

## Mothering in hostile environments

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Article

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# Mothering in hostile environments: Migrant families negotiating the welfare and immigration regime nexus

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## Abstract

This article examines the production, working and impact of the UK's hostile environment on migrant families with precarious legal status. Our approach is informed by two bodies of scholarly work: critical border studies and research on migrant families. We bridge these literatures to show how the hostile environment is neither a singular, neatly bounded space, nor limited to a set of interactions between immigration enforcement and a clear-cut group of people (so-called 'illegal immigrants'). It affects the lives of a wider segment of the UK population, in particular racialised migrants and citizens, by making their legal status more insecure and precarious, and percolates in multiple and intersecting domains in the lives of families, such as education, housing and welfare, making them ambivalent sites of protection and safety as well as control and enforcement. Drawing on ethnographic engagement with families with insecure immigration statuses, we explore

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how the hostile environment manifests in the everyday lives of families; how the hostile environment circulates and is re-enacted within the micro-politics of families; and how families negotiate the continuous work of protecting children from the effects of the hostile environment. In conclusion we argue that dramatic and rapid shifts in immigration rules and regulations undermine the capacity of mothers to navigate the policy environment and welfare for their children and to shield them from the consequences of state-driven hostility towards immigrants.

### **Keywords**

families, hostile environment, immigration regime, migration, mothering

## **Introduction**

In the early 2010s, the creation of a ‘hostile environment for illegal immigrants’, in the words of then-Home Secretary Theresa May, became a primary goal of the UK’s immigration policy (see editorial introduction) (Kirkup and Winnett, 2012). Far from being a targeted intervention, hostile environment-driven initiatives have since then been affecting not only irregular migrants but all migrants, irrespective of their legal status, and also citizens (Erel et al., 2016). One of the consequences of such a policy approach has been that racialised migrants and citizens have been increasingly asked to prove their right to stay in Britain, in the context of a continuous shifting of goalposts for lawful migration (SSAHE, 2020).

This article examines how the hostile environment percolates the everyday lives of migrant families with precarious status in multiple sites, including public services, churches, and homes. Drawing on long-term ethnographic engagement with families with insecure immigration statuses, we explore where and how the hostile environment manifests in the everyday lives of families; how the hostile environment circulates and is re-enacted within the micro-politics of families; and how the family negotiates the continuous work of protecting children from the effects of the hostile environment. We conclude by reflecting on this uncertainty and the ramifications for other policy categories of migrants in an increasingly complex and rapidly shifting context.

## **Everyday bordering and the multi-sited production of hostile environments**

Scholarship on borders has burgeoned in recent decades. This literature has made distinctions between nation-state geo-political borders, bureaucratic

borders that emerge through migration governance, and relational social borders or boundaries. As Webber (2019) has emphasised, people encounter borders multiple times and in multiple sites during their migratory experiences (see also Fassin, 2011). Alternative concepts describe a continuum of in-between statuses (Gonzales and Sigona, 2017; Kubal, 2013; Ruhs and Anderson, 2010), or emphasise the increasing diversity of potential paths into and out of irregularity (Bloch et al., 2014; Cvajner and Sciortino, 2010; Düvell, 2011; Gonzales et al., 2019). A closer look at this growing body of literature reveals further dimensions of complexity. Scholars emphasise the fluidity of migrant status: not only do individuals repeatedly move between ‘legality’ and ‘illegality’ (Calavita, 2003), but also the underlying legal categories and migration policies change over time (Couper and Santamaria, 1984; Düvell, 2006). Statuses are thus highly contingent and subject to change (De Genova, 2002; Menjívar and Abrego, 2012). The complex and rapidly shifting UK immigration policies exemplify these broader trends. UK immigration regulations render it almost impossible for non-state actors such as service providers, civil society, NGOs, faith groups, activists and advocates to make sense of a migrant’s legal entitlements at a given moment (Griffiths and Yeo, 2021; Kapoor and Narkowicz, 2019).

The concept of everyday bordering foregrounds how state bordering practices increasingly take place within territorial borders, ‘carried out by anyone anywhere – government agencies, private companies and individual citizens’ (Yuval-Davis et al., 2018: 230). The diffusion of state borders into everyday sites of encounter and interactions creates ‘uncertainty, confusion and probably most importantly a divisive atmosphere of suspicion and mistrust’ (Yuval-Davis et al., 2018: 240). The creation of multiple ‘in-between’ statuses (Menjívar, 2006: 1000) subjects increasing numbers of people to precarious and uncertain lives. Complex and unclear statuses and wide-ranging hostile environment policies have particular effects for migrant families who engage with the welfare state through their children’s health, education and housing.

