experienced as hostile and restrictive, particularly by groups who are racially minoritized. Since 2012, “Hostile Environment” policies have further restricted access to residency rights and citizenship status, generating legal and financial precarity for many families. Whilst research on state bordering practices is growing, little is known about their impact on mothering. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in a London neighbourhood, I show that hostile policies marginalize mothers with insecure immigration statuses and constrain experiences of mothering. Mothers face challenges and relational tensions which play out in ways specific to their structural positioning. I argue that mothers undertake strategic mothering work to address these tensions, enacting relational belonging and citizenship *as mothers*, for themselves and their children. This article contributes to sociological understandings of strategic mothering as a form of relational belonging and active citizenship in the context of hostile policies.

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Introduction

Immigration and citizenship policies in the UK have long been experienced as hostile and restrictive by racially minoritized groups. Since the government’s announcement of the “Hostile Environment” in 2012, it has been an explicit aim of the government to make life difficult for residents deemed not to have the right to live in the UK. Following the Conservative Party’s pre-election manifesto commitment in 2010 to reduce net migration to the “tens of thousands” (McNeil 2020), in 2012 Theresa May, then Home Secretary, set out

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the government's intention to create "a really hostile environment for illegal immigrants' (Kirkup and Winnett 2012). Hostile policies and discourses have generated precarity not only for people without residency rights but for people with diverse immigration statuses, including racially minoritized citizens (Gentleman 2022; Erel 2018). This article focuses on the specific effects of the "Hostile Environment" strategy on racially minoritized mothers without permanent residency rights.

Since 2012, a series of laws, rules and new requirements have been introduced to make it more difficult for people to obtain and retain residency rights, citizenship status, and associated rights. Measures include significant increases in Home Office visa and residence application fees, the introduction of the Immigration Health Surcharge, the minimum income requirement (for bringing a spouse or partner from overseas), the expansion of the "no recourse to public funds' (NRPF) condition, and making routes to settlement more complex and costly for families applying to stay in the UK on the basis of family and private life (Pinter et al. 2020, Dickson and Rosen 2021). These measures particularly affect people who are not wealthy, have moved from the Global South, are "categorised as less skilled" (Erel 2018, 175) and are from racially minoritized backgrounds (Pinter et al. 2020, 4). The number of people without residency rights has risen, increasing levels of socio-economic precarity (GLA 2020). Government policies exclude people who are subjected to NRPF – either as a condition of their visas or by default – from mainstream welfare benefits, many public services and social housing. Those with "no leave to remain" (of whom there were estimated to be 674,000 in 2017 [GLA 2020]) are prevented from doing paid work.

The Immigration Acts of 2014 and 2016 have extended borders into everyday life, requiring landlords to check tenants' "right to rent", employers to verify employees' "right to work", higher education institutions to check students' right to study, and healthcare officials and banks to check customers' right to live in the UK (Jones et al. 2017). Public services, businesses and individual citizens have been co-opted as agents of border control (Griffiths and Yeo 2021; Sigona 2018; Yuval-Davis, Wemyss, and Cassidy 2018). People with insecure statuses are deterred or prevented from accessing healthcare in the UK by additional barriers such as misinformation or confusion about entitlements (resulting from complex and changing rules), charging for secondary healthcare, concerns about data-sharing between the NHS and the Home Office, and fears of being detained or deported while receiving healthcare (Medact 2020; Essex et al. 2022; Nellums, Powis, and Jones 2021; Harris and Hardwick 2019).

These measures have had a disproportionate impact on mothers. First, mothers are more likely than fathers to be primary (or sole) caregivers (Erel and Reynolds 2018); second, becoming a mother creates new needs, challenges and responsibilities which can be exceptionally difficult to meet

when marginalized economically, socially and legally (Erel and Reynolds 2018; Erel 2018; Erel and Ryan 2019; Yuval-Davis, Wemyss, and Cassidy 2019; Erel 2011). Mothers with insecure statuses who are racially minoritized face additional and intersecting forms of exclusion and marginalization (Erel, Reynolds, and Kaptani 2018; Suerbaum and Lijnders 2023), affecting how they access different types of support. These multiple forms of bordering are inter-generational in their impact, from the transmission of precarious immigration status to the effects of financial precarity and the impact on wellbeing.

