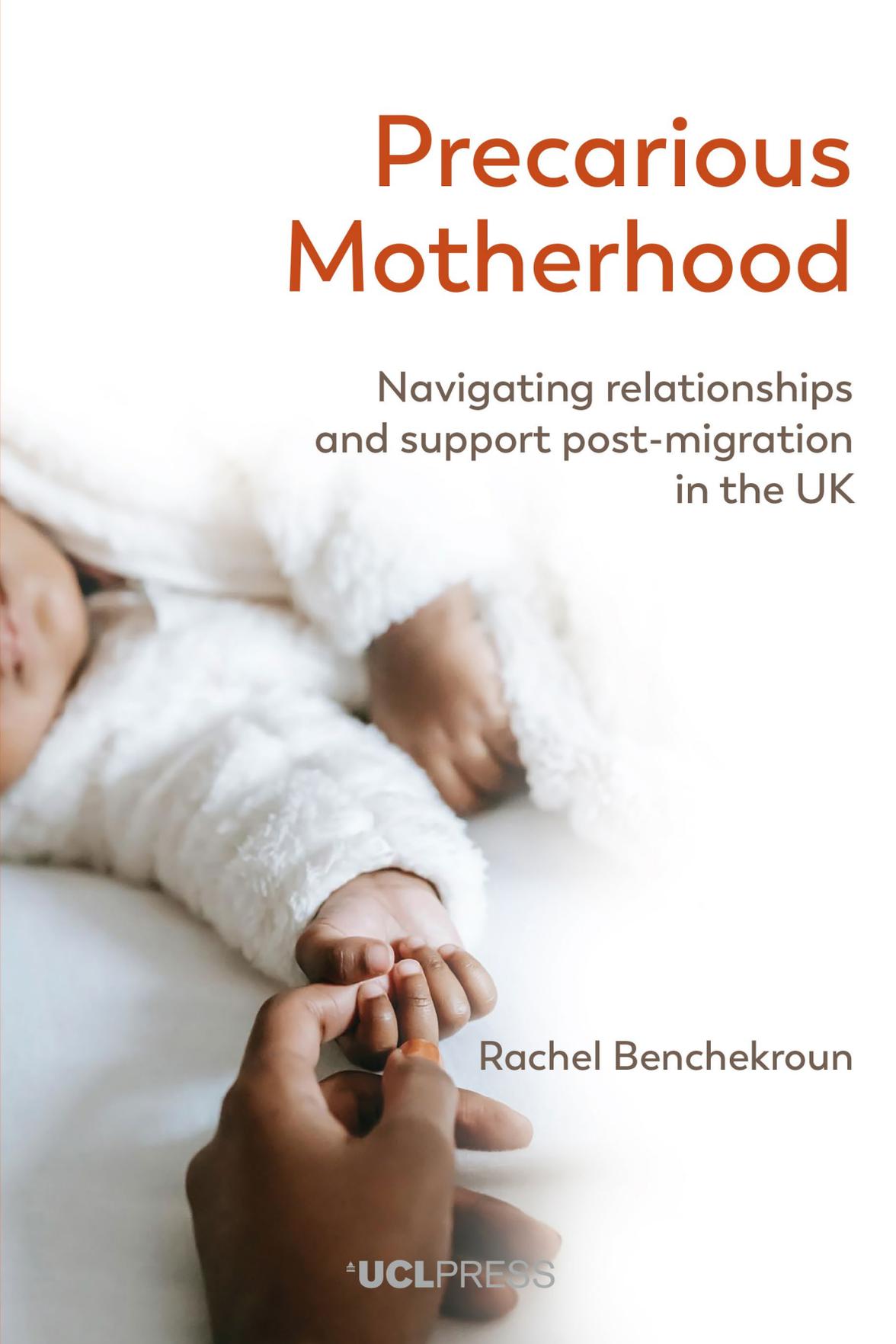


Precarious Motherhood

Navigating relationships
and support post-migration
in the UK

Rachel Benchekroun

**UCLPRESS**

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To my husband and daughter

To my parents

*To the families, especially the mothers, and the frontline
workers and volunteers who took part in this research.*

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Introduction

Three mothers

Patricia, a soft-spoken young woman in her late thirties, moved to London, UK, from West Africa when she was in her late teens. Having been raised by her grandmother, she wanted to join her parents, who had settled in Britain when she was a child. She was granted a student visa, and once in London she completed an undergraduate degree and took up a role in a financial company. She formed a relationship with a British citizen, and they had a son, but her partner then left. She later met a new partner, who did not have British citizenship, and had a second son. This relationship ended abruptly, leaving Patricia to bring up both boys alone. As the mother of a British child, she was granted 'limited leave to remain' – permission to reside in the UK for two and a half years – subject to the condition of 'no recourse to public funds' (NRPF). This meant she was not entitled to claim welfare benefits or housing assistance. The resulting instability permeated all aspects of her daily life. She worked full-time, but it was a huge struggle to meet her family's needs. She and her boys had to resort to sofa-surfing among friends, church members and her parents, which put significant pressure on these relationships.

Tamara, an eloquent, engaging woman, had arrived in London as a teenager on a student visa from the Caribbean to stay with her stepsister, a UK citizen. When her visa expired, she felt unable to return to her country of origin, and had to live 'under the radar'. Moving in with a cousin outside London, she continued to study and managed to find paid work. Yet she had to hide her status from other people and attempt to 'blend in' to avoid being exploited or reported to the authorities. As the UK Government's 'Hostile Environment' policies came into force from 2012, her access to paid work reduced. Tamara had been doing well in her job, which offered good prospects for career development, but she had to leave it and take on low-paid, cash-in-hand roles. Tamara was under significant pressure: she now felt exploited in the workplace and also faced the continual risk of

deportation. After 14 years of living in the UK, under the rules in place at the time, she applied for leave to remain, but her application was refused. This meant she had to start ‘reporting’ to the authorities every month. Tamara felt that her world was falling apart. Returning to live with her stepsister in London, things became increasingly difficult; she sought refuge in a couple relationship, and had a baby. However, the relationship became abusive. Since she still had no leave to remain and no income, she felt trapped.

Ayodele had moved to London from West Africa. She had been granted a spouse visa to join her husband, Victor, who was pursuing postgraduate study and working part-time. A university graduate herself, Ayodele was looking forward to both starting a family and developing her career in the UK. Unable to find work in her professional field, she took on low-paid care work. After having their first child, she and Victor applied to renew their visas, but their efforts were thwarted by the new ‘minimum income requirement’: a letter from the Home Office informed them that their earnings were below the required threshold, so their application had been refused. The UK was their family’s home, yet they now found themselves without leave to remain. They embarked on a convoluted, costly journey towards regularisation of their status. Neither Ayodele nor Victor was allowed to do paid work, and they had no family in the UK to support them.

These brief summaries represent the situations of three of the 22 mothers who took part in my research in 2018–19. I wanted to understand how hostile immigration policies, precarious immigration statuses, the NRPF condition and financial disadvantage intersected to shape mothers’ interpersonal relationships and access to support. I had previously spent many years doing community development work with families in London, and, since the early 2010s, I had noticed that a growing number of mothers were finding themselves with NRPF – being prevented from accessing mainstream welfare benefits and many public services. I was aware of differences in their respective situations: for some, NRPF was a visa condition, while for others it happened by default, because they had not been able to obtain, or renew, leave to remain in the UK. I learned that the expansion of NRPF as a visa condition and the introduction of the ‘ten-year settlement route’ were part of the Conservative-led Coalition government’s ‘Hostile Environment’ approach to immigration – a set of policies and laws implemented since 2012 in a deliberate effort to make life difficult for people without ‘leave to remain’. How did these policies affect mothering practices and mothers’ relationships with their partner, friends, adult kin and faith

networks? How did these relationships – and tensions within them – shape their access to different kinds of support? These are the questions I sought to address.

Bordering, precarity, relationships and support

Since the introduction of the Hostile Environment, immigration policies in the UK have increasingly restricted residency rights and access to welfare support and public services for many people who have moved to, or plan to move to, the UK. This has happened in ways which are racialised and ethnicised (Ellermann 2020, El-Enany 2020). It mirrors trends across Europe and much of the global North (Menjívar and Kanstroom 2014, De Haas et al. 2020). New migration categories have been created, producing complex hierarchies, stratifying social rights and increasing deportability (De Genova 2002, Abrego and Schmalzbauer 2018, Ataç and Rosenberger 2019). Political discourses have also become more hostile (Yuval-Davis et al. 2018, UN CERD 2024), in attempts to deter ‘undesirable’ and ‘irregular’ migration (Hollifield and Wong 2014, Ataç and Rosenberger 2019). Yet national policies and laws produce ‘irregular’ migration or ‘illegality’ (De Genova 2002, Düvell 2011, Menjívar and Abrego 2012, Menjívar and Kanstroom 2014, El-Enany 2020), as well as positions of ‘liminal legality’ or ‘in-between’ statuses (Menjívar 2006, Goldring et al. 2009), in which some people find themselves trapped for decades. Such policies create multilayered forms of precarity, uncertainty and anxiety (Goldring et al. 2009, Hondagneu-Sotelo and Ruiz 2015, Meissner 2018, Phillimore et al. 2022).

The laws and policies introduced in the UK have been conceptualised as ‘everyday bordering’: they require everyone, from health professionals to private landlords and employers, to check individuals’ right to reside in the UK and their entitlements, effectively acting as border guards (Yuval-Davis et al. 2018: 230, Griffiths and Yeo 2021). Dramatic rises in the minimum income requirement to sponsor a spouse or partner (Jorgensen 2024) and increases in the costs of renewing visas (Migration Observatory 2024) have separated families and ‘irregularised’ many people living in the UK. As this book shows, these policies intersect with socio-economic structures, with gendered and racialised effects (Gomberg-Muñoz 2017). Racially minoritised women and mothers who have insecure immigration statuses and are experiencing financial hardship – especially those who are parenting alone – face intersecting forms of oppression (Collins 1990/2022, Brah and Phoenix 2004, Hondagneu-Sotelo and Ruiz 2015,

El-Enany 2020). They may experience this in the workplace (Menjívar and Salcido 2002, Price and Spencer 2015), access to housing and public services (Mayock and Bretherton 2016, Freedman et al. 2022), and couple relationships (Anitha 2015, Dudley 2017, Gomberg-Muñoz 2017). Women and mothers experiencing legal and financial precarity often face prolonged uncertainty (Yuval-Davis et al. 2018, Ellermann 2020), with implications for mothering.

There is a growing literature on various aspects of hostile immigration policies. Until now, however, little research has addressed how these forms of ‘structural violence’ (Vandevoordt 2021, Freedman et al. 2022) or ‘state violence’ (Menjívar and Abrego 2012) – sometimes referred to as ‘slow violence’ (Mayblin et al. 2020, Dickson and Rosen 2020, Sahraoui and Freedman 2022) – affect mothers’ interpersonal relationships, mothering practices and access to support (Abrego and Menjívar 2011, Luibhéid et al. 2018). This book reports on research that addresses this question. It examines how hostile immigration policies, insecure immigration statuses and financial precarity intersect with ‘race’,¹ ethnicity and gender to shape experiences of becoming and being a mother. In particular, the book explores how these structural factors affect how mothers form and sustain different kinds of relationships, and how they access and share different types of support – material, financial, practical, informational and emotional. The book shows that mothers’ experiences of bordering and multilayered precarity increase the importance of interpersonal relationships. It also shows how these experiences necessitate and sometimes constrain certain relational practices. In some relationships, these factors increase mothers’ vulnerability to exploitation, control and abuse.

Yet, as this book demonstrates, mothers with NRPF are not passively subjected to Hostile Environment policies or the impact of such policies on their relationships: on the contrary, mothers enact belonging and citizenship (Erel and Reynolds 2018, Humphris 2019) and do so in subtle ways that are adapted to specific spaces and relationships. The book also highlights, however, the tensions that play out in relationships in particular ways, and shows how mothers navigate these in their everyday lives.

The book focuses mainly on the experiences of mothers who had been living in the UK for more than five years (in most cases more than a decade), and who had either ‘limited leave to remain’ (right to reside in the UK usually for two and a half years) or no leave to remain (for example, because they had overstayed their visa, having been unable to renew it, or because they had been refused asylum). Mothers with

'limited leave to remain' were mostly on the ten-year route to settlement, which they found prohibitively expensive. A small number of mothers had been granted refugee status. To a lesser degree, the book includes the experiences of mothers who had moved to the UK more recently and were on a short-term work, study or spousal visa.

In this chapter, I set out the key concepts which frame the analysis in this book. These are relational belonging; strategic mothering; intersecting social structures; space and social infrastructure; the 'work' of everyday relational practices; dialectical tensions; and self-disclosure, trust and vulnerability. I then outline how I conducted the research, and provide some information about the participants. Finally, I present an overview of the chapters.

Relational belonging

Hostile immigration policies and discourses seek to undermine a sense of national belonging for racially minoritised, financially disadvantaged women who have moved to the UK and have temporary or irregularised statuses. As in many countries in the global North, such policies and discourses create uncertainty and exclusion (Menjívar and Kanstroom 2014, Yuval-Davis et al. 2018, Dennler 2018). This makes it difficult for people with precarious immigration statuses to feel safe, secure or 'at home'. Many mothers in this position hope to obtain leave to remain for themselves and their children. Being granted secure status can provide 'a formal, official, public-oriented recognition of belonging' (Fenster 2005: 253; see also Bosniak 2000, Menjívar 2006). In turn, this facilitates socio-economic integration, making it easier to manage risks and uncertainty in everyday life (Antonsich 2010). But mothers with precarious immigration statuses also strive to create a sense of belonging in other ways for themselves and their children. Belonging is spatial and relational: it is something people *do* or *negotiate* in institutional and interpersonal interactions (Rosaldo 1994, Yuval-Davis 2006, Hondagneu-Sotelo and Ruiz 2015). This book shows how mothers build and sustain relationships, and how, through relationships, they claim rights and belonging in particular spaces (Flores 2003, Bloemraad 2018) for their families. While nationality, immigration status, socio-economic status, gender, motherhood, 'race', ethnicity and beliefs are often deployed to exclude and marginalise mothers and children, they can equally be mobilised by mothers to enact relational belonging (Erel and Reynolds 2018, Isin and Nielsen 2008).

Strategic mothering

Precarious Motherhood argues that strategic mothering is a vital form of enacting relational belonging. Racially minoritised mothers with insecure immigration statuses in the context of hostile immigration policies face multilayered forms of bordering (Erel and Reynolds 2018, Erel et al. 2018, Reynolds 2020) which intersect with the new needs and challenges involved in becoming and being a mother (Humphris 2019). But caregiving, and specifically mothering, produces new opportunities and spaces for enacting a dual form of belonging: for oneself and for one's child or children (Fisher and Tronto 1990, Chandler 1998, Jeremiah 2006, Dyck 2018). As scholarship on Black motherhood has shown, mothers who experience racial discrimination engage in strategic mothering practices to contest racism and discrimination, cultivate counter-narratives around positive identities, build communities of support and facilitate access to resources (Collins 2007, Kershaw 2010, Reynolds et al. 2018, Erel and Reynolds 2018, Reynolds 2020). This book shows how racially minoritised mothers who are further marginalised by insecure immigration statuses enact relational belonging *as mothers* (Björnberg 2011, Luibhéid et al. 2018, Benckekroun 2023).

Participants' strategic mothering practices were multiple and included seeking status through legal pathways, striving to provide for their children, protecting them from knowing too much about their precarious circumstances, participating in extracurricular cultural or faith-based activities and co-creating a shared vision of a liveable future. The book argues that strategic mothering equally involves building and sustaining (and occasionally ending) relationships – with partners, friends, adult kin and faith-based networks – as sources of mutual support, to improve access to resources, and to help mothers nurture a sense of self and belonging for themselves and their children.

Intersecting social structures

Popular constructions of interpersonal relationships suggest they are self-contained with their own logic or internal dynamic. Friendships, for instance, are widely perceived as voluntary and based on personal choice (Pahl 2000). However, a sociological perspective indicates that all kinds of interpersonal relationships – with one's children, partner, friends, kin and faith community – are, to a large extent, facilitated, constrained and otherwise moulded by social structural factors (Gillies 2003). For

example, social similarity plays a significant part – albeit subconsciously – in how friendships are formed and sustained (Spencer and Pahl 2006, Allan and Adams 2006, Bunnell et al. 2012, Smart et al. 2012).

This book takes an intersectional perspective (Crenshaw 1991, Collins 1990/2022, Brah and Phoenix 2004, Phoenix and Pattynama 2006, Yuval-Davis 2007, Erel and Reynolds 2018) in examining how mothers' interpersonal relationships are shaped by different social structures. It considers how the intersection of factors including gender, motherhood, 'race' and ethnicity, language, socio-economic status, migration trajectory and immigration status affects the formation and development of different kinds of relationships, and consequent access to support, by racially minoritised mothers with insecure immigration status experiencing financial hardship.

Building on this perspective, the book also shows how particular relationships are shaped by other relationships. For example, becoming a mother may lead to new friendships with other mothers (Vincent et al. 2017). A woman's development of early support networks may be facilitated by her partner if he has migrated ahead of her. Conversely, interactions with adult kin and the development of friendships may be obstructed by an abusive partner (Dudley 2017).

Space and social infrastructure

Mothers' interpersonal relationships are shaped by the spaces in which they play out, whether these are domestic, public or semi-public. Without access to mainstream state support, mothers and children experiencing legal and financial precarity are often confined to small, shared, overcrowded spaces, such as a single room in someone else's home or in a house in multiple occupancy (HMO). These arrangements are often a form of 'permanent temporariness' (Bailey et al. 2002), creating uncertainty and anxiety. Such spaces may be in poor condition and/or lacking in privacy. This puts pressure on mothers' relationships with their children and partner, as well as with their hosts, who might be kin, friends, faith group members or simply acquaintances. Such domestic spaces are not conducive to nurturing friendships. First, they are cramped and lack privacy. Second, they risk revealing too much about mothers' precarious immigration status. In addition, mothers often encounter barriers to many kinds of public spaces (Sigona 2012), such as entertainment and leisure spaces, or even faith spaces. Potential barriers include being a single mother, language, precarious immigration status and lack of resource.

Conversely, mothers' relationships can be influenced positively by social infrastructure. Physical, social, public or semi-public spaces that feel safe, welcoming, accessible and family-oriented can have significant, beneficial effects on mothers' circumstances and wellbeing (Small 2009, Bunnell et al. 2012, Klinenberg 2018, Kathiravelu and Bunnell 2018, Werbner 2018). Family drop-ins, food banks, legal advice centres, faith organisations, adult learning classes, children's centres, nurseries and schools can play a vital role as spaces where mothers can form connections with other people, build trust and develop support networks. Some kinds of spaces are characterised by regular attendance of mothers and children, including those with certain social similarities, such as family role, language, religious belief, migration trajectory or immigration status. By facilitating 'habitual contact' (Rzepnikowska-Phillips 2016) among mothers and children with various shared characteristics, these spaces – and the paid and volunteer workers within them – may act as 'spaces of sanctuary' for women and mothers experiencing legal and financial precarity, providing opportunities for 'a sense of belonging, social connection, and emotional support' (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Ruiz 2015: 257) and leading to acquaintanceships and friendships.

The 'work' of everyday relational practices

Precarious Motherhood highlights the 'work' undertaken by precariously positioned mothers to navigate different types of social relationships in different spaces in their everyday lives. This involves accessing and sharing different types of support, or social capital (Bourdieu 1986, Hirschman 2004). Particular spaces and social structural factors necessitate or constrain relational practices in often hidden ways. For example, poverty increases the significance of material exchanges in friendships (Stack 1974, Allan 1998, Hruschka 2010) but also reduces access to material resources, since friends may be similarly struggling (Bourdieu 1986, Fernandez Kelly 1998): evaluating who and when to ask for help, and what kind of help to ask for, requires relational work.

Mothers must very carefully navigate relationships when living temporarily with kin, faith group members, friends or acquaintances, in often cramped, shared spaces with minimal privacy. Moreover, mothers must navigate physical constraints on sociable interactions in small and/or shared domestic spaces: they may avoid inviting friends to their home to protect their privacy (Allan 1998), and may instead confine interactions with friends to specific places and activities. This contrasts

with securely positioned mothers who tend to broaden the contexts in which they enact their friendships (as argued by Willmott [1987] and Allan [1998] in relation to socio-economic background and class). Yet in different spaces and different relationships, mothers may mobilise their motherhood status, ethnicity, religious beliefs and/or other aspects of their identities. All of the above practices can be understood as relational ‘work’, and specifically as emotion work (Hochschild 1979) or strategic mothering work, as discussed above in ‘Strategic mothering’.

Mothers’ relational work includes navigating obligations and the principle of reciprocity. Mutual obligations underpin different kinds of relationships. The concept of ‘family responsibilities’ guides actions within kin relationships (Finch 1989), including relationships between mothers and dependent children, between adult children and ageing parents, between siblings and among other kinds of adult kin. A sense of responsibility for helping family develops over time and is negotiated by asking or offering (Finch and Mason 1993). This process produces commitments and arrangements which structure how different kinds of resources and support are exchanged. Navigating family responsibilities and obligations necessitates sometimes difficult ethical decisions and negotiations (Morgan 2011a). Negotiating responsibilities with transnational kin requires sustained ‘kinwork’ (Di Leonardo 1987, Baldassar 2007) through online technologies (Ryan et al. 2015, Keles 2016).

Within friendships, the concepts of obligation and exchange (of resources and services) are important within both the sociology of friendship (Adams and Allan 1998, Eve 2002, Spencer and Pahl 2006) and the social networks literature (Portes 1998, Ryan 2007). Friendships are understood as being based on the principle of social exchange. However, precariously positioned mothers must navigate the tension between this principle and the difficulty of reciprocating, as noted below in ‘Dialectical tensions’.

Dialectical tensions

Interpersonal relationships are often characterised by tensions between competing discourses or needs. This book argues that, for mothers experiencing legal and financial precarity, tensions play out in different kinds of relationships in particular ways. Such tensions, and how they are managed, affect how trust is built and sustained, and how different forms of support are accessed and shared. Theorised by communications

scholars as relational dialectics (Rawlins 2008), these tensions are not straightforward binary oppositions, but complex, dynamic and multivocal dialogues (Baxter and Montgomery 1996). More than one type of tension is likely to be at play in any given situation. Three main tensions have been identified by scholars. The first is the tension between autonomy and connectedness (Baxter and Montgomery 1996, Baxter and Scharp 2015), described by Rawlins (2008: 3) as ‘the dialectic of the freedom to be independent and the freedom to be dependent’. The second is ‘the dialectic of affection versus instrumentality’, or caring ‘as an end in itself’ versus ‘as a means to an end’ (Rawlins 2008: 3). The third tension is that between openness (self-disclosure) and closedness (privacy) (Baxter and Scharp 2015), or ‘the dialectic of expressiveness and protectiveness’ (Rawlins 2008: 3). Sociologist David Morgan (2009) conceptualised this as finding the balance between intimacy and distance. This requires constant decisions about what to reveal and what to conceal within new and existing relationships. The book shows that these three relational tensions are key to understanding how structural factors influence precariously positioned mothers – and how these tensions must be navigated by mothers in their everyday lives to access and share support.

Moreover, the research on which this book is based suggests there are additional tensions faced by mothers in precarious positions: first, between the need for and the apparent scarcity of material, financial and emotional support; second, between the principle of social exchange and fears of being unable to reciprocate; and third, between the principle of equality in certain kinds of relationships and the effects of unequal power resulting from different immigration statuses. For precariously positioned mothers, navigating tensions within relationships involves countless careful decisions in relation to everyday interactions.

Self-disclosure, trust and vulnerability

In friendships and couple relationships, mutual self-disclosure practices – together with supportive responses and maintaining confidence – create and sustain ‘a subjective sense of closeness’, attunement and trust (Jamieson 2011: 1, Weber and Carter 1998, Pahl 2000). Small or ‘trivial’ self-disclosures lead to deeper ones, if met with an appropriate response, and if the benefit of disclosing is felt to outweigh the cost to the self of a negative response (and the cost to the other, and to the relationship) (Weber and Carter 1998). In this way, trust is constructed and, if not broken, maintained over time (Weber and Carter 1998). This

helps to produce ontological security and protect from anxiety (Giddens 1991, Yuval-Davis 2006, Antonsich 2010, Ryan and Mulholland 2015, Wessendorf and Phillimore 2019).

Trust is built not only through self-disclosure practices but through the development of synchronicity: the ‘passing of external and internal time together’, both ‘sharing in the conscious life of the other’ and developing a shared ‘spatial and temporal orientation’ (Weber and Carter 1998: 13). It involves gradually taking the other’s perspective in making decisions, understanding how they view you and believing they take your perspective into account when they make decisions (Weber and Carter 1998). Building trust requires the other person to be discreet and to recognise what response or support is needed (Rebughini 2011). These practices build and ultimately constitute friendships and couple relationships and are what distinguish them from acquaintanceships (Weber and Carter 1998).

Intimate confiding within friendships – ‘admitting dependency, sharing problems, and being emotionally vulnerable’ (O’Connor 1998: 122) – is often associated with female friendships (O’Connor 1998, Allan and Adams 2006). Intimate confiding may be a way for mothers to construct friendships, creating webs of practical support and emotional care (Cronin 2015). Trust is particularly fundamental in this context, since friendships are not supported by institutional or legal frameworks.

However, while self-disclosure is necessary to create trust, it also poses risks. Trust can increase the opportunity for, and vulnerability to, betrayal, exploitation, control and abuse (Granovetter 1985, Weber and Carter 1998, Pahl 2000). The stakes are high for people with insecure immigration status: they must weigh the need to build trust through self-disclosure against the risks of exploitation and betrayal (Amrith 2018). Within couple relationships, there is a risk that unequal immigration statuses can create or exacerbate unequal power dynamics and trap women within abusive relationships (Menjívar and Salcido 2002, Raj and Silverman 2002, Anitha 2015, Dudley 2017). Some women may prefer not to disclose personal information, at least in the earlier stages of a couple relationship or friendship. But concealing information creates a risk of the ‘secret’ being discovered at an inopportune time, jeopardising the relationship (Weber and Carter 1998).

This book shows that social structures and social infrastructure intersect in the context of hostile immigration policies, insecure statuses, NRPF and financial precarity to shape the development of different kinds of relationships. How are particular spaces and places organised, and who frequents them? How do they affect mothers’ relational practices?

What does it mean for accessing and sharing support? How do they affect how mothers enact belonging and citizenship? These are the questions explored in the chapters which follow. These concerns are vitally important, not only in their own right within this specific context, but because of the wider questions they tackle about how government policies, social structural factors and space and place affect interpersonal relationships, access to support, personal wellbeing, social inequalities and implications for children; and about the role of individual agency in navigating dialectical tensions and unequal power dynamics in relationships within the context of oppressive social structures.

The research

This book is based on my ethnographic doctoral study conducted over 20 months in a highly diverse inner London neighbourhood, 'Ryeton',² as well as on a follow-up postdoctoral study.

The ethnographic research

The neighbourhood is diverse in relation to its residents' nationalities, languages, migration trajectories and immigration statuses, as well as its infrastructure. Some of the many Victorian terraced houses are occupied by single households, others are divided into self-contained rooms with shared kitchen and bathroom facilities (HMOs). These are interspersed with local authority tower blocks and luxury apartments. Independent stores, hair salons and cafés dominate the main shopping streets, commingled with the familiar names of betting shops and fast-food restaurants. Away from the buzz and traffic of the main streets lie playgrounds, schools, nurseries, children's centres, churches and mosques, community centres and tranquil green parks.

My entry point to the research was as a volunteer. With the support of managers and their teams, I became a 'volunteer/researcher' in two advice centres, a family drop-in and a food bank, and I also spent time in several children's centres. This helped me to better understand the nature of the challenges facing mothers positioned by insecure immigration status. It also helped me see how they navigated their way through bureaucratic barriers to access support and seek a more secure status for themselves and their children.

What became evident over time was how complex and ever-changing the Hostile Environment policy context was. Throughout (and since) the research, I often felt perplexed in trying to get to grips with the

details of the policies and processes, and their implications for mothers and children. The implications – such as eligibility for particular services – varied according to the mother’s migration trajectory, her immigration ‘status’ or ‘category’, including any conditions attached to it, and her child’s status. And not only did policies, laws, regulations and rules change frequently, but people’s personal circumstances changed too. My frequent moments of confusion served to remind me how disorienting it must be for families attempting to obtain or renew their leave to remain. It was also striking how much work was involved for legal advisors, advocates and campaigners seeking to make sense of, engage with or challenge these policies. It became apparent that the constantly changing and increasingly hostile policy landscape was part of a deliberate strategy by the government to ‘make life difficult’ and deter people from staying in the UK, or from claiming their rights if they did remain (Grierson 2018). This approach has been described as a ‘politics of exhaustion’ (Welander 2021, Darling 2022).

Through my volunteer roles, and later snowball sampling, I recruited 22 mothers to take part in the research. I met with most mothers at least twice, and with nine mothers many times. In most cases, I would ‘walk with’ participants (Sheller and Urry 2006), ‘travelling alongside [them] in dialogue’ (Sinha and Back 2014: 10), so that I could experience their social worlds and gain a sense of their typical everyday encounters. I spent time with mothers and their children in their homes, went with them to drop-ins and children’s centre groups, sat together in parks and went along on the ‘school run’. I regularly accompanied one mother and her preschooler to hospital outpatient appointments. I went with another mother and her young son to ‘report’ at a Home Office centre, and later to the tribunal for a final decision on whether she would be granted ‘leave to remain’. In some cases, I became part of mothers’ support networks, visiting them in hospital, helping them to register with a GP, or looking after their child while they attended an appointment or moved house. I met partners, friends, neighbours, teachers and support workers. I witnessed phone calls, visits and social media messaging, and was shown family photos. Mothers recounted mundane incidents (conflicts with neighbours, everyday conversations), rites of passage (children starting nursery or school, birthdays, weddings, bereavements) and life-changing events (serious illness, being granted or refused leave to remain). I witnessed emotions which ranged from frustration, anxiety and worry to relief and joy. Participating in mothers’ everyday lives provided deep insights into how they were affected by forms of bordering, how they interacted with others and developed and sustained (or ended)

relationships, and how they accessed and shared diverse forms of social support. Walking together and ‘deep hanging out’ (Rosaldo 1994, Clifford 1997, Geertz 1998) created spaces to reflect together and construct ‘a shared viewpoint’ (O’Neill and Reynolds 2021). It also helped ‘flatten the power relationships’ associated with conventional interviews (O’Neill and Reynolds 2021).

In most cases we engaged in a series of open-ended conversations over time. From our very first encounters, many of the mothers wanted to share with me their experiences of moving to and settling in the UK, forming couple relationships, becoming a mother, difficulties obtaining or renewing leave to remain, and people who had provided support. A few participants were hesitant at first, perhaps unsure whether I could be trusted, or uncertain as to what stories to share.

Our conversations showed that meanings are relational and socially constructed (Scheper-Hughes 1992). I learned to listen deeply, to ‘catch’ mothers’ ‘understanding of the meaning of their experiences’ (Wolf 1992: 5) and to work with the ‘ambiguity, multiplicity, contradiction and instability’ which were part of the ‘messiness’ of human experience (Wolf 1992: 129). Trying to piece together non-chronological narratives, or to link up accounts mothers shared with me at different times, sometimes required work on my part.

When arranging to meet with participants, I used the word ‘conversation’ rather than ‘interview’, and when we met I did my best to ensure encounters felt comfortable. I did not want to create unease by triggering participants’ possible memories of being interviewed by immigration enforcement officers, or of having formal meetings with social workers acting as gatekeepers to much-needed resources. Despite my efforts, at times I felt too close to such roles. When I met with Reyna, originally from Southeast Asia, for the second time, she told me about her journey from the Middle East to safety in the UK, and explained that her solicitor had interviewed her for three hours; I expressed shock and asked what kinds of questions she had been asked. Her response, although light-hearted, made me feel awkward: ‘Like you! Interviewing the past ... how I get here, become pregnant, when I meet [my child]’s dad.’ Reyna’s comparison made me re-evaluate how she felt about our interactions. While our conversations – in the presence of her toddler son – had felt comfortable to me, and Reyna had shown me great hospitality, I now wondered if she – and other participants – felt wary about my interest in the development of their personal relationships and support networks. At times, this perhaps uncomfortably paralleled a similar ‘interest’ from social workers carrying out ‘Section 17’ assessments. When

I felt my questions were taking me too close to this kind of role, I held back. I also avoided ‘probing’ when I felt that mothers did not want to talk about certain topics. This was important ethically, and to build trusting relationships. For example, while some mothers talked very openly and frankly about their earlier experiences of conflict or abusive relationships, others only made allusions, not wanting to go into detail.