## **Migrant families and hostile environments**

It is helpful to conceptualise ‘family’ in migration studies as members bound together ‘in intergenerational networks of reciprocity and obligation, love and trust, that are simultaneously fraught with tension, contest and relations of unequal power’ (Baldassar and Merla, 2014: 7). ‘Families’ are understood as a series of often mundane practices, rather than being defined in accordance with pre-established characteristics such as co-habitation or consanguinity (Finch, 2007; Morgan, 1996).

Increasingly restrictive immigration policies – such as significant increases to fees for visas and renewing residency rights, and imposing a minimum

income to bring a partner or other family member to the UK – have had the effect of keeping families separated for longer and with greater uncertainty concerning their rights to reunion (Carling et al., 2012; Christou and Kofman, 2022; Sigona and Hughes, 2012). In the UK, changes in the reunification route for adult dependent relatives in 2012 and more recently the Brexit process have highlighted the need to interrogate the consequences of shifting rules on families' reunification and settlement plans, as well as on their caring intentions (Sigona and Godin, 2019). A study of French movers living in the UK suggests that Brexit has undermined their sense of belonging and, for those who are parents, has shaped their parenting practices (for example avoiding speaking in French with their children in public, or turning to other French parents for informal support in particular francophone spaces) (Brahic and Lallement, 2020).

Immigration policies also create borders among family members within the same country by granting citizenship status or residency rights to some and not to others, resulting in 'mixed-status' families (Bonjour and de Hart, 2021; Fix and Zimmermann, 2001; Zambelli et al., 2022). This generates differential access to state welfare benefits, education, healthcare, housing and paid work (Bonjour and de Hart, 2021; Lopez and Castañeda, 2022). It also constrains family members' sense of belonging, their intimate lives (Bonjour and de Hart, 2021; Griffiths, 2019) and everyday practices of care. Irregular status can create dependency on family members with residency rights, which can cause tensions (Sigona, 2012). Unequal statuses within families can make individuals vulnerable to exploitation and abuse, and can reduce access to help and support (Anitha, 2010; Erez and Globokar, 2009; Menjívar and Salcido, 2002; Raj and Silverman, 2002; Voolma, 2018).

In the context of hostile environment policies, migrant parenting practices are used as a key index of deserving citizenship (Erel, 2018) and as a means of policing 'unwanted' immigrants (Humphris, 2019). Conversely, parenting practices are deployed agentively by migrant mothers and fathers without citizenship status as a means of engaging in 'good citizenship' as a 'practice of belonging and participation' (Erel, 2011: 695). Scholarship on migrant mothering has identified how insecure immigration status creates barriers to accessing services and impedes migrant mothers from fulfilling culturally and socially defined mothering roles (Abrego and Menjívar, 2011; Luibhéid et al., 2018). This literature has also placed emphasis on mothers' agency, exploring how mothers with insecure status 'devise survival strategies' and make meaning through 'intensive mothering' and sacrifice (Abrego and Schmalzbauer, 2018: 16). Mother-child relationships are therefore complex sites through which migrant mothers simultaneously experience and seek to renegotiate their marginalized citizenship positions (Luibhéid et al., 2018: 18), and challenge hegemonic understandings of citizenship and belonging (Longman et al., 2013; Reynolds et al., 2018). Mothering work is also

highly embodied work and includes the '(re)generation of cultural and/or faith practices, social values and identity' (Kershaw, 2010: 399). How insecure status intersects with bureaucratic bordering is strongly contingent on social-spatial relationships, in particular how ethnic, cultural and class differences and a lack of safe spaces to gather can impede the development of trust and constrain access to services and resources (Abrego and Schmalzbauer, 2018; Hondagneu-Sotelo and Ruiz, 2013).

Crucially, mothering can be a valorised subject position but must always be placed in the context of intersecting oppressions of 'race, gender, class, sexuality, and nation', creating tensions between empowerment and oppression (Collins, 2000: 176). Black mothering has been identified as a 'collective and connective space' but also as a 'site of struggle and survival' (Reynolds, 2020: 3). In the context of austerity, health and economic inequalities, racialising policy discourses, anti-immigration attitudes and the government's hostile environment strategy, Reynolds has argued that Black mothering can be understood as 'a political act of resistance against intersecting inequalities' (Reynolds, 2020: 3). Mothers may cultivate 'a particularized, ethnically based identity' and values in their children as a means of resisting racism (Erel, 2011: 698). As we explore in the empirical section, mothers work with their children to enact resistance through 'caregiving for identity' (Kershaw, 2010: 399), facilitating access to resources and cultivating identities and social and cultural capital.