Drawing on an ethnographic study with families with insecure immigration statuses, this article examines how hostile policies constrain mothering and access to support, and how these shape feelings and practices of belonging. Using the theoretical lenses of *bordering* and *belonging*, I argue that in the context of hostile immigration policies, insecure statuses and NRPF, mothers contest their marginalization and enact relational belonging and citizenship *as mothers*: by providing for their children, by protecting them from “knowing too much”, by cultivating their children as active citizens, and by recognizing care as a two-way process within the mother–child relationship. Yet in doing so, mothers face challenges and must negotiate relational tensions specific to their structural positioning.

Bordering

The multiple and frequently changing legal categories relating to migration trajectories and immigration statuses are a form of bordering by nation-states. Migration and migrants are often described by right-wing politicians and sections of the media as “illegal” or “irregular”, but “irregular migration is a social, legal and political construction” (Düvell 2011, 276). Statuses are produced by changes to laws, rules and regulations and their application (De Genova 2002, 2013; Düvell 2011; Menjivar and Kanstroom 2013; Luibhéid, Andrade, and Stevens 2018; Crawley and Skleparis 2018). Increasingly complex and ever-changing visa regimes “irregularize” and marginalize groups deemed “undesirable” or “undeserving” by those in power, controlling their movement and subjecting them to precarious statuses (Erel 2018; De Haas, Castles, and Miller 2020; Goldring and Landolt 2022; Dickson and Rosen 2021). Immigration and citizenship rules are selective, discriminatory and exclusionary (Ellermann 2020; Yeo 2020; El-Enany 2020). The multiplicity of legal categories, and the complexities and contradictions of frequently changing rules, serve the interests of the state in its efforts to control migration (Boswell and Geddes 2011) whilst creating barriers for people subjected to them (Meissner 2018).

Such bordering practices produce deportability (De Genova 2002), undermining belonging and generating perpetual anxiety. Insecure statuses intersect with financial precarity caused by the NRPF condition. Drawing on Butler,

this precarity can be understood as the “politically induced condition” caused by the state’s failure to protect certain populations, allowing them to become “differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death” (Butler 2009: ii). It exposes women and mothers with insecure statuses to exploitation, and increases the risk of abuse in interpersonal relationships (Erel, Reynolds, and Kaptani 2018; Menjívar and Salcido 2002).

In the UK, state bordering practices have spread into internal spaces, taking the form of “everyday bordering”, “carried out by anyone anywhere” (Yuval-Davis, Wemyss, and Cassidy 2018, 230). As outlined in the previous section, recent legislation requires public and private sector workers to check customers’ and service users’ immigration status, and potentially to share data with the Home Office for immigration enforcement purposes (Papageorgiou et al. 2020). This can lead to homelessness, destitution, detention and deportation (Berg 2019; Yeo 2020; El-Enany 2020). Whilst local authorities in the UK have a duty (under Section 17 of the Children Act 1989) to provide appropriate support to children assessed as being “in need”, for example due to the family being homeless and destitute, this support can be very difficult to access, and the assessment process may be experienced as hostile (Dennler 2018; Erel 2018).

Intersecting identities and inequalities shape experiences of bordering. Immigration status intersects with “race”, gender, class and nation; for racially minoritized women with insecure immigration statuses, this can create “multiple marginalities” (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Ruiz 2013, 250; Erel 2018; Suerbaum and Lijnders 2023), encompassing, for example, exclusion from education and employment opportunities, financial precarity, poor housing and both structural and everyday experiences of racism (Shobiye and Parker 2023). Crucially, bordering at multiple levels and in intersecting ways can create uncertainty and mistrust in interpersonal relationships. Specifically, it constrains mothers’ interpersonal relational practices and access to support.

Belonging

Belonging is widely understood to mean feeling safe, secure and “at home”. Feelings of belonging are based on emotional attachments to places, groups and practices (Yuval-Davis, Wemyss, and Cassidy 2018; Antonsich 2010, hooks 2009, Fenster 2005). The need to belong is particularly strong when faced with “uncertainty, disconnection, alienation and invisibility” (Anthias 2006, 21), such as in the context of migration and insecure status. It is helpful to understand belonging as a *practice*, which is generated, negotiated and displayed *relationally*. Since bordering and exclusion are multi-layered, belonging must be enacted at different levels: within intimate relationships, in local places, and at national, supranational and transnational levels (Erel 2011).

Enacting belonging through everyday interactions in interpersonal relationships generates mutual trust over time, and enables different forms of support to be shared.