I asked mothers to draw a sociogram to represent the people who were important to them, and, as they did so, to tell me about these relationships and the nature of their interactions (Ryan et al. 2014, Ryan 2015, Tubaro et al. 2016, Ryan 2020). Providing a large sheet of paper, pens and pencils, I asked them to put themselves in the centre, and suggested they put the people to whom they felt closest nearest to them on the page. Beyond this, it was entirely up to participants to decide how to proceed. I have termed this a ‘freestyle’ approach (Benchekroun 2020), as opposed to a ‘target’-style template (Pahl and Spencer 2004), which might have felt restrictive and controlled. This method enabled us to focus on relationships and relational practices which generated social support. It helped participants to grasp what was at the heart of my research. As a visual and participatory process, it also enabled mothers to shape their narratives – they could decide which relationships to talk about and which to exclude. This helped to redress power imbalances in the researcher–participant relationship in the process of producing data. It enabled me to be responsive to mothers’ constructions and representations of their social networks, and shaped my questions both in the moment and for later conversations. As a dialogical process, it evoked memories, prompted stories, called attention to everyday interactions and provided insights into meaning-making. It also prompted a deeper awareness of social contexts and encouraged some analytical thinking on my part and together with the mothers (Tubaro et al. 2016, Ryan 2020).

While my focus was on the experiences and perspectives of mothers, I also met with a small number of support workers and advisors from the voluntary and public sectors who worked with women (often mothers) with insecure immigration status, whether as their main role or part of it. Conversations at an early stage of the research helped sensitise me to relevant issues, including the needs and challenges faced by mothers with insecure status and NRPF, the development of relationships and their access to support. Later conversations deepened my understanding of the processes of applying for Section 17 support and leave to remain, and the respective roles of advocacy organisations and state-funded services in providing support to individuals and families with insecure immigration

status and NRPF. I also undertook two focus groups with frontline practitioners, first to pilot the use of the sociogram and second to discuss and reflect on some of my early findings on friendship practices.

My role as a volunteer/embedded researcher in several trusted local organisations was critical in being able to recruit mothers to participate in the research. First, it provided opportunities for initial interactions with mothers. Second, the trust the mothers had in the organisations was generally extended to me, because I was seen as part of those organisations. I was conscious of this – as well as how other aspects of my identity (for example, as a university-based researcher) may have played into this. I therefore took care not to take advantage of my position in the recruitment process, making it clear to mothers that taking part in the research was entirely up to them, would not affect access to services and that if they did take part, they could change their mind at any time.

Some aspects of my identity were fairly apparent – for example, being a white, middle-class woman. Socio-economic status did not seem to be a barrier in developing relationships, and perhaps facilitated them, as many of the mothers who took part were from middle-class families themselves (although many had experienced de-classing as an effect of their migration trajectory – see [Erel and Ryan 2019](#)). I chose to either share or not share aspects of my identity which were not visible, according to how I felt it would affect relationships with participants. Sharing my identity as a mother played a significant role in building connections with many participants. On the other hand, unless I was asked directly, I did not share that I did not follow a religion, since faith was an important aspect of most mothers' identities: I did not want to draw unnecessary attention to this difference. I felt uncomfortable at times that I could not respond to participants in ways which would have been appropriate had I shared their religious beliefs, especially in moments of crisis or great stress.

Given that all the mothers who took part in the research were racially minoritised (most were Black), my identity as a white woman may have affected the research in ways which I was unaware of at the time. Although a small number of mothers talked about racial identity and racism, most did not. Looking back, I felt that I should have acknowledged our different ethnic/racial identities and how this would have shaped our experiences (as I did in relation to citizenship status), and asked more frequently and directly about experiences of racism. This may have produced different narratives. I did, therefore, do this in the follow-up research.

Knowledge-exchange workshops

Following the original ethnographic study, as part of an Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)-funded postdoctoral fellowship I undertook a series of ten knowledge-sharing workshops: four with different groups of mainly mothers with insecure immigration status, and six with frontline professionals and volunteers; I also met with four parents individually who were unable to attend a workshop. In total I met with 66 people, including two fathers. The workshops provided an invaluable opportunity to share and reflect on the research findings. They generated thoughtful discussions which largely confirmed the findings about the impact of immigration policies, insecure statuses and financial hardship on interpersonal relationships and access to support.

Importantly, the workshops created a new dynamic that contrasted with the largely one-to-one approach taken in the original research, generating additional data. For example, when facilitating discussion groups with mothers (and fathers) affected by insecure status and NRPF, to protect confidentiality I explained that they did not need to directly share their personal experiences but instead might prefer to talk more generally, drawing on their broader knowledge. This led to many participants talking freely about sometimes sensitive topics, some of which had not been explored in such detail in the ethnographic research. This was the case, for example, in relation to the question of if or when to disclose insecure immigration status to a (prospective) partner – this is discussed in [Chapter 3](#).

The workshops also brought in new perspectives. First, participants included mothers who had moved from countries not included in the original research, such as Eastern European countries. Second, many of the mothers (and fathers) who took part had arrived in the UK more recently, and were therefore more connected to their lives in their country of origin and had had fewer encounters with the Hostile Environment in action. Third, participants drew on the experiences of friends and acquaintances with NRPF, bringing in a broader range of experiences.

The mothers who took part in the ethnographic research

The mothers who took part in my ethnographic research had moved to the UK from a wide range of countries, including homelands in Latin America, the Caribbean, Southeast Asia and many parts of Africa. The majority had moved from countries in West Africa previously colonised by Britain, notably Nigeria and Ghana. Most had arrived with either a

student visa, a fiancée or spouse visa, or a holiday visa to visit family members. Five had fled wars and had claimed asylum on arrival. Two had been trafficked to the UK. Most were in their twenties when they arrived, while two were teenagers and two were in their thirties. A small number were in couple relationships at the time of migrating; most formed a relationship after their arrival in the UK. All began to make the UK their home, and later started a family. Most of the participants identified as Christian, from a variety of denominations, including Catholic, Orthodox, Pentecostal, Seventh Day Adventist and Anglican. One mother identified as Muslim and a second was not practising but had been raised in the Islamic faith. All but one participant spoke English fluently or well. The mother who spoke limited English agreed to meet with me with the help of a frontline practitioner who spoke her first language and was known to her.

On arrival in the UK, London had been the first destination for most participants, although not all of them had moved to the neighbourhood of Ryeton in the first instance. Many had moved around the city. Several had spent time living in other towns or cities, either staying with relatives or having been placed there under the government's dispersal policy for people in the asylum system. All participants lived in Ryeton during at least some of the fieldwork, or, in one case, had moved away just before the fieldwork began but travelled into the neighbourhood most days and maintained strong links with people and organisations there.

Fourteen of the mothers in my study had been living in the UK for at least ten years. Mothers' immigration statuses had been affected by a variety of factors, not least by frequent changes to immigration policies. At the start of my fieldwork, ten mothers had no 'leave to remain' because their visas had expired and they had not been able to renew them. A further eight mothers had been granted 'limited leave to remain' for two and a half years and were on the ten-year settlement route. Most of these mothers had spent many years with no leave to remain before reaching this point. Those without leave to remain and most of those with only limited leave to remain were subject to the condition of NRPF. Finally, four mothers had 'indefinite leave to remain' (permission to reside in the UK without any time limit); all four had been living in the UK for two decades or more and had been granted refugee status within a few years of their arrival.

During the course of my fieldwork, or soon after, six of the mothers with no leave to remain were granted limited leave to remain and were therefore able to begin the ten-year route to becoming eligible for 'indefinite leave to remain'. Those who did not have leave to remain

were receiving either Section 17 support from the local authority or, if seeking asylum, Section 95 support from the Home Office; this included accommodation in an HMO as well as subsistence funding.

While I did not ask participants directly about their sexuality, to the best of my knowledge all the participants were or had been in heterosexual couple relationships.

To protect identities, pseudonyms are used for all the research participants. Additionally, I have not linked mothers to their country of origin (instead referring to the wider geographical region) or to children's particular disabilities or health conditions. When referring to those who took part in the knowledge-exchange workshops, I refer to them simply as 'a mother', for example. This is to avoid overwhelming the reader with too many names.

Overview of the chapters

[Chapter 1](#) outlines the policy context of the research, focusing on the UK's Hostile Environment policies which have affected women, mothers and children. [Chapters 2 to 6](#) focus on the findings of the study. [Chapter 2](#) shows how Hostile Environment policies constrain the experiences and practices of mothering for mothers with insecure immigration status and NRPF. It shows that becoming a mother with insecure immigration status creates new challenges and needs and leads to new forms of exclusion. It also argues, however, that becoming and being a mother can be understood as enacting belonging through the mother-child relationship. It shows how mothers engage in particular 'work', or *strategic mothering*, whether parenting with a partner or alone, in order to provide for their children, protect them from 'knowing too much' about their precarious immigration status and cultivate a strong sense of identity. It also shows how children can be an important source of care and support for their mothers. The chapter indicates that other kinds of relationships play a key role in shaping mothering practices – for example, through exchanging care and resources and opening up ways of enacting belonging relationally. This theme is developed in the subsequent chapters.

[Chapters 3 to 6](#) examine how different kinds of relationships are shaped by wider structural factors and by physical (and online) spaces and places. These chapters consider how different kinds of support and care are shared within these relationships. They also highlight the dialectical tensions which emerge and how they play out in particular ways in different kinds of relationships, focusing on how mothers

navigate these in their everyday lives. These include tensions between the need for connectedness and the need for autonomy; between the need for openness and the need for privacy; between affection and instrumentality; and between the need for support and difficulties in reciprocating.

Chapter 3 focuses on the role of couple relationships in providing care and support, including financial and material resources, shelter, support with regularising immigration status, and emotional support in the context of hostile government policies, exclusion and multilayered precarity. It shows how couple relationships can be a 'haven in a hostile environment', but also how they can be sites of tension, conflict and sometimes exploitation and abuse. It examines how mothers navigate these challenges – by negotiating shared parenting practices, 'holding' tensions, sustaining communication with their child(ren)'s father when a couple relationship ends, or seeking help and escaping abusive relationships.

Chapter 4 addresses the role of friendships. It shows the importance of friendships in exchanging practical care, material resources and emotional support. It also highlights tensions between the need for self-disclosure and the need for privacy, and between the need for help and difficulties in reciprocating. It shows that mothers navigate these tensions through various strategies, including: finding a balance between 'holding back' and 'reaching out'; carefully considering what kind of help to ask for and whom to ask; being creative in reciprocating support; and avoiding disclosing information about immigration status.

Chapter 5 looks at adult kin relationships, both transnationally and within the UK. It shows how care responsibilities are negotiated with adult kin in the country of origin in light of physical and structural barriers. It suggests that distance may reduce mothers' responsibilities for providing practical and personal care, but also reduces their access to these kinds of care. It demonstrates that kin may be hopeful for financial support which precariously positioned mothers may struggle to provide, which can produce feelings of guilt. Mothers navigate these relationships through their use of online technologies. The chapter also shines a light on relationships with adult kin in the UK, showing how they can be a source of practical care, financial support and accommodation. It argues, however, that tensions emerge in 'mixed-status families' because of differential access to resources and unequal power dynamics, which mothers have to navigate with care.

Chapter 6 considers faith-based relationships, focusing on Christian churches. It shows that co-national or co-ethnic faith networks play a key

role in enabling cultural continuity and creating a sense of belonging; it shows, too, that church members and leaders can, in different ways, be valued sources of different kinds of help and support, including shelter. It also indicates, however, that hierarchies within faith networks may at times give rise to marginalisation, controlling behaviours and exploitation. It argues that mothers navigate these dynamics by reducing their attendance, moving to a different church or holding back in conversations among church members. They navigate tensions, such as that between the need for openness and the need for privacy, by not getting too close to other church members and avoiding sharing information about insecure immigration status.

Chapters 2 to 6 are each prefaced with an ‘interlude’ to allow mothers’ voices to be heard in longer form, both as a mark of respect to participants and to demonstrate vividly how Hostile Environment policies constitute a form of state violence which constrains mothers’ relationships, their access to support and their families’ everyday lives. In two of the interludes, I appear as an interlocutor. Each interlude presents some of the key themes explored in the chapter which follows.

The concluding chapter draws together the main arguments and key themes of the book as a whole. Following this, the Glossary includes explanations of terms used in the book.

Notes

- 1 I use scare quotes when referring to ‘race’ to make it clear that it is a social construction. Racism and racial minoritisation, on the other hand, have a firm basis in reality.
- 2 This is a pseudonym.

1

The Hostile Environment in the UK

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

(Theresa May, Home Secretary, 26 May 2012)

We're breaking the link between work and settlement, so that only those who contribute the most economically will be able to stay long-term.

(David Cameron, Prime Minister, 25 March 2013)

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.

(Chinelo)

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.

(Kidane)

Migration and movement to, from and around Britain has long characterised British society. People have moved in order to explore, seek new opportunities, increase their earnings, seek safety, make new connections, join family and friends, put down roots, set up home and start a family. Much migration (or mobility) to and from the UK has been shaped – if indirectly – by the country's involvement in the slave trade until the nineteenth century, its former colonial projects and the

subsequent construction of the Commonwealth (Winder 2013, El-Enany 2020, Sanghera 2021). Conditions of movement continue to be shaped by the colonial invention of ‘race’ (Anderson 2013, El-Enany 2020, Mayblin and Turner 2021). As in much of the global North, since the mid-twentieth century, as more people have become internationally mobile, immigration and citizenship legislation in Britain has become increasingly restrictive and racist in its effects (Anderson 2013, El-Enany 2020, Yeo 2020). Although since the end of the nineteenth century policies in the UK have been ostensibly ‘raceless’, people have been allocated differential mobility rights on the basis of nationality and income – and in practice these factors are often intertwined with ‘race’ because of Britain’s colonial history (Anderson 2013).

Having announced its intention to significantly reduce net migration, the British Conservative-led Coalition government introduced the ‘Hostile Environment’ in 2012 as its approach to managing migration (Kirkup and Winnett 2012, Jones et al. 2017, Yuval-Davis et al. 2019, Gentleman 2019). The policies that followed further restricted rights to reside in the UK and constrained mobility for those not considered to be ‘deserving’ or ‘desirable’ (Shamir 2005, El-Enany 2020).

This chapter begins by providing a brief historical context of bordering in the UK since the Second World War. It then offers an overview of the policies introduced since 2012, and what these mean for racially minoritised women who have moved from less affluent countries to Britain, and have settled and become mothers.

Bordering in the UK since 1945

The British Empire was reliant on the contributions of its colonial ‘subjects’ not only during the Second World War but afterwards, when Britain needed rebuilding and was facing labour shortages. The government encouraged migration from Ireland and mainland Europe, which increased. Politicians were more ambivalent about migration from across the British Empire, but this increased too, along with migration from newly independent formerly colonised nations (as processes of decolonisation got under way), which became part of the newly formed ‘Commonwealth of Nations’. Ultimately this was facilitated by the British Nationality Act 1948, which gave people from across the Commonwealth – until then designated ‘British subjects’ – the status of ‘Citizens of the UK and Colonies’ (CUKCs) or ‘Commonwealth Citizens’, allowing them to enter and settle in the UK (Winder 2013, Gentleman 2019, Olusoga

2021). Commonwealth citizens migrated from India, Pakistan, the Caribbean, South Africa, Nigeria, Ghana and elsewhere. Britain's towns and cities gradually became more ethnically diverse. At the same time, incidences of violent racism and discrimination increased (Winder 2013, De Haas et al. 2020, Olusoga 2021).

The rise of anti-immigration views in the 1950s and 1960s led to an increased politicisation of immigration (Messina 2001). Successive postwar governments introduced legislation in the 1960s and the early 1970s¹ to restrict the immigration and settlement of Commonwealth citizens of colour (Messina 2001, Travis 2002, Winder 2013, El-Enany 2020). Later, the British Nationality Act 1981 introduced the concept of 'British citizenship', ending citizenship links with Commonwealth countries. In 1982 the government introduced passport checks and charging for those not 'ordinarily resident' in the UK to restrict their access to the National Health Service (NHS) (Medien 2021).² In keeping with much of Europe and North America, such laws (re)produced racialised understandings of belonging and non-belonging (Coutin 2007, Anderson 2013, Gonzales et al. 2015, Chavez 2015).

Nevertheless, immigration to the UK and Northwest Europe grew steadily until the early 1990s, and then more rapidly from the mid-1990s (De Haas et al. 2020). This was due to multiple factors, including the spread of conflict and insecurity internationally, the effects of globalisation, greater socio-economic inequalities within and between countries, cheaper international travel, advances in information communication technologies, and the European Union (EU) expansions in 2004 and 2007 (De Haas et al. 2020). By 2010, annual immigration to the UK had reached 591,000 and had outpaced emigration, which had reached 339,000 per year (ONS 2016).

From 1997, the UK's New Labour government encouraged certain forms of economic migration but sought to restrict asylum-seeking, target 'irregular' migration, and reduce overall levels of immigration and settlement by introducing an array of restrictive measures (Somerville 2007, Yeo 2020). The Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 consolidated the principle of 'no recourse to public funds' (NRPF) for people subject to immigration control, preventing access to mainstream welfare benefits or social housing (Dickson and Rosen 2020). Migrant spouses were targeted by the introduction of a minimum age of 21 and a two-year 'probation' period before they could apply for indefinite leave to remain (Kofman 2004, Turner 2015). These and other immigration-related measures introduced by the New Labour government were in some respects the 'precursors' of the Hostile Environment approach, but

their scope was limited (Griffiths and Yeo 2021). The Conservative-led Coalition government brought a significant intensification in the hostility of immigration policy after it came to power in 2010.

Everyday bordering in the UK's 'Hostile Environment' since 2012

In the run-up to the 2010 general election, David Cameron, then leader of the opposition Conservative Party, pledged to reduce net migration from over 200,000 per year to 'the tens of thousands' by 2015 (McNeil 2020). Responding to pressure from the right wing of his party, he claimed the right 'balance' would enable the country to reap the benefits of immigration. He wanted to reduce legal immigration routes from non-EU countries and reduce settlement by people with temporary visas (Migration Observatory 2011). Once in power, Prime Minister David Cameron's Coalition government introduced a cap on the number of skilled visas available, restricted access to student visas, and in 2012 created a minimum income requirement of £18,600 for fiancé and marriage visas (Cameron 2011, McNeil 2020). A later Conservative government, led by Prime Minister Rishi Sunak, increased the minimum income to £29,000 from April 2024, intending to further increase it to £38,700 by early 2025 (House of Commons Library 2024) – this represented more than the median salary in the UK, which raised concerns that it would have a significant impact on lower earners, including women (Jorgensen 2024).

Following its initial measures, Cameron's Coalition government turned its attention to 'irregular' migration, most of which concerned people who had overstayed their visas. In 2012, the then Home Secretary Theresa May announced the 'Hostile Environment' approach,³ the aim of which was to 'create, here in Britain, a really hostile environment for illegal migration' (Kirkup and Winnett 2012, Grierson 2018). The Home Secretary wanted to make life so difficult for people without leave to remain that they would choose to leave the UK (ICIBI 2016, Qureshi et al. 2020). An additional aim, as expressed by the then Prime Minister David Cameron, quoted at the start of this chapter, was to deter people from settling in the UK (Walsh 2020, Griffiths and Yeo 2021). A new inter-departmental group was tasked with generating ideas to reduce irregular migration (Gentleman 2019, Qureshi et al. 2020). In an overtly hostile early move, the Home Office launched Operation Vaken. Vans appeared in several ethnically diverse urban neighbourhoods displaying the words: 'In the UK illegally? GO HOME OR FACE ARREST', along with numbers

for people to call or text (Jones et al. 2017). The Home Office texted people telling them – often wrongly – that they no longer had ‘leave to remain’ and were required to leave the UK (Olusoga 2021).

Although not presented as a coherent strategy, and not put forward for consultation, the Hostile Environment built on and gradually systematised the Home Office’s existing immigration control policies (Sigona and Hughes 2012, Qureshi et al. 2020, Griffiths and Yeo 2021). Through the Immigration Acts 2014 and 2016, as well as new regulations and changes to the Immigration Rules, the UK Government significantly increased Home Office fees for visas and renewal applications; expanded the NRPF condition; made it more difficult to settle by introducing the ‘ten-year settlement route’; made it a criminal offence to let property to anyone without the ‘right to rent’; criminalised the employment of someone known or believed not to have the ‘right to work’; introduced the ‘Immigration Health Surcharge’ for those applying for ‘limited leave to remain’; denied free secondary healthcare to those unable to prove they have the official right to live in the UK; and increased data-sharing between public and private institutions and the Home Office for immigration enforcement purposes, including close collaboration between the police and the Home Office (Yuval-Davis et al. 2019, Qureshi et al. 2020, Yeo 2020). Some of these policies are discussed in more detail in the section below entitled ‘Key impacts of the Hostile Environment’.

Hostile Environment policies have not been shown to have had any impact on the Home Office’s objective of increasing the rate of voluntary returns (NAO 2020, House of Commons PAC 2020). In fact, according to the government’s own figures, the number of voluntary returns fell significantly between 2015 and 2023 (gov.uk 2024a; see also Qureshi et al. 2020). Most people deemed ‘irregular’ arrived in the UK with a visa but were prevented from extending their leave to remain by bureaucratic error, inefficiency or rule changes (Spencer 2011, Düvell et al. 2018); others were trafficked to the UK, and/or were seeking asylum and/or were refused asylum. Government measures reduced access to legal aid, created a proliferation of visa types and reduced access to residency and working rights (De Haas et al. 2020), causing confusion about rights and entitlements to services and resources (Yeo 2020).

The allocation of residency rights and associated rights, such as access to mainstream welfare benefits and social housing, privileges certain groups and excludes others. It positions certain groups as undeserving of state support and not entitled to basic rights (De Genova 2013, Menjívar and Kanstroom 2014, Dickson and Rosen 2020). As a result, many families experience destitution, and many women are

put at risk of exploitation and abuse by their partner (Woolley 2019). Women who become mothers in the UK without leave to remain often find that their children have inherited their ‘irregular’ status. The threat of detention and deportation – or ‘deportability’ – confines people to ‘a space of forced invisibility’ (De Genova 2002: 427).

It is not known how many people have ‘irregular’ immigration status, because it is difficult to detect and not officially recorded (Walsh 2020, Walsh and Sumption 2020, House of Commons PAC 2020). One study estimated that, in 2017, between 800,000 and 1.2 million people were living in the UK without leave to remain (including people seeking asylum) (Pew Research Center 2019). A study undertaken on behalf of the Greater London Authority (GLA) indicated that 674,000 people living in the UK in 2017 had ‘irregular’ status, of whom 215,000 were children (Jolly et al. 2020). Of these, 106,000 children were born in the UK (Jolly et al. 2020). Approximately 397,000 people with ‘irregular’ status (59 per cent of the total) were thought to live in London (Jolly et al. 2020). More than one-third had been living in the UK for at least ten years (Pew Research Center 2019).

In 2016, the UK Government held a referendum on whether to leave the EU, following continued anti-immigration and anti-EU agitation by largely right-wing politicians and hostility in much of the right-wing media. The (largely unexpected) vote in favour of leaving the EU, or ‘Brexit’, was implemented on 31 January 2020. This repositioned EU citizens living in the UK as migrants subject to immigration control. Most were able to apply for ‘settled status’, but those who were not able to do so by the deadline, or whose applications were refused, effectively became ‘irregular migrants’ subject to immigration control (Gentleman 2021). European Economic Area (EEA) citizens who moved to the UK after 1 January 2021 as visitors, students or workers were also subject to immigration control and NRPF (gov.uk 2023).

Ultimately, Hostile Environment policies and Brexit have not reduced net migration to the ‘tens of thousands’. In fact, it rose from 256,000 in 2010 to 313,000 ten years later (ONS 2015, Sturge 2023), had more than doubled to 672,000 by the year ending June 2023⁴ (ONS 2023, Migration Observatory 2023) and is estimated to have reached 685,000 in the year ending December 2023 (ONS 2024).

While Hostile Environment policies were aimed at people without ‘leave to remain’, they have also had severe effects on British citizens and lawful residents who are racially minoritised. There has been evidence of racial and national discrimination by landlords since the introduction of the ‘right to rent’ policy (Garvie 2016, Qureshi et al. 2021, Griffiths and

Yeo 2021). Moreover, these policies have affected people who migrated to the UK after the Second World War as Commonwealth citizens and have lived and worked in the country legitimately for decades. Without the paperwork proving citizenship that is now required to access housing, employment and public services as a result of Hostile Environment policies, many had to leave their jobs, and were denied access to welfare benefits, healthcare, social housing and other essential public services. This group of people became widely known as the ‘Windrush generation’, named after the ship HMT Empire Windrush, which brought some of the first Commonwealth citizens from the Caribbean to the UK in 1948. In 2018, the racial discrimination against these citizens resulting from Hostile Environment policies was brought to public attention and became known as the ‘Windrush scandal’ (Gentleman 2019). It led to a government-commissioned independent review which identified the many serious and racist effects of these policies (Williams 2020).⁵

Key impacts of the Hostile Environment

No recourse to public funds

In 2012, the government expanded the condition of NRPF, applying it to people on the ‘ten-year settlement route’ (see next section), in addition to people who had overstayed their visa, or who had entered the UK without permission, and those who had migrated to the UK on a student, work, fiancé or marriage visa. At the time of writing, approximately 1.3 million people were being subjected to NRPF as a condition of their visa or limited leave to remain (Morris and Qureshi 2021). Almost half a million of these were children, many of whom were born in the UK. In 2021, at least 224,000 children under 18 were thought to be subject to NRPF because of their visa status (Fernández Reino 2022), and a further 215,000 children had no leave to remain (Jolly et al. 2020).

Legislation sets out the welfare benefits and services categorised as ‘public funds’. These include Universal Credit, Child Benefit, disability living allowance, housing assistance and, until 2022, free school meals. People with limited leave to remain and NRPF are entitled to access healthcare through the NHS, having paid the Immigration Health Surcharge. While everyone living in the UK has the right to access primary healthcare, such as a GP, people without leave to remain face barriers to secondary NHS healthcare (hospital treatment). Children with NRPF can access primary and secondary education, but for higher education some people with NRPF may be subject to international student fees,

although the situation is very complex and depends on their particular ‘category’ (UKCISA 2024). This is likely to present a significant barrier to higher education. There are also restrictions on access to childcare by children whose parents have NRPF (Fernández Reino 2022), increasing the risk of non-eligible parents using unregistered, informal childcare (Woolley 2019).

While not everyone subjected to the NRPF condition is struggling, for many it contributes to financial precarity, debt, destitution and homelessness (Berg 2019, Yeo 2020, El-Enany 2020, Morris and Qureshi 2021). Families on the ten-year route are particularly at risk because they are more likely to be on low incomes (Pinter et al. 2020). NRPF penalises particular groups. First, it disproportionately affects women – especially pregnant women and mothers of young children – because it affects their access to full-time work by restricting access to free childcare, and because pregnant women and mothers (especially if they are parenting alone) cannot avoid other types of expenditure related to children (Woolley 2019, Pinter et al. 2020). Second, NRPF disproportionately affects people in low-paid work, since they cannot access in-work benefits (Woolley 2019). Third, NRPF particularly affects racially minoritised families (Pinter et al. 2020, Morris and Qureshi 2021) from less affluent countries, targeting and ‘punishing’ those perceived by the state as ‘undesirable’ and ‘undeserving outsiders’ who cannot be easily deported (Dickson and Rosen 2020: 9, 2). Single mothers and racially minoritised children with NRPF disproportionately experience food poverty and inadequate and overcrowded accommodation (Price and Spencer 2015, Woolley 2019). Many people with NRPF were particularly affected during the COVID-19 pandemic, as a result of job losses and/or having to continue working despite the risks to their health (Morris and Qureshi 2021).

While people subject to NRPF as a condition of their leave to remain can request that it be removed in exceptional circumstances, in reality this is granted only rarely; moreover, NRPF is automatically applied to renewals of leave to remain (Pinter et al. 2020, Yeo 2020, Morris and Qureshi 2021, McKinney and Sumption 2021). There is some additional protection for women with limited leave to remain who are on a spousal or partner visa and whose relationship has broken down due to domestic abuse: they can apply for the Migrant Victims of Domestic Abuse Concession (MVDAC), formerly known as the Destitution Domestic Violence Concession (DDVC), which provides access to public funds and means they can apply for indefinite leave to remain (NRPF Network n.d. a, gov.uk n.d. a), but there are no guarantees that applications will succeed.

Ten-year route to settlement

In 2012, the government introduced the ten-year route to settlement for people who do not meet the income-based and other criteria for shorter (usually five-year) settlement routes (Pinter et al. 2020). This means that mothers (and fathers) excluded from shorter routes, who instead can apply to stay in the UK on the grounds of family and private life under Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights, face much longer, more expensive and convoluted routes to settlement (Pinter et al. 2020, McKinney and Sumption 2021). Parents must wait to apply for limited leave to remain on the basis of their child being resident in the UK continuously for seven years, or being the parent/carer of a British citizen child⁶ or having lived in the UK for over 20 years. Families who are eventually granted limited leave to remain as part of the ten-year settlement route are therefore likely to have been struggling financially for many years (Pinter et al. 2020). At the time of writing, an estimated 170,000 people were on the ten-year route (McKinney and Sumption 2021).

The ten-year route to settlement is an exceptionally costly process. First, family members must apply for 'limited leave to remain' (two and a half years), which for many is prohibitively expensive; they must do this four times consecutively, without interruption or errors, in order to become eligible to apply for indefinite leave to remain.⁷ Second, as part of each 'limited leave to remain' application, family members must pay the Immigration Health Surcharge; if their application is successful, this entitles them to access healthcare through the NHS.⁸ Third, most applicants must also pay lawyers' fees, since the process is complex, the rules change frequently and legal aid is no longer available (Woolley 2019). While on this route, families are usually subject to the NRPF condition, preventing them from accessing mainstream welfare support. Moreover, because of the previous precarity experienced by many parents on this route, they are more likely to already be 'financially insecure and in need of access to public funds' (Woolley 2019: 18). Many families on the ten-year route therefore face destitution and risk losing their right to reside in the UK (Mort 2023).

The exclusion, stigmatisation and harms caused by the indefinite waiting imposed on those wanting to regularise their status in the UK and across the global North has been conceptualised as 'structural violence' (Vandevoordt 2021, Freedman et al. 2022), legal or 'state violence' (Menjívar and Abrego 2012) or 'slow violence' (Mayblin et al. 2020, Dickson and Rosen 2020, Sahraoui and Freedman 2022). The ten-year

settlement route renders residency rights ‘precariously conditional’ (Ahmed cited in [El-Enany 2020: 30](#); see also [Goldring et al. 2009](#), [Kubal 2013](#), [Ellermann 2020](#)), forcing families to be continually oriented to the present ([De Genova 2002](#)) and preventing planning for the future.

Restricted access to services

The measures introduced by the Immigration Acts 2014 and 2016 prevent access to employment, housing, public services and some business services by people unable to prove they have the right to reside in the UK. They also position frontline workers, managers and businesspeople as ‘border guards’ ([Goodfellow 2019](#), [Yuval-Davis et al. 2019](#), [Griffiths and Yeo 2021](#)), making them responsible for checking that individuals have the right to reside in the UK. Landlords are required to check that current and prospective tenants have the ‘right to rent’. Employers must check employees’ ‘right to work’. Higher education institutions must check students’ right to study, monitor their attendance, report absences to the Home Office and determine whether they should be charged as ‘home’ or ‘international’ students. Banks are required to carry out immigration status checks on new customers, and sometimes on existing customers. Marriage registrars must report suspected ‘sham’ marriages or civil partnerships. Border controls are ‘carried out by anyone anywhere – government agencies, private companies and individual citizens’ ([Yuval-Davis et al. 2018: 230](#); see also [Yuval-Davis et al. 2019: 102–5](#)).

These laws have also restricted access to secondary healthcare. NHS trusts are required to check patients’ eligibility before providing care, and to record their chargeable status ([Harris and Hardwick 2019](#)). Patients face being charged upfront, at 150 per cent of the cost, if they cannot prove they are eligible for treatment, or being refused care if they cannot pay. Treatment deemed urgent or ‘immediately necessary’, such as maternity services, is not withheld; however, patients who cannot pay are charged retrospectively. Clinical staff are expected to support ‘Overseas Visitor Managers’ with frequently complex decisions on patient eligibility ([Qureshi et al. 2020](#)). Not only does this position them as border guards, but it also undermines the NHS principles of free and universal treatment at the point of use ([Weller and Aldridge 2019](#), [Medact 2020](#), [Worthing et al. 2021](#)). Many people (including some staff working in healthcare and the wider public) are unaware that everyone living in the UK, regardless of immigration status, has the right to register with a GP and access certain other healthcare services: some GP surgeries have wrongly asked new patients to provide proof of address and identification ([Medact 2020](#)).