## Policy background and context

The intimate lives of migrant families have long been a site of immigration control. Political discourse frequently blames migrant parents for their children's living conditions (Erel, 2018; Heidbrink and Statz, 2017). Regulatory regimes for 'dependent' migrants and 'family reunion' are stringent and intrusive. To different degrees, countries of immigration (e.g., in the EU and North America) have implemented policies over recent years to curb the arrival of family members and the formation of new families that do not conform to their imagined core values, for example by family sponsorship regulations that benefit those holding more privileged positions in the labour and housing markets (Kulu-Glasgow and Leerkes, 2011; Schweitzer, 2015). These policies include, but are not restricted to, the application of a minimum age to fiancés in international marriages, supposedly as a way of preventing forced matrimonies; the refusal of the right of reunification to polygamic spouses; restrictions to what states perceive as arranged unions in opposition to 'real' relationships; and restrictions to the right of reunification of extended family members (Bonjour and de Hart, 2021; Eggebø, 2013; Ruffer, 2011; Strasser et al., 2009).

In the UK, the costs of visa applications have soared: prospective migrants and those wishing to renew their 'leave to remain' face bills of thousands of pounds, comprising Home Office fees, the Immigration Health Surcharge and lawyers' fees. The process is prohibitively expensive for many individuals and becomes more so when everyone in a family is required to apply (McKinney and Sumption, 2021). Moreover, the immigration rules and requirements are constantly being amended and extended. Families have to make decisions based on a set of rules that are always changing, leading scholars to argue that this is a new form of bureaucratic bordering based on 'governance through uncertainty' (Biehl, 2015; Humphris, 2019).

In 2012, a more complex and expensive route to settlement was implemented as part of the government's hostile environment approach. This affects families and partners applying to stay in the UK on the grounds of family and private life who are unable to meet the financial requirements for shorter settlement routes (Dickson and Rosen, 2021; Pinter et al., 2020). Whilst waiting (potentially for years) to become eligible for the ten-year route, and whilst on it, individuals are usually subject to 'no recourse to public funds' (NRPF), either by default (if 'no leave to remain') or as a condition of 'limited leave to remain' status; this restricts access to public services, mainstream welfare benefits and economic and civic participation (Morris and Qureshi, 2021).

Families with insecure immigration statuses face multiple barriers to healthcare services. Widespread confusion about universal rights to access primary healthcare has stopped many families with insecure statuses from registering with a GP (MedAct, 2020). Recent immigration legislation requires NHS trusts to check patients' eligibility for secondary healthcare before providing care, to record their chargeable status, to charge patients upfront if they cannot prove eligibility, and to refuse care to those unable to pay (except where treatment is deemed urgent or 'immediately necessary', in which case patients are charged retrospectively). Complex rules on eligibility and exemptions have led to treatment being wrongly withheld or people being wrongly charged at times (Harris and Hardwick, 2019; Nellums et al., 2021; Weller et al., 2019). Many people with insecure or irregular status are deterred from seeking healthcare advice or treatment – including maternity care – by fears of detention, deportation and debt (Nellums et al., 2021; Russell et al., 2018; Weller et al., 2019).

When families become destitute, local authorities have a duty (under Section 17 of the Children Act 1989) to assess children and to provide services and resources identified as necessary. However, restrictive immigration rules intersect with austerity policies and pressures on budgets to position social care teams as gatekeepers, leading to many families with no recourse to public funds being turned away (Dennler, 2018; Humphris and Sigona, 2019; Price and Spencer, 2015; Ratzmann and Sahraoui, 2021; Wroe, 2019).

It is also important to note that everyday bordering has taken on two new dimensions. First, under Memoranda of Understanding, personal data of potential overstayers are being passed from diverse public institutions (including the Department for Education, NHS Digital, DVLA and the police) to the Home Office for immigration enforcement purposes (Griffiths and Morgan-Glendinning, 2021; Hiam et al., 2018; Papageorgiou et al., 2020; Weller et al., 2019). Second, immigration officers have been embedded in housing and social care teams in many local authorities. As families are more likely to encounter welfare systems, through the education system, social workers and health care, these developments have particular effects for families with precarious immigration status.

## Methodology

Rachel Benchekroun undertook an ethnographic study over 20 months in a London neighbourhood, exploring how mothers with insecure immigration status and NRPF access support through different kinds of interpersonal relationships. Engaging in everyday activities and ‘walking with’ mothers enabled a dialogical and responsive approach (O’Neill and Reynolds, 2021; Scheper Hughes, 1995; Sinha and Back, 2014), positioning the researcher in relation with mothers affected by these issues, and with their families. The approach was conducive to deep listening, leading to nuanced understandings of mothers’ experiences and perspectives. During the fieldwork, Rachel volunteered in several support and advice organisations, which deepened her understanding of mothers’ trajectories, access to support and the barriers they faced. She recruited 22 mothers and 5 frontline advocates to take part in the study as individual participants, drawing on her volunteer roles and snowballing. She met with most mothers at least twice, and in some cases multiple times (this particularly applied to participants who had more availability and who were willing to spend time ‘hanging out’ with the researcher, share their experiences openly and reflect deeply on them). She was mindful of the vulnerable positions of many participants and was sensitive in how she engaged with them, for example not pursuing topics of conversation which appeared to cause discomfort, and regularly revisiting the issue of consent. In the organisational settings, she also took care to interact sensitively with people accessing services and support.