Relational belonging is connected to citizenship, which has been reframed in recent years as a participatory practice (Erel and Reynolds 2018), rather than simply a political-legal status representing political belonging to a nation-state. The concept of “active” or “cultural” citizenship highlights how people subjected to insecure immigration statuses (and other minoritized groups) contest state-based criteria and *enact* citizenship (Isin and Nielsen 2008) by claiming space and rights, “not only to gain full membership in society but also to reshape it” (Flores 2003, 296). Through everyday activities, groups “define themselves, form a community”, engage in “political and social movements’ and struggle “for a distinct social space in which members of the marginalized group are free to express themselves and feel at home” (Flores 2003, 297). Forming a community on the basis of shared experiences of precarious immigration status can be difficult and may pose risks. However, creating and maintaining safe spaces for cultural activities or informal volunteering can be a form of, and facilitate, relational belonging practices and active citizenship by groups marginalized in this way (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Ruiz 2013). Little research has so far identified or explored the possibilities of such spaces, however, or how mothers constrained by their immigration status might engage in them to enact relational belonging and active citizenship.

Motherhood intersects with different aspects of identity and, whilst creating new needs and challenges, opens up new spaces and potential practices of belonging. Gilligan (1982) and Tronto (1998) have emphasized that *caring about* and *for* others can produce a sense of relational belonging. Others have suggested that the nurturing activities of mothering can shape maternal identities (Chandler 1998) and create a sense of belonging for mothers and their children (Dyck 2018). In the context of structural and everyday racisms, racially minoritized mothers may engage in strategic mothering that cultivates positive identities and develops counter-narratives that contest racism and intersecting forms of discrimination and inequalities (Erel and Reynolds 2018; Reynolds, Erel, and Kaptani 2018; Kershaw 2010; Collins 2007; Barnes 2016). Mothers “invest in and deploy cultural resources and strategic action” to help their children manage experiences of racism, and to build communities of support and facilitate access to resources (Erel and Reynolds 2018, 8).

Mothers who are both racially minoritized and positioned as migrants face additional intersecting layers of bordering and exclusion (Erel 2011; Erel and Reynolds 2018; Erel 2018). As Erel and her colleagues have argued, mothers’ struggles for recognition and rights and their everyday “cultural and caring work” transcend the private sphere (Erel, Reynolds, and Kaptani 2018, 57)

and make them “political subjects”, enacting citizenship and transforming understandings of citizenship (Erel and Reynolds 2018, 3). This is particularly crucial for racially minoritized mothers with insecure immigration statuses. Excluded from citizenship status, permanent residency and associated rights, mothers in this position are marginalized by the intersection of hostile immigration policies, persistent health and economic inequalities, anti-immigration attitudes and racialising policy discourses (Reynolds 2020; Erel and Reynolds 2018; Erel et al. 2017). Family relations, or intimate ties, have “provided grounds for states to grant or refuse their admission, structure their incorporation, and designate them as excludable or deportable” (Luibhéid, Andrade, and Stevens 2018, 18). However, intimate ties have also been a basis on which mothers claim rights to belong, on behalf of their children and for themselves (Luibhéid, Andrade, and Stevens 2018; Björnberg 2011), both by applying for citizenship as a legal status and through their everyday practices. Mothering practices can therefore be understood as “acts of 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).

Little research has so far examined the everyday practices that racially minoritized migrant mothers with insecure statuses engage in *as mothers* in their efforts to negotiate everyday bordering and enact belonging and citizenship. The analysis below demonstrates the centrality of the mother–child relationship as a site for enacting relational belonging – both for mothers themselves and on behalf of their children. It emphasizes the importance of everyday relational practices and how these shape mothers’ conceptualisations and imaginaries of the relationship and feelings of belonging. It also demonstrates the challenges mothers face, and the tensions within the mother–child relationship and other key relationships, produced by hostile immigration and citizenship policies.

Methodology

The ethnographic study on which this article is based aimed to explore how mothers with insecure immigration status and NRPF access support through different kinds of interpersonal relationships. Prior to the fieldwork, ethical approval was given by my institution’s Research Ethics Committee. Based in a London neighbourhood over 20 months, I volunteered in several support and advice organizations, and through these roles and through snowballing, I recruited 22 mothers as participants. All participants provided their informed consent at the outset, and consent was revisited on subsequent meetings. Being embedded as a volunteer in respected community organisations, together with my identity as a mother, helped to establish trust and build rapport with participants. Other aspects of my identity (as a white,

middle-class, UK-born, UK citizen, non-religious, university-based researcher) are likely to have shaped – in diverse ways – my relationships with participants, their perceptions and feelings about the research, our conversations and my own analyses. I reflected on this throughout the research.