These laws have had serious consequences, not only for people with irregular immigration status but for citizens and residents with the right to reside in the UK who are racially minoritised. Healthcare treatment has been wrongly withheld at times, and people have been wrongly charged, when patients have been unable to prove their right to reside in the UK (Weller et al. 2019, Harris and Hardwick 2019, Nellums et al. 2021). Many people with insecure immigration status are deterred from seeking healthcare advice or treatment by widespread confusion about eligibility for different kinds of healthcare, concerns about unaffordable charges, and fears of detention and deportation. This means that existing conditions and prevention opportunities are missed, leading to avoidable hospitalisations (Weller et al. 2019) or, in the case of communicable diseases,⁹ risks to public health. Pregnant women who access maternity care face unaffordable bills, which creates worry and high levels of stress (Feldman 2018). Pregnant women (especially those experiencing domestic violence) who avoid or delay access to healthcare face particular risks, including low birth weight, pre-term delivery or perinatal death of the child, as well as maternal death (Phillimore 2016, Harris and Hardwick 2019, Nellums et al. 2021). The risk of maternal death is known to be higher for Black women regardless of immigration status (UK Parliament 2023). Exclusion from healthcare may increase mothers' marginalisation and reduce their engagement with wider services.

Risks of violence against women

Pregnancy and new motherhood are times when women face increased risk of coercive control and violence in couple relationships (Harris and Hardwick 2019). Irrespective of their immigration status, women subjected to partner abuse face barriers to seeking help and reporting abuse because of unequal power and controlling dynamics within the relationship, which may lead to threats by the abusive partner and well-founded fears on the part of the victim/survivor. Insecure immigration status intersects with and increases these barriers, threats and fears. Despite some legal protection being in place for women on a spousal or partner visa (discussed above in the section entitled 'Everyday bordering in the UK's "Hostile Environment" since 2012'), they may worry that leaving their abusive partner could lead to their children being taken away from them and/or losing their immigration status and associated rights, including the right to access hospital care (Harris and Hardwick 2019, McIlwaine et al. 2019, Pinter et al. 2020). Having NRPF may also prevent access to a refuge (Voolma 2018, Step Up Migrant Women 2020).

Mothers may feel trapped: while staying in an abusive relationship presents an ongoing risk of violence to them and their children, leaving the relationship may put them at risk of homelessness and destitution. Becoming homeless and destitute could lead to further exploitative or abusive relationships and increased instability. Women with NRPF are therefore at increased risk of both being subjected to domestic violence and struggling to escape it.

Data-sharing for immigration enforcement purposes

As part of the Hostile Environment approach, the Home Office drew up agreements with public and private institutions so that personal data could be shared for immigration enforcement purposes. Agreements were put in place with the Department for Education (Whittaker 2016, Gayle 2016, Persson 2019, Yuval-Davis et al. 2019), NHS Digital (Hiam et al. 2018, Weller and Aldridge 2019, Papageorgiou et al. 2020, Button et al. 2020), the police (McIlwaine et al. 2019, Griffiths and Yeo 2021), the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA) and banks. This has increased families' fears of detention and deportation, and has deterred many from seeking advice and support from essential public services, marginalising them still further.

Support for families facing destitution

Some families with children facing destitution are eligible for help from the local authority area in which they are living. In England, under Section 17 of the Children Act 1989, local authorities are required to provide support to children they assess as being 'in need' – for example, due to homelessness; there is similar legislation in the other nations of the UK (Leon and Broadhead 2024). Section 17 support may take the form of accommodation and/or subsistence funding (Pinter et al. 2020). Research suggests that over 5,000 families with NRPF were supported by local authorities across the UK in 2021/22 (Leon and Broadhead 2024). Local authorities do not receive ring-fenced funding for this, which means that social care practitioners are effectively positioned as gatekeepers of limited resources (Leon and Broadhead 2024). Many families are turned away (Dennler 2018, Dickson and Rosen 2020, Walsh et al. 2021). Data indicate that two-thirds of new referrals were turned away in 2022/23 (NRPF Network 2023). The majority of families referred and supported were living in London (Leon and Broadhead 2024).

The Home Office is responsible for providing accommodation and subsistence to families awaiting a decision on their asylum application,

or who are ‘appeal rights exhausted’ (ARE) and still qualify for Section 95 support, and who would otherwise be destitute (NRPF Network n.d. b). It is estimated that in December 2017 there were just under 24,000 children under 18 years old receiving asylum support under Section 4 or Section 95 in England (excluding unaccompanied asylum-seeking children looked after by local authorities and children resettled under schemes for designated refugees) (Hutchinson and Reader 2021).

As the subsequent chapters will show, hostile immigration policies, precarious immigration statuses and the NRPF condition intersect with wider socio-economic structures to shape mothers’ interpersonal relationships, creating or exacerbating tensions which play out in particular ways. This in turn affects mothers’ access to different kinds of care and support.

Notes

- 1 Commonwealth Immigrants Act 1962, Commonwealth Immigrants Act 1968, Immigration Act 1971.
- 2 The NHS was founded on the principle that all treatment is free at the point of access; note that the charges were not systematically implemented at the time.
- 3 The term was previously used by Liam Byrne, former Labour immigration minister, when introducing fines for employers taking on individuals without the right to work in the UK (Travis 2007), as well as in a Labour policy document in 2010 (UKBA 2010).
- 4 This was down from a peak of 745,000 in the year ending December 2022 (ONS 2023).
- 5 In response, the government established a scheme to support and compensate victims, but this was widely recognised as having failed in its aims (Teffer 2023, Gentleman 2023).
- 6 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 state that a child who has lived continuously in the UK for seven years may qualify for *limited leave to remain* if it would be unreasonable for them to leave the UK (Yeo 2020). A child born and living in the UK can register for British citizenship at the age of ten, although there is a fee for this (£1,214 at the time of writing). Parents can apply for a fee waiver (gov.uk n.d. d).
- 7 At the time of writing, applying for ‘limited leave to remain’ cost more than £1,000 per person (gov.uk 2024b) and applying for ‘indefinite leave to remain’ cost almost £3,000 per person (gov.uk n.d. b).
- 8 At the time of writing, this cost more than £1,000 per person per year of the visa (gov.uk n.d. c)
- 9 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).

Interlude

Ndidi: 'They don't have the same life'

It's a hard life ... [At the time I'm talking about,] 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 [of swimming lessons], '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 [social workers/school] 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.

Two and a half [years of limited leave to remain] 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 two 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?]

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 two 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.

2

Strategic mothering

Becoming a mother creates new responsibilities – to meet the physical, emotional and material needs of one’s children. Parenthood may be shared with a current or former partner, or another family member, or may be undertaken alone. In practice, it continues to be gendered: mothers usually bear most of the weight of this role (Faircloth 2021). This means new mothers may find themselves in need of new kinds of support. For many women who have become mothers after moving to the UK, the unique demands of motherhood intersect with the challenges of migration, hostile immigration policies, insecure immigration status, the NRPF condition, financial precarity and racial minoritisation. These create particular forms of exclusion (Erel and Reynolds 2018, Suerbaum and Lijnders 2023, Phoenix 2023) – including barriers to public services, paid work, childcare and accommodation.

In this context, different kinds of relationships are crucially important as sites of support – for example, friendships and extended family (Boyd 1989, Björnberg 2011, Ryan 2015). The nature of the couple relationship is key, as it shapes possibilities for co-parenting. Parenting practices may be relatively evenly balanced or distributed unequally. Whether parenting with a (current or former) partner or mothering alone, mothers must find ways to provide for and protect their children, and to enact belonging for themselves and their children within different spaces and places. This involves carefully navigating everyday interactions within different kinds of relationships. I conceptualise this as *strategic mothering*. In this chapter, I examine how mothers do this in the context of the UK’s Hostile Environment by considering the following: becoming a mother; differences between parenting with a partner and mothering alone; how mothers make efforts to provide for their children; how mothers protect their children and cultivate a strong sense of identity for them; and parenting children with additional needs. I also reflect on the mother–child relationship as two-way, reciprocal care practices.

Becoming a mother in the Hostile Environment

Daniela had moved to the UK from Latin America. When we met, her visa had expired several years previously, and she had not been able to renew it. She was surviving by working ‘under the radar’ as a cleaner in commercial premises. Daniela told me that she had been in a relationship, but her partner had left her soon after she unexpectedly became pregnant. She realised she could no longer count on his support; this meant that her job was her only source of income. After she gave birth, she had to pause work to sort out childcare for her newborn. But she soon heard on the grapevine that her employer had replaced her, and she was no longer needed. With no income, Daniela quickly had to find work elsewhere. Through friends, she found another cleaning job, this time working night shifts. A neighbour who rented a room upstairs in the shared house where she lived agreed to look after her baby. ‘I had to pay her what I was earning,’ Daniela told me. ‘No one gives anything for free.’ She felt ‘stuck’, with no help available from kin, since she had no relatives in the UK, or from friends, since most lived far from her or were busy with their own lives. For Daniela, as for many other mothers, positive feelings around her pregnancy were overshadowed by the multiplying layers of precarity, her worries about the future and the need to secure leave to remain – for herself and for her child. Mothering alone in this context was lonely, a space of non-belonging.

On the other hand, having a baby could symbolise ‘putting down roots’. In the context of the Hostile Environment, becoming a mother was sometimes experienced as enacting belonging (Erel et al. 2018). The mother–child relationship was often experienced as co-constitutive, creating a sense of self and relational belonging through the development of basic trust (Erikson 1950, Markova et al. 2007). New motherhood also opened up access to new resources, spaces and relationships. It often facilitated connections with frontline workers and other mothers, paving the way for the development of friendships over time (Ryan 2007, Small 2009, Cronin 2015).

Moreover, giving birth to a child in the UK – a (potentially) British child – generated belonging claims. These sometimes derived from the child’s father’s citizenship and/or the child being born and growing up in the UK. Through the legal right to family life,¹ becoming a mother could engender hope as a potential pathway to leave to remain. This was, however, an increasingly long, gruelling, costly and uncertain process, as discussed in Chapter 1.

Becoming a mother in the context of insecure status, financial hardship and hostile immigration policies increased the significance of different types of interpersonal relationships as sources of support. However, it could also increase vulnerability within these relationships. Within couples, adult kin relationships and faith-based networks, insecure status and financial difficulties intersected with gendered, generational and/or racialised power dynamics (Menjívar and Salcido 2002, Dudley 2017). New motherhood intersected with existing dynamics and could create or exacerbate tensions, generating new vulnerabilities. Mothers had to navigate these tensions in their everyday interactions.

Kianga had moved to London from West Africa a decade before we met: her plan was to study to become a nurse. Her parents were supporting her financially from their home country, and her uncle's family in London had agreed to accommodate her. She soon realised, however, that her uncle's family expected her to contribute to the household through hours of unpaid work and childcare, as well as by finding paid work outside the home. Kianga struggled to meet their expectations on top of her studies. She initially found solace in a new couple relationship with a man from another West African country. When the increasing pressure from her uncle and his wife became unbearable, Kianga moved in with her partner, who lived with his mother and sister. But when she became pregnant, her family disowned her. Deeply disappointed that she would not complete her studies, and rejecting her partner (partly on religious grounds, in Kianga's view²), her parents stopped providing financial support. As a result, without sufficient funds in her bank account to renew her 'leave to remain', her student visa expired.

Kianga's in-laws were not happy about the pregnancy either. Unable to support her financially, they told her to leave. Her partner then ended the relationship and abandoned her. With nowhere else to go, Kianga turned to friends and church members for help. At first they were supportive, giving her somewhere to stay and sharing practical support. But as time went on, relationships with those providing shelter began to deteriorate. Kianga had to navigate emerging power dynamics and tensions within what became 'host/guest' relationships (discussed further in Chapter 4). Managing such relationships to protect access to shelter and essential material resources for one's children, as Kianga did, is a form of strategic mothering.

Parenting with a partner or mothering alone

Hostile immigration policies, insecure immigration status and financial hardship shaped couple relationships and (co-)parenting practices in multiple ways. A supportive, stable couple relationship could unite parents in their struggle to secure 'leave to remain' and associated rights. This was the case for Assia, from North Africa. Although her husband, Ali, had British citizenship, Assia had repeatedly been confronted by the 'culture of disbelief' at the Home Office (Yeo 2020): their marriage was rejected as not genuine, and later, when her visa expired and she was forced to 'report' to the Home Office, she found officials did not believe she was pregnant either. Assia had to wait years before she was eventually granted limited leave to remain with NRPF. The only way forward was the prolonged and costly ten-year route to settlement. The lack of state support, the vast sums Assia and Ali had spent on Home Office applications and the resulting financial hardship built up layers of stress. Yet, within their couple relationship, this had created a shared determination to strive to provide for their family. Assia and Ali, both in full-time employment, juggled their respective work roles and parenting responsibilities to try to keep up with the rent and bills and meet their children's needs. Whenever we met, Assia emphasised how supportive Ali was, and how they worked as a team and helped each other to access the resources they needed as a family.

Mothers who were in 'living apart together' couple relationships (Levin 2004, Duncan et al. 2014), or who had separated from their partner, received varying levels of support. This shaped their approaches to shared parenting. For some mothers, shared parenting practices were (at times) experienced as satisfactory and were valued. For example, some fathers paid the rent, bought food or clothing, shared in parenting-related decision-making, took their children out, played with them, supported them with schoolwork or did the school run. This was more common among fathers who were doing paid work and/or were entitled to Child Benefit. In other cases, mothers were frustrated by fathers' inadequate or inconsistent contribution to parenting and provision of support. Mothers in this position carried a greater burden of responsibility. Some were compelled to negotiate with their ex-partner, which meant navigating tensions. Reyna, originally from Southeast Asia and (when we first met) with no leave to remain, had separated from her son Jay's father, Adem, after a relatively short relationship, having become concerned that he was not proving to be a reliable partner and was not prioritising the family's needs. She had stayed in contact with

him, however, to facilitate contact between him and their baby son, and to ensure he provided financial support. Yet, at times this support was not forthcoming, and Reyna had to negotiate with him in various ways. She felt vexed by his unpredictability, and suspected he was spending his money in betting shops:

That's why I don't get any money in [my] account. When I know that he [had applied for Child Benefit], I feel confused, because he doesn't give it to me ... But when I know everything, I asked him, I said you need to give me Jay's income, that's for Jay, because I have to give him healthy food ... What's going on, this man? When I [moved] here, I ran out of the milk at the time. So I called social services: 'Jay's dad doesn't give me income of Jay.' ... And I can't work ... I can't rely on him because he can't manage Jay at all. Then social services call him. And then he give it to me for every month.

Reyna sought to negotiate directly with her son's father to get the financial support she needed to provide for her baby, but when this did not work, she turned to social care practitioners to back up her claim. When she was later granted leave to remain, Reyna was keen to find paid work, but felt she could not rely on Jay's father to provide childcare because of his unreliability, so she had to turn to other people. Despite the many challenges she faced, Reyna felt she still had to assume the role of the fully responsible parent.

For mothers with insecure immigration status, one of the most significant contributions of children's fathers was their acknowledgement of paternity. Mothers wanted fathers to declare their paternity at the register office following the child's birth, so that their name would be on the child's birth certificate. As well as the symbolic significance for both mother and child, this action by fathers with British citizenship represented a pathway to British citizenship for the child. Moreover, mothers felt it would strengthen their own claims to leave to remain, particularly if the child's father actively supported the mother's application. Not all fathers were willing to take such actions, however. Some fathers did not have secure immigration status themselves and some did not want to engage in the process.

Fathers with secure status were potentially in a position to help their partner to renew their leave to remain or to regularise their status; however, there were often multiple barriers along the way. As discussed in [Chapter 1](#), these were likely to include unaffordable application fees, increasingly restrictive and complex immigration legislation, difficulty

accessing reliable legal support and exorbitant legal fees. These obstacles reduced the chances of a successful outcome, which in turn could lead to homelessness and destitution. The process put immense pressure on couple relationships. It sometimes contributed to relationship breakdown, separation and the father's withdrawal from family life, leading to mothers having to parent alone. In some cases, it appeared to have exacerbated unequal power dynamics within the couple relationship and contributed to controlling and violent behaviour by the father. This is discussed further in [Chapter 3](#).

Chinelo, for example, felt that her insecure immigration status had contributed to the breakdown of her relationship with her daughter's father. She had left her West African country over a decade previously for the UK, arriving via a short-term visa. Having struggled to get by for several years, taking up precarious paid work where she could, Chinelo met her partner. He was from her country but had been granted British citizenship. Over time, they moved in together, married and had a child. Initially he agreed to help Chinelo apply for 'leave to remain' on the grounds of being the mother of a British child. It was a highly complex and expensive process, and caused stress for both partners. Her application was refused. They applied again, only to be 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.

Chinelo felt that the excessive demands of the regularisation process were a key factor in her husband's decision to leave her and her daughter, and to cease contact with them. The end of the relationship had dramatic consequences. Chinelo and her daughter became homeless, and, still with no leave to remain, Chinelo was now parenting alone. It also meant that her daughter, without a British passport, would struggle to prove her British citizenship. She also had no contact with her father.

Mothers whose partners had left them were forced to navigate single-handedly the intersecting challenges of parenting, poverty and deportability. Kianga emphasised the emotional burden, and the unfairness, of carrying this responsibility alone:

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.

Kianga felt that whether or not a mother was in a couple relationship had a significant impact on parenting practices and personal wellbeing, especially for mothers experiencing legal and financial precarity. 'When you have a partner,' she pointed out, 'he can share things with you, like taking the children to school, picking up, going to the market. You can also discuss things together.' Parenting alone, on the other hand, was draining. Kianga believed you could tell from a mother's face whether she had a (supportive) partner. She reflected on the mothers she encountered at the weekly family drop-in in the neighbourhood, which was frequented mainly by mothers and children with insecure status. She explained to me:

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.

Calling my attention to how mothers' anxiety and stress were embodied in visible ways, Kianga highlighted how the challenges of coping with insecure immigration status intersected with mothering alone. And while Kianga and other mothers tended not to discuss poverty directly, it was understood to be an intrinsic aspect of their precarious status and the associated condition of NRPF. Places like the drop-in were safe spaces – or social infrastructure – where mothers could find a degree of recognition and emotional support. This is discussed further in [Chapter 4](#).

Existing gendered socio-economic inequalities intersected with the gendered impact of Hostile Environment policies, insecure status and NRPF (Yoval-Davis 2015, Phillimore et al. 2022, Freedman et al. 2022). Fathers could be and often were flexible and mobile. Regardless of their immigration status, they could more easily leave their children and partner, whether on a temporary, regular or permanent basis. Social

expectations of motherhood meant that mothers were much less likely to do so (Jackson 1994, Beyer and Robertson 2019, Savage 2022). Equally, while fathers without leave to remain could usually find ‘cash-in-hand’ work, this was much more difficult for mothers with a similarly precarious status, especially mothers who were parenting alone. Moreover, for many mothers the stakes were too high to risk jeopardising the precarious road to regularisation as a mother. Chinelo reflected, ‘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.’ She felt that her status confined her to an endless present as a mother without rights, not knowing if or when her circumstances would change. Mothering alone with insecure status exacerbated precarity, isolation and structural ‘stuckness’ (Suerbaum and Lijnders 2023).

Flora had built a life with her partner in the UK, having moved from West Africa almost a decade previously; they had had three children, but Flora’s visa had expired and she had been unable to renew it. Her partner had been supporting the family financially. But one day he left, with no explanation or further contact. Flora later found out through a mutual acquaintance that, having lost his leave to remain, he felt ashamed that he was no longer able to provide materially for the family. She felt deeply disappointed at his abrupt departure, yet she sought to understand his reasons for doing so. She was forced to find ways of mothering alone, while holding on to the hope that he would return one day:

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.

As Flora's account suggests, fathers' precarious immigration statuses, unemployment and poverty made it very difficult to meet socially defined obligations to provide for the family (Stack 1974). Flora believed this had produced shame and stigma for her partner, leading to his leaving the family and cutting off contact. Her sense of disappointment was attenuated to a degree by recognising his previous good fathering practices. But at the same time, she felt affronted by the abruptness of his departure, underlining how this had affected her and their children.

Relationship breakdown, or the father leaving the family, often led to the reduction or ending of financial, material and emotional support to mothers and children. In turn, this could weaken co-parenting practices, increasing demands on mothers left to parent alone. Finding ways of coping was a key aspect of 'strategic mothering'. Some mothers had to remind their former partner to send money to support their child(ren), or to buy items they needed, such as school uniforms. Many mothers had to cope not only with destitution and homelessness, but with the practical, material and emotional demands of everyday parenting alone. Chinelo 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.

Like Kianga, quoted earlier in this section, Chinelo missed sharing the responsibilities of parenting with a partner. In other contexts, mothers in crisis situations may turn to members of the wider family for practical, material and financial support and shelter (Stack 1974); this was far more difficult, or impossible, for mothers with precarious status separated from kin by international borders.

Providing

Providing, or 'provisioning', is a central role of motherhood (Collins 2007, Clarke 2013). Mothers experiencing legal and financial precarity in the context of hostile immigration policies, especially those who were mothering alone, often faced significant challenges in providing shelter, food, clothing and cultural resources for their children.

For example, as discussed in [Chapter 1](#), legislation introduced in 2014 and 2016 created huge barriers to the housing market for families unable to prove they have the ‘right to rent’. Ndidi, presented in the Interlude before this chapter, had moved to the UK from West Africa more than a decade previously, and had married; she and her husband had children, but the couple’s visas expired and they were trying to renew them. She recalled the difficulties they had faced in trying to find a flat to rent for their family, while waiting for a decision from the Home Office. ‘No one wants to take you; no one wants to risk it, anyway,’ Ndidi told me. ‘It was so difficult. You go to the agency and they need to see your passport – I do not have any passport to show!’ Moreover, families were at risk of being exploited by unscrupulous landlords, as Kianga described:

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.

Kianga felt that some landlords took advantage of precariously positioned families. Rented accommodation was often in poor condition, but families were reluctant to complain, conscious they risked being evicted. With market rents high and rapidly rising, especially in the context of the cost-of-living crisis, many families struggled to afford even a single room in an HMO. Kianga was aware that families with insecure immigration status were severely disadvantaged in the housing market. She connected legislative measures with the feeling that the government was trying to persuade families like hers to ‘leave the country’.

Many mothers experienced episodes of destitution when they could not afford to rent any kind of accommodation, and had to seek shelter from kin in the UK (if there were any), or from friends, faith group members or acquaintances, as Kianga described in the section entitled ‘Becoming a mother in the Hostile Environment’. Yet people in mothers’ support networks tended to live in modest circumstances themselves, with limited resources and no spare rooms. This meant that ‘sofa-surfing’ significantly increased pressure on hosts’ resources and space. Arrangements were contingent on resources available and sometimes tenuous relationships,

and tended to last only a few weeks or months. This is discussed further in [Chapter 4](#). When someone offered a room, it sometimes meant moving to another part of the city, or to another town altogether, at a distance from support networks and children's nurseries or schools.

Patricia and her two sons were staying with her parents and sister during most of my fieldwork; they slept in the living room of the two-bedroomed flat. Patricia had to navigate similar kinds of tensions to those experienced by Kianga. The arrangements were difficult for all members of the family, reducing private space and disrupting routines. This exacerbated tensions in their everyday interactions. For mothers like Patricia, staying in someone else's home created a sense of obligation – and yet it was often difficult to work out how to reciprocate, since resources were limited ([Spencer and Pahl 2006](#)). Different immigration statuses within a household, sometimes within a family, produced differential access to resources, creating unequal power dynamics. This is discussed further in [Chapter 5](#).

Navigating personal relationships to obtain and sustain access to accommodation, food and other essential resources required significant, sustained emotion work for mothers ([Hochschild 1979](#)). Part of this involved focusing on their children's needs to play and express themselves freely. Children's and mothers' wellbeing was often precarious in the context of strange surroundings, lack of space and privacy, instability and unfamiliar routines. Mothers had to make great efforts to contain their children's energy, so as to avoid upsetting their hosts. Kianga recalled how this had created constant worry for her – in relation to concern for her children's wellbeing, concern for their hosts and the effects of this ongoing emotion work on her own wellbeing. 'The children, because they don't have no space to move around, they will be stressing you,' she observed.

In addition to providing shelter, mothers with insecure immigration status faced barriers in providing food, clothes and toys for their children. Mothers doing paid work tended to be in low-paid, precarious roles. This was particularly striking as food, energy and housing costs began to rise and wages stagnated in the context of the post-pandemic cost-of-living crisis. Mothers who took part in discussion groups and who had moved to the UK more recently – for example, on a skilled worker visa or a spouse visa – described themselves as 'living on the edge', being 'in survival mode' and facing endless obstacles.

Mothers without leave to remain who were experiencing homelessness and destitution and were parenting alone were highly reliant on informal support networks. However, when such support had been

exhausted and there was nowhere left to turn, mothers were forced to seek help from social services, via ‘Section 17’.³ For some, this provided a route to shelter (typically a single room in an HMO) and subsistence support. But the process was often experienced as hostile and gruelling (Dennler 2018). Ndidi recalled her 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.”’

Like other mothers I met, Ndidi highlighted the hostile attitudes she experienced from social services practitioners in these meetings. As Dennler (2018: 84) has suggested, such a stance ‘delegitimizes people – their existence, their presence, and their needs – and denies their rights’. With limited resources at their disposal, social services teams appeared to act as gatekeepers, restricting access to support. Mothers – sometimes with the support of a voluntary sector advocate – had to navigate these encounters with persistence and determination to claim the right to be assessed for support under Section 17. Ndidi and other mothers were told that submission of an application for ‘leave to remain’ to the Home Office was necessary to be assessed for Section 17 support. Yet this would cost a huge amount, forcing mothers who were destitute to borrow money from friends and acquaintances.

Eventually, the local authority agreed to provide accommodation for Ndidi and her children in a room in an HMO. But, one day, the social worker turned up to tell them they would have to leave because the Home Office had refused her ‘leave to remain’ application. Ndidi experienced the eviction as rapid and harsh, causing her family distress. Homeless once again, she was advised to go to the council department responsible for homelessness. She was given a room in a hostel, but only for one night at a time, which meant returning to the council every morning. Providing for her children during this time was exceptionally challenging. Living in a hostel felt unsafe, and there was no access to a kitchen. Ndidi had to resort to taking her children to McDonald’s, or asking friends if she could use their kitchen to make noodles. She often went without meals herself. The family’s routines were disrupted: not being able to give her children breakfast or pay for school uniform meant that for a while Ndidi could not get them to school. This caused the family immense stress.

Kianga, after many years of sofa-surfing with her two children, and then being housed in a single room in an HMO, was eventually granted limited leave to remain. Her family was moved to a flat. This had a very positive impact on the family. She reflected on how much easier it now was to provide for her children:

I feel relief, I feel happiness, I feel joy. My children are happy. They can move from one room to the other. 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 ... There are a lot of changes. You have courage. You have your confidence back.

Being granted leave to remain, albeit for a limited period at this stage, led to improved accommodation and meant having enough to eat, all of which dramatically increased the family's wellbeing and sense of belonging.

Providing for one's children involved not only meeting their physical needs, but also enabling them to 'fit in' with their peers (Ridge 2002, Gillies 2007, Phoenix 2019). One aspect of this was buying children certain kinds of clothing and material possessions (Vincent 2010). This meant navigating significant financial challenges. Some mothers made use of a local clothes bank; others exchanged clothes with friends who had similarly aged children. Ndidi told me that as her children reached the end of primary school, they were becoming increasingly aware that they did not have access to the sports brands and expensive items displayed by their friends (see Ndidi's narrative in the Interlude preceding this chapter). She felt uncomfortable that their second-hand clothes made them feel different; she wanted them to be able to express themselves alongside their peers, and she wanted to protect them from social exclusion and bullying (Ridge 2002, Croghan et al. 2006). Providing such items was also experienced as a way of showing love and care as a mother (Taylor 2004). As Kianga explained: 'It make them to feel they are important, they have life in a way.'

Protecting children from 'knowing too much'

Another key aspect of strategic mothering was protecting children from 'knowing too much', to use Claudia's words, about their insecure immigration status. Mothers with precarious status had to navigate underlying tensions between the need for openness and the need for privacy without burdening their children. Claudia had moved to the UK from West Africa more than a decade previously on a spouse visa. Her marriage had broken down, leading to her losing her leave to remain. She had two primary-school-aged girls and was mothering alone. She wanted to protect her children from knowledge about the family's precarious position:

Claudia: 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?

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

Claudia was determined to protect her children from 'knowing too much' about how their status differed from that of other families, or how it reduced their rights and their access to resources and a home. Earlier negative experiences (when living outside London) had shown Claudia how quickly information about immigration status could spread within a community. Consequently, she had decided not to share this with anyone, to avoid the risk of having other parents 'discuss about you' at home in front of their children – who in turn might make comments or direct questions at her daughters. Protecting children in this way required ongoing work. It meant that mothers like Claudia had to bear the emotional burden – and deal with the practical and material challenges – alone, with little support from people in their informal networks. The decision to avoid sharing personal information with friends to protect one's family is discussed further in [Chapter 4](#).

Actively seeking to protect children from 'knowing too much' required not only careful withholding of information but also particular ways of talking. Flora explained how she managed her children's inevitable questions as they compared their material and cultural resources with those of their peers. A key strategy was to offer vague yet reassuring answers. This involved avoiding sharing details about their status or making commitments, but at the same time adopting a hopeful position for a liveable future. Whenever her daughter asked if they could go on holiday abroad, Flora would take this stance:

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. 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.

Flora was often unable to give her daughter the kind of answers she sought. She had to navigate the tension between the need to offer

reassurance and the risk of overburdening her daughter with too much information about the precarity and immobility inherent to the family's circumstances. In this scenario, Flora explained that their family lacked the necessary documentation to travel abroad, without going into detail about their undocumented status. 'Soon' was a device for navigating such conversations, suggesting a liveable future in which her daughter would have equal rights to her peers, and equal opportunities to mobilise them. In this way, Flora helped her daughter to feel she belonged.

Despite mothers' efforts to protect their children from 'knowing too much', there were sometimes signs of children's insights into their family's precarity and its impact on them. Usually when I visited or met up with mothers, their school-aged children were at school, but I met Kianga's primary-school-aged son, Josh, several times. Once, on a visit towards the end of the fieldwork, he was in the room with Kianga and me as we talked. At this point, having recently been granted limited leave to remain, the family had moved out of their room in an HMO to a self-contained flat. Kianga was comparing their circumstances before and since the regularisation of their status; she reflected on the extreme difficulty she had faced in providing for her family while trying to find the money to pay a lawyer to support their application to the Home Office. Her son Josh appeared to be playing a computer game while we were talking, but, as I observed in a fieldnote after my visit, 'from time to time [Josh] 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'. When Kianga recalled how she had had to ration food when they had no leave to remain, such that they did not always eat three meals a day, Josh pointed out to me that they could now eat 'morning, afternoon and night'. When Kianga described how people seemed to show her more warmth now that they knew she was self-sufficient, Josh finished her sentence for her, showing an astute awareness of the impact of the immigration status on their relationships with other people and their wellbeing.

Cultivating a strong sense of identity

Mothers marginalised by their immigration status engaged in multiple strategies to create a strong sense of identity for their children (Reynolds et al. 2018). These included participating in cultural activities, actively engaging in faith groups (discussed in Chapter 6) and encouraging high career aspirations. Tamara, introduced in the Introduction chapter, while struggling to survive on Section 17 subsistence funding, was

highly attentive to the question of how her son was able to ‘fit in’ at school. On the back of the door to their single room in an HMO, she had sellotaped a timetable of daily activities that she had put together. She was determined to find ways for her son, Ethan, as a preschooler, to participate in a range of cultural, physical and social activities, but much of what was available locally was unaffordable for her. Tamara wanted him to be actively engaged, and ‘not just home 24/7’. She felt frustrated that many activities were financially out of reach: ‘It really burns my heart.’ She wanted not only to support Ethan’s personal development but to demonstrate his right to participate in groups with his (better-off) peers – his right to belong. Once he started going to nursery, and later school, Tamara enrolled him in all the free extracurricular clubs. She also looked for children’s library books which affirmed his cultural identity, to challenge pervasive racial stereotypes and cultivate a strong sense of identity and belonging (Reynolds 2003).

Flora signed her older daughter up for a free after-school club, but, like Tamara, felt frustrated that many other activities cost money, which she could not afford. She was keen to provide her children with the opportunities she had been fortunate enough to access as a child, conscious of how these could support her children’s education and future careers:

Flora: 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...

Flora: 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!

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

The need to provide children with ‘extra help’ was a priority for many mothers, but remained largely out of reach because of the financial precarity caused by their insecure immigration status.

Achieving a more secure status opened doors to opportunities for children to participate in activities and for mothers to cultivate their cultural capital. When Ndidu was granted limited leave to remain as well as recourse to public funds, she prioritised paying for maths tuition, swimming lessons and creative activities for her children. She felt that,

in doing so, her children would no longer be excluded from their friends' conversations, and would feel 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.

Strategic mothering in this sense involved enabling belonging by seeking 'economic and social inclusion' (Dyck 2018: 99) for their children. It involved proactively creating the circumstances to enable the full development of children's 'intellectual, physical and creative skills' (Vincent 2010: 113, Lareau 2002), supporting children to participate with their peers through extracurricular activities, and helping them to engage in their community as active citizens. Many mothers did this through their family's involvement in the church; this is discussed in Chapter 6.