All of the participants lived in (or had lived in and retained strong links to) the neighbourhood, which was highly diverse in terms of ethnicities, nationalities, immigration statuses, languages spoken and income levels. I met with most participants at least twice, and in many cases multiple times over many months. I joined each mother in their everyday activities: at home, doing the school run, visiting family drop-ins, attending appointments, and, in one case, “reporting” at the Home Office. Walking and talking with participants over time allowed me to listen deeply, gain insights into their everyday interactions, and witness the twists and turns in their trajectories toward gaining “status”. This approach produced nuanced understandings of mothers’ experiences and perspectives (Sinha and Back 2014; O’Neill and Reynolds 2021).

To gain an understanding of the mothers’ support networks, I asked them to create a “freestyle” sociogram on a large piece of paper, representing (through images, words and/or initials) themselves and the people who were important to them. The sociograms helped generate shared understandings of how mothers developed relationships and accessed support (for further discussion see Benchekroun 2020; also Ryan 2020; Ryan, Mulholland, and Agoston 2014; Tubaro, Ryan, and D’Angelo 2016). I also interviewed five frontline advocates and public sector workers. With participants’ informed consent, I audio-recorded most in-depth conversations (when in private spaces), or took notes during the conversations. I kept detailed fieldnotes, recording my observations and reflections immediately after encounters. I analysed transcripts of all recorded conversations and fieldnotes, using open coding to identify specific practices (and participants’ conceptualisations of these) within particular types of relationships or networks (Hammersley and Atkinson 2019); over time I reviewed codes, categories and themes.

Most of the mothers had migrated from West African countries; others were from other parts of Africa, Latin America, the Caribbean or Southeast Asia. The majority were in their twenties when they had arrived in the UK, where most had been living for at least ten years at the time of the fieldwork. Participants had entered the UK with a visa or had sought asylum when they arrived, but many had then lost their residency rights or had been refused asylum. Of these, some had later been granted “limited leave to remain” (temporary residency rights), usually for 30 months. Only four had been granted permanent residency rights. At the point of the initial research encounters, ten mothers had no residency rights and a further eight had only temporary residency rights (although statuses changed during the course of the fieldwork). Twenty of the mothers identified as Christian, across a range of denominations; one identified as Muslim. Several participants were graduates. All had given

birth in the UK. Their children were aged between one and 18+ years old. Some participants were living with a partner, others were in a relationship but living apart, and other participants were not in a relationship. Almost all spoke English fluently. The following sections focus on the experiences of four mothers: Monifa, Kayin, Amma and Izara. This is for three main reasons: first, I met with each of them at least twice (more than five times with Kayin and Izara), during which time they constructed in-depth accounts of becoming and being a mother in the UK; second, their experiences of mothering appeared to resonate in many ways with those of other participants; and third, their narratives were particularly poignant and reflexive. To protect mothers' identities, I have used pseudonyms and do not provide detailed biographical information.

Enacting belonging as mothers

Monifa, Kayin, Amma and Izara were from West African countries. Kayin was university-educated. Both Kayin and Amma had been employed before moving to the UK. All had arrived with a visa, but, having been unable to extend it, had lost their "leave to remain" in the UK; they were at different stages of seeking to regain residency rights. During my fieldwork, two of the mothers were granted temporary residency rights (for 30 months). All had become mothers after moving to the UK. One lived with her husband; the other three were no longer in couple relationships and were mothering alone. Two of the mothers each had two children; the other two each had three; all of the children were under 12 years. Mothers' partners/ex-partners (children's fathers) had similarly insecure immigration status and/or were unwilling to mobilise their status to help the mothers obtain permanent residency rights for their children, and in several cases had ceased contact. Consequently, the children were growing up with insecure immigration status, despite being born in the UK. However, two of the children had been notified by the Home Office that they were entitled to register as British citizens (this applies when children reach the age of ten and is subject to a fee of over £1000 [NRPF Network 2022]). Monifa, Kayin, Amma and Izara recounted in detail the status-related barriers they faced as mothers. They explained how they navigated these challenges in order to provide for and protect their children and to cultivate active citizenship within them. Their narratives also revealed how important their children were as a source of support and relational belonging.