Children as a source of care and support

The mother-child relationship often played a crucial role as a source of care, support and wellbeing for mothers too. Care flowed in both directions: children could be valued caregivers as well as 'receivers' of care and support. Claudia shared several examples of how her young daughters responded with sensitivity when she experienced moments of difficulty and distress, offering her much-valued practical and emotional support:

Claudia: 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...

Claudia: It has to come out – you can't hold it any longer.

Rachel: They sound like amazing girls!

Claudia: Yeah. I can't do without them.

Experiences of everyday bordering practices, including sometimes anxiety-inducing encounters with frontline professionals, meant that the mother–child relationship was particularly important for Claudia as a source of emotional support, solace and belonging, as for many other mothers. Mutual caring practices included being attentive to each other's needs, reading bodily cues, recognising emotions and responding sensitively through micro-acts of care (Tronto 1998, Benchekroun 2021). For many precariously positioned mothers, difficulties in confiding in 'conventional' friends about personal information relating to their immigration status (discussed in Chapter 4), as well as (for some) mothering alone, increased the centrality of the mother–child relationship.

The mother–child relationship also provided affirmation and hope for the future. Nurturing and cultivating one's children as citizens were often rewarding processes, despite the immense challenges resulting from legal and financial precarity, racial minoritisation and everyday experiences of exclusion. As Flora articulated, her children were her reason for her continued struggles, and they made her happy:

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.

Imagining a liveable future with and for one's children was a central aspect of strategic mothering, and produced moments of pleasure. Mothers encouraged their children to have high aspirations for their futures and sought to help them work towards their goals. Chinelo enjoyed these kinds of conversations with her two young children:

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.

Engaging her children in this kind of motivational talk was a form of resisting the family's experiences of everyday bordering and contesting their precarity by being hopeful for the future. Co-constructing a shared vision of her children's futures, as well as her own, as 'liveable lives' (Butler 2009) helped to alleviate Chinelo's worries, and allowed her to enact a sense of belonging and citizenship with her children. 'It's just to think positive, that's how I get myself through – just think tomorrow is a better day,' Chinelo explained. 'Just keep going. The children are there, they will become what I will wish myself to be. Don't do that. Keep thinking, thinking.' Trying to focus on what was possible – what her children might be able to achieve that she felt she could not achieve for herself – helped Chinelo to fight her feelings of despair and cope with the immense challenges she faced each day.

Glimpses of her young daughters' ambitions and excitement for the future made Chinelo happy, even though she had to engage in continual emotion work to protect them from 'knowing too much' about the family's precarious status, as discussed in the section entitled 'Protecting children from "knowing too much"':

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.' [She asked me]: '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.'

Chinelo found comfort in her children's talk about the future. She sought to resist her multilayered exclusion by offering her young daughters an alternative narrative and hope for a liveable future, presenting herself as a capable and powerful role model. This form of strategic mothering required significant emotion work from Chinelo: she had to conceal her own anxieties and try to balance a need for openness, reassurance and optimism with the family's material and legal status realities.

Framing daily forms of oppression through the lens of struggling for belonging for their children helped some mothers to find the motivation to persevere in the context of hostile immigration policies and legal and financial precarity. It also allowed them to experience the mother-child relationship as a site of two-way care and support, and to enjoy moments of happiness. This alleviated mothers' stress and increased their wellbeing.

Caring for a child with additional needs

Mothering a child with a physical or learning disability, long-term health condition or serious illness required additional work and particular strategies. Approximately half of the mothers who took part in my research had a child with a serious health need or a disability. To meet their children's additional needs, they engaged regularly with their child's nursery or school and attended regular, sometimes frequent hospital or health centre appointments. In some cases, mothers struggled to obtain the support their child needed, as well as support for themselves. One mother was told that she was ineligible for respite care because she had no recourse to public funds.

Experiences of precarious accommodation and financial hardship associated with insecure immigration status had even more severe implications for families with a child with a health need or disability. For example, being forced to move away from the local area sometimes made it more difficult to access necessary healthcare services, and being placed in a hostel or shared housing could feel unsafe. Meeting their child's everyday needs as well as advocating for them in sometimes hostile situations placed heavy emotional demands on mothers. Conversely, mothers shared many examples of healthcare professionals being very supportive and advocating for the children in their care, as well as examples of other kinds of frontline professionals (such as nursery, school and children's centre staff) providing exceptional care and support.

As this chapter has shown, faced with multilayered and intersecting forms of oppression, mothers engage in an array of strategies to provide for, protect and nurture their children, enacting belonging in particular places and spaces both as mothers and on behalf of their children. The next chapter examines the role of couple relationships as an important (potential) source of support and resources, especially in the context of co-parenting, but also as a potential site of tensions, conflict, exploitation or control which mothers must navigate with care.

Notes

- 1 Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights and the Human Rights Act 1998.
- 2 Kianga's family were Christians, and her partner was a Muslim; in Kianga's country of origin there were longstanding tensions between Christian and Muslim communities.
- 3 This term was widely used as shorthand for Section 17 of the 1989 Children Act, explained in Chapter 1.

Interlude

Catia: 'Just stay here, stay quiet, because no one will help you'

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 [would have] 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.

3

Coupledness

Couple relationships play a crucial role in shaping access to support and developing a sense of belonging, particularly for mothers subjected to hostile immigration policies, precarious immigration statuses and financial hardship. A couple relationship may be a factor in the decision to move to a new country, or it may be formed once there. It is important to understand how couple relationships – whether formed pre- or post-migration – can facilitate access to (and sharing of) material, financial, practical and informational resources and shelter. Through the development of trust and intimacy (Giddens 1992) as well as through everyday actions (Jamieson 1999), couple relationships can also be a vital source of emotional support. A partner can be an important source of social connections, helping to develop early support networks (Ryan and Mulholland 2014, Charsley et al. 2016). Couple relationships can provide stability and belonging in other ways: marriage or civil partnership with a person with British citizenship, or with indefinite leave to remain, can potentially provide a route to residency rights, as can becoming the parent of a British child, as noted in Chapter 1, section entitled ‘Ten-year route to settlement’ and Chapter 2, section entitled ‘Becoming a mother in the Hostile Environment’ (Kofman 2004, Right to Remain 2023). As discussed in the previous chapter, a supportive partner may provide support and resources as a co-parent. Ultimately, a (supportive) couple relationship can play an important part in creating a sense of belonging and self. These various practices involved in ‘doing coupledness’ – building on Morgan’s (2011b) concept of ‘doing family’ and Butler’s (2009) notion of performativity – can be understood as ‘intimate citizenship’ (Bonjour and de Hart 2021).

However, as illustrated by Catia’s narrative in the preceding Interlude, mixed-status couple relationships can be a site of unequal power, and differential rights and dependency (Gomberg-Muñoz 2017),

potentially leading to exploitation, abuse and violence. Precariously positioned women and mothers are at risk of being abused and/or abandoned by their partners. They are particularly vulnerable when alternative forms of support are scarce (Dudley 2017). This chapter first considers the role of the couple relationship as a ‘haven in a hostile environment’, and how this can change. It then looks at the work involved in ‘doing coupledom’ in a mixed-status relationship. It examines the role of self-disclosure within couple relationships in building trust, but also how it can create vulnerability. The final section explores how mothers navigate – and resist – coercive control by partners with secure immigration status who take advantage of unequal power within the couple relationship.

A haven in a hostile environment?

Couple relationships often felt like a ‘haven’ in a hostile environment for women who had migrated to the UK – particularly for those without (supportive) wider family members or friends living locally. This could be the case even if the partner did not have secure immigration status. Ayodele, for example, presented in the Introduction chapter, had joined her husband Victor on a spouse visa, but after several years of living, studying, working and starting a family in London, the couple found their renewal application was refused by the Home Office because they did not meet the new minimum income requirement. With two young children and now no ‘leave to remain’, Ayodele and Victor pooled their various resources – informational, social, practical – to try to find a way to regain leave to remain, and to co-parent together through these challenges. As a family, they attended church together and went to the park. Victor liked ‘doing the school run’. At home, he would care for the children upstairs in the family’s two rooms in the shared house, while Ayodele would cook downstairs in the communal kitchen. As a couple, they shared in decision-making and caring for their children. Facing this highly precarious situation together, Ayodele and Victor appeared to experience their relationship as a source of much-needed emotional and practical support.

A couple relationship sometimes appeared to be a haven for women with precarious status whose partner had British (or, at that time, EU) citizenship or indefinite leave to remain.¹ In such situations, the couple relationship seemed to offer secure access to much-needed material and financial resources, as well as the hope of regularising the woman’s

status. Yet the differing legal statuses of the two partners sometimes created (or exacerbated) differential power dynamics, which might also be gendered, racialised and ethnicised (Griffiths 2019). Some women found themselves increasingly dependent on their partner, and in some cases were subjected to coercive control and abuse – this is discussed further later in the chapter.

Catia, quoted in the Interlude preceding this chapter, arrived in the UK in the 1990s as a young teenager from central Africa, seeking asylum with her mother. She enrolled in a local secondary school, where she was subjected to racism and bullying by her peers; she also struggled because she initially did not speak English. She felt deeply isolated, and experienced anxiety and depression. When their asylum application was refused, Catia and her mother faced homelessness and deportation. Through relatives, Catia met Felipe, an EU citizen living in London who spoke her first language. Five years her senior, he took her under his wing. He would pick her up from school and show her around the city. They had ‘nothing in common’, Catia reflected, but at the time she felt he was the only person she could talk to. He would make her feel good, make her laugh, and she would forget about her problems at school and at home. He understood her immigration situation, which made her feel safe. Unlike her peers at school, he did not ask awkward questions or taunt her for being an ‘asylum seeker’. Felipe became a haven from the hostilities she faced at school and beyond. They became a couple – ‘not because I loved him, or anything’, Catia told me, matter-of-factly. ‘It was just because he was there, in the right place at the right time.’

Catia’s mother encouraged her to move in with Felipe and marry him, keen for her to regularise her status. They did marry, and Catia, still a teenager, became pregnant. Their marriage provided her with a route to leave to remain, material and financial resources and a shared domestic space. It also provided a sense of belonging – as a couple, as a mother and as part of wider society. However, as Catia described in the Interlude before this chapter, she remained dependent on Felipe for her right to reside in the UK, and he began to take advantage of this. The couple relationship shifted from being a haven of support to a site of control and abuse. This is discussed further below in the section entitled ‘Navigating and resisting coercive control’.

Tamara, originally from the Caribbean, had experienced similar hopes of finding safety, security and mutual understanding in a couple relationship. When her application to renew her leave to remain was refused, she felt increasingly vulnerable to deportation. The refusal meant that her status had become visible to the authorities, and, when living

outside London, she had to report regularly to the local police station. Friends and family members repeatedly advised her to try to regularise her status by forming a relationship with a British citizen, or someone with residency rights. Tamara had long been resisting this route, however. She had heard ‘horror stories’ of ‘women being with men just for papers, and how the men treat them’, making them ‘do demeaning stuff’ – she wanted to avoid this at all costs.

After years of sofa-surfing among friends and relatives, she returned to live in her stepsister’s household. But there she felt exploited, being expected to do all the household chores, and unsafe, because of the suspicious activities and sometimes violent behaviours of other members of the household. On top of this, she felt exploited at work. Desperate both to escape these living arrangements and to regularise her status, Tamara gradually reached the conclusion that a couple relationship was the only way forward. She began to ask friends for help. This led to an introduction to Marshall, who had migrated from West Africa many years previously and was an EU citizen. They started talking on the phone, and Tamara felt able to share her troubles with him:

He knew about my situation, he understood everything ... I was in a desperate situation. We started talking, he seemed okay. 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.

The relationship seemed to offer a means of escape for Tamara, as well as a chance to resolve her insecure immigration status. She felt grateful that Marshall appeared to offer a route to safety and to show deep understanding of her needs. He at first behaved in caring ways, encouraging her to talk about her problems. Tamara felt relieved at being able to voice her worries about the volatile family dynamics in her sister’s house, her precarious immigration situation and her frustrated hopes

and ambitions. The unfolding process of apparent mutual self-disclosure, including Marshall's supportive responses to her disclosures, had, from Tamara's perspective, created a trusting and intimate space (Giddens 1992, Greene et al. 2006). At this early stage, she felt that moving in with him had been the right decision, even though she recognised that it was very unusual for her to make such a big decision so quickly. As research has shown, insecure immigration status may accelerate the formation and development of couple relationships (Robertson 2020).

However, this 'haven' was not to endure. As Tamara had feared, the collision of her precarious immigration status and Marshall's secure status generated (or heightened) unequal power dynamics, which came to define the relationship. Marshall's caring ways evaporated, and his behaviours became controlling and abusive. This was particularly apparent when Tamara became pregnant, and escalated further once their son was born. This pattern of violence by men against their partners escalating during pregnancy is not unusual (Harris and Hardwick 2019).

Precariously positioned women in mixed-status couples may also be at risk of financial abuse, as mothers highlighted to me in discussion groups. One mother shared that it was her husband who received Child Benefit payments from the state, since she was subject to the condition of NRPF and was therefore not entitled to it. While this had not created problems in her own case, she observed that 'if you have a wicked husband, he will keep it. He is the powerful one.' Another mother agreed that in mixed-status couples some husbands with secure immigration status used their power against their insecurely positioned wives in harmful ways:

So many spouses become vulnerable – because when you come you know that you are not entitled to this, you are not entitled to that – [but] he is, so automatically, if he is not a good person, he has some superpowers over you – he can exploit you financially.

In mixed-status couples where the partner with secure status wanted to exploit his position, the intersecting inequalities at the heart of the couple relationship – in relation to gender, socio-economic status, immigration status and sometimes 'race' and ethnicity – increased the risks of harm to mothers (Erez and Globokar 2009, Dudley 2017).

The work of doing coupledness in a mixed-status couple

Being part of a mixed-status couple requires particular forms of emotion work (Hochschild 1979). Assia, from North Africa, met Ali during her second stay in the UK as a student, and knew she wanted to commit to a life with him. Ali was from a similar cultural background and was a caring person; he had a secure job and had become a British citizen. It seemed it would be straightforward for Assia to obtain indefinite leave to remain and ultimately British citizenship once they were married. Yet, as described in the previous chapter, the British state deemed their marriage – under Islamic law and later under UK civil law too – not to be genuine. When she and Ali attempted to renew her ‘limited leave to remain’, Assia explained to me, the Home Office ‘wouldn’t believe it was a love marriage – [they thought it was] just for papers’. Following the refusal of her application, Assia was required to ‘report’ every fortnight while the legal process unfolded. She was eventually granted ‘limited leave to remain’, which she had to renew every two and a half years as part of the ten-year settlement route. At the end of the ten years, she would be entitled to apply for indefinite leave to remain. Looking back on the costly and convoluted process so far, Assia emphasised to me her husband’s good qualities and the genuine nature of their marriage. She attributed to Ali the positive outcomes of their difficult journey:

Thank God for my husband – he’s powerful. 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 ... 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.

Assia represented her husband as a hard-working man, and their family as deserving of recognition, residency rights and associated rights by the state – alongside other families who had been granted such rights. Having experienced many years of marginalisation by the state, Assia saw her husband and herself as a team who would continue to resist, maintain their right to belong and enact citizenship through their friendships and in the workplace. It struck me that Assia’s interactions with me were a form of ‘displaying coupledness’ (in the sense of Finch’s [2007] ‘displaying family’) or performing ‘intimate citizenship’ (Bonjour and de Hart 2021), which in turn was a means of enacting belonging.

Women with precarious immigration status who were in a mixed-status couple had to navigate the tension between sustaining access to essential resources and rights, on the one hand, and, on the other, nurturing the couple relationship in its own right. The tension between affection and instrumentality, or between ‘romance’ and ‘rationality’ (Baxter and Scharp 2015), exists in most couple relationships to a degree. But it is particularly salient in mixed-status couples, where both partners recognise that the relationship may offer a pathway to regularising or protecting the immigration status of the partner without indefinite leave to remain. This may be accepted as an unavoidable legal obstacle which does not call into question the couple’s mutual feelings of affection or their motivations, as seemed to be the case for Assia and Ali. Even in such cases, emotion work is required to provide reassurance of deep affection and that the relationship is worth the investment of considerable financial resources and bureaucratic work. If doubts emerge in the partner with secure status, significant work may be needed by the one with insecure status to convince them to continue to support them in this journey. As Assia and Ali found, work may also be required to convince state actors, such as Home Office officials, of the ‘genuine’ nature of the couple relationship (Yeo 2020, Griffiths 2019, Kofman and Vacchelli 2023). In some cases, the relationship may be understood (implicitly or explicitly) by one or both partners to be primarily instrumental, as a means of seeking leave to remain for the partner with insecure status. This could create a more fundamental kind of power inequality within the couple and requires an altogether more intense kind of emotion work by the insecurely positioned partner. This is discussed further later in the chapter.

The work of doing coupledness in a mixed-status couple also involves ‘holding’ tensions and conflict in efforts to minimise or resolve them, to protect the relationship – even at the cost of speaking out and expressing one’s true feelings. Chinelo’s applications to regularise her status, supported by her husband Joseph, were refused by the Home Office (as discussed in the previous chapter) because, as she explained to me, ‘they didn’t believe the marriage’. She became pregnant and they had a daughter. But the prolonged, costly and unsuccessful process put pressure on their relationship. Joseph would drink and become verbally abusive. In response, Chinelo would do her best to stay serene: ‘Anything he does, I will just try to hold it, keep calm, so that I can continue with the relationship.’ She tried to believe his cover stories when he disappeared for long periods of time, wanting to sustain the idea that their marriage was based on trust (Duncombe and Marsden 1993, Jamieson 1999).

As indicated in the previous chapter, Reyna had to navigate tensions and sustain communication with Adem both during their somewhat rocky relationship and after it ended. His behaviour was erratic and hostile at times. When they were still together, Reyna developed strategies to protect herself and their son Jay, such as going to the park until Adem had cooled down. When he told her to move out of his flat, she accepted that the couple relationship was over; she found a friend who agreed to accommodate her and Jay. Although Reyna found Adem unpredictable and unreliable, she worked to maintain communication with him to protect the father–son relationship, and to ensure he continued to provide some form of financial support. By finding ‘cash-in-hand’ work, developing her wider support networks and seeking legal advice on how to regularise her status, Reyna avoided being too dependent on Adem. In this way, she managed to find a balance between autonomy and connection (Baxter and Scharp 2015).

In addition, being in a mixed-status couple, or in a couple where both partners had insecure status, created financial pressures on both partners. Couples affected by the NRPF condition faced restrictions on access to welfare benefits, social housing and help with childcare costs. Mothers who had no leave to remain were often financially dependent on their partner, creating additional pressure on him to provide for the family. This was particularly difficult to do if he also had no leave to remain. Partners with limited leave to remain and the right to work were generally able to find only low-paid, low-skilled work, despite often being highly qualified in their countries of origin. One mother who took part in a discussion group explained that she had lost her right to work, while her partner had limited leave to remain and NRPF, which meant that he had to ‘provide everything’ as the only breadwinner. ‘You can see the tension he is bringing to me and the tension that is going on the baby,’ the mother remarked. ‘It is just too much.’

Mothers faced additional barriers to finding work if they had young children. Mothers with limited leave to remain who were sharing the burden of doing paid work – and who were not entitled to mainstream welfare support – often struggled to combine the roles of doing paid work and mothering work. One mother revealed that she and her husband, both with limited leave to remain, had been doing paid work to support their family, but now that they had a young baby, she was unable to work; this created additional pressure on her husband. ‘At the end of the month, he’s worried, what can we do?’ she reflected. ‘We have family, we have to pay council tax, we have to pay for [the] house. He come back home [from work], he’s like sad.’ Another mother in a discussion group shared:

I have to work to avoid a lot of pressure on my partner. I'm working but on the other hand I feel like I'm constantly running and I feel like I'm not doing my job as a mother the way I would want to do it, because I have to give more focus to work as well. I feel like I'm not 100 per cent productive at work because I have a baby, and I'm also not 100 per cent productive at being a mum because I'm also working – a lot of pressure.

Not only did legal and financial precarity put immense pressure on the couple relationship, but mothers felt a wider pressure to be 'good' mothers as well as 'ideal' workers (Hays 1996, Christopher 2012). Although not articulated, these experiences were located within wider discourses of the 'ideal immigrant' (McLaren and Dyck 2004). Some mothers indicated that fathers experienced similar pressures at times, particularly when couples shared responsibilities for doing paid work and looking after their children.

Sometimes mothers felt that managing the demands of looking after children and doing paid work (often in low-paid roles) in order to survive as a family – without informal support networks or support from the welfare state – required so much energy that little was left for nurturing intimacy in the couple relationship:

The men also suffer emotionally, because they don't get to have their spouse again. Because if you have a spouse like me ... I want to be comfortable, I want to be able to take care of my children, to buy them the small things that they need ... so I will forgo other things in the house to look for the money. I will forgo the other things. The men I think they go through a lot of emotions, because they don't even recognise you again. Like, is this the woman ... ?

It affects your sex life. [Even] if nobody is saying it, it's true. Because you don't have the mind for sex. I stayed in the room for four months without even looking at [my partner]. He hasn't done anything, he's trying all his best but I was not satisfied. I hate it when I don't know my left from my right, I don't know whom to go to. He was always giving me everything, but I still wasn't satisfied. So sex, it was out. Every day it's like this. If you look at my face, I don't laugh. I'm so moody every day ... So up until now, I'm still chasing money. So sex is once in a blue moon. It can even lead to whatever that can lead to. But I won't go starving. No. I will choose money over it. It is what it is.

As these mothers noted, the pressures of surviving day to day and providing for one's children in the context of legal and financial precarity put immense pressure on couple relationships, to the point of potentially jeopardising the relationship.

The 'work' of doing coupledom was therefore wide-ranging, and the nature of it changed in response to changes in mothers' position in the life course, their immigration status and entitlements, and national policies. Mothers engaged in multiple and varying strategies to manage this work. I now turn to the complex question of navigating self-disclosure in the couple relationship.

Navigating the potential dangers of self-disclosure

Couple relationships are widely understood as being built on mutual self-disclosure, which fosters the development of trust, intimacy and a sense of closeness (Giddens 1992, Weber and Carter 1998, Greene et al. 2006). In this way, couple relationships can be a vital source of emotional support – although this may not always endure. Self-disclosure also carries risks. For women/mothers, decisions to disclose or conceal personal information – such as insecure immigration status – to or from one's partner (or prospective partner) must be carefully weighed up, with ongoing evaluation of the potential benefits and risks of disclosure, including the questions of if and when (Baxter and Montgomery 1996, Greene et al. 2006, Baxter and Scharp 2015). This can have potentially significant repercussions.

In a discussion group, mothers explained that one strategy was to avoid disclosing one's insecure status to a new partner, since being open about it from the outset might prevent a couple relationship from forming. One mother illustrated this point by drawing on a friend's case:

the man has documents but the woman doesn't have it – because of that he said no. [He said to her] I don't want to take any responsibility because when we have a child everything will hang on me. You can't claim benefits, and I'm not ready for that stress.

This example indicated the immense pressure exerted on couple relationships because of demands to provide placed on the father when the mother is subjected to legal and financial precarity. As in this case, it could be a reason for a relationship not getting off the ground, and hence for some women preferring to avoid disclosing their insecure status.

Linked to this, mothers suggested that disclosing your insecure immigration status to a prospective partner with secure status could make them cynical about your motives. It could make them worry that the relationship was based not on true affection but on instrumentality. As one discussion group participant put it, a person with secure status who finds out that their partner has no leave to remain may wonder ‘whether they were really interested in me, or whether they were just taking advantage’. Another mother in a discussion group pointed out:

When you meet somebody and immediately you tell them you don’t have your papers, and if the person is British, they will start treating you as if that’s what you want. The relationship sometimes won’t go anywhere. No matter what you say, [they will think] ‘oh, it’s what you want to get out of me’.

In assessing whether or when to disclose their insecure immigration status, women/mothers therefore had to take into account the securely positioned (prospective) partner’s fears of being exploited for their immigration status, since this could put an end to any nascent relationship.

Where a relationship did develop with a securely positioned man who was aware of his partner’s insecure status, the unequal statuses could potentially lead to his exploitation of her as the relationship developed. ‘He can use it against you,’ one mother explained. ‘He can take advantage of you because he knows that if you talk [seek help], he can report you to Immigration [department of the Home Office].’ She underlined the emotional turmoil of such experiences and the potential impact on women’s mental health.

In the context of accelerated processes of couple formation in situations of legal precarity (Robertson 2020), mutual self-disclosure practices seemed to speed up, which in turn increased the risk of exploitation and abuse by the securely positioned partner. On the one hand, mutual self-disclosure can serve as a protective measure, since both partners make themselves vulnerable and simultaneously acquire personal knowledge about the other; on the other hand, a partner who is willing to exploit the other may knowingly avoid sharing overly sensitive information about themselves, to give the impression of jointly building trust while protecting themselves from the risks they have induced their partner to take. As discussed earlier in the section entitled ‘A haven in a hostile environment?’, Tamara initially felt able to confide in her partner, Marshall, about the complexities of her immigration status, the constraints of her living conditions and the often tense and conflictual relations with

her extended family members. He showed her that he understood, and shared personal information with her, which seemed to deepen their emotional connection. Likewise, in the early stages of her relationship with Felipe, Catia felt safe because he was aware of her precarious status and understood the difficulties she was experiencing; she felt she could be herself with him. These practices of intimacy, care and (apparently) mutual self-disclosure helped to build trust and create a strong bond, making the couple relationship an important site of emotional support. Yet looking back, Tamara felt that Marshall's early disclosures had been 'calculated' and inauthentic, designed to make her dependent on him and gain control over her. In this way, couple relationships can become a site of exploitation, control and abuse. Women/mothers with insecure immigration status may not only find themselves dependent on their partner as a means of sustaining or obtaining their leave to remain, but also feel trapped in the relationship, with limited space for action (Menjívar and Salcido 2002, Raj and Silverman 2002, Anitha 2015, Dudley 2017).

Self-disclosure can make women vulnerable to exploitation in more fluid relationships too. When Chinelo and her daughter were evicted from their flat following abandonment by her husband, they faced street homelessness; at night, Chinelo would entrust her daughter to a friend, and would sleep on night buses or in churches hosting all-night vigils. It was at night that she encountered Christopher, who reached out to her and invited her to his house. Chinelo's extreme precarity led her to accept his invitation. Like Tamara, mentioned previously, she felt she had no other options. She began to visit him regularly, and they would talk for hours. On one occasion, however, things took a different turn, against her will, and Chinelo was shocked to discover, several months later, that she was pregnant. She had tried to avoid getting into a situation where a man could be 'using [her] problem', but, looking back, she described how her precarity at the time had made her even more vulnerable in this informal relationship:

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.

Although Chinelo did not believe that Christopher had intended to exploit her, she felt, looking back, that she had gone along with what he wanted from her because she was 'in problems'. Although it had seemed that trust had been built through self-disclosure, the relationship became exploitative, with significant consequences for Chinelo.

Because of the risks of self-disclosure, some women/mothers felt their only option was to hide their immigration status from a new partner who did have secure status. This approach created a deep secret at the heart of the relationship, however, which at some point would become known, creating feelings of betrayal and potentially jeopardising the relationship (Weber and Carter 1998). This discovery that immigration status had been concealed could undermine or destroy trust. In another discussion group, one participant, talking about the experience of someone they knew, shared the following example of insecure status having been hidden:

[Someone I know] met a young British man, they started going out. For nearly 12 months, he never knew that she had [no leave to remain] ... He just found out, the relationship broke down. He was serious. He said, 'I don't trust her anymore, because if she can keep a big secret...' So that's another side of it. She said, 'I love him, but I could not open myself up to tell him that this is where I am.' She said, 'I didn't want him to think that I'm with him because...' – but when he found out he said, 'if you can hide something big like that...'

Another discussion group participant shared that she knew women who had hidden their status from their partners 'because they liked them and they were afraid to lose them', but once their partners had found out, the situations had become 'a big mess'. Concealing one's status could cause or precipitate the end of a relationship.

Alternatively, the revelation of the secret of one's insecure status once a relationship was established could lead to exploitation or abuse within a relationship, just as initial disclosure could. Drawing on the experiences of people she knew, one mother in a discussion group explained:

The worst thing anyone could do when you come in [to the UK] is when you're single ... you haven't got your status right, you're in the country, you want a relationship ... you want to settle down. Maybe you're in love truly truly, purely in love, the two of you start going

on, understanding each other, then living in one room. Then the day you tell them about your status, they switch – they use that, they use the hell out of you. The lady say, ‘I’m breaking up, I don’t like the way I’m being treated.’ They’re holding you down, you can’t go ... There’s a lot going on ... We women, we go through a lot.

Delayed disclosure of precarious immigration status both raises questions about trust and reveals inequalities within the relationship. In such cases, couple relationships can become controlling and abusive, putting insecurely positioned women at risk of harm, not only within the relationship but at the point of trying to leave (Dudley 2017).

To avoid such dynamics, suggested one mother, drawing on her own experiences, a common strategy was to avoid getting into relationships with people with British citizenship:

Most times, people with no recourse [to public funds] try to date somebody with no recourse as well, so you can understand each other ... No recourse is ... a lot of issues. Trying to meet someone new. I try to be very careful. I try not to mingle with people that already have British [citizenship] ... because I don’t want to be treated like I’m a nobody, or treated like I’m after something. [Rachel: It feels safer to be with somebody who’s in a similar situation?] Who understands me. Who’s struggling as well. [Rachel: Because they’re not going to exploit you?] Exactly. Or make me do things I don’t want to do because they’re trying to help, or they’re promising that they’re going to help me. I’d just fall victim and that’s it ... I’d just tell them straight, I’d tell them straight – ‘I don’t have my papers’ ... It’s kind of tricky. And there’s so many dangerous people as well. Looking for ... They’re trying to target people that don’t have their papers ... They start making promises ... Once you tell people you don’t have your papers, that’s it, you’re already a victim. Because there’s so many unscrupulous characters. They will just say oh, don’t worry, come to my place. If they sexually harass you, who are you going to talk to?

This strategy did not offer any hope of regularising one’s immigration status. The aim was to reduce the risk of being exploited on the basis of unequal status. This mother believed the risk to be high, suggesting some men actively pursued relationships with women with insecure immigration status in order to exploit them. Consequently, for her (and, she believed, for other women) it made more sense to avoid men with

British citizenship as far as possible. In practice, this would rely on prospective partners being willing to disclose their insecure immigration status, or on women being able to read and interpret possible signs.

Linked to this, a significant problem for some women was not knowing whether or not their partner, or former partner, had secure status, since he might be withholding this information from them, but also because, in the words of one frontline volunteer, 'it's very complicated trying to understand it'. As discussed in [Chapter 1](#), individuals' leave to remain and associated rights could change whenever government policies or personal circumstances changed. These issues affected mothers significantly in terms of 'trying to work out the status or potential status for the child, whether the child is eligible for citizenship', as the volunteer put it.

As this section has shown, women/mothers with insecure immigration status face crucial questions of whether, and, if so, how, to navigate self-disclosure within couple relationships. As the examples above show, the stakes are high, including the risks of being exploited or abused. Women in such relationships, therefore, have to navigate and resist coercive control and abuse. This is the subject of the final section below.

Navigating and resisting coercive control

Miriam had been living in the UK for two decades, and had, through her work in her francophone African-led church, developed an in-depth understanding of the controlling dynamics within some mixed-status couple relationships in her co-ethnic community. Although her former partner was, she told me, a 'good guy', she explained to me through an imagined dialogue how some men exploited their wives' insecure status and dependency on the couple relationship to coerce and control them:

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.

Miriam highlighted how precarious status could intersect with gendered power dynamics. She indicated that some men used the spouse visa to control their wives, making them aware that their right to live in the UK was dependent on the couple relationship. Miriam also described how women sought out spaces for solidarity with other women in similarly vulnerable positions, such as English-language classes and all-women groups at church. She noted, however, that some male partners did not want their wives to access such spaces and tried to stop them taking part – ‘because you will learn too much, you will know the truth’, as Miriam put it, ironically adopting the perspective of a controlling husband. ‘You will find out things that then you was thinking that is allowed, then ah no, that’s the wrong way,’ she elaborated, referring to the men’s abusive behaviours. She added, ‘It’s like you will see light!’ Similarly, frontline practitioners who took part in a discussion group noted that some mothers who had moved to the UK did not seem to be allowed to make their own decisions about accessing adult learning classes and family support groups, having to seek permission from their husbands. Mothers in such situations seemed to lack autonomy and control over their own lives, finding themselves in ‘a strange place’, not speaking English and being dependent on their husbands.