Providing shelter, food and material resources

there was nowhere to go. But, there was this friend [...] – she was like, "you know my room is just one room – I can't do too much". [...] She came and

took us to her place. [...] Me and the girls were staying in her room. I got some money, and the next thing I could buy for the girls was a bunk bed. Because at the time they were just sleeping on a quilt on the floor. [...] [My friend] had a double bed. If she's not there, then me and the girls can sleep in it. [...] She fed us. 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. If I don't have any, what we have to depend on, just get eggs or tuna flakes, just make food. (Monifa)

Having been evicted from their rented accommodation following separation from her partner, and having lost her "leave to remain", Monifa and her primary-school-aged daughters had very few available options. By seeking help from a friend who was renting a studio flat, Monifa was able to put a roof over their heads in this moment of crisis. Although initially on a short-term basis, she managed to sustain the arrangement for almost a year. Drawing on her sporadic and often negligible income, her creativity and their host's goodwill, Monifa adapted the limited space to establish a sense of being "at home" (Yuval-Davis, Wemyss, and Cassidy 2018). When able, she prioritized buying food and cooking for her family and their host. In this context of "multiple marginalities" (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Ruiz 2013, 250), Monifa sought – through her daily acts of provisioning and care – to "maintain, continue, and repair [their] world" in order to "live in it as well as possible" (Fisher and Tronto 1990, cited in Tronto 1998). This was a form of enacting belonging both for her children and for herself as a mother. Yet whilst this first experience of "sofa-surfing" had produced an unusual degree of stability, the lack of space and privacy had, Monifa reflected, unsettled her children's wellbeing. The arrangement ended when the landlord decided to sell the flat: this disrupted the family's temporary sense of belonging and again heightened the pressure on Monifa to meet their basic needs.

Sofa-surfing arrangements with friends, acquaintances or extended family members tended to be fragile and short-lived, and often created relational tensions, as Kayin explained:

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. [...] 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 ...

Such arrangements exacerbated the uneven power dynamics between hosts and guests produced by their unequal immigration statuses and differential access to resources. As Kayin pointed out, relationships initially based on solidarity or benevolence could quickly be recast as hierarchical and even hostile. This reduced mothers' autonomy in their everyday mothering. Relational

tensions underlined mothers' obligations towards their hosts, and their limited means to reciprocate. Mothers like Kayin were highly tuned into the dynamics underpinning daily interactions, and carefully navigated emerging tensions. Maintaining amicable relationships was a crucial aspect of their strategic work as mothers to sustain support networks and continue to provide shelter and necessary resources for their children and themselves.

Having exhausted resources within their personal support networks, many of the mothers in my study had sought "Section 17" support from the local authority as a final resort. Negotiating subsistence support from the state represented a step forward in the journey towards recognition of rights, but mothers continued to face barriers in providing for their children. During the assessment stage, families were sometimes placed in a hostel. This had been the case for Amma and her children. She recalled the challenges she had faced as a mother:

In the hostel you're not meant to cook, you're not meant to do anything, you just go to sleep, wake up. So we just buy chips. You buy chips, you eat, you go to bed. [...] It was difficult. [...] 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? [...] Sometimes I come by friends, I said can I just make a quick noodles and quickly give it to my children. I refuse to eat because I'm not happy. I just want those children to feed. [...] Once they feed, automatically my brain 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, cos they are so innocent. Why would they make life so tough for them? And it affects them so much. I don't want that. I want their life to be okay.

The precarious accommodation and inadequate facilities at the hostel constrained Amma's ability to nourish and clothe her children, preventing them from getting to school. Amma framed her struggles to meet her children's needs as a core mothering practice. In this way, providing for her children was a source of ontological security, strengthening her sense of self (Antonsich 2010) and relational belonging as a mother (Dyck 2018) in the context of hostile policies and multi-level bordering. Amma identified her children unequivocally as "British" and asserted their rights to belong and to access support. Claiming these rights was a form of challenging the institutions that excluded them (Luibhéid, Andrade, and Stevens 2018) and can be understood as "acts of citizenship" (Isin and Nielsen 2008; Erel, Reynolds, and Kaptani 2018).

Families granted accommodation and subsistence funding by the local authority under "Section 17" (and asylum-seeking families supported by the Home Office) were usually allocated one small room in a "house in multiple occupation" (HMO), with shared kitchen and bathroom facilities. These arrangements required particular forms of mothering work. Rooms were