For mothers experiencing legal and financial precarity who found themselves caught up in controlling and abusive relationships, it was exceptionally difficult to navigate this. For those who had arrived in the UK via a spouse visa, their right to remain was based on the couple relationship.² For others, hopes of regularising immigration status had been a factor in the formation of couple relationships, as in the cases of Tamara and Catia, presented above in the section entitled ‘A haven in a hostile environment?’ Although both had believed their partners were genuine in their feelings of affection and their willingness to support them, apparently caring behaviours had quickly turned to control and abuse, as both partners used their own more secure positions to exert power.

Felipe used not only Catia’s insecure status but also her young age and role as a mother to exploit her, reducing her ‘space for action’ (Kelly et al. 2014) still further, as she described in the Interlude preceding this chapter. She was not included on the tenancy agreement and was not named as the first parent when they registered their first child for school. With three young children, and not being eligible for government subsidies, she could not afford childcare, so could not sustain employment. She felt that her life had become ‘just home, and him’. Felipe would remind her that she was dependent on him for her

leave to remain and had no rights outside of the marriage. The abusive relationship severely affected her physical and mental health. Looking for a way to leave, she sought advice, anonymously, from the local authority where they were living, but was told (wrongly) that there was nothing they could do to help her – but that they would take her children into care if she was unable to support them. Catia could not afford to pay rent on the private market and was fearful that leaving Felipe would lead to her losing her leave to remain and associated rights (Anitha 2010, 2015, Dudley 2017). She felt trapped.

Felipe began to distance himself from the family, spending an increasing amount of time away from the family home. He ultimately ended the relationship. Catia's visa, tied to the marriage, could not be renewed when it expired. She and her children faced destitution, and she was worried that she could be deported. She had no choice but to find shelter and essential resources for her children and herself. They found their way to a church in a neighbouring area, where they were given a storage room in which to stay (discussed further in Chapter 6). Day-to-day life became exceptionally difficult.

When we met, many years after this period, Catia looked back on the years of her marriage with deep ambivalence. She was painfully aware of how Felipe had exploited her, yet she described this time as living in a 'bubble'. Despite the abuse, the difficulties she had experienced and the loneliness, she felt the marriage had provided a degree of protection from a hostile society. She had had access to a home, food, money and temporary leave to remain. Conversely, her situation after the marriage ended was devoid of many of the resources she needed to provide for their three children and herself. She struggled to support their children through sporadic financial contributions from Felipe, intermittent 'cash-in-hand' work and occasional help from her mother, who was herself precariously positioned. It was some years later that Catia was granted leave to remain. She continued to be deeply affected by the years of intense struggle.

Tamara recalled early signs of Marshall's controlling behaviours. He would monitor her movements and try to make her stay at home. He began to coerce her into sexual activity against her will. Sitting on the bed she now shared with her young son in their tiny room in the HMO, Tamara reflected: 'There were times when I didn't want to be intimate with Marshall, and he would make me feel guilty. 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...' Tamara became pregnant. But Marshall was unenthusiastic. 'He was like, "If you want to keep it, keep

it; if you don't want to keep it, just get rid of it," Tamara told me. She was worried by his indifference and apparent disregard for their unborn baby. He also became increasingly hostile towards her now that she was pregnant. When Tamara went into labour, and following the birth of their son, the emotional abuse escalated. He belittled and humiliated her at every opportunity.

Marshall began to restrict where Tamara went, which friends she saw, what she wore, what she ate, how she exercised and which room of the flat she was in. He criticised her cooking, cleaning and how she bathed their baby. He checked her phone and started to cut her off from her friends. He pressurised her to use her position as a new mother to request accommodation from the local authority, which caused Tamara distress, since she knew she would not be eligible. On one occasion he was physically violent. Exploiting Tamara's sense of deportability and her lack of options, Marshall threatened to take their son away from her. Looking back, Tamara felt he intentionally undermined her identities as a woman, partner, mother and friend:

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 ... I lost me in the whole thing. I think I lost me anyway, years ago. I just lost whatever image I had of myself.

Marshall's behaviour exemplified coercive control, which is against the law in the UK, and further eroded Tamara's sense of self and increased her dependency on him, making her exceptionally vulnerable. Yet she began to find ways to resist. To escape the flat and his oppressive presence, she would take her young son to children's centres or to friends' homes. Agreeing to clean her sister's house in return for money gave her a degree of financial autonomy and increased opportunities to visit places with her son. Marshall would warn her not to talk to other women: '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.' But Tamara began to reach out to other mothers with young children, developing friendships over time.

Later, Tamara managed to disclose some information about the abuse to frontline staff, which led to a call from a social worker. Afraid that this would place her at greater risk, however, she then downplayed the situation and denied that she or her child were at risk of harm:

I realised that I wasn't going to get any help, cos I didn't have any status, any nothing ... 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 ... 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!

Faced with a prospective home visit, Tamara missed this potential opportunity to leave the relationship because of her fears of further abuse and the risk of being deported. It was some months later that a particular incident drove her to seek and accept help to leave, and she was able to escape the situation with her son to a place of safety. She continued to be affected by the abusive relationship, however: having been made to feel that she was an 'inadequate' mother, she struggled to believe in her own abilities as a good mother.

As Catia's and Tamara's narratives have shown, mothers experiencing legal and financial precarity may be subjected to coercive control, exploitation and abuse within couple relationships, whereby these forms of precarity intersect with gendered power dynamics, motherhood and other factors such as nationality or ethnicity to increase risk and vulnerability. Partners with secure status may exploit mothers' multilayered precarity to control and abuse them, and/or to abandon them. They may also prevent them from leaving the relationship by making threats to report them to the authorities, or by convincing them that they would be denied official help (Menjívar and Salcido 2002, Anitha 2010, 2011, 2015, Dudley 2017). Women encounter multiple barriers to seeking help and to exiting an abusive relationship, and this is particularly the case for mothers with insecure immigration status. But, as this section has also shown, mothers subjected to abuse may also find ways to resist abusive and controlling behaviours through their everyday actions, both within couple relationships and after escaping them.

This chapter has demonstrated how couple relationships can be a vital source of support and resources for mothers experiencing multilayered precarity, whether a partner is former or current and whether living together or apart. The partner's role as co-parent is important, affecting mothers' wellbeing in positive or negative ways. This chapter has also highlighted how couple relationships can present challenges, tensions and risks, and, in certain cases, threats to safety. When a partner/father abandons the family, mothers are often left to parent alone with minimal resources or support. For mothers, the work of

'doing coupledom' can be significant. Faced with these challenges, other kinds of relationships may become increasingly important in managing day to day and sustaining a sense of belonging and wellbeing. In the next chapter, I turn to the role of friendship.

Notes

- 1 This can of course apply to men with precarious status whose partner has British citizenship – for example, see [Griffiths 2019](#).
- 2 But see the Migrant Victims of Domestic Abuse Concession ([Chapter 1](#)) which provides some protection in such cases.

Interlude

Flora: 'They don't want to hear'

Rachel: Have you got anybody helping you [care for your daughter]?

Flora: Nobody is helping me. It's only me. Nobody.

Rachel: You were saying [last time we met that] you've got friends, but you don't always tell them everything. Do they know about [your daughter's health condition]?

Flora: 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 [at the 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?

Rachel: What about people at church, do any of them know about your daughter's condition?

Flora: It's only the [advice] centre, they know about it, because they are the people I know that can support me ... Anybody that cannot support me, I can't just start telling them my problems. It's just like bothering them with my family problems. They've all got their own problems as well.

Rachel: Have you got to know any of the parents at school?

Flora: Like there is one particular parent here, one girl she is in the same class as [my older daughter] – if I go on an emergency admission [for younger daughter] and I can't come back to pick up [older daughter], I always call her to beg her to pick her [up] for me – she always help me.

When I tell her, she never said no. She said no problem, take time, look after the kids. She's been helpful.

Rachel: Do you feel like you can share things with her?

Flora: No. No. I just beg her just to collect my child for me.

Rachel: You don't explain why?

Flora: No. No. I just tell her we are in the hospital; when I'm finished, I will come. She says no problem.

Rachel: She doesn't ask questions?

Flora: No, she doesn't ask questions. She only says make sure they are fine, the doctors will take good care of them ... If I start telling her, 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 her [up] ... 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.

Rachel: Has anyone ever said that to you?

Flora: No – that's the way I feel! I only tell people I feel can help me, give me advice, or know somebody that can help me, or suggest something. I don't want to put my problem on people's head ... I have seen so many parents, like when you are passing, that one will say 'I'm not interested, don't tell me, go to social services.' 'I'm not advisor, go and seek advice on so-so place.' I have overheard them saying such things. I think, if I tell somebody, they might feel embarrassed or unhappy. It's better to go to the right people that can give you advice ... The only place I will ask is at the hospital, the social worker at the hospital is always there to give you advice. There is no point telling other people ... They are happy to help. They are ready to help you. Those are the people I can tell something.

4

Friendship

Friendships can be crucial as a site for sharing information, material resources, practical help and emotional support – especially for mothers experiencing precarious immigration status and financial hardship. Spaces and places may facilitate or constrain the formation and sustaining of friendships. Living in small, shared, temporary spaces, such as a room in someone else’s home or in an HMO, as most of the mothers in my research did, is not conducive to initiating or nurturing friendships; yet commercial public spaces are often inaccessible to precariously positioned mothers. Social infrastructure – places which are accessible and welcoming and feel safe – plays an important role in bringing together people who share certain social characteristics (such as being a mother), cultural backgrounds and/or migration trajectories (Benchekroun 2024b). Early childhood settings, schools and churches, for example, enable regular contact with other parents (Ryan 2007, Rzepnikowska-Phillips 2016, Vincent et al. 2017), allowing initial connections to develop into friendships over time. As my conversation with Flora shows (in the Interlude before this chapter), friendships may centre around sharing practical help or resources rather than intimate confiding.

Friendships of all kinds require ongoing ‘work’ or ‘investment’ (Bourdieu 1986, Hruschka 2010, Bunnell et al. 2012). Developing friendships creates expectations of reciprocity. Importantly, there are inherent tensions in friendships, especially for precariously positioned mothers (Benchekroun 2024a). First, as Flora indicated, there is a tension between the need for support and perceptions that friends cannot provide it. Second, the principle of equality presents a tension between expectations of mutual exchange of resources (reciprocity) and barriers to reciprocating. Third, there is a tension between the need to be open and the need to conceal personal information (Rawlins 2008): confiding can help develop intimacy, establish trust and facilitate access to emotional support (Rebughini

2011, Ryan 2015), but simultaneously creates vulnerability, presenting the risk of betrayal or exploitation. Precariously positioned mothers must navigate these tensions with care in their everyday interactions. This chapter examines mothers' strategies of 'reaching out' versus 'holding back'; sharing information and resources; navigating the role of guest when a friend provides shelter; and deciding whether, or how much, to confide in friends.

Reaching out/holding back

In the highly diverse neighbourhood of Ryeton, physical spaces shaped the extent to which mothers were able to reach out to others to initiate and develop friendships. Social infrastructure facilitated regular encounters, which opened up the possibility of forming friendships. Early childhood settings, schools and churches were frequented by mothers and children from different ethnic, language, faith, class and migration backgrounds. Mothers' intersecting social and cultural identities played out in these spaces in particular ways. In certain spaces, mobilisation of particular identities created social recognition and trust (Benckroun 2024a); mothers were made 'visible' and given 'positive value' (Björnberg 2011). Miriam, for example, recalled joining her church when she first arrived in the UK. The church was led and attended by people from her country: 'Same language, same background people ... Same country ... They are so close. It was a very lovely group to go to, to talk to people. It was helpful.'

The weekly family drop-in (an informal group session), the advice centre and the food bank, in all of which I spent time volunteering, were largely attended – either regularly or when needed – by mothers (and their young children) who were racially minoritised and subjected to precarious immigration statuses. In these spaces, mothers' migration trajectories and cultural backgrounds – including ethnicity, country of origin and languages – produced a tacit mutual recognition, which in turn created a sense of understanding, discretion and tentative trust. Mothers generally felt safe to reach out to other mothers in these spaces. At the drop-in, based in a large church hall, fluid groupings and interactions were shaped by shared languages, countries and regions of origin. One of the main attractions was the clothes bank; there was also a large play area with an array of toys, and sometimes an arts and crafts table. Staff and volunteers would chat with families and share information about local services. The space facilitated tentative connections among mothers, as Kianga explained:

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. [A mother] 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, [it's difficult]. [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.

Here, mothers felt safe to reach out to each other because there was a mutual recognition of probable precarious immigration status: they did not fear being asked indiscreet questions about it, which could happen in other settings (Rebughini 2011). Reaching out allowed mothers to share a degree of emotional support, albeit in a carefully managed way (Björnberg 2011). They recognised and empathised with each other's worries, encouraging each other to 'keep hoping' that they would soon be granted leave to remain and their living conditions would improve. Like Kiana, Chinelo attended the drop-in most weeks; she explained to me that going there allowed mothers 'just to free our minds', and to know they were not alone. The regular opportunities for sociability in this supportive space relieved the heaviness of the ongoing stress and anxiety caused by their precarious positions.

Mothers' regular attendance at the drop-in and at churches, early childhood settings and schools facilitated habitual encounters (Rzepnikowska-Phillips 2016). Perceived similarity or shared interests and a sense of empathy sometimes encouraged mothers to reach out to develop these 'passing acquaintances' into friendships (Allan and Adams 2006, Morgan 2009, Hruschka 2010, Ryan 2015). However, this required not only effort, time and sociability (Bourdieu 1986, Willmott 1987), but, as Grace pointed out, a degree of caution:

[At church] 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.

Like other precariously positioned mothers, Grace was careful in choosing whom to share personal information with, because of the risks of gossip or exploitation. Even in apparently safe spaces such as church, she told me, you could not necessarily trust other people. Grace sought to balance a need for connection with a need to protect her privacy. At times it was safer to hold back, to ‘just say hi, hello’, as she put it, and avoid developing new friendships to protect personal information (Amrith 2018, Kathiravelu and Bunnell 2018). Instead, mothers like Grace chose to rely on a limited number of established, close friendships, or, where possible, to be self-sufficient (Sigona 2012).

Precariously positioned mothers were conscious that information could travel fast, particularly within established co-ethnic communities. Daniela spoke little English, so most of the people she met were from her Latin American community; since moving to Ryeton, she had been cautious about getting too close to anyone. ‘The first thing Latinos ask each other,’ Daniela told me, ‘is “what papers have you got?”’ At church, she kept conversations to the level of small talk because, she explained, people ‘ask too many questions’, and these sometimes felt ‘judgemental’:

We greet each other but I don’t want to get too involved ... 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.

Revealing personal information would make Daniela feel vulnerable. Like other mothers, she had to navigate the risks of being judged, personal information being spread and being exploited; this meant managing the tension between the need to connect and the need to protect herself and her children (Rawlins 2008, Björnberg 2011). Holding back and not allowing acquaintanceships to develop into close friendships often seemed to be the safest course of action (Sigona 2012, Killias 2018).

The perpetual uncertainty caused by precarious status and homelessness was an additional reason to ‘hold back’. The ever-present possibility of having to move from one temporary home to another discouraged some mothers from investing time and energy in building new friendships. Within the last few years, Grace and her two young children had had to move several times from one London neighbourhood to another. Each time they moved, they would join a new church in the local area, but this did not necessarily lead to new friendships or much support (something I discuss further in Chapter 6). Being frequently

on the move risked making mothers and their children feel like eternal outsiders, which made 'reaching out' particularly difficult to do (Björnberg 2011).

Having limited leave to remain was widely seen as offering more security than having none, yet it presented difficulties in forming (and sustaining) friendships. Patricia, despite having lived in the UK for many years, had limited leave to remain with NRPF and had to work long hours to support herself and her two boys. Relying on her childminder and wraparound care at nursery and school meant drop-off and pick-up times did not present opportunities to meet other mothers. By evening, Patricia was usually too exhausted to call or message friends. The difficulty of arranging childcare in the evening meant going out socially was a rare occurrence. Many of the mothers I met through the discussion groups had limited leave to remain too, having moved to the UK more recently on a work or spouse visa; they had little time to reach out to develop new friendships. One mother had moved with her children from West Africa to join her husband a year earlier, and had been working exceptionally long hours; she laughed at my question about new friends. 'What is friends?' she asked me in an ironic tone. 'I don't have anybody. I just have my boys. I need to work. It's not easy.' Another West African mother, who had moved with her young child to join her husband in the UK just a few months before we met, similarly told me, 'I don't have friends.' She encountered other mothers when dropping off or collecting her son from nursery, but 'I only greet them and go. We don't sit down. We just say hi and go.'

Being trapped in an abusive couple relationship was, for some mothers, an additional, significant barrier to reaching out to other people. Catia, introduced in the previous chapter, had felt deeply alone and isolated when she arrived in the UK as a teenager seeking asylum. When she married and became a mother, her then husband's controlling behaviours largely confined her to the domestic environment, which limited her opportunities to meet and befriend other people. This perpetuated her sense of isolation. Similarly, Tamara, whose earlier couple relationship was also discussed in the previous chapter, reflected that her friendships had been constrained by her former partner's abusive behaviours. 'I didn't know a lot of people at the time,' Tamara recalled. 'Friends were becoming very minimal ... I was supposed to be so dependent on him, I wasn't supposed to have friends ... He made me feel incapable of making friends, and unsure of myself.' Tamara's former partner had sought to cut her off from her friends as part of a pattern of coercive control which was eroding her self-esteem and

increasing her dependency on him. This had made it hugely challenging for Tamara to reach out and connect with other women and mothers (Dudley 2017).

Sharing information, material resources and practical support

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.

(Ndidi)

As Ndidi illustrated, sharing information was a crucial friendship practice for precariously positioned mothers. Highly valued information included where, when and how to access food banks, clothes banks and free, reliable immigration advice. But to share information means also to 'channel, filter, and interpret' it, and, in so doing, to 'allocate resources' (Fernandez Kelly 1998: 219) – or, conversely, to withhold them. Information-sharing practices therefore (re)produce friendship (and trust), or undermine it. Kianga recounted a story of a friend in a different part of London whose neighbour had withheld from her much-needed information about a local immigration advice centre until her own situation had been resolved – wanting, perhaps, to protect her own access to this scarce resource until she felt secure enough to share it with others. For Kianga, this type of behaviour was unforgivable. Like Ndidi, she felt that precariously positioned mothers should support each other and show care, not hoard useful information.

Ndidi was keen to share information about 'good stuff' and even to accompany mothers to these resource-rich places. However, she admitted that at times she wondered if her generous spirit reduced her own access to resources. Moreover, her willingness to share useful information created other problems: Ndidi told me that certain other mothers who regularly attended these places were not happy about her frequently bringing new people along, concerned that resources would be too thinly spread. The practice of sharing information about valued resources therefore had to be navigated carefully. While it was important within both new and existing friendships, doing it too much could harm other friendships.

Developing friendships with people from more diverse backgrounds, or ‘bridging networks’ (Granovetter 1973, Burt 2000), could be fertile grounds for accessing useful – and potentially transformative – information. Talking while she constructed a sociogram,¹ Miriam explained her experience of this following her arrival in the UK two decades previously. Having initially formed connections with women from her co-national faith community (introduced to her by her husband, who had arrived in the country a short while before her), Miriam began to join English-language (ESOL) classes and other groups at the local college and, on becoming a mother, at a local Sure Start programme. These spaces brought her into regular contact with women and mothers from more diverse cultural backgrounds who possessed different kinds of knowledge and experience:

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, ‘[I was in] 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.

Forming new friendships in safe, sociable spaces with women and mothers from a wide range of backgrounds opened up new kinds of information unavailable in Miriam’s relatively bounded co-national community. Teachers, peers and invited speakers shared information, whether practical (for example, how to find paid work or trustworthy advice), legal (women’s rights, applying for citizenship) or relational (parenting and couple relationships). Discussions and debates comparing cultural norms in the UK with those in women’s countries of origin accelerated the possibility of living differently – for example, by contesting traditionally gendered family roles, developing new skills or seeking employment. In these ways, friendships with people beyond

one's immediate network produced 'lived spatialities' that opened up new 'freedoms, fears and possibilities' (Bunnell et al. 2012: 2; see also Burt 2000).

Friendships were also sites for exchanging material resources and practical support. When Tamara moved to a different part of the borough and her son started nursery, she reached out to other mothers to cultivate new friendships, anticipating moments when she would need to ask for help with collecting her son and looking after him, so that she could make the required visits to the Home Office to 'report', for example. She was also in regular contact with a good friend from the neighbourhood where she used to live, and would look after this friend's daughter whenever she asked; she knew she could ask for the same, or ask her friend to do her hair, something she could not afford to pay for in a salon. Reciprocating and sustaining this balance of exchange, in practice and symbolically (Allan 1998), was always a consideration in mothers' friendships, preventing them from becoming (or appearing to be) one-sided or instrumental (Allan 1998, Rawlins 2008).

Like Tamara, Claudia had developed a trusted network of friends among whom social exchange played a key part. Drawing a sociogram, she explained the friendship practices within her network. She had never shared information about her precarious immigration status with any of her friends, but she knew she could turn to them for different kinds of material or financial support. Moreover, she always ensured she reciprocated any gestures of help. Telling me about a friend who would pass on clothes that her daughter had grown out of, Claudia emphasised that this friend did the same for other friends too, and she herself would 'give out stuff as well'. As such, passing on clothes (or other items) was valued as a two-way or multi-way friendship practice; the friendship was not seen as instrumental. Borrowing money, a more delicate matter, was confined to certain friends, two of whom Claudia would repay at the earliest opportunity; with a third, a former neighbour who did not expect cash to be repaid, Claudia would reciprocate with a plate of food.

Chinelo had a close friend she would turn to in times of need, and would reciprocate in whichever ways she could. It was important to her to know that she and her friend were there for one another. 'She will give me when I need help,' Chinelo told me. '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?' For Chinelo and others, reciprocity within friendships was seen as evidence of mutual support, care and trust. As such, friendship was seen not only as a 'social glue' but as a kind of (ideal) mirror providing a strong sense of self (Pahl 2000, Smart et al. 2012).

The question of seeking resources through friends had to be navigated with care, however. First, friends were often subjected to similar levels of financial hardship, which meant they might not be able to spare the resources or provide the practical support needed (Stack 1974, Fernandez Kelly 1998). Second, seeking and accepting help created expectations or obligations (Hruschka 2010), and reciprocating could be hard to do. Ndidi observed that people like herself who were precariously positioned maintained a certain distance within friendships to protect themselves from expectations or potential obligations they could not meet; this could create an additional obstacle to getting help. She recalled how once, when she had been unwell, her friends – and one in particular – had not visited her or brought her medication:

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, 'Ndidi, 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.

For Ndidi, asking her friend for support at a moment when she was in real need was a form of 'testing' her availability and 'evaluating the solidity of the relationship' (Rebughini 2011). Her friend's similarly precarious position meant that she was unable to provide the care Ndidi expected, leading to a degree of disappointment. However, through this story Ndidi was keen to show me how multilayered precarity – and the consequent difficulties in providing resources or support that friends might expect – led people to 'hold back', to protect themselves from being asked for help they could not give.

Flora exemplified this strategy of avoiding asking friends for help. She felt they were reluctant to listen to her problems and unable to provide support, since 'they've got their own difficulties'. In fact, she claimed not to have friends, explaining she did not like to talk to people about her issues,

preferring to deal with her situation by herself. She took a pragmatic approach, evaluating her options in terms of who was best placed to provide support based on their perceived relevant knowledge – what Spencer and Pahl (2006: 66) have described as the ‘subtle calculations’ necessary before asking for help. Flora wanted to ask ‘the right person that can support me’: to this end, she had identified several organisations and professionals she could approach for specialised advice. While 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.’

Mothers often avoided asking for help because of concerns that it would create obligations to reciprocate which they might not be able to honour. A mother from Eastern Europe who took part in a discussion group explained, ‘It’s very hard accepting things from other people because you’ve got to give it back.’ When she had found herself with no residency rights and was struggling financially, she had avoided borrowing things from other people because ‘I had nothing to give back’; she did not want to be worrying constantly about how she would ‘return it’. However, mothers were aware that reciprocating did not necessarily mean mirroring the original gesture; it meant providing an act of care to meet the friend’s needs in the moment. As a mother from West Africa observed, ‘It might be more like I owe you a duty. Doing someone a favour in return, like going to Tesco ... Because you’ve done me a favour, I’ve got to pay you back.’ Being able to meet one’s own needs as a family was, nevertheless, often felt to be preferable to asking a friend for help, which risked creating ‘asymmetric dependency’ (Björnberg 2011).

While the exchange of material support could contribute to the formation of friendships, such arrangements were contingent. Over time, available resources and goodwill sometimes diminished, and conflicting expectations or misunderstandings sometimes emerged in relation to reciprocating, which could precipitate withdrawal of support and even the end of the relationship. This was often the case in relation to providing shelter, as discussed in the following section.

Navigating friendship as a guest–host relationship

Precariously positioned mothers facing homelessness turned to friends, faith group members or acquaintances for shelter. Offering a place to stay was valued as an act of kindness and a friendship practice. Widely framed by scholars as ‘hospitality’ (Derrida 2000, Dikeç et al. 2009),

hosting has been researched primarily in the context of (white) middle-class families with large homes hosting refugees through established refugee organisations (Farahani 2021, Gunaratnam 2021, Burrell 2024). But hosting mothers and children – with diverse immigration statuses – is prevalent in much more informal contexts, within less affluent, racially minoritised communities, and needs to be understood within the context of doing friendship.

The twin practices of hosting and ‘guesting’ are firstly a form of support and survival in a hostile environment. For example, soon after her partner abandoned the family, Claudia found herself with no leave to remain, and she and her children were evicted from their home. With nowhere to go, she turned to a friend, not one to whom she was especially close, but who was from her country and had been an acquaintance for a long time; she lived locally and had helped her once before. Claudia felt this friend might be able to provide shelter for her family in this moment of crisis:

I called her: ‘This is the situation now ... I don’t know what to do!’ She was like, ‘You know my room is just one room – I can’t do too much – I know it’s not just yourself, you have two children.’ I said, ‘Anything you wanna do to help.’ ... She came and [got] us and took us to her place. She took me in for eleven months.

Although cramped, this friend’s studio flat provided a safe and warm place to live while Claudia sought a longer-term solution. Tamara had had a similar experience some years earlier, before becoming a mother, when, while struggling to renew her leave to remain, she had turned to a friend for shelter. This temporary living arrangement had significantly reduced the pressure Tamara was under at that time. But she quickly pointed out that she had been expected to contribute to ‘food and things like that’. Both Tamara and Claudia were conscious of their obligations to contribute to their hosts’ households through financial, material and/or practical means to reciprocate the provision of shelter.

Second, hosting and guesting can produce or strengthen friendships. On arrival in the UK, Chinelo was put in touch with a woman who had agreed to accommodate her; while living with her, the relationship was often difficult, but ‘in the long run we became friends’, Chinelo pointed out. ‘That’s why I said she’s my “friend”.’ Nurturing friendships within this context requires careful work, including adapting to the space and reciprocating the act of hosting in small ways. For instance, having moved with her two young children into her friend’s small studio flat,

Claudia did what she could to adapt the space, and, when she had the means, purchased food and toiletries. Hosts' 'giving of space and time' and their empathy and care (Gunaratnam 2021: 708), as well as guests' appreciation of this, were in some cases the basis for new friendships, or strengthened existing friendships.

However, tensions emerged too, requiring both parties to navigate everyday interactions with sensitivity. Hosting/guesting (or 'sofa-surfing' from the perspective of guests) was a temporary and contingent arrangement. Unlike more formal hosting arrangements, friends or acquaintances who assumed the role of host tended to have limited space. Hosting often required existing household members to give up or share bedrooms or to offer up shared living spaces to guests. These practices reduced privacy and constrained normal routines both for hosting household members and for guests. This was usually bearable for a short period, but would become difficult or intolerable over time. Conscious of the contingency of such arrangements and their own multilayered precarity, women/mothers as guests sought to reciprocate through household chores or childcare, as mentioned earlier in this section, since financial payment was often limited or impossible when destitute and unable to do paid work. However, it seemed that hosts tended to reach a point where these forms of reciprocation were viewed as insufficient. Chinelo described how her first host's goodwill had petered out:

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]'.

Chinelo realised belatedly that reciprocating her host's hospitality through household chores was no longer enough: her host had expected her to contribute financially. As Small has argued, 'the deepest form of obligation is to know that one is indebted while being unsure exactly how the debt must be repaid' – the state of 'reciprocal ambiguity' (Small 2017: 83).

Ndidi had experienced this too. When she had arrived in the UK and was put in touch with a woman from her country who ‘took [her] for free’, the host–guest relationship initially developed well, but tensions began to emerge:

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.’

At the time of the episodes they described, Chinelo and Ndidi were not yet mothers and therefore did not have caring responsibilities and were relatively mobile; when they realised they were expected to reciprocate financially, they were able to find casual paid work, which allowed them to sustain their (tenuous) friendships with their hosts. Motherhood, conversely, meant that finding appropriate ways to reciprocate, especially after the initial ‘grace period’, was much more difficult.

Women/mothers positioned as guests in a friend’s home were ever-mindful of ‘the question of the appropriate time-span of a sojourn’ (Dikeç et al. 2009: 11) and were uncomfortable about overstaying their welcome; however, they often had nowhere else to go. This made them hyper-aware of their hosts’ feelings towards them and their presence in their home. Flora, for example, was highly attuned to signs of erosion of her hosts’ initial goodwill:

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... [laughs]

Mothers like Flora were quick to detect signs of the gradual evaporation of hosts’ initial expressions of hospitality and welcome, and the emergence of feelings of resentment. Mothers sought to avoid conflict to reduce the risk of being asked to leave. As guests, they were also aware of their hosts’ fears of getting into trouble with their landlords for hosting. Concerns about potential repercussions meant that hosts were not always willing

to provide confirmation in writing that they had until this point been accommodating a family; consequently, mothers could not prove to local authorities that they had become homeless and needed urgent support.

Mothers were alert to how the power asymmetry in host–guest relationships constrained friendship practices. Hosting sometimes became controlling and exploitative, ceasing to be a form of friendship. It could be experienced as a form of ‘pre-emptive bordering’, in which the power of the state had been shifted to interpersonal interactions in domestic spaces, and the tension between care and control had to be navigated by hosts and guests (Gunaratnam 2021: 717, drawing on Van der Veer 2020). When Kianga and her children had to resort to sofa-surfing, moving ‘from friend to friend’, she became alert to how the power dynamics shifted over time:

I started trying to survive, through friends, through church members. I ended down to one of my friends. My friend let me to be with her for two months. 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 the children they keep giving me headache. And again, 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.

Kianga’s account of being hosted by different friends and church members illustrated how the deterioration over time of friendships as host–guest arrangements further reduced the power of those who were ‘guesting’. Even though friends and acquaintances providing shelter often had limited resources themselves, they did have a home and some kind of income. The inherently unequal power dynamic within the host–guest relationship often made guests feel uncomfortable, and in certain cases led to hosting practices experienced by guests as exploitative or hostile. As in Kianga’s case, it could mean the mother as guest having to adopt a subordinate position within the household, being prepared to take on any task that was asked of her.

Mothers made careful calculations before asking friends to provide shelter, conscious that friends had limited domestic space, and that asking them to provide this kind of help could cause embarrassment and affect the friendship (Spencer and Pahl 2006, Rebughini 2011). Chinelo recalled how, when she and her young daughter became homeless

(following abandonment by her husband and eviction from their flat), she was afraid to approach the local authority for help; instead, she turned to a mother she had met previously at a children's centre. At the time this mother was not a close friend, but Chinelo felt she would understand. Knowing she had very little space, Chinelo would ask her to take in her daughter at night, while she would spend the night on 24-hour buses or at whichever church was open for the all-night vigil.

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, Chinelo had to weigh up her own needs against her friend's limited resources, but also the acts of care she knew she could count on. Each day she would resolve this tension by accepting food when she was hungry, and on occasion joining her daughter to spend the night there, but, knowing that fully moving in would be 'too much', usually deciding to leave her daughter there overnight and returning in the morning to collect her. Chinelo had to continually make calculations to balance meeting her and her child's needs against the availability of the support. She also had to navigate the tension between instrumentality and care. Through careful navigation, Chinelo was able to protect the friendship, and even to strengthen it. Her friend's acts of care shaped Chinelo's perception of their friendship as close, even as family-like.

'Guesting' in the home of a friend or acquaintance was therefore a crucial yet complex and generally hidden aspect of 'doing friendship'. The final section of this chapter examines how precariously positioned mothers navigate the question of whether, when or how much to confide personal information to friends.

Confiding (or not)

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.'

(Chinelo)

Chinelo articulated the importance of confiding in friends during difficult times. The ability of certain friends to listen, recognise emotions and respond sensitively with tact and discretion helped build trust, reduce anxiety and relieve suffering (Rawlins 1983, Rebughini 2011). However, for precariously positioned mothers, confiding in friends was problematic: first, friends were often in similarly precarious positions and therefore not physically or emotionally available, and second, the stakes of trust being broken were high. Mothers had to continually navigate the tension between being open with friends and protecting their own privacy (Rawlins 2008, Baxter and Scharp 2015). They often avoided confiding in friends, preferring to cope alone (Sigona 2012) or to seek emotional support from other people perceived to have specialist knowledge, or who were simply more available (Small 2013, 2017).