cramped, with minimal space for children to eat, play or do schoolwork, and no private space. The pressures of being “stuck in one room” with “nowhere to go” strained relationships, as Izara explained: “*The children, because they don’t have no space to move around, they will be stressing you.*” The overcrowded living conditions and minimal resources (Erel 2018; Shobiye and Parker 2023) created intra- and extra-familial tensions. These tensions intersected with perpetual uncertainty around immigration status, generating feelings of deep anxiety and insecurity (Björnberg 2011). Emotion work (Hochschild 1979) was therefore a key aspect of strategic mothering: mothers strove to manage their own and their children’s (inner) feelings and (expressed) emotions. They sought to smooth out conflicts between children struggling to share spaces; to placate neighbours upset about noise levels; to cope with neighbours’ own disruptive behaviours; to minimise the impact on their children; and to negotiate use of shared spaces with other residents. Strategic mothering meant adapting daily routines, such as cooking in the middle of the night. At times it meant making extremely difficult choices on behalf of the family, such as going without food to pay lawyers’ fees in efforts to regularize their immigration status. Strategic mothering also involved seeking and sharing useful information with other mothers, enabling access to crucial resources. Izara described both her anguish at having faced the painful dilemma of foregoing food, and her immense relief at finding a centre providing free legal advice. Providing necessities in the context of the marginalization produced by hostile government policies (Erel 2018) thus required constant work as a mother at both material and emotional levels.

Beyond shelter and food, mothers sought to provide clothes, toys and books, support with schoolwork and access to leisure activities. Like several other mothers in my study, Izara prioritised a weekly family drop-in which included a clothes and toy bank. The items she sourced there made her children “*feel they are important; they have life, in a way*”. In the context of “*uncertainty, [...] alienation and invisibility*” (Anthias 2006, 21), these resources were crucial to her children’s sense of self and belonging (Björnberg 2011). By extension, Izara’s ability to provide them was central to her identity as a mother. However, providing the “*right kinds*” of clothes, toys and experiences was often difficult and sometimes impossible. Amma recalled both the importance and immense challenges of providing such items for her children prior to (and even since) being granted temporary residency rights:

[My children] were born here but they don’t have the same life [as their peers]. 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? 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. [...] 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 [to] people who've got a better life.

For mothers like Izara and Amma, securing access to material resources and extracurricular activities for their children (discussed further below) was a means of ensuring they "fit in" with their peers and did not feel different. "Fitting in" mattered, not only because of being positioned by financial precarity (Ridge 2002; Gillies 2007) but because of its intersection with insecure immigration status, and the de-classing effect of this (see Erel and Ryan 2019 in relation to migrant mothers more generally). Izara and Amma were highly attentive to how having (or not having) the right kinds of clothes and possessions affected their children's sense of self and their interactions with their peers. Recognising this and doing what they could to provide these resources represented a specific kind of mothering work.

Protecting

Monifa: There's so much 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.

Me: You wanted to protect them.

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

Monifa, like other mothers, was determined to protect her primary-school-aged children from "knowing too much" about their insecure immigration status and its implications. This meant not only taking care not to burden them with such information, but also exercising caution in what she shared about their status with friends and faith group members (Björnberg 2011). Past experience had shown her that information can spread rapidly through personal networks. She was conscious that disclosing her precarious status to others presented a risk of it being talked about in front of her children.

For Monifa, shielding her children from too much knowledge about their status was a crucial means of protecting them from potential bullying, exploitation or abuse by peers who might take advantage of their precarious status (Erel, Reynolds, and Kaptani 2018). This was intertwined with the need to protect them from feeling insecure or unequal to others because of their status. Monifa explained: *"I didn't want anything that was [...] going to*

make the children feel less, that someone is more superior than they are. I wanted them to feel equally." This form of protecting was another significant type of strategic mothering. It required adjustment as children grew older and their awareness of the impact of external forces (and the effects on their everyday lives) developed. As her daughters began to ask her questions, for example, Monifa tried to "*break it down to how best for them to understand it.*"

Protecting children from knowledge about their status generated tensions within the mother–child relationship. Managing these tensions necessitated ongoing work. First, mothers had to navigate the tension between the desire to meet their child's needs and the intersecting financial and legal status barriers preventing them from doing so. Second, mothers had to balance the need to withhold information from their children and the countervailing need to provide answers to their questions, as they became increasingly aware of being "different" to their peers. Mothers managed these interlacing tensions by responding in ways which were deliberately vague yet reassuring. Amma recounted:

My son wants to go to France. [...] 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. [Me: [Does he] ask why?] 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".

Similarly, Kayin would tell her daughter 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."* 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.*" Like other mothers in my study, Amma and Kayin sought to protect their children from becoming too aware of how their families were socially excluded by their insecure immigration statuses and the associated financial precarity. They attempted to both distract and reassure them in their everyday conversations ("don't worry", "soon", making up stories), whilst managing their children's growing awareness of difference, and their own pain that their children did not have an "equal life". The work to protect their children's self-esteem and build their resistance whilst managing their own emotions was a central element of their strategic mothering (Reynolds, Erel, and Kaptani 2018; Kershaw 2010). It was shaped by their structural positioning as mothers subjected to insecure immigration statuses and

no recourse to public funds, enduring financial precarity and de-classed by their migration trajectories (Erel and Reynolds 2018; Erel 2018; Erel and Ryan 2019). This practice was a form of enacting belonging relationally as a mother, yet simultaneously served as a reminder of how they and their children were being excluded from society.