Mothers' sharing of information, practical support and material resources (discussed above) created trust, which could pave the way for mutual confiding; this helped to build close friendships. Mothers assessed certain friends as suitable confidants because of their perceived empathy and trustworthiness. Their (presumed) similarly precarious status could form part of this judgement. Friends who had recently been granted leave to remain (and potentially 'recourse to public funds') might be perceived as having both more stability and relevant knowledge, and as being more emotionally available and likely to empathise with their situation. The exact immigration status of a potential confidant was often not evident, however, for reasons discussed above in the section entitled 'Reaching out/holding back'. Chinelo explained to me that to establish the suitability of a friend before confiding in them, you had to get to know them a little, then test them with a minor problem and evaluate their response:

Before I can share my problems with you, I [have to] 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 [laughs]. 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 Chinelo explained, essential to take your time in identifying who could be trusted as confidants. It was also important that potential confidants were non-judgemental and sensitive to your precarious legal status.

Catia had had only one close friend, and they had lost contact when Catia's marriage ended, but she recalled clearly what had drawn her to this friend and why she had felt able to trust her:

She knew about the whole system of asylum seeking, all of that stuff. She could understand and was not judgemental. That's a thing, you do find a lot of [people who are] judgemental, when you go to the Council, or whatever you go to do, or even from friends, people do treat you differently. I can trust [that friend] and be myself. And she's not going to ask you 'where did you go on holiday?' Because that's the question ... Because you can't!

Trustworthiness, recognition, empathy, discretion and sensitivity were all seen as essential characteristics of a friend in whom you could confide (Spencer and Pahl 2006, Rebughini 2011, Amrith 2018).

While being granted leave to remain could potentially create inequality between friends, such friendships continued to be a site for emotional support (although being re-housed far away because of a change in legal status sometimes made this more difficult). Chinelo, for example, explained that when her friends got 'their papers', '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 told me that her friends called her, encouraged her when her morale was low and helped her to be hopeful about the future, which made her happy. 'At least we are at same level,' she reflected. They would reassure her, "God that changed my own story, he will change yours. We are in it together, we will get out of it, don't worry."

Chinelo in fact saw confiding in close friends as a moral obligation to herself, to her children and to her friends. She sometimes confided in close friends despite feeling disinclined to do so. One day, when we were sitting in a park together, she reflected on this:

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.

Struggling with the tension between the need for autonomy and the need for connectedness as a precariously positioned mother, Chinelo resolved this in times of crisis by framing confiding as an obligation of friendship. Sharing your struggles with those you care about enables them to care for you. On the other hand, as Chinelo articulated so powerfully (above), protecting them from guilt about your misfortune by not confiding in them 'can result in them feeling distanced or unwelcomed', and could in fact make them feel guilty – what Baldassar has described as 'a kind of social death' (Baldassar 2015: 86).

Close friendships characterised by mutual confiding, attentive listening and appropriate forms of responding were an important site for sharing emotional support. Ayodele, for example, although precariously positioned herself, was keen to motivate her close friends when they became demoralised about their immigration status and the future. One friend would confide her worries in Ayodele when they spoke on the phone, including how her situation was affecting her mental health:

[She] 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, Ayodele had sought to rebuild her friend’s sense of hope for a liveable future. In this way, confiding in close friends who were in similar situations (or had experienced similarly difficult trajectories) enabled some mothers with insecure immigration status to share emotional support and care.

The problem of trust exists in any new or established friendship, since seeking support is exposing and creates vulnerability (Rawlins 2008, Hruschka 2010, Small 2017) and the risk of betrayal (Smart et al. 2012, Killias 2018). For mothers with insecure immigration status, the stakes are high, since disclosure of their status to others could increase the risk of exploitation, detention or deportation, as well as being gossiped about and marginalised. It was therefore crucial for precariously positioned mothers to manage the tension between the need for disclosure and the need for privacy in their decisions about whom to confide in, and what to share and when (Baxter and Scharp 2015, Amrith 2018). Flora’s way of managing this was to avoid confiding in friends. ‘I don’t want to interfere in somebody’s affairs, and I don’t want anybody interfering in my world,’ she explained to me. ‘Some people are good at ... nosying about, knowing what is happening in somebody’s life, gossiping, that is part of it. That’s why I don’t want any trouble. It is just myself and my children.’ Flora protected her family by not sharing personal information with any friends. Since her children were all young, in practice this meant Flora carried much of her emotional burden alone.

Likewise, having experienced the betrayal of her trust by friends where she had lived previously, Claudia had decided not to share information about her immigration status with any friends, no matter how close the friendships:

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.

Claudia was keen to protect her children from the potential shame and embarrassment that gossip could lead to. 'You do not want your children to feel that or have that,' she told me. 'Cos you know, children can hear what their parents are talking about, and then it will start getting on the children.' In Claudia's view, confiding in friends who were from the same country or church posed the greatest threats to confidentiality: the closeness of the community increased the likelihood of gossip being passed along. She managed this risk by not confiding even in her closest friend: 'I never, for one day ... 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.' Equally, Claudia respected her friend's need for discretion. There was an unspoken understanding of the risks of sharing sensitive information:

She never dugged into anything that I don't want her to dig into. There's a borderline you won't be able to cross ... 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 ... 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.

Drawing her sociogram,² Claudia counted her friends, concluding, 'That is literally it. That is my circle of friends.' Claudia and her friends recognised how certain kinds of self-disclosure created vulnerability; this generated mutual understanding and discretion in their friendship practices (Rebughini 2011). The development of interpersonal trust over time did not mean being fully open about immigration status.

This approach was widely shared. Miriam emphasised that individuals' immigration status was 'a little bit shy zone' and was kept private, 'like a secret', because of concerns that personal information could be used to sabotage a person's application for asylum or leave to remain:

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 ... It's like misery. It's like a private situation. We never put it on the table.

While some women developed close friendships, others avoided them altogether; in both cases, they generally steered clear of the topic of immigration status and related issues. In close friendships, mutual confiding was based on other topics.

Friends' perceived unavailability, together with the risks of sharing highly sensitive personal information, even with those who were otherwise trusted, meant that mothers with insecure immigration status might instead confide in people they were not emotionally close to. In some cases, this was a deliberate strategy, motivated by the other person's perceived specialist knowledge or ability to help; in other cases, it was more spontaneous, 'because they were there' (Small 2017). At a playgroup, for example, Ndidi had met other women who were in positions of similar precarity. Divulging her situation to them opened up space for reassurance and support: the women encouraged her by pointing out that many people in the neighbourhood did not have leave to remain. 'I became stronger ... I became bolder,' Ndidi recollected. '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.'

Specialised settings also provided opportunities for a degree of openness and self-disclosure, whether in relation to immigration status, such as legal advice centres, or in relation to other topics, such as support groups for mothers who had experienced domestic abuse or families with children with disabilities. Confiding in women with shared experiences did not always lead to friendship, however. Sometimes deep confiding needed to be separated from friendship. Tamara found the emotional support she needed through a professional counsellor:

You know, sometimes, being around older people, as well, they help to put things ... In the Caribbean, people like to sit and talk with old ladies, because they tell them about their experiences, it helps you to shape your thoughts, understand things from a different perspective. That's what [my counsellor] was like to me ... That's what I needed in my life. Someone I can talk to. They can help me understand things from a different perspective. [pauses] ... I think people need that in their lives. Do you know what I mean? Somebody you can sit and talk to. They don't feel judged. I think that's what I really need in my life ... I just need somebody to talk to.

For precariously positioned mothers, navigating the questions of what to disclose, to whom and when, was complex and required careful thought. Mothers generally avoided confiding in friends about their immigration status, and some avoided forming close friendships entirely. Instead, mothers sometimes opened up to professionals or to women with similar experiences in other areas of life, whether in a planned or spontaneous way. The cost of not confiding in friends, however, was often an increased emotional burden of managing alone.

This chapter has underlined the importance of friendships and has shown how spaces, places and the intersection of structural factors shape their formation and development. While certain spaces and places constrain friendship practices, social infrastructure provides opportunities to form connections and nurture friendships. The chapter has also highlighted, however, how precariously positioned mothers are compelled to pay careful attention to the tensions that develop within friendships to avoid risks of exposure and exploitation. It has explored a range of strategies that mothers deploy to navigate these.

Whereas friendships are based on principles of equality and reciprocity, this is not the case for all kinds of relationships. Adult kin relationships are infused with structural power dynamics, and, for precariously positioned mothers, immigration status intersects with generation, gender, family role and other social characteristics to shape the nature of these relationships. In turn, this affects how support and resources are shared – as we will see in the following chapter.

Notes

- 1 See the Introduction chapter for an explanation of this method.
- 2 See the Introduction chapter for an explanation of this method.

Interlude

Kianga: 'I will be somebody ... to make them proud'

They have a principle, with my family, I don't know other family, but mostly in [my country], when you tell a child don't do something and they do it, badly, they will turn their back against that child, until you do something that will make them happy. I am just praying for everything to be all right. I need to go back to [university] – that's one of my priorities. If I do things that will make them to see that I [am doing well], they might change their mind because of that. It's like a shame, it's like I'm bringing a shame...

I'm going to bring good things back. They feel that shameful way now, but when I go back to [university], I will be somebody, I will have a degree in this country, to make them proud. I will also be proud of myself.

5

Adult kin relationships

Women who have migrated abroad, settled and become mothers are often separated from adult kin by geographical distance, national borders, complex and restrictive immigration policies, insecure immigration statuses and financial hardship (Menjívar and Abrego 2009, Sampaio and Carvalho 2022). ‘Adult kin’ may include ageing parents, siblings, cousins, aunts and uncles, grandparents, more distant relatives, and people not connected by blood or marriage ties but seen as kin. It is very difficult for adult kin living across borders to exchange personal and practical care, whether routine or during major life events (Baldassar 2007), since these types of care require physical co-presence (Skrbiš 2008, Baldassar 2015, Merla et al. 2020). In some respects, it may be easier to share other forms of care transnationally, such as financial and emotional support (Baldassar 2007, Baldassar et al. 2014, Brandhorst et al. 2020), which can be done by phone or through social media (Wilding 2006, Madianou and Miller 2013, Nedelcu and Wyss 2016, Baldassar et al. 2016). Nevertheless, sustaining relational practices with adult kin transnationally requires ‘time, intention, and skill’ in communication, understood as the ‘work of kinship’ (Di Leonardo 1987: 442–3) – and material resources.

Mothers negotiate caregiving commitments in the context of these physical constraints as well as wider structural factors such as gender and generation (Brandhorst et al. 2020). Migrating across borders constrains some forms of care exchange with adult kin in the country of origin, which can be isolating for all parties; it may also raise the hopes and expectations of adult kin that they will receive financial and material assistance from those who move abroad. Precariously positioned mothers often struggle to provide such assistance (Menjívar and Abrego 2009). This can induce feelings of guilt (Baldassar 2015).

In the destination country, relationships among adult kin who are (re)united by chain migration can also be a site of tensions. Young women joining family members in a new country may experience ambivalence and emotional distance because of ‘prolonged physical absence’ and ‘generational and cultural differences’ (Phoenix 2019: 2324). New forms of expectations and obligations may need to be negotiated. Moreover, chain migration over time and changing national immigration policies create families with mixed immigration statuses and stratified access to resources (Menjívar and Abrego 2009, Gomberg-Muñoz 2017): this means there are stark differences within families in individuals’ abilities to provide and access support (Baldassar et al. 2014) and their mobility (Shamir 2005, Brandhorst et al. 2020, Merla et al. 2020).

This chapter explores how precariously positioned mothers living in the UK navigate responsibilities, reciprocity and tensions in relationships with adult kin transnationally and within the UK to exchange care and resources.

Navigating the exchange of care with transnational adult kin

The precariously positioned mothers who took part in my research faced significant barriers to accessing care from kin across borders and providing care to them. The prohibitive costs of visas and travel, complex bureaucratic processes, and in some cases old age and frailty often prevented transnational family members from visiting mothers in the UK (Merla et al. 2020). Meanwhile, both legal and financial precarity immobilised the mothers themselves, preventing them from travelling to visit geographically distant family members across borders and from providing practical and financial support to them. Assia felt isolated from her parents and siblings, and other relatives who lived in her North African country, particularly during times of crisis and significant moments in the life course, including when she became a mother:

I think six, eight years I’m not seeing my family. My mum is sick, I can’t see her. My cousin’s wedding, I missed that. My grandparents passed away. I loved them so much. They lived in the countryside. [As a child] I went there every summer, every holiday. I was pregnant with my son when my grandfather passed away. A year later my grandma died. Then my husband’s mother got cancer. All this pressure. We’re paying money all this time. We got the pregnancy. I prayed, please let her see her grandson.

Being 'stuck' in place created feelings of distress and sadness. Assia's prolonged loss of leave to remain, followed by her limited leave to remain, coupled with multiple financial challenges resulting largely from the effects of immigration policies, had prevented her from providing practical and personal care to her ageing kin at key moments in the life course, including sickness and bereavement (Baldassar 2007). She had felt trapped when she had no leave to remain, describing this time as being 'like a prison'. Travelling to her country of origin at that time – even if she had been able to afford to – would have entailed 'giving up an entire migration project' (Sampaio and Carvalho 2022: 6), which would have had consequences for the whole family, including displacing their UK-born children. Assia's immobilisation created feelings of guilt and frustration (Baldassar 2015). Instead, she stayed in touch through phone calls, video calls and messaging, seeking to create a sense of co-presence (Baldassar 2008) and fulfil her 'sense of moral obligation' (Baldassar 2015: 82).

Not being able to provide financial support to kin across borders also produced feelings of guilt and distress. Managing family members' hopes and expectations of financial assistance, and the tension between these and mothers' material realities, required significant emotion work. Remitting money to transnational kin was exceptionally difficult for mothers experiencing legal and financial precarity. Deka, for example, who had no leave to remain, told me with sadness that her brother back home in West Africa had been diagnosed with cancer, and she was unable to help him financially. She felt this had harmed their relationship:

I wish I could help him, but I don't have any money. He thinks I have money but don't want to help him. He has disowned me. He doesn't talk to me anymore. People think that just because you are living here you must be rich. I get upset thinking about it. When I have money, I will be able to help him. I hope I will be able to help him. My mum passed away four years ago. There's no one else. Just some distant cousins. People don't want to know you if you haven't got money, if you can't help them.

Seeking and providing financial support can be 'a form of receiving and giving care' (Baldassar et al. 2014: 168, Stark and Lucas 1988, Lindley 2009). Migration can cause financial hardship for the family members left behind, but may be accepted on the understanding that it will improve the economic situation of the wider family (Baldassar 2015). This can lead to 'significant and often continuing and extensive expectation from extended family' that those who have migrated and settled abroad will

provide financial support (Baldassar 2015: 86). Mothers like Deka who were destitute or facing financial hardship found these expectations of financial support impossible and overwhelming, and experienced feelings of guilt. Some mothers withdrew from interactions with kin to protect themselves from the pressure of these expectations and guilty feelings (Baldassar 2015). As Deka's account suggests, transnational kin may also have withdrawn from relationships if they felt let down by those who had migrated abroad.

Many mothers missed the physical presence of their own mothers and other kin, particularly around the time of giving birth and when raising infants and young children. Rose, who had been granted asylum from her West African country two decades previously, reflected that, had she become a mother in her country of origin, a host of wider family members would have been on hand to provide practical support. With no family to care for her in the UK, she recalled that she had not stopped to rest after giving birth to her children:

If I was giving birth like that in my country, my feet would be up for three months at least. People cooking for me, look after me. But here, I don't have no mum, no dad, no brother, what should I do? I can't rely on friends – they've got their own life.

Childbirth, and the ensuing challenges of becoming a new mother, made the absence of family more painful. For Rose, as for many other new mothers, the only option was to be self-sufficient.

Over time, mothers' sadness and frustration about the absence of close kin evolved into a sense of resignation or acceptance. Grace tended not to call her family very often, recognising they could not be a source of practical or other kinds of support. 'I've been separated [from my mother] for a while now, so I'm used to it,' she pointed out to me. 'I've got my own family now. I've got to concentrate on them.' She acknowledged that it had not been easy without adult kin nearby to support her: 'It's been difficult – the realisation that you can't just rush home. You can't do the things that you are used to. It's like being cooped up in a box and moving about. I have to focus on my future now.' Grace indicated that she had to accept that the impossibility of physical co-presence meant that practical care from her family was not possible. Flora, who had lost her leave to remain and whose child had a serious health condition, expressed a similar mix of frustration and acceptance that her mother and brothers – who remained in her country of origin in West Africa – were unable to provide certain kinds of support:

It's a pity at this moment they can't do nothing for me, because they haven't got anything to help, they can't help me. They know [about my situation] but they can't do nothing, because they haven't got the money and they can't do nothing. My mum is old and she is not working, she can't help me. They can only support me in prayer ... That is the only thing.

Both Flora and her transnational family faced multilayered forms of immobility. Foregrounding the lack of practical and financial support available from them, Flora nevertheless recognised the value of their emotional support through prayer (Baldassar 2008).

Mothers who had moved to the UK more recently were more likely to be in regular, frequent contact with kin in their country of origin. They kept open the possibility of returning as a means of restoring access to practical forms of care and support from adult kin. One mother who, along with her two children, had joined her husband in the UK a year earlier from West Africa, shared that she missed having family around her to provide support, and doubted whether migrating had been the right decision. She was experiencing severe pressure as a result of holding down two jobs, caring for her children, including focusing on her son's additional needs, dealing with the poor condition of their rented accommodation, and navigating the structural barriers and financial burden caused by her temporary immigration status and the NRPF condition. She missed having her wider family around her to provide practical support:

I told my husband that I want to go back. I don't know how, but [in our country] we have children there who are not developed early but they are okay. Maybe it was a mistake thinking I would have help [here]. Let me go back ... I have support there – born and bred. My mother will be there. Even though she's [not in good health], she is always there constantly. My father will be there. We have support. I have four sisters. They have kids, they have cousins. They go to a good school. Children there, they are bright, they are good, they are smarter. So I want to go back. I don't see anything here.

The insufficiency of professional help for her son at the time we met, and the very tough conditions that she was experiencing, made her yearn for the practical support and care that her parents and siblings could provide through their physical co-presence.

When communicating with kin in their country of origin, mothers often concealed information that could cause distress or worry (Sampaio 2020, Sampaio and Carvalho 2022). Mothers whose mobility was severely limited tended not to confide in transnational kin about the extent of the challenging circumstances they faced in their everyday lives. One reason was to avoid causing close kin to worry, which might have adverse effects on their health. For example, to avoid overburdening her mother, Flora did not disclose her daughter's serious health condition:

She don't know anything – I'm not telling her because if I tell her – I don't want her health starting to ... She start thinking ... I don't really tell her everything. I'm not around there. I don't want her to start worrying. One, I'm taking care of us here; two, some people, you know ... I don't want to bother her with my troubles. She hasn't seen us for a long time. She will be struggling to sleep at night, and she will be thinking – what is happening now? So, I don't want that.

This practice of 'filtering', 'curating' and withholding information can be understood as a form of 'shielding' ageing parents (and others) back home from worries about children's (and mothers') health and wellbeing, and mothers' struggles to cope (Sampaio 2020). Concealing information to shield others can be seen as a care practice in itself (Sampaio 2020, Hsu 2021).

Choices made around the use of technologies to communicate helped with 'sieving and managing emotions across time and space zones' (Sampaio 2020: 285). For example, one mother explained that she did not want her sisters back home to know about the difficulties she was facing and the impact on her, so she avoided video calls with them, which might reveal too much:

Always your mind is not working. Always you look scattered. Always you look drained. I looked like a madwoman. When my sisters call me video, I don't pick up, I just say let's do audio. Because where I was living, it looked horrible. It had moulds all around. It looked horrible ... I didn't want to say everything to them.

This mother did not want her sisters to see her looking 'scattered', or to see the 'horrible' state of her family's accommodation. Restricting communication with them to only audio was a means of filtering the

information she shared with her siblings, which protected or shielded them from worry about her situation, and potentially saved her embarrassment about her living conditions.

One participant had shared her son's autism diagnosis with her mother and siblings, but it was only with her sister that she discussed his everyday needs and what it meant for her as a mother. She avoided talking about it with her mother because 'she would get worried'. On the other hand, she did not discuss it with other adult kin because she felt they would not understand or accept it; this allowed her to protect herself from the possibility of certain extended family members gossiping about it. Her sister, conversely, was a source of emotional support, offering encouragement and prayer, even if she did not accept the autism diagnosis. 'She will say that she believes there is nothing that God cannot do,' the mother told me. 'She knows that God will heal him. That she's praying for him. So, it's like that.' Avoiding disclosing certain kinds of information to transnational kin helped ensure privacy around sensitive issues affecting the immediate family. For mothers it was therefore a strategy to protect their own wellbeing as well as the wellbeing of transnational kin – even if it was at the cost of potential emotional support.

Negotiating the exchange of care with kin transnationally in the context of legal and financial precarity and hostile immigration policies required creativity, resourcefulness and sensitivity in navigating tensions. Relationship difficulties with transnational kin, whether longstanding or more recent, further complicated how mothers navigated mutual care and responsibilities.

Navigating troubled relationships with transnational adult kin

Mothers sometimes experienced relationships with transnational family members as troubled (Phoenix 2019), whether the roots of this preceded or followed migration. Mothers' legal and financial precarity further complicated such relationships by constraining the forms of care they could provide to transnational kin. In some cases, being separated by international borders and multilayered immobility post-migration helped mothers manage such relationships. For example, Tamara, who had been living in the UK with insecure immigration status for two decades, had felt deeply ambivalent since childhood about her relationships with both her birth mother and her biological sister, who lived in her country of origin in the Caribbean. The distance between

them gave her the space to develop her sense of self. She managed these relationships through occasional phone calls; this required significant emotion work, however.

The need or desire to sustain some kind of connection with transnational kin gained new significance on becoming a mother; in the context of troubled relationships, this increased the emotion work. For mothers like Tamara, it was necessary – through phone calls and social media – to build relationships between their children and transnational kin, who in many cases had never met in person. As Tamara explained:

Even with my sister, we talk, yes, and if I was supposed to say I'm close to anybody in this world, it would be her. Because not even with my own [birth] mum, I'm very ... close with. [Rachel: You haven't mentioned her...] Haven't I? Yeah, because ... she doesn't make the effort to call me. Because we already have this distance between us, I don't make the effort to call her. I did call her for Christmas and New Year's. Because for the sake of [my son], if I'm segregating myself from everybody else, then he's going to grow up not knowing anybody else. He was asking ... about ... his sisters. He was asking me, mummy do I have any sisters? I had to explain to him on his dad's side he has [several] siblings. He was saying, 'oh, my sister this...' I probably need to work on the whole connection thing.

Tamara was conscious that her young son, who was beginning to show curiosity about his wider family, risked growing up with a truncated family network. This was partly because she had had to minimise links with the kin of her abusive ex-partner (her son's father) and partly because she had to preserve a careful distance from her own family members in the UK, with whom relationships were uneasy. Tamara therefore felt she had a duty as a mother to build connections between her son and her kin back in the Caribbean. This would help him develop a strong cultural identity and sense of self (Levitt 2009, Zontini and Reynolds 2018). Yet, while using social media helped mothers like Tamara sustain relationships with transnational kin (Madianou and Miller 2013, Baldassar et al. 2016, Wilding and Baldassar 2018, Baldassar and Wilding 2020), it was not necessarily sufficient as a means of *forming* new relationships without regular physical co-presence (Haikkola 2011: 1212).

When difficulties in mothers' relationships with transnational kin emerged post-migration, they risked being cut off from different kinds of support and resources. As discussed in Chapter 2, and alluded to in the Interlude before this chapter, Kianga's relationships with her kin in

her West African country of origin had deteriorated not long after she had moved to the UK to study. At that time, her parents were supporting her financially, on the understanding that she would study and achieve a qualification, but when she formed a relationship of which they disapproved, and became pregnant, they told her she had brought shame on the family. They told Kianga they no longer wanted to see her, and made threats about what would happen to her if she returned to their country. They stopped providing financial support, which prevented her from renewing her student visa. Her sisters likewise turned their backs on her. Kianga turned to her partner and his family, and subsequently to friends and church members, for support, resources and some stability. She struggled for many years; relations with her family back in her home country were fraught.

Conversely, taking steps to resume communication and nurture or repair difficult relationships created (mutual) expectations of support. In Kianga's case, she began to communicate with her sisters through social media. When she and her children were finally granted leave to remain in the UK, and their situation began to stabilise, she shared the news with one of her sisters, which led to her mother reaching out to her through a messaging app and on the phone. Kianga was conscious that being granted leave to remain, or getting her 'status', changed the way 'people back home' perceived and interacted with her. 'Maybe they are looking at me like maybe I have money now!' she remarked wryly. Recognising the hopes and resources they had invested in her, she reflected sadly, 'There, they are suffering, and someone that is supposed to help them, they just lose hope, and again, what I do'. While Kianga was relieved that communication had resumed with most of her transnational kin, and relations had largely improved, she was also aware that their hopes and expectations of her, previously shattered, would now be reinstated. The news that she had been granted leave to remain would make her transnational family members think she was now financially stable and able to support them. But for mothers like Kianga, the status of limited leave to remain was likely to be accompanied by the NRPF condition, and finding paid work as a single mother of young children would be difficult. Online interactions with transnational kin could 'create new obligations and expectations for kin separated by distance' as well as 'new opportunities for misunderstandings' (Baldassar et al. 2014: 167).

While online communication played a key role in managing troubled relationships, it was important to some mothers to keep open the possibility of travelling to visit kin in person at an imagined future point in time when their legal and financial precarity was resolved. Kianga (as

shown in the Interlude before this chapter) strongly hoped to return to higher education to earn a degree, and imagined returning to her country to make her parents proud of her, proving herself worthy of their support. Tamara, meanwhile, reflecting on the emotional distance between herself and her birth mother, remarked:

To be honest, if things were sorted for me, I would go down and I would go and see her and I would try and sort things out face to face. But over the phone, kind of thing [sighs] ... I just don't make the effort ... I would prefer if I was able to go down and see her and spend time with her. That would have been my ideal thing. If I went to [country] on a holiday, guaranteed I'll be spending time with her, getting to know her, stuff like that. It would be a different ball game. It's always something that's been in the back of mind, on my list. If I went [there], that's something I would love to do, get to know my family – my blood family.

Tamara found it too painful to think about the events which had led to their estrangement, but she felt sure that if she were to travel back to her birth country, she 'would make it a point of duty to go and see her'. The expectation and sense of 'moral obligation' to return to her country of origin to care for kin weighed heavily on Tamara, creating feelings of guilt (Baldassar 2015: 86). She felt that physical co-presence offered a route to resolving relational difficulties which online communication could not. For the time being, however, her immobilisation resulting from her precarious immigration status prevented the possibility of even visiting.

Managing differential access to resources within mixed-status adult kin relationships in the UK

Family members with British citizenship or indefinite leave to remain could and did provide different forms of support for those with insecure status, including accommodation, food, money, practical help and access to wider support networks. But unequal access to such resources created tensions and awkward interactions, which could affect individual wellbeing. This is demonstrated by Patricia's story, presented briefly in the Introduction chapter. Patricia and her three younger siblings were born in West Africa. Their parents migrated to the UK, leaving the four young children to be raised by their grandmother. Once settled in the UK, her parents had another daughter, who grew up 'British'. More than a decade

later, on completing school in her country, Patricia was granted a student visa for the UK. Just after this, her parents' application for indefinite leave to remain in the UK was approved, which meant that Patricia's younger siblings were subsequently able to apply for visas under 'family reunion'. This helped them later obtain indefinite leave to remain and British citizenship fairly easily. Yet Patricia, despite putting down roots in the UK like her siblings, remained on a short-term visa (with NRPF) which she had to renew every 30 months. The different immigration statuses among the members of her family created differential access to resources. This had implications for the exchange of care and support. Although Patricia was working full-time, her precarious status and lack of entitlement to state support with housing or childcare meant that she and her two boys faced continual financial hardship and could not afford to rent privately. When her couple relationship broke down, Patricia's parents provided shelter for her and her boys in their modest, two-bedroom flat. This was a vital form of support which continued for many months. However, the situation created challenges which led to tensions in family relationships.

Since her UK-born sister was still living with their parents, there were no spare rooms, which meant Patricia and her sons had to sleep on the two sofas in the living room. Not having grown up with her parents or her UK-born sister, Patricia had had to build relationships with them since moving to the UK. This had been both more urgent and more challenging since moving into their home. In the modest flat, Patricia and her boys had no space to themselves and no privacy. Their routines had to fit around her parents' and sister's routines. They did not cook or eat together. Her parents liked to watch television in the living room in the evenings – her father would often stay up until 11 o'clock at night – which meant Patricia and her boys had to wait until then to make the sofas into beds and sleep. Once everyone was asleep, Patricia would venture into the tiny kitchen, but, rarely having any appetite by this point, she would just make herself some tea and toast. She and her boys would have to rise early, around 5.00 a.m., to get ready for nursery, school and work. They would all wake up tired.

Trying to fit in around her parents' and sister's daily routines affected Patricia's and her boys' interactions and relationships with each other and with their host family members. Patricia had to constantly try to contain her boys' energy and prevent them from making too much noise. This was important to avoid upsetting her parents, especially her father, who liked to watch his television programmes, and seemed to resent his grandsons' sometimes lively or boisterous behaviour, which he found distracting. Patricia felt that he sometimes spoke to her boys in

a harsh way – for example, claiming they watched too much television, getting angry about toys being visible in the living room or, if they started jumping on the sofas, shouting at them to leave the room. Patricia felt they could not express themselves freely and just ‘be themselves’.

The constant need to manage these tensions made Patricia feel highly stressed when she got home from work, adding to the exhaustion of her long days, tiring routine and lack of personal space. She remarked wryly that it felt like a ‘hostile environment’ at home. She would try to prevent conflict with her father by hiding away with her boys in her sister’s bedroom. While Patricia avoided depicting her relationship with her parents as instrumental, there was an unspoken recognition that, with no other viable options for accommodation, the immense effort to sustain peaceful relations with her kin was the price of keeping a roof over her and her children’s heads.

Building and sustaining relationships with adult kin in the UK and feeling able to ask them for material, financial, practical and/or emotional support was often crucial for mothers as a means of surviving and providing for their children. However, just as in the context of friends (Chapter 4) and faith group members (Chapter 6), resources were sometimes in short supply, even among kin with indefinite leave to remain and/or British citizenship; and different forms of support might be initially offered with warmth, but over time were less readily available and more reluctantly given. This led to tensions affecting everyday interactions and putting pressure on relationships in the longer term. Navigating such sensitive situations required emotion work from mothers (and all parties).

Differential access to resources among kin with different immigration statuses prevented family members from participating in activities together on equal terms. This was emphasised in a discussion by several West African mothers who had moved to the UK with temporary working visas and were subjected to the NRPF condition:

Mother 1: It is difficult ... I have two cousins who are British, and I can’t talk to them because any time I talk to them they bring this whole document issue and it just traumatises me. So I can’t go close to them anymore ... Any time I’m close, they are talking about, ‘oh we wish your child was British because then we could all go on holiday’ – it’s just too much.

Mother 2: Oh! Like you know we Africans we're the type of people [who] like teasing indirectly. They might be trying to sympathise with you but indirectly they'll be teasing you. So it's really difficult.

The first mother was conscious of the immobility differential between her own family and her cousin's family, resulting from their different immigration statuses and their differential access to welfare benefits. She felt that her cousin's family was financially better off – and therefore able to go abroad on holiday – because they received a range of welfare benefits, whereas her own family was struggling financially, despite her husband working full-time. Both mothers felt that apparent efforts by kin with secure immigration status to express sympathy could be inauthentic and even provocative. In any case, interactions such as these served as constant reminders of inequalities among kin living in the UK, and the relative immobility of those with insecure immigration status.

Families (re)united: dealing with emotional distance with adult kin in the UK

As was the case for Patricia (see the previous section), many women whose parents had migrated overseas or were internationally mobile during their childhood grew up in a different country from their parents and/or siblings, separated by immigration laws and raised by grandparents or other kin (Menjívar and Abrego 2009). Subsequent migration by women 'left behind' brought them together for the first time – or reunited them – with their parents and siblings. (Re)building these kin relationships as adults was sometimes a pathway to different forms of support, as illustrated in the previous section. However, it also presented the difficult task of navigating emotional distance or even a sense of estrangement, and having 'to get used to each other' over time (Phoenix and Seu 2013: 311, Phoenix 2019). It involved adapting to living together and negotiating inter- and intragenerational kin relationships in a new social location and socio-cultural context (Menjívar and Abrego 2009).

Like Patricia, Grace was born and grew up in West Africa, raised by her grandmother alongside some of her cousins. She was not the firstborn: her internationally mobile parents, as students in the UK, had had other children before Grace, whom they raised in the UK and who had British citizenship. As a young woman, Grace visited her siblings in the UK while pursuing her studies in her country. Eventually she settled in the UK herself and became a mother, but her limited leave to remain

expired. She was conscious of how the outlook of her UK-raised siblings differed from her own, and noted how these differences had shaped their relationships:

[My siblings] were very different from us. They studied here. Their lifestyle is a bit different. To me I felt they were a bit different. They just don't see things the way I see them. They are more relaxed. I don't know. They seem more happier. I think they feel more happier and more relaxed. They don't really know a lot of stress. Different background, different life ... Sometimes I see [my sister] is distanced from me. [Rachel: You don't feel that connection?] No, not at all. I mean, I should be living with her now. If it was in [my country of birth], we would almost be in the same house, living together, raising our kids together.

Grace felt that her UK-raised siblings did not understand how difficult it was for her as a mother with insecure immigration status. It seemed to her that her siblings' very different upbringings and their British citizenship gave them a greater sense of security and a more relaxed approach to life; she hinted that they perhaps took this for granted. One much older sister had tried to build a relationship with her, taking her out shopping and 'things like that', 'but there wasn't really a connection'. Grace told me they had not seen each other for years, although her sister called once in a while. 'She's really nice,' Grace remarked, 'but ... she's got her life!' Despite efforts on both sides, their relationship was characterised by a certain emotional distance. This had implications for Grace's ability to ask her sister for practical or other kinds of support.

One mother explained that it would be too difficult living with a sibling who had grown up in the UK with British citizenship because of the tensions that would arise from having different immigration statuses and differential access to resources:

You need your own space. Especially with kids. I don't think I could live with my sister. It's not like she wouldn't have me, but ... I wouldn't live there, with her in her house with my kids ... We would end up not speaking anymore. That's what happens, a lot of families, they're not on speaking terms anymore. They throw each other out. And that's it. Well, at least now, she speaks to me, and she speaks to me with respect, because I've never really got a lot of stuff from her. I don't ask her for anything, I don't ask her for money, I don't ask her for a place to live, nothing.

This mother noted that the one thing she had asked her sister for was a letter of support when she was applying for limited leave to remain, which her sister had been happy to do. The mother believed this had been possible only because she had never moved in with her or asked her for financial assistance, and had thereby avoided becoming embroiled in potential conflicts. Maintaining a certain emotional distance had helped her to preserve good relations with her sister and ultimately to obtain the support she most needed to regularise her immigration status.

Another strategy was to tolerate (or to be prepared to tolerate) negative treatment from a family member by trying to rationalise it in the context of a temporary situation of dependency, and to have a plan in place to ensure it did not become indefinite. This was apparent in the narrative of a mother who had moved to the UK a few months earlier with her young son to join her husband who was studying and working in another city:

The only relative I have here is my sister-in-law. If she didn't approve for me to stay with her for the next two months, probably I would be on the streets by now, or probably I should have gone back. It also depends on the type of person you are, type of relative you have. I can be very calm and accommodating – some people are not even accommodating, not even for a day. It is normal for her to have [moments of frustration] because at times she will need her privacy. She will just flare up sometimes. It's a normal thing that happens. As a woman, and considering the fact that whatever I am doing is for the sake of my child, no matter how bad it is, I will just have to let it slide. She can tell me to move out today – where will I go?! [laughs] [Rachel: That puts you in quite a precarious position.] She has really tried, trust me. I have other people in the UK, but some of them are living outside London. I wanted to come to London because it's a place where you can easily get a job. [But] outside London seems to be much, much cheaper.

This mother was mindful that she did not have a particularly close relationship with her sister-in-law; consequently, she was prepared to be 'accommodating' of any hostile behaviours by her relative in order to sustain the relationship and access to shelter for herself and her child.

As this section has shown, being closely related biologically, or through marriage, did not necessarily engender intimate connections or uncomplicated access to support. In relation to adult kin in the UK, mothers had to carefully navigate emotional distance, everyday tensions

and limited episodes of dependency, enabling access to different kinds of support. This reveals the unequal power dynamics in relationships with adult kin, to which we now turn.

Mixed-status adult kin relationships in the UK as a site of unequal power and conflict

At times, tensions escalated and fed into unequal power dynamics in mothers' relationships with adult kin shaped by differential immigration statuses and access to resources. Such dynamics could have a particularly harmful impact on mothers when these relationships played a central and prolonged role as a source of material, financial or practical support. In these situations, kin relationships were sometimes experienced as sites of marginalisation, exploitation or conflict (Menjívar and Abrego 2009), affecting how mothers were able to provide for and protect their children.

When Tamara first moved to the UK as a teenager, she lived with her stepsister Janice and her adult nephews, all of whom had British citizenship. As well as providing somewhere to live, Janice helped her to enrol on a course at a local college and find paid work. As a teenager who was 'still a bit unsure of the world', Tamara 'took on the role of cooking, cleaning, and not going out, [looking after] the house and [Janice's] kids'. Initially, Tamara accepted this. But as she became more confident and began to develop her social networks – including, later, couple relationships – she began to resent her relatives' expectations of her.

Over the years that followed, Tamara spent time living with friends and relatives in and, later, outside of London. Her trajectory was shaped not only by her insecure immigration status, but also by the laws and rules in place at the time, and how these were implemented. At times she was able to study and do paid work within 'the system', which helped her develop new kinds of knowledge. She did well at work and was promoted, which increased her confidence and gave her a stable income. At other times – such as when new legal measures were introduced, putting regularisation of her status out of reach – Tamara's position was highly precarious, and she became more reliant on her sister and cousins for material and practical support. In such situations, this dependency made Tamara vulnerable to exploitation and mistreatment by her relatives. At one point, while trying to regularise her status, Tamara lived with a cousin and worked for his small business on an informal basis. She worked very long hours for exceptionally low pay, which she described as 'demeaning'. Later, at Janice's invitation, she returned to London to move back in with

her. Janice found her a job as a care worker, but, as before, the wage was very low, and Tamara felt personally exploited. On top of this, she felt unsafe in Janice's home because of her adult nephew's violent behaviour: it was a volatile space, and conflict was frequent.

As discussed in [Chapter 3](#), Tamara felt an urgent need to leave Janice's home: she quickly formed a couple relationship and moved in with her new partner. This relationship soon became abusive, and even more so once she became a mother. Looking back, Tamara felt that Janice had been exploiting her: she had effectively 'left a controller – for the next controlling person'. Janice had openly disapproved of Tamara's partner from the outset, and was frustrated that her warnings had not been heeded. Yet when she realised that Tamara's relationship was becoming abusive, and that her partner was withholding the money she needed to survive as a mother, Janice provided Tamara a lifeline, as mentioned in [Chapter 3](#): she offered her cash in return for cleaning her house every week. This gave Tamara the means to buy the everyday things that she and her baby needed. On occasion, Janice also gave Tamara clothes for her young son. Tamara was grateful for this support. However, Janice continued to ask her to clean the house even after she had escaped the abusive couple relationship. For Tamara, this arrangement, presented as a form of financial assistance, had become an obligation. She felt uncomfortable: the nature of this obligation felt degrading. It reinforced Tamara's sense of not being seen as an equal member of the wider family:

The whole family thing is a very complicated thing for me. At this moment in time, I don't feel part of a family unit ... The family unit is [my son] and me ... I'm starting to come to the realisation that I'm just ... I don't know ... I'm just existing ... I suppose it's because I've realised I don't feel I've had much achievement. I don't feel a part of the family unit ... When I went to clean for my sister just before Christmas ... I realised like I'm really just the cleaner. She had a family meal – and me and [my son] wasn't invited. She was giving me some kind of story, and when I looked on the WhatsApp picture her grandkids were there. She was like, I didn't invite you cos I know it's a bit late and [your son] has to go to school ... But her grandkids were present at the dinner. So I'm really just ranked as ... the cleaner! So that's it, really. I just need to, just wait for the papers to come through, so that I can move on with another phase of my life, do things with [my son].

For Tamara, the reframing of the cleaning job as an obligation became entwined with her sister's exclusion of her and her son from the family's Christmas meal. Tamara felt she was being deliberately marginalised and excluded from her wider family. She believed this stemmed from her not having leave to remain intersecting with not being a 'blood' relation, as well as having been raised separately from her much older stepsiblings. Tamara's sense of exclusion was also made visually apparent to her by the fact that there were no photographs of her or her son in her sister's home, whereas there were photographs of other family members. 'If you go to her house, I don't think we've ever had a picture together,' Tamara reflected. 'I see pictures of her grandsons and her son's babymum. I've never felt like I fit in.' The selective display of family photographs indicated inequalities in family relationships (Finch 2007, Morgan 2011b). It reinforced Tamara's prolonged and multilayered experiences of being made to feel she did not belong.

The unequal power dynamics were also underpinned by expectations and obligations in relation to providing care for elderly transnational kin. Tamara felt that her stepsister's marginalisation of her was partly due to a perception that, as the youngest child in the family, and the one with precarious immigration status in the UK, she had an obligation to return to the Caribbean to care for their mother:

To my sister, it seems like nothing is going on for me, even before I had [my son]. She was like, why are you here, what's the point of you being here, there's nothing going on for you. Because her mum is getting old, there's always been a plan for me to go back. Now that [she] is getting older, they are telling me that her eyesight is getting bad, and she refuses to have anybody in the house to look after her – they're telling me ... [I should go back and look after her].

This account suggests that Janice was using 'guilt as a motivating emotion' to 'elicit caregiving responses' from Tamara, being a 'less powerful' member of the family (Baldassar 2015: 82). Tamara resisted this role, however. While feeling some guilt, her sense of obligation and guilty feelings were not strong enough to convince her to return to her country of origin to assume this caring role (Baldassar 2015: 86). Her decision was shaped by both having put down roots in the UK and her insecure immigration status, which would have likely prevented her from returning to the UK had she decided to visit her kin in the Caribbean.

Like Tamara, Kianga had left what had felt like an unliveable life with her adult kin in London, choosing instead to move in with her new partner and his family, to the disapproval of her kin. Becoming pregnant led to her being ostracised by her kin both in her country of origin (as discussed in the section entitled 'Navigating troubled relationships with transnational adult kin') and in the UK. From this point onwards, she received no support of any kind from her relatives, leading to her loss of immigration status. During her pregnancy, her partner's sister told her she had to leave. This had a major impact on her physical health and wellbeing, and further increased her precarity. She and her son spent many years sofa-surfing among friends. When, by chance, Kianga bumped into her aunt, having not had any contact for many years, she felt a mixture of obligation to demonstrate subservience and a desire not to rebuild the relationship:

I saw her recently ... She was the one who saw me. She said, Kianga, it's been a long time. I knelt on the floor, on my knees. It's to show respect. But I don't want to see her again ... She wanted to visit [my son], but I didn't want her to.

Kianga's anecdote about this encounter with her aunt illustrated vividly the hierarchical relationship, shaped by generation and immigration status. It also conveyed Kianga's agency in resisting her aunt's expectation of seeing her son.

For individuals with no leave to remain and no right to do paid work, a big source of discomfort in mixed-status extended families was the potential dependency on wider family members with leave to remain, and how this could create a sense of indebtedness towards them, a feeling of obligation to do any task that was asked of them, and a feeling of being unable to redress the power imbalance in family relationships. It could also generate feelings of humiliation and produce low self-esteem. In a discussion group, a father told me he believed that his kin in the UK had shared information among themselves about his insecure immigration status. 'I'm a laughing stock,' he remarked. Deterred from asking for help, he resolved instead to cope alone. Yet he felt stuck: 'You can't move, you can't go back, you are stuck to one place.'

Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated the important role of adult kin relationships, both transnationally and within the UK, as sites for care and support, but has also shown how they can become sites of tension, ambivalence, marginalisation or conflict. Precariously positioned mothers may yearn for in-person care from family members abroad, especially during pregnancy and after giving birth. While mothers may find their responsibilities for providing personal and practical care for transnational kin are reduced, they may instead be expected to send remittances, which can be difficult or impossible to do. Sustaining relationships with transnational kin through online technologies may be an important means of sharing emotional support but requires careful communication management. The chapter has also shown the importance of relationships with adult kin within the UK as sources of support in times of difficulty, but has highlighted how differential immigration statuses and access to resources can create tensions, exacerbate existing power dynamics and present risks of marginalisation or exploitation. It has underlined how mothers must navigate tensions in adult kin relationships with care. The next chapter examines how faith networks can play a key role in addressing unmet support needs and act as spaces of belonging – but how emerging tensions and power dynamics must be navigated in this context too.

Interlude

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

Claudia: She [case worker] 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?

Claudia: 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?

Claudia: 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 ... 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.

6

Faith-based relationships

When facing uncertainty and distance from friends and kin post-migration, many women who follow a religion seek out a faith organisation with which they have some kind of connection; this can provide feelings of security (McAndrew and Voas 2014). Finding a co-ethnic-led faith group can be a route to finding people with shared languages, values and cultural practices (Hirschman 2004). Faith organisations can play an important role as social infrastructure, providing safe and welcoming spaces for connection. They may facilitate opportunities for social engagement and provide a degree of ‘visibility in public space’ (Burgess 2009: 265; see also Hirschman 2004, Garbin 2013, McAndrew and Voas 2014), generating social trust (Portes 1998). In this way, belonging to a faith community can be a source of ‘respectability’, recognition and social mobility (Hirschman 2004: 1229). Faith spaces and networks can also open doors to social and economic resources, such as English classes, accommodation and parenting support (Hirschman 2004, Foner and Alba 2008). Faith organisations may act as spaces of both physical and psychological refuge (Hirschman 2004, McAndrew and Voas 2014), which can be particularly important when facing multilayered precarity. African-initiated churches – especially those within the transnational neo-Pentecostalism movement – have been growing strongly in London (Garbin 2013, Dawson and Schomberg 2019, Owolade 2023). Many Pentecostal churches are oriented towards social action, providing support to those facing poverty (Burgess 2009).

Yet faith-based networks bring challenges, tensions and risks, which mothers must navigate with care. First, as discussed throughout the book, relationships create expectations of reciprocity and unspecified obligations (Portes 1998). Within tight-knit communities, compliance may be ensured through rewards but also sanctions (Portes and Sensenbrenner 1993, Portes 1998). Second, as discussed in Chapters

3 and 4, confiding in others presents risks. Women must weigh up the risks of being judged, and of their personal information being spread, as indicated by Claudia's narrative in the preceding Interlude. Third, in a bounded community, relationships are often shaped by unequal power, social control and exclusionary practices (Portes 1998). 'Demands for conformity' may constrain individual actions (Portes 1998: 16, Portes and Sensenbrenner 1993), including mothering practices. Focusing on the context of Christian churches, this chapter explores precariously positioned mothers' relational belonging through six overlapping practices: becoming part of a church community; active participation in church groups; sharing (scarce) resources; confiding in church leaders and members; claiming faith spaces; and, finally, practising faith on a personal level.

Becoming part of a church community

When Miriam fled her war-torn central African country to join her husband in the UK and claim asylum, she knew no one but him. Her husband had already joined a church led by co-nationals, and he introduced her to women from the church. Becoming embedded in this network soon after her arrival made Miriam feel safe and welcome in a time of turmoil (Hirschman 2004). During the early months, while her husband took care of their joint asylum application and Miriam was confined to their single room in an HMO, her 'community ladies' helped in practical ways, bringing her clothes and food:

They were coming one by one, day by day, lunchtime, in the morning, in the evening, just to keep me company, just to tell me everything will be fine, just to say to me, 'You're not the first one going through this. We have paper, we have passport, we've been accepted in this country, but this is the way. So you will get there.' They come and just keep me busy! They come over with food, we cook, we talk, they come with children, just for me not to be bored. So it was my [co-national] community. It was a big church, with lots of people, activity. They will come, we share the word of God, we watch some videos from back home. So they was the first people that I met that I was comfortable to be around. Because I was indoor! I was in the box! They make me feel like I was going outside. That was great support.

Miriam's network of 'community ladies' was central to her sense of social identity and belonging. As Miriam began to venture out into the neighbourhood, she started attending weekly services at the community church with her husband. Becoming part of this group provided cultural continuity, cohesion and a sense of status for her and her husband (Hirschman 2004). Her religious beliefs and practices had been a core aspect of 'doing family' throughout her life, as well as a civic responsibility. 'We was born in a family that there was faith already,' Miriam told me. '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.' Joining this church made Miriam and her husband (and later their children) part of a moral community with shared beliefs and practices.

Kidane, who was from East Africa, had, like Miriam, sought asylum in the UK more than a decade earlier. When we met up in a children's centre, Kidane described how her faith was a central aspect of her social identity and, as such, an important means of embedding in the local community. Kidane recalled how, having claimed asylum on arrival in London, she had initially been 'dispersed', as part of a government policy, to a town in a different part of the country where she did not know anyone. She was an Orthodox Christian, and had not been able to find an Orthodox church in her town. Instead, she had decided to attend weekly services at a nearby Church of England church, at least temporarily. 'Even if it's not the *same* religion,' Kidane explained to me, 'it's same religion, it's faith of God.' Through a serendipitous encounter in the street with a woman from her country, she then found out about an Orthodox church in the neighbouring city, and began attending services there instead. This allowed her to connect with people from her country, providing cultural continuity (Hirschman 2004). Kidane reflected:

It was really very important, because when you stay in this country for the first time, the culture is different. [This country is a] 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 [you feel] happy, and sometimes you find the traditional culture, food.

Kidane's regular attendance at the Orthodox church provided access to shared cultural practices and opportunities for friendships with people from her co-ethnic community. She became part of mutually supportive networks, which provided the 'psychological ballast' to help her adjust to life in the UK and cope with experiences of loneliness and exclusion (Foner and Alba 2008: 362). More than this, it gave her the confidence to enrol in English classes and other courses at the local college, and she became actively engaged in the local community. When Kidane later moved back to London, she found an Orthodox church much more easily. She met her partner and they had a child, but her partner became abusive and they later separated, leaving Kidane to mother alone; her regular attendance at the church became a vital means of accessing emotional, 'moral' and material support (discussed later in this chapter in the sections entitled 'Active participation in church groups' and 'Confiding (or not) in church leaders and church members').

Grace, who had been raised within a Pentecostal church in West Africa, similarly prioritised regular church attendance with her two young children. As a mother with precarious immigration status experiencing financial hardship, she had undergone multiple house moves with her children from one neighbourhood to another, which limited the stability that church membership could provide. Nevertheless, Grace felt that regular attendance was essential to transmit religious practices to her young children (McAndrew and Voas 2014). She was prepared to take on the necessary emotion work to embed in a new church community each time they moved – even though their hypermobility made it difficult to build strong connections with other church members. 'Sometimes people feel that, well, you've been here for [only] two months, we don't really know you,' Grace remarked. 'So I just go to church and pray, and that's it. Sometimes I make friends, but when you have to leave them behind...' She paused. It takes time to build trust, I suggested. Grace agreed: 'It takes a long time to build trust.'

When we met at her room in an HMO, Grace told me she had enrolled her young son in a Catholic school. In addition to attending a Pentecostal church, they attended services at the Catholic church linked to the school. Grace underlined the importance of attending church:

The Bible says train your child the way you want them to grow. 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.

Respectability was important to Grace. She was concerned that church members might look down on her or criticise her because she was a single mother and because of her insecure immigration status (if they suspected it) and her financial precarity. Cultivating her family's Christian identity would, she felt, help her both maintain respectability in the eyes of others and protect her children from perceived dangers in the wider community:

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.

Bounded faith communities were therefore not always or necessarily welcoming and inclusive, but could at times be experienced as hierarchical and exclusionary.

One mother explained that her main reason for going to church was to connect with other people, to manage her depression and attenuate her isolation:

I just go to church to pray and to cure my depression. I just want to go to a public place to see people. I go to church to socialise, because my Christianity is within myself. I'm not going to church because that's where Jesus is – Jesus is everywhere, in my home. I don't want to be in the house by myself, and be depressed, and be sad with the kids. You get dressed, you go to church.

She felt that she could practise her faith anywhere; for her, the function of her church was to provide a space for engagement and a sense of community.

Making choices about joining, attending or withdrawing from a church was a means by which many of the women protected themselves from hostile practices and embedded themselves in safe, welcoming spaces. Some years before we met, Tamara, who had moved to the UK from the Caribbean, had attended a church in the town outside London where she was living at the time, but she became increasingly uncomfortable with what she saw as the pastors' exploitative and controlling behaviours towards some congregants, including herself. Although she had confided her precarious situation to the pastors, they had still expected her to contribute financially to the church. 'Being open with your situation, they use that,' she remarked. "*You come to church, you pay your tithe, God will see you through.*" Tamara recounted how the church leaders had branded

her friend 'a witch' and had excommunicated her for 'not conforming to what they want'. Tamara also related how she had offered support to a neighbour who was struggling with depression by accompanying her to her church, a different one, but her actions were deemed unacceptable by leaders of her own church; they designated her 'a witch' too, and church members began to avoid her. 'Church is controlling just as a human person is,' she reflected. Ultimately, Tamara decided to leave that church and shift her allegiance to one where 'they weren't so demanding'. Some years later, back in London, as a mother, she found a local church of her denomination and began attending weekly services with her young son.

Active participation in church groups

Mothers' involvement in their churches often went beyond attending weekly services. Many joined Bible study groups and women's groups, the church choir or events committees; several taught children at Sunday school. Getting involved in these groups was a way of embedding more deeply in a 'moral community' (Durkheim 1995 [1912]). It offered opportunities to take on leadership roles, which could increase 'respectability' and social status (Hirschman 2004). In some cases, it led to greater engagement with the wider society (Foley and Hoge 2007).

Rose, having been granted asylum from her West African country two decades previously, had moved to Ryeton and joined a Catholic church. On becoming a mother, she was keen to ensure her children participated actively in the life of the church: she enrolled them in the church choir and sent them to the Catholic school connected to this church. Through these practices, Rose embedded her family within her local faith community and formed friendships with other mothers; this gave her a sense of stability and attachment to the local neighbourhood. Rose's participation was also a means of demonstrating and reflecting her faith. She shared with me examples of thorny challenges in her life which had been resolved, sometimes in ways that had exceeded her expectations: she attributed these outcomes to her strong religious beliefs, and in turn wanted to show her thanks by further embedding herself in the church. This is discussed further later in the chapter.

When Tamara returned to the London neighbourhood of Ryeton and joined a new church, she was invited to join a weekly fellowship group, held midweek at a church member's house. She valued the intimate, welcoming, non-hierarchical structure of the group. 'It's like a little family thing,' she explained. She would bring her young son along,

and he would play with the son of another fellowship member. Despite Tamara's very limited resources, she took her turn in preparing meals for the group.

People are coming from work, so they're hungry, so we prepare a meal, we pray, we eat it and we do Bible study. We read something from the Bible, a text from the Bible, or a chapter. And then they pose questions to everybody, and it helps you understand it better, basically. I like the setting, the scenario, because it's not like you go to church, sitting down and the pastor's already found what he needs to find and he's telling you 'this is what happened'. It's a different way around. We are doing all the interaction, we are reading the Bible, all these questions are being posed, it kind of makes you think on what it is actually saying.

Participating in this family-like fellowship group in an intimate domestic and non-hierarchical space felt comfortable and safe. Tamara had developed a strong sense of connection with her church members. The fellowship group facilitated the development of social trust (Portes 1998).

Miriam became increasingly involved in church life on becoming a mother and being granted refugee status. She taught at Sunday school, engaged with the young people's group, became an active member of the women's group and helped organise large-scale events. Her participation in these groups generated a strong sense of community and conviviality:

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!

Moreover, the women's group and the youth group provided opportunities for leadership and transformative dialogue, as spaces for open discussion of sometimes sensitive issues. The women's group was an empowering gendered space for discussion and critiques of couple relationship practices and cultural norms, differences and change. At times the women invited outside speakers as a way of bringing in new perspectives on particular topics and supporting further discussion, debate and reflection. Sometimes the women's group joined with the youth group for intergenerational debates. For example, the young people were able to raise their concerns about parenting practices, questions

about integration with the wider community and intergenerational relationships ('the things children don't like that the parents do'). Miriam recounted:

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 all our 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'.

Miriam's account suggested that the women's group was able to claim a 'distinct social space' (Flores 2003: 88) within the church: this facilitated intergenerational communication and provided access to information about women's rights. In this space, women (and young people) were 'free to express themselves and feel at home' (Flores 2003: 88) in ways which had not been possible in male-dominated or male-regulated spaces. Participation in these groups was in many cases ultimately transformational, enabling women to contest and resist traditional gendered roles, and relinquish oppressive couple relationships. The space also allowed mothers to navigate the tension between stability and change (Baxter and Scharp 2015).

Sharing (scarce) resources within faith communities

Being a member of a faith community and accessing services and groups within faith spaces often facilitated access to economic and material resources, such as cash, food and shelter. This was crucial for mothers subjected to multilayered precarity, yet seeking resources could entail risks. For example, asking for help could require mothers to divulge personal information, such as precarious immigration status, which could create vulnerability. Accepting help could create obligations to reciprocate, and in ways which may not be clear (Small 2017). Attending weekly church services produced expectations, such as financial contributions in the form of tithes or offerings. Managing such obligations and expectations was in some ways more difficult than in friendships or relationships with kin, since faith-based relationships were more tenuous. Mothers therefore navigated sharing practices and associated tensions within faith spaces with care and caution.

When in need of material resources, mothers sometimes approached church leaders or co-congregants because, among the people in their networks, they considered them to be most likely to ‘possess a relevant resource’ (Small 2013: 472) and most willing to share it. Despite this instrumental dimension, faith-based connections incorporated affective aspects too (Wessendorf and Phillimore 2019, Chimbidzikai 2021). Many mothers I met told me that church members who were aware of their financial hardship would sometimes lend or give them small amounts of cash, whether in response to a request for help with a specific situation or as a gesture of solidarity. Tamara’s local pastor told her if she was ‘ever stuck for bus fare’ she should tell him; on a few occasions she had taken him up on this offer. Meanwhile, she had made friends with two church members, ‘so if I’m ever stuck, I can borrow £10, £20 – never more than that, in case I have to pay it back!’ She felt she could rely on these two people as they had been ‘consistent’ in their support, and would offer practical help too, such as giving her a lift to church.

On the other hand, both Flora and Ndidi pointed out the sporadic and limited nature of financial assistance available from co-congregants. A member of Flora’s church had been helping her family, ‘giving us £10, £20’ whenever he saw them at Sunday services, which had been ‘really helpful’ – but he was now travelling abroad, so that had ended the gifts of cash. The irregularity of this kind of financial support led Flora to ‘not bother myself too much’ with seeking help through her faith network. Ndidi shared similar views: if people at her church provided support, it was ‘just the one-off’, which was insufficient to meet her family’s ongoing needs:

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 Ndidi, whose immigration status had stabilised somewhat but who was still struggling financially, the occasional help provided by church members was, while appreciated, a symbolic gesture rather than a sustainable means of paying the bills or feeding her family. Claudia, meanwhile, was averse to asking for any such help at her church, because of the inherent risks of being judged or gossiped about, as she explained in the Interlude before this chapter. For some mothers, therefore, small gifts or loans of cash by co-congregants were highly valued and helped them provide for their families; on the other hand, such acts were sometimes seen as an unreliable or insufficient source of financial support, and asking for help could represent a risk by alerting people to their precarity.

Beyond financial support, many mothers who were regular churchgoers felt able to (and sometimes had no choice but to) turn to their faith community for material support in times of need. Tamara's co-congregants knew that she used a food bank, and sometimes helped her out by giving her food items themselves. Mothers whose church attendance had lapsed, or had been interrupted by multiple house moves, were also able to return to a church they had previously attended and ask for help. For example, Deka and her children had survived by sofa-surfing; when the friend who had been hosting them moved away, Deka returned to the church she had attended some years earlier to ask for help. There, church members gave her food and clothes for her children, and one couple invited the family to move into a room in their flat in Ryeton, letting them use the living room too, and making them feel 'part of the family'. Similarly, Patricia and her young children had been sofa-surfing among family and friends, and turned to church members when their situation became desperate; the willingness of her church members to provide shelter was a lifeline. Like the financial support discussed earlier in this section, this kind of support can be understood as social capital. Churches acted as communities united by 'common adversities', creating 'bounded solidarity'; this generated 'norms of mutual support' which could be accessed as a resource when needed (Portes and Sensenbrenner 1993: 1325).

While the provision of shelter by fellow church members was a crucial safety net for mothers and children with nowhere to go, there were inherent tensions, as discussed in [Chapters 4 and 5](#) (see also [Benckroun 2024b](#)). The new host–guest relationship amplified unequal power relations generated by different immigration statuses and the resulting differential access to resources and dependencies. Mothers had to navigate obligations and expectations of reciprocity with care. As discussed in [Chapter 4](#), Kianga and her children had been accommodated for two years by a church member; to preserve the relationship with their host and sustain the living arrangements, Kianga felt she had to ‘bring [herself] down, very low’. The development of hierarchies and the increased emotion work required of mothers were most noticeable when hosts’ goodwill was used up. Such experiences underlined the contingency of this form of social capital, and the precarity produced by insecure immigration status, which meant that mothers were vulnerable to ill treatment by those on whom they depended for day-to-day survival. Practices of inclusion and exclusion were (re)produced and embodied in the private spaces of church members’ homes.

Participating in a faith community was a two-way process. While mothers were able to ask for material and financial support, they were expected to contribute in various ways too. These community norms were communicated by church leaders in the form of moral guidance. Precariously positioned mothers contributed to the best of their abilities. As mentioned above in the section entitled ‘Active participation in church groups’, Tamara joined the cooking rota for her Bible study group, while several mothers volunteered to clean their churches, as discussed in the section entitled ‘Claiming (physical and virtual) faith spaces’ later in this chapter. However, at times mothers were expected to contribute in ways which were beyond their means, which made them feel marginalised and vulnerable. Chinelo, for example, felt that her Pentecostal church was unreasonable in its expectations of church members, in relation to both time and money. Church services were long – three to four hours – and involved continuous prayer. Chinelo was uncomfortable with this. For her, prayer was a personal practice, not a public performance, and should not demand so much time. Talking to me in her home, she imitated the pastor, dramatically calling on the congregation to pray for various groups. She paused, then reflected:

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!

Chinelo also felt uneasy about the expectation that all church members should contribute financially to the church as part of the practice of tithing, when some, like herself, were experiencing severe financial hardship:

Chinelo: So they drag, drag, drag, pay, pay, pay ... They say you need to pay 10 per cent.

Rachel: What do you do then?

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

Rachel: You have to show everybody?

Chinelo: 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?

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

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

Chinelo: One time I was going, and I don't have money. That day I put I think £2. [Shouts] 'Some people are putting coins! *Ten per cent!*' [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 [for me] it's very big. These people, when they see it, they will think it's low, but that is what I have.

For mothers like Chinelo, who were experiencing extreme financial hardship, expectations of conforming to a faith community's norms around tithing were potentially alienating. Chinelo felt her ability to participate as an equal member of the community was being called into question. The shaming discourses she experienced at this church signalled that membership of the community was not automatic but dependent on meeting expectations of a certain level of financial contribution. Those unable to do so were at risk of being ostracised. Ultimately, Chinelo resisted what she felt were unreasonable demands on her time and resources: she reduced her attendance at this church and instead on some days attended an Anglican church where services were shorter and the practice of financial contribution was managed more discreetly.

Kianga experienced other forms of exclusionary practices at her church. Before her immigration status was regularised, she felt excluded from conversations with co-congregants about church projects. She felt she was seen as ‘not like them’, because she was unable to contribute financially:

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 will have a say]. 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 [the church] 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 [money] ... 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.

Kianga was acutely aware of how her legal and financial precarity impacted on power and relational dynamics, feeling silenced when she attempted to contribute to discussions. She felt that church members were not interested in hearing her views (Björnberg 2011). Conscious that others could exploit her insecure status (Erel 2018), Kianga felt it was safer to remain in the margins rather than draw attention to herself:

In the church, people might know my circumstances, but when they are talking, I just keep my mouth ... [If] I do things that are not right, that's when people are like, ‘she does not have her status’, and they want to use it ... that will make people to look at you like, ‘you don't have your stuff’.

Immigration status appeared to play a key role in the social boundaries and “‘community’ politics’ that played out within Kianga's church, along with other social structural factors (Silvey 2005: 144). Faith spaces were therefore not always safe or welcoming forms of social infrastructure for women who were positioned by insecure immigration status. ‘[S]ocially accepted forms of public civility’ shaping encounters did not always

'equate with an ethics of care and mutual respect for difference' and did not necessarily 'develop any lasting challenge to embedded prejudices and stereotypes' (Vincent et al. 2017: 1976). This had implications for access to resources, which could be limited or denied (Bourdieu 1986, Ryan 2011).

During my fieldwork, Kianga was granted leave to remain; she felt this changed how her co-congregants interacted with her, as well as her own sense of belonging:

In the church, I see the way they ... before if you don't have stuff [leave to remain], you will be left out of stuff. But now they are inviting, they want you to be among [them]. 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. So I have my own confidence. It's not like they are pulling me away – I am the one putting myself away. But now I am doing a little. 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.