Cultivating children as active citizens

They have some free clubs [...] I let her go, that one I don't have to pay. I would love her to go to science club, or art and craft, but it's £50, I can't afford it. 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. [Once I am granted leave to remain] I will do everything for her, to make sure that she's outstanding. [...] She says she wants to be a doctor or nurse. [...] She needs extra help to do that. Before you do that, you need extra help. (Kayin)

Many of the mothers in my study highlighted the importance of supporting their children to participate in extracurricular activities. Often, they felt it would help them develop skills and cultural capital that would prove useful in the future. However, as Kayin explained (above), financial precarity was a major barrier. Instead, mothers enrolled their children in activities which were free of charge, or drew on their social networks to access support for their children with their schoolwork.

When mothers' financial situations improved, often as a result of being granted "limited leave to remain", this opened the door to a wider range of cultural opportunities, which in turn increased feelings of belonging. For example, Amma enrolled her children in a supplementary school to support them with maths and English. She also signed them up for music lessons in the hope that they could monetise these skills in the future by playing professionally:

They do a lot, they do choir, they do dancing, they do all stuff. I just choose the unique ones that will really help them in the future [...] – something that will take them to another career in life. [...] 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 she had the means, Amma was eager to create the circumstances to support her children's creative, cultural and social development. This "concerted cultivation" (Lareau 2002) was not necessarily (or only) a class-based practice, since it was shared by mothers from different class backgrounds. Rather, it can be better understood as a means of contesting the "devaluation of their mothering practices" by "the ethnically dominant society" (Erel 2011,

702; Barnes 2016), which positioned them as racially minoritized and (inter-sectionally) as migrant mothers with insecure immigration status. In this way, mothers were enacting citizenship on behalf of their children in the sense of both investing in their “children’s access to cultural capital validated in the society of residence” (Erel 2011, 698, drawing on Kofman 2007) and promoting their (future) socio-economic integration (Antonsich 2010; Erel 2011).

Mothers’ work to cultivate active citizenship in their children also involved efforts to instil moral and civic values (often associated with religious faith) through everyday discourses and actions. For mothers who were positioned by the state as racially minoritized migrants excluded from residency rights and the legal status of citizenship, this strategic work was a means of demonstrating “competent mothering” (Erel 2011) and “active citizenship” (Isin and Nielsen 2008). Practices included regular attendance at church, participation in church-based activities, and daily prayer. Kayin, mother to three young children, explained to me:

I try my best to talk sense into them, tell them things about our beliefs and values [...]. I try as much as I can – so lecturing them on things like relationships with people, being nice to people, not to be cruel, how important it is to have your relationship with God. [...] So we have to do as Christians, not to deviate, but to do those things that please God. You will not get yourself into trouble, you will not get yourself into alcoholism, you will not get yourself engaged in prostitution, you will not get yourself doing all manner of rubbish that is not welcome in society. You will not get yourself engaged in crime and all that, you will be safe and free. You will be useful to yourself and to society at large. So I try as much as I can to make them to pray every day. [...] I make them to believe that whatever you ask, God will give it to you. So they have that faith and they believe it, and they talk to God as well. [...] I talk to them about their school, to always do the things that are required of them [...]. The teacher will always tell you what is good for you. Not to be rude to your teacher. I try as much as I can.

Kayin drew on her religious beliefs and practices to offer her children guidance on developing good relationships, and being “good” and “useful” members of society. She was keen to transmit her Christian faith to them through their daily interactions at home, in order to foster core values and ensure they would be “useful” citizens. Additionally, by promoting a belief in God and instilling prayer as a daily practice, Kayin sought to create “self-esteem in [her] children as a resource for their coping with past insecurity and uncertainty about the future” (Björnberg 2011).

For Kayin and other mothers in my study, this strategic work unequivocally positioned their children as members of society and as British citizens. As such, it constituted “culture work”, promoting “a particularized, ethnically based identity” which helped develop “cultural resistance to racism” (Erel 2011, 698; also Reynolds, Erel, and Kaptani 2018; Collins 2007; Kershaw

2010; Barnes 2016). In this way, mothering work had “effects beyond the household” and represented “a citizenship practice” (Erel 2011, 698). Whether or not the state had yet recognized their children as British citizens, mothers asserted these belonging claims on their behalf. By extension, they enacted belonging and citizenship for themselves as mothers.