Kianga felt that her new immigration status, having recourse to public funds and the right to earn an income gave her the confidence to participate more actively as part of her faith network.

It has changed the way I feel before. 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.

Kianga's ability to contribute financially to her church community strengthened her sense of belonging: she felt more accepted and respected by her church members. As her narrative suggests, her earlier sense of exclusion was at least partly due to her own reserve because of her precarious immigration status and financial circumstances. The improvement in Kianga's situation strengthened her sense of self and wellbeing.

Confiding (or not) in church leaders and church members

A degree of self-disclosure was essential to build connections with others and create interpersonal trust within faith spaces as in other contexts. As discussed in [Chapters 3 and 4](#), confiding in others was a necessary aspect of seeking and sharing emotional support, and even material and financial support. However, as discussed above in the section entitled ‘Sharing (scarce) resources within faith communities’, for some mothers it also created risks of being judged or personal information being spread. Directly or indirectly revealing one’s legal precarity presented risks. Mothers had to weigh up the risks and benefits of confiding in church leaders or members. Ayodele, for example, was cautious about revealing too much about her situation to people at her Catholic church, not least the priest:

[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.

This tension between the need for privacy and the need for a degree of self-disclosure in faith-based relationships mirrored the tension in evidence in the early stages of couple relationships (discussed in [Chapter 3](#)) and in friendships ([Chapter 4](#)). While shared beliefs and values might bring people together as a bounded faith community, relationships formed within faith organisations were not as strongly based on the principle of social exchange as friendships, and trust was often less established. This meant that mothers had to be more explicit about their needs to justify requests for specific types of support. Ayodele felt that church members and leaders were unlikely to understand her circumstances, and so avoided confiding in them, instead turning to one of a handful of trusted friends from outside her church.

Building trust with co-congregants was particularly difficult for mothers like Grace, as discussed in [Chapter 4](#), who had been subjected to frequent house moves, since this meant repeatedly having to find a new church to join, and undertaking the emotion work of reaching out to church members. Grace felt marginalised by her precarious situation.

She chose not to tell church members about her immigration status and NRPF condition to avoid being judged by those who were more affluent and who, in her view, had had a much easier journey to leave to remain and success:

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 [national insurance] 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.

Despite having grown up in an upwardly mobile family, and having been university-educated, Grace was in a precarious situation, and felt excluded by church members who were in more secure positions. The disparity between their status and her own was perhaps further complicated by her church's 'prosperity teaching', an approach found in many Pentecostal churches suggesting that wealth and success are earned through faith (Burgess 2009, Garbin 2013). These factors made it difficult to build trust and deterred precariously positioned women from confiding in others.

Claudia, as she articulated in the preceding Interlude, was similarly disinclined to share personal information with co-congregants, so as to protect herself and her family from judgemental responses, gossip and potential exploitation. However, as she acknowledged in relaying the interaction with her support worker, this reduced opportunities for accessing material and other kinds of support.

One mother told me that she avoided making friends at her co-national church because she did not want to disclose her immigration status or her financial difficulties:

I try not to disclose my leave to remain with anyone, because once you do, they'll treat you really badly, they will look down on you. They will exclude you from things because they think you don't have money. They think you are begging. Within the African circle, once they realise you don't have your papers, they start treating you funny. And those ones that pretend they want to help you, they want to take advantage of you ... Once they know you don't have your papers, you are a victim already ... So I don't make friends ... Try

not to talk to lots of people, try not to tell them your situation ... We just socialise. Nobody knows I don't have papers. [We just say] 'How are you doing? How are the kids?'

This mother felt that it was important to 'socialise' within her church but also to avoid getting too close to other people, so as not to have to disclose personal information, as this presented a risk of being exploited.

Kidane avoided sharing information with church members about her personal life because of her concerns that they would be judgemental about the breakdown of her marriage. In her culture, she told me, such things are viewed as shameful. On the other hand, she did confide in her church leaders: 'With the priests, it's very easy, they are listening to you, they are very, very helpful, they are kind.' The priests would phone Kidane regularly when she was going through a particularly difficult time, offering reassurance and counselling her to keep hoping and praying that her situation would be resolved: "Don't worry, tomorrow is another day, be faithful, just pray."

Despite the difficulties in building trust with co-congregants, some mothers were able to build strong connections, and found their support invaluable during difficult times. When Kianga's son was seriously ill in hospital, some of her 'church people' would visit them at home or at the hospital, or, if they could not visit, they would call her; some would look after her young daughter so that she could stay with her son. This helped relieve the pressure she was under:

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.

Confiding in others was important as a means of accessing emotional support, empathy, understanding and care within faith organisations and networks. Yet not everyone could be trusted: mothers had to be selective about what they confided and in whom. Confiding made mothers vulnerable, and, as in other kinds of relationships, the benefits of self-disclosure had to be weighed up against the risks of indiscretion or exploitation.

Claiming (physical and virtual) faith spaces

The space – physical or virtual – of faith organisations plays an important role in facilitating belonging practices (Flores 2003, Bloemraad 2018). Mothers *claimed* physical faith spaces not only through the exchange of material and emotional support, as discussed earlier, in the section entitled ‘Sharing (scarce) resources within faith communities’, but also through diverse practices such as volunteering to clean the space and taking shelter. They claimed virtual faith spaces through connection with others who shared their religious beliefs, exchanging different types of support with them.

Two mothers, both members of Catholic churches in the neighbourhood, told me they volunteered to clean their churches. Ayodele used to ‘sweep and tidy’ her church once a week, continuing a practice familiar to her since childhood. She stopped only when she was pregnant. Rose made time every week to ‘wash and mop’ her church, ‘because I believe! The Lord touch me. Because I clean his house, he cleans my house.’ She had been inspired by a fellow church member whom she had observed cleaning their church after mass one day: ‘She’s there *every – single – day!*’ Rose had been impressed by this woman’s dedication to the role, which she had undertaken ever since recovering from a serious illness. ‘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!’ Cleaning the church was, for Rose and her co-volunteer, a way of giving thanks for good fortune. It was also a form of displaying their faith.

People who regularly attend a faith organisation have been shown to be more likely to volunteer, whether in a religious or secular setting, which can create social trust (Wilson and Musick 1997, Putnam and Campbell 2010, Aksoy and Wiertz 2024). Ayodele’s and Rose’s voluntary cleaning of their churches can be understood as the continuation of an established (gendered) cultural practice, as the embodiment of their faith or as a performative practice, demonstrating their religiosity. Equally important, it functioned as a means of claiming space to participate in community life and create belonging – when opportunities for other forms of economic or social participation were less accessible.

Faith communities have long been recognised as ‘a place of refuge, a “haven in a heartless world”’ where members can find ‘cultural as well as spiritual sustenance’ (Foley and Hoge 2007: 11). But faith organisations sometimes took on a more literal form of refuge, as was apparent from both Catia’s and Chinelo’s narratives. When Catia’s abusive husband left

her, leaving her to care for their three young children alone, she was told she was ineligible for housing support from the local authority, and she could not afford to rent privately. Catia and her children spent months sofa-surfing among acquaintances, until all goodwill had dried up. With nowhere else to go, the only place that she could think of was a church. Previously, when she used to drop her older boys off at school, which was far from where they were living at the time, Catia and her preschooler would spend the hours until school pick-up time at a nearby church. They had later started attending some weekly services there. In this moment of crisis, Catia returned to the church to ask for help; they allowed Catia's family to stay in a small unheated room. They ended up living there for one year:

I had nowhere to go, basically. They were helping me as well. We were there for about a year or so. It was tiny, it was cold. There was heating in the church, but the room was like a storage room. It was tiny, basically. 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. 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.

For Catia's family and others in similarly precarious positions, the church took on a vital role as a physical shelter, as well as a psychological space of sanctuary and refuge in 'an otherwise hostile territory' (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Ruiz 2015: 253, [Foley and Hoge 2007](#), [Foner and Alba 2008](#)).

For Chinelo, churches provided shelter in a different way. When she and her young daughter became homeless and had nowhere to go, she would check every evening which church in the local area would be hosting the all-night vigil. Sometimes Chinelo would leave her daughter to sleep at a friend's house, as discussed in [Chapter 4](#), and would make her way to the church alone; at other times she would take her daughter with her. Finding a night vigil meant they had a warm and safe space to sleep. Chinelo would arrange their coats on the floor to make it as comfortable as possible. Fearful about what might happen to them, however, she did not disclose their situation to anyone there. They would 'pray, pray, pray, pray, pray', and then leave by six in the morning. In contrast to Catia's experience, faith spaces did not provide a substitute home for Chinelo, and were not a site where she could access other kinds of material resources.

Mothers' seeking of shelter in churches was first and foremost a form of survival, and a means of keeping their children safe in a context of hostile immigration policies, precarious status, destitution and homelessness. It can also be understood as a form of claiming space in times of crisis. Mothers' presence in these spaces, out of hours, was a way of asserting their families' rights to have their fundamental needs met and to stay together as a family.

Online faith spaces were sometimes more accessible and flexible than physical ones, enabling mothers to engage with a wide range of people with shared beliefs. During my fieldwork, Ayodele had a young baby and often stayed at home in the family's two small rooms, rather than going outside. The internet was her main means of connecting with her friends; she was also deeply embedded in several online faith networks on Facebook, WhatsApp and other forums. These spaces allowed her to adopt a more active role in sharing support and discussing ideas with others – in contrast to the marginalised position she often felt her family was relegated to in the Catholic church that they attended each week. Online faith spaces enabled Ayodele to connect with people from her country of origin and from all over the world. Members could become online 'friends' and communicate directly with each other. In one forum, people would share their situations with other members and make 'prayer requests' or ask for financial or material help. This was managed by an administrator: the identities of those seeking help would be shielded, and those wanting to help them would be put in touch. Ayodele explained how she had formed a strong friendship with a woman from her country of origin:

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.

Online forums provided unique spaces for mutual confiding and sharing of support between and among people with shared beliefs. Sharing care through virtual spaces allowed flexibility in how they communicated and developed connections, and in how they negotiated ways of contributing material resources and emotional support.

Online spaces for shared faith practices could also be found within non-religious networks. One Muslim mother from West Africa had, with her young son, moved to the UK to join her husband just a few months before we met up. In her country of origin, she had been an active member of a non-religious, international humanitarian association. Since moving to the UK, she had continued her involvement via online meetings and conversations. She valued the emotional support of fellow members, including through prayer:

It's being part of the group, a member of the organisation ... [Members] support me emotionally but not financially. The majority of them know what's happening here ... I do talk to people ... They support me, they pray for me, you know. It's very, very important.

While her local mosque did not provide space for women to pray, she was able to engage and share mutual support through prayer transnationally with members of the organisation she was part of who shared her faith, when they met online.

Physical and online spaces therefore played an important role in shaping mothers' faith practices and how they connected with people from shared faiths.

Faith as a personal practice

The faith-based practices discussed so far have focused on possibilities for relational belonging and the exchange of resources. Yet faith is often a personal practice and, as such, a source of strength and emotional support in itself. Claudia, for example, acknowledged that church was 'part of [her] life', but emphasised that in fact 'God ... has been my main strength', rather than the church as a community or an institution. She felt that, while God had 'made [her] go through a whole lot', she would nevertheless be 'lost in the world' without him. In Claudia's view, her faith had given her the determination to keep struggling to regularise her immigration status and stabilise her family's situation:

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 ... 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.

Claudia's persistence was driven by her faith and by her belief in her family's rights to be granted both legal status and the material support they needed to survive. She felt that, despite the multiple rejections and the hostility she had experienced from a frontline worker, her repeated efforts had led to her family being given accommodation, and would ultimately lead to their being granted leave to remain. For her, this reflected the strength of her personal faith. She avoided confiding in church members or leaders, and did not see her faith network as a significant source of support in itself. Instead, what mattered to her was the personal relationship at the centre of her faith:

Claudia: 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?

Claudia: Yes. Although you go, you don't tell the head pastor, 'oh this is what I am going through', cos [he 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.

From Claudia's perspective, talking to 'human beings' at church was largely futile, since there was little they could do to help. Rather, the

significance of her church was as a shared physical space for prayer, which could provide temporary relief from ‘all your worries’, and which could lead to the gradual resolution of the problems she faced.

Like Claudia, Kianga valued her faith above all as a personal relationship. At home, she enjoyed listening to gospel songs: these helped alleviate her worries. When I sat with her in the family’s small room one day, songs from the television filled the room. ‘The music calms me down,’ she told me. ‘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.’ Prayer was important and could happen anywhere, Kianga told me; you did not need to be in church. For Kianga, faith was an important source of hope for the future in a context of extreme precarity:

[T]o 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! ... 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.

Kianga told me that her family had recently been granted limited leave to remain, ahead of the court case they had been waiting for. For her, this was evidence of the power of faith: ‘No matter how hard the situation, God is really good.’

Flora, too, placed more importance on her faith as a personal relationship than regular attendance at her church. Like Claudia and Kianga, she avoided sharing personal information with co-congregants or church leaders, nor did she open up to kin or friends. Instead, her faith was her central 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.

For Flora, positioning God as her comforter and confidant avoided the risks of personal information being gossiped about or exploited, and thereby resolved the problem of trust. Like Claudia, Flora contrasted talking to God, who had the power to change your situation, with talking to a ‘human being’, who could not be trusted and, moreover, could not resolve your problems.

For some women, therefore, faith was valued as a personal practice over and above regular church attendance and the rituals associated with it, or relationships with church members or leaders. They saw personal faith as being more important in providing a sense of hope and contributing to their subjective wellbeing. In such cases, ‘doing faith’ took place ‘within the smallest and intimate circles, in personal human situations, in pianissimo’ (Weber 1958: 134).

This chapter has shown that, for many mothers experiencing multilayered precarity, faith networks played a vital role in helping them access and share different kinds of support. The physical spaces of churches – which can be seen as social infrastructure – were important in bringing people together to engage in faith-related activities, enabling families to embed themselves in communities with people with shared values and often shared cultural backgrounds. In these ways, mothers enacted belonging for themselves and on behalf of their children. Moreover, faith spaces provided shelter in times of crisis. The chapter has also highlighted how, within faith-based relationships and spaces, as within other kinds of relationships, tensions emerge which mothers must navigate to protect themselves and their families from risks of gossip, exploitation or exclusion. While faith networks may be vital sources of practical, material, financial and emotional support, they may also be experienced as hierarchical and controlling, requiring mothers to deploy diverse strategies to protect themselves and their families. Ultimately, personal faith may be understood as the most important aspect of ‘doing faith’, providing hope for a liveable future.

Conclusion

This book began with the question of how hostile immigration policies, insecure immigration statuses and the condition of NRPF affect women who have moved to the UK and become mothers. It has shown that mothers in the UK do not have equal access to material, financial, informational or emotional support. The book has demonstrated that government policies, immigration statuses and the financial precarity caused by them, in intersection with wider structural factors, affect mothering practices and mothers' personal relationships with their children, partners, friends, adult kin and faith networks. It has highlighted how *all* of these factors shape mothers' access to different kinds of support and affect their wellbeing. It has foregrounded the centrality of personal relationships in accessing support, but also the tensions which emerge in relationships and how mothers navigate them in their everyday interactions.

The detailed ethnographic research in a diverse London neighbourhood, and subsequent knowledge-exchange workshops, gave me the opportunity to learn from mothers' first-hand experiences and practitioners' perspectives. Their accounts, together with my observations of mothers' everyday lives, showed how the 'Hostile Environment' in the UK has produced an increasingly restrictive and oppressive array of policies that have particularly harmful effects for racially minoritised mothers with insecure immigration status and NRPF, and for their children.

As I showed in [Chapter 1](#), mothers with temporary immigration statuses have been put at risk of losing their leave to remain and getting into debt through unaffordable Home Office fees and increasingly complex and fast-changing legislation. Mothers who cannot prove their right to reside in the UK have been excluded from secondary healthcare (or issued with unaffordable bills), housing, education and employment. Many who see the UK as their home and are eventually granted limited leave to remain have to pursue the convoluted and costly ten-year settlement route, and must find ways to pay the often-unaffordable costs of renewing their limited leave to remain every two and a half years.

Temporary immigration statuses and loss of status expose mothers to anxiety, depression and low wellbeing. The book has shown how legal and financial precarity affects mothering practices, as well as mothers' relationships with other people and their access to different kinds of support.

A major contribution of this research has been to bring together three theoretical concepts that are underused in work on women who migrate and become mothers: intersectionality, social infrastructure and strategic mothering. The book illuminates the relevance of intersectionality to the lives and experiences of mothers with NRPF. It has shown how mothers' interpersonal relationships are shaped by government policies which intersect with wider structural factors, including gender, family role, 'race' and ethnicity, nationality and immigration status, creating intersecting forms of oppression. The book has extended understandings of intersectionality by demonstrating how these factors intersect with physical spaces and places, affecting mothering and mothers' relationships in both positive and negative ways.

Precarious Motherhood has contributed to the understanding of a second vital concept, that of social infrastructure. Building on important work by Small (2009) and Klinenberg (2018), the book has illustrated how certain kinds of safe, welcoming spaces – such as advice centres, family drop-ins, early years settings, schools, faith groups and adult learning centres – not only bring together mothers and others from shared (or diverse) cultural backgrounds, similar migration trajectories or immigration statuses, and similar family roles, but affect how they form and sustain relationships and share different kinds of support. I have argued that, within these kinds of spaces, mothers mobilise different aspects of their identities in order to reach out to and connect with others. Such spaces and the people within them provide social recognition and enable regular contact, leading to acquaintanceships, friendships or other kinds of relationships, and increasing wellbeing. Importantly, these relationships, in turn, can facilitate – and/or constrain – mothers' access to different forms of care, support and resources.

The book has not only examined the impact of intersecting structural factors, spaces and places on mothers' relationships and everyday lives, but also shone a light on mothers' agency in navigating and resisting the multiple forms of oppression they face. In doing so, the book has extended the concept of strategic mothering. First, building on scholarship by Tracey Reynolds, Umut Erel and Patricia Hill Collins, among others, on Black motherhood, I have shown that, in the context of hostile immigration policies and multiple forms of oppression, mothers engage

in particular forms of strategic mothering. These include employing creativity and resourcefulness in providing for their children, protecting them from 'knowing too much' about their multilayered precarity, and cultivating a strong sense of identity. Second, I have shown how these strategic mothering practices are facilitated and/or constrained in diverse ways by mothers' interpersonal relationships and the spaces they access. I have also highlighted how children can be a crucial source of support to their mothers through mutual practices of care and co-constructing liveable futures.

The book has sought to extend understanding of interpersonal relational practices. It has gone beyond highlighting the vital role of different types of interpersonal relationships in enabling the exchange of information, financial and material resources, shelter and emotional support for mothers experiencing multilayered precarity. The book has built on important work by communications scholars on dialectical relational tensions (Rawlins 1983, Baxter and Montgomery 1996, Rawlins 2008, Baxter and Scharp 2015), bringing this together with the concept of precarity (Butler 2009) to show how tensions emerge within different kinds of relationships and play out in particular ways for precariously positioned mothers. *Precarious Motherhood* has developed existing scholarship on the tensions between the need for connectedness and the need for autonomy; between the need for openness and the need for privacy; and between affection and instrumentality. Moreover, it has drawn attention to the tension between the need for support and anticipated difficulties in reciprocating, in particular showing how this complicates 'doing friendship'. Again, highlighting the significance of mothers' agency, the book has demonstrated how precariously positioned mothers navigate these tensions with exceptional care in their everyday interactions. As I have shown throughout the book, the stakes are high: disclosing too much personal information, especially in relation to immigration status, could increase the risk of being gossiped about, exploited, reported to the authorities and potentially detained or deported.

Precarious Motherhood has contributed to scholarship on particular types of interpersonal relationships and has produced original empirical findings in relation to the experiences of mothers subjected to multilayered precarity. It has shown, for example, that mothers' legal and financial precarity and their exposure to hostile immigration policies affect even intimate practices within couple relationships. On the one hand, it has underlined how 'doing coupledom' provides access to emotional and financial security, wider support networks, parenthood and shared

parenting practices, and, potentially, the right to reside in the UK. On the other hand, it has foregrounded how hostile policies and precarity often also produce or exacerbate tensions and unequal power dynamics within the couple. The book has highlighted how mothers undertake ongoing 'work' within couple relationships. It has shown that this work includes 'holding' tensions and conflict; sustaining communication with children's fathers when couple relationships break down; navigating the complex questions of disclosure of precarious immigration status and asking for help to extend or regularise it; and managing to provide for children when on a very low income or no income at all. It has underlined how the breakdown of a relationship or abandonment by a partner sometimes leads to (worsening) financial difficulties, homelessness, destitution and unresolved immigration statuses, which mothers have to face alone. The book has also drawn attention to how, in some mixed-status couples, the partner with secure status may exploit their position to control and abuse the woman/mother with insecure status. I have shown how seeking help and leaving an abusive relationship can be exceptionally difficult for precariously positioned mothers. Yet, supportive networks and access to safe spaces can play an important role in helping mothers to resist coercive and abusive couple relationships and seek safety.

The book has argued that friendships, adult kin and faith networks can be vital sites for sharing financial and material resources, shelter, practical care and emotional support – but that precariously positioned mothers must still navigate tensions with care to avoid risks of exposure, exploitation or marginalisation. I have shown that, within friendships, mothers' strategies include holding back in everyday interactions; considering what information to share and with whom; assessing whom to ask for different kinds of help; reciprocating support in whichever ways are possible; (as guests in a friend's home) being attuned to hosts' feelings and responding with caution; and assessing carefully what to confide and in whom.

Within transnational relationships with adult kin, the book has shown how mothers negotiate what kinds of support they can offer, and how they exchange care through online communication. I have shown that mothers do this in ways which protect kin from knowing too much about the extent of their precarious circumstances, and which save themselves from the discomfort of revealing too much. Mothers undertake kin work to sustain (or sometimes step back from) relationships with family members abroad. While relationships with kin in the UK can provide different types of support, including practical care and shelter, mothers are compelled to navigate gendered and generational power dynamics

and negotiate family responsibilities. I have illustrated how mothers navigate tensions between care and control – for example, by avoiding asking for help except as a last resort. This reduces the risk of creating obligations which cannot be met, and the risk of being marginalised or exploited by family members.

One issue that had not been evident in previous research is the importance of faith networks to people with no recourse to public funds. Although the research that informs this book did not set out to investigate the place of faith networks, it became apparent that these are of importance to mothers with religious beliefs. Focusing on mothers who are practising Christians, the research shows that the impact is, however, contradictory. On the one hand, faith networks can be a vital source of material, financial and emotional support. On the other hand, the findings show that, within faith spaces, mothers navigate tensions between privacy and openness, and between autonomy and connectedness, to protect themselves and their families from risks of gossip, exploitation or marginalisation. As in the context of friendships not related to faith networks, I have highlighted mothers' core strategy of avoiding sharing personal information with others, including details of immigration status. I have shown how mothers seek to protect themselves from hierarchies and controlling dynamics by holding back from conversations, reducing the frequency of their attendance at church services or moving to another church. Personal faith, on the other hand, may play an important role in providing hope for a liveable future.

Precarious Motherhood has underlined the centrality of interpersonal relationships for mothers contending with multilayered precarity and restrictive immigration policies – not only for sharing care, support and resources, but in order to claim belonging and enact citizenship in everyday spaces for themselves and on behalf of their children. The book has highlighted in a broader sense how government policies, physical and online spaces, and wider structural factors shape different kinds of personal relationships. It has also emphasised the agentive, creative and resourceful role individuals play in resisting oppressive structural factors and navigating everyday tensions to enact belonging and protect their wellbeing and that of their families.

The findings of this research have implications for the health and wellbeing of racially minoritised families with insecure immigration status who are experiencing financial hardship. During the writing of this book, in their efforts to reduce net migration, Conservative governments implemented measures to restrict access to skilled worker visas and spouse/partner visas and to prevent migrant care workers from bringing

family members to join them (House of Commons Library 2024, Sumption and Brindle 2024). New legislation was passed restricting the rights of people seeking asylum in the UK, including the highly controversial ‘Rwanda scheme’ (Walsh and Sumption 2024), a plan to ‘offshore’ the processing of asylum claims (this scheme was subsequently cancelled by the new Labour Government in July 2024). Alongside this, right-wing politicians and much of the right-wing media doubled down on hostile narratives around migration, targeting racially minoritised groups migrating to the UK, including those seeking asylum. These narratives have been seen as a major factor contributing to racial discrimination and racist violence in the UK (UN CERD 2024, Gentleman 2024). The eruption of far-right violence and riots in August 2024 – which targeted people seeking asylum, Muslims and racially minoritised people more broadly – was a particularly shocking and visible manifestation of such racist violence (Webb-Strong 2024, Sinmaz and Vinter 2024).

The findings of this book make it undeniable that government policies and rhetoric on the Hostile Environment for immigration has had harmful effects on mothers, children and families with NRPF, reducing their access to different kinds of support. The new Government, and policymakers and politicians more generally, must consider the impact of immigration policies on families and, at a broader level, on health and social inequalities. This includes access to housing, children’s experiences of school, and family members’ access to further and higher education. Policies should be reviewed to ensure they do not impoverish families on the basis of their immigration status, ‘race’ or ethnicity, gender or family role, or exclude them from the services, support and networks they need to flourish. At the local level, local authorities, schools and third-sector organisations should work with local communities to create, expand and protect safe, accessible spaces where families can access good-quality information and advice, form connections, develop friendships, share resources and support, develop a sense of belonging, and thrive as active and full members of their community and wider society. This is crucial to reduce the stark inequalities and multiple forms of oppression experienced by many racially minoritised mothers with NRPF living in the UK. As mothers of British or soon-to-be-British children, many will eventually be granted leave to remain, but only after years of waiting and spending thousands of pounds which they cannot afford. This uncertainty, and the financial precarity and relentless anxiety it produces, can be traumatic, as Kianga pointed out to me at the end of the fieldwork, soon after she was granted limited leave to remain (below). Yet this could be alleviated if policymakers were to reverse the harmful policies of the Hostile Environment.

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 ... 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.

(Kianga)

Glossary

NB These are not official or legal definitions, but are intended to help readers who may not be familiar with some of the terms used in the book.

appeal rights exhausted (ARE): A person is considered to be ‘appeal rights exhausted’ if their asylum claim was refused by the Home Office and any appeals they are allowed to make have been unsuccessful.

benefits: Regular payments from the state for people on low incomes or with specific needs. Some benefits require proof of a right to reside (e.g. Universal Credit, Child Benefit).

borough: Greater London is divided into 32 local authority districts, each governed by a London borough council.

Brexit: Widely-used term referring to the UK’s withdrawal from the European Union in 2020.

child benefit: Monthly allowance paid to the parent or carer of a child aged under 16 (or under 20 if they remain in education or training).

children’s centre: A centre where families with children aged 0–4 years and their parents and carers can take part in activities and access the support they need, including health, education and advice services. May include early years education and childcare provision. (See also ‘[Sure Start](#)’.)

cost-of-living crisis: The effects of the rising costs of food, energy and housing since 2021, which have had the biggest impact on low-income households.

council: A form of local government. In London, this refers to borough councils (see above). They are responsible for services such as housing.

dispersal: The UK Government’s policy of dispersal (introduced by legislation in 1999) involves Home Office provision of longer-term temporary accommodation to people seeking asylum across the UK (outside London and the South East).

EU citizen: Any person who holds the nationality of a European Union (EU) member country. EU citizens living in the UK had residency rights and associated rights when the UK was a member of the EU (i.e. until January 2020).

Home Office: Government department with responsibility for immigration and passports (among other areas).

Hostile Environment: Set of policies announced in 2012 by then Home Secretary Theresa May designed to make life as difficult as possible for people unable to prove they have the right to reside in the UK.

house in multiple occupancy (HMO): House inhabited by at least three different households, with shared bathroom and kitchen facilities.

Immigration Health Surcharge: Fee paid by most people on temporary visas or seeking to extend their 'leave to remain' (introduced in 2015).

indefinite leave to remain: Permission to reside in the UK without any time limit or conditions.

leave to remain: Permission to reside in the UK for non-UK citizens.

limited leave to remain: Permission to reside in the UK for a limited period of time, often with the condition of 'no recourse to public funds'.

local authority: Official organisation responsible for public services and facilities in a particular area. (See also 'Council'.)

minimum income requirement: The annual income that must be shown by a UK citizen or long-term resident applying to bring their spouse or partner to live with them in the UK (introduced in 2012).

National Insurance number: Number used to administer National Insurance (a form of social security) in the UK; required to do paid work.

net migration: Number of people immigrating minus number of people emigrating.

no recourse to public funds: A condition attached to work, family and study visas restricting access to homelessness assistance, social housing and welfare benefits such as Universal Credit and Child Benefit. This condition also applies by default to people who have no leave to remain.

nursery: Early education and childcare setting for children aged up to four years old.

'papers': Informal term for 'leave to remain' (whether limited or indefinite).

primary school: School for children aged between 4 and 11 years old.

public funds: Certain benefits are defined as ‘public funds’ by the Home Office and the Immigration Rules. Includes welfare benefits and housing and homelessness assistance, designed to support people on a low income.

register office: Government office (England and Wales) in local authorities responsible for registering births, adoptions, marriages, civil partnerships and deaths.

right to rent: Landlords and letting agents in England are required to check tenants have the ‘right to rent’ by checking their right to be in the UK (since 2016).

right to work: Employers are required to check that prospective employees have the ‘right to work’ by checking their right to be in the UK and their immigration status. (Working while disqualified and employing a person if you have ‘reasonable cause to believe’ they have no right to work have been criminalised since 2016.)

secondary school: School for children aged between 11 and 16 or 18 years old.

Section 17 support: Refers to Section 17 of the Children Act 1989 which sets out the general duty of local authorities ‘to safeguard and promote the welfare of children within their area who are in need’ by providing appropriate services.

Section 95 support: Refers to Section 95 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999, under which the Home Office can provide housing and financial support to a person who is seeking asylum and is destitute or likely to become destitute.

settled status: Refers to the EU Settlement Scheme, introduced when the UK withdrew from the EU. EU citizens already living in the UK were allowed to apply for ‘settled status’ to continue living in the UK.

social care: The provision of social work, personal care, protection or social support services to children or adults in need or at risk, or adults with needs arising from illness, disability, old age or poverty (in England).

social services: Department of local authority providing social care.

sponsor: Supports the visa application of a person who wants to come to the UK. May be an employer, university or family member, depending on type of visa.

‘status’: Informal term for ‘leave to remain’ (whether limited or indefinite).

subject to immigration control: Defined by Section 115(9) of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999. Refers to people who require but do not have ‘leave to remain’, or people whose leave to remain is subject to restrictions.

Sure Start: Introduced by the New Labour government in 1998 as a multi-departmental programme of early intervention for children aged 0–4 years old. Initially delivered through ‘local programmes’ in the most deprived areas of the UK. From 2004, the expanded programme saw the development of ‘Sure Start Children’s Centres’, with the aim of reaching all families with young children. The change of government in 2010 led to the closure of many centres.

‘two and a half years’: Informal term for ‘limited leave to remain’, reflecting its usual duration.

Windrush generation: People who migrated to the UK after the Second World War as Commonwealth citizens and have lived and worked in the UK since then.

Windrush scandal: Many members of the ‘Windrush generation’ (see above) did not possess paperwork proving citizenship which – following ‘Hostile Environment’ policies and legislation in 2014 and 2016 – became a requirement to access housing, employment and public services. This led to job losses and withholding of welfare benefits, healthcare and other public services. The situation was brought to public attention in 2018 and became known as the ‘Windrush scandal’; it led to a government-commissioned independent review which identified its racist and harmful effects (Williams 2020).

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'This beautifully written and meticulously researched ethnography captures vividly and with deep humanity the richness and complexities of migrant mothers' lives as they navigate the violence of hostile immigration policies. Profoundly social, intimate and relational yet never losing sight of powerful exclusionary structures, *Precarious Motherhood* is accessible, thoughtful and illuminating.'

Cecilia Menjivar, University of California, Los Angeles

'*Precarious Motherhood* brilliantly captures the resilience of migrant mothers as they engage in "strategic mothering" – crafting networks of care and belonging against the backdrop of hostile immigration policies.'

Jessica Potter, Patients Not Passports Campaign

Precarious Motherhood explores the experiences of racially minoritised mothers living with insecure immigration status and financial hardship in London, UK. It exposes the impact of hostile immigration policies and precarity on mothers' interpersonal relationships and access to support. The author draws attention to how mothers manage the constraints they face and enact belonging. She then explores the impact on mothers' couple relationships, friendships, adult kin relationships and faith-based networks. The book underlines the vital role of personal relationships in providing access to resources and support, but also demonstrates how precariously positioned mothers must carefully navigate relational tensions in their everyday lives. It highlights how social infrastructure facilitates relational practices, helping mothers to sustain their children's wellbeing and their own.

Rachel Bencheekroun is Senior Research Fellow at UCL Social Research Institute.



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