Reciprocal care and support

My eyes were red; [my daughter] came over to me: “Mummy, are you okay? Why are your eyes red?” “I’m stressed, I’m tired, I’m frustrated.” (Monifa)

When a telephone conversation with the case worker (in the context of a stressful Section 17 assessment) had caused Monifa some distress, her young daughter had recognised this and responded with empathy and concern, allowing her to acknowledge and share her feelings of frustration and exhaustion. Monifa’s narrative suggested her relationship with her children was characterized by reciprocal care practices. During some of the darker moments of dealing with the separation from their father, homelessness and insecure immigration status, and in their everyday interactions, Monifa’s daughters had demonstrated an array of emotional care and practical support:

It came as a shock, I was broken. I would say that the girls were there and 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. [...] I talk to them a lot. [...] When we go shopping [...] they help me with everything. [...] I put the bag, I say, this is okay for you to carry, and then we carry ... [Once] we got half of the way [home] and I couldn’t move. I hurt my back, I just felt like a sharp pain and I screamed. I couldn’t move. [...] So [my older daughter] was like, “don’t move, stay”. So she ran to put her stuff that she was holding at the door, to come and get my one. I was like, “no, my one is heavy”. She was like, “I’ll do it bit by bit”. She did it. [...] That’s how they have been. They have been my strength, seriously, they have.

Caring for and about each other was fundamental to their mother–child relationship. Not only did Monifa’s caring practices strengthen her sense of her maternal self (Chandler 1998), but their reciprocal practices, mutual responsiveness and meeting each other’s needs helped establish their shared sense of belonging. Monifa’s narrative suggested that enacting relational belonging as a mother not only consisted of a repertoire of practices *by* mothers directed *towards* their children, but incorporated receiving care *from* their children and feeling “cared for” and “cared about” (Tronto 1998).

Reciprocal care practices in mother–child relationships were generated by the multi-level forms of bordering they had to negotiate together. For some, such practices contributed to a sense of purpose and self as a mother

(Chandler 1998; Björnberg 2011; Dyck 2018), and a wider sense of relational belonging. As Kayin reflected:

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 [...] they are number one in my life.

Conclusion

This article has examined the impact of some of the UK's Hostile Environment policies on the experiences of racially minoritized women from the Global South who have moved to the UK, made it their home and become mothers. The article has highlighted how these policies create precarious legal statuses and restrict access to public services and mainstream welfare support for families excluded from residency rights. It has shown how, in doing so, these policies create financial precarity and subject families to relentless uncertainty, constraining mothers' access to support, their experiences and practices of mothering, and their sense of belonging.

Drawing on empirical data from my ethnographic study with racially minoritized mothers subjected to insecure immigration statuses and NRPF, I have explored some of the specific challenges and relational tensions faced by mothers precariously positioned in this way. Importantly, I have examined some of the ways in which mothers contest multi-level forms of marginalization, navigate the challenges and tensions, enact relational belonging and engage in active citizenship for themselves as mothers and on behalf of their children. Building on theorization by Erel, Reynolds, Collins, Kershaw and other scholars, I have conceptualized this as strategic mothering work. The article has identified four core aspects of strategic mothering in a Hostile Environment: providing shelter, food and other resources; protecting children from "knowing too much" about their insecure status and its implications; cultivating active citizenship within their children; and recognising care within the mother-child relationship as a reciprocal process. Through the mothering practices explored in the article, mothers helped their children "fit in" with their peers, do well at school, engage in cultural activities and develop skills, and build resistance and self-esteem. This required emotion work. Thus whilst the mother-child relationship could be a source of ontological security, care and support for mothers, mothering in a Hostile Environment often meant carrying additional emotional burdens, particularly for those who were parenting alone.

Whilst highlighting the impact of Hostile Environment policies and legal and financial precarity on mothering, the article has also emphasised mothers' agency in resisting this. The article contributes to the emerging

literature on strategic mothering, and more broadly to scholarship on precarious motherhood at the nexus of migration and poverty. In drawing attention to the intergenerational impact of hostile policies on family life, the article raises questions about how policies (re)produce deep and often hidden social inequalities, notably in relation to “race”/ethnicity, gender, residency rights and citizenship status, all of which have implications for future policymaking.

Ethical statement

Ethical approval for the study on which this article is based was granted by the UCL Research Ethics Committee, Project ID number: Z6364106 2018 03 122.

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