With participants’ informed consent, and when in private spaces, Rachel audio-recorded most in-depth conversations, or alternatively took notes during the conversations, and in all cases she made notes directly afterwards. The researcher asked participants to create a sociogram showing who was important to them (this usually took place during the second research encounter); this produced narratives about relationships and friendships, different forms of



interaction and how these had changed over time (Bencheckroun, 2020). It also helped inform subsequent conversations. Rachel recorded her observations and reflections on encounters and on her positionality; at times these were descriptive, at other times more reflexive or analytical. She transcribed recordings as soon as possible after each research encounter. She analysed all transcripts and fieldnotes, and used open coding to identify ways in which policies affected mothering and access to support (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019). She regularly reviewed codes and grouped these into categories and themes.

The majority of the participants in the study had migrated from West African countries; others were from other parts of Africa, Latin America, the Caribbean or South East Asia. Most were in their twenties when they had arrived in UK, and most had been living in the UK for at least ten years at the time of the fieldwork. Participants had entered the UK with a visa or had sought asylum on arrival, but many had subsequently lost the 'right to remain' (residency rights), or had been refused asylum. Of these, some had later been granted 'limited leave to remain' (temporary residency rights). Four had been granted permanent residency rights. At the point of the initial research encounters, ten mothers had no residency rights and a further eight had only temporary residency rights (although statuses changed during the course of the fieldwork). Twenty of the mothers identified as Christian, across a range of denominations; one identified as Muslim. Six participants had studied at university. All of the participants had given birth in the UK. Children were aged between one and 18+ years old. Some participants were living with a partner, others were in a relationship but living apart, and the rest were not in a relationship. Pseudonyms have been used for all participants.

The structure and argument of the article was developed collaboratively by all three authors. Rachel Humphris and Nando Sigona contributed in particular to the writing up of the conceptual framework, literature review, introduction and conclusions. They also worked closely with Rachel Bencheckroun to ensure alignment between theoretical framework and empirical data.

## **Ambivalent sites of hostility and welfare**

'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."' (Efu)

The ethnographic study revealed that migrant families encounter the hostile environment across multiple sites, which may act both as sites of bordering and exclusion and as sites of support and protection. At the local authority

level, this ambivalence reflected policy tensions between children's rights to protection and provision of services (discussed earlier) and hostile immigration policies denying residency rights and creating destitution. Mothers with no leave to remain and NRPF worried about the risks of stepping forward to claim rights; the decision to request support from social care staff was thus a last resort, often taken only after months or years of 'sofa-surfing' with their children amongst friends and acquaintances. When they did seek local authority support, some mothers reported initially being turned away by social care staff (as Efu recounted, above), being offered financial support to return to their country of origin, and/or being told they had to submit another application for 'leave to remain' to the Home Office (potentially costing thousands of pounds) before an assessment could be considered. Mothers who did get past the first stage reported being asked for contact details of relatives and acquaintances as potential sources of accommodation, or being subjected to scrutiny of their everyday mothering practices. Several mothers were informed that support would be withdrawn following the Home Office's rejection of their application. For example, during a 'Section 17' assessment by the local authority to ascertain if she was 'destitute', Efu found that new items of clothing elicited suspicion, and the contents of her fridge were subject to examination. Her family were provided with a room in a shared house, but were subsequently moved multiple times. Efu was abruptly informed one day by a social worker that she and her children were to be evicted following the Home Office's rejection of her application for leave to remain: "You need to move because of your status. They've rejected your [application], so you need to move." As a mother, Efu thus experienced her relationship with the local authority (and its various actors) as veering between being supportive at times, and intrusive, hostile and undermining at other times.

Olivia, having lost her leave to remain following the break-up of her marriage, and facing homelessness with her young children, had sought help from the local authority where she was living at the time, but was told she was not eligible for support despite her children having 'leave to remain'. She was advised instead to 'leave the children and come back when you have documents'. The implicit message that her children would be taken into care if she could not manage without local authority support seemed intended to deter her from seeking help as a mother with NRPF, and this was indeed the effect.

These multiple forms of bordering experienced at different stages of help-seeking from local authorities – described by Dennler (2018: 83) as 'anti-migrant gatekeeping by social workers' – not only denied mothers and children access to basic resources for extended periods of time, but produced further marginalisation of racially minoritised mothers with insecure status by inhibiting their everyday mothering practices. As Dennler (2018: 84) has argued,

'A hostile stance delegitimizes people—their existence, their presence, and their needs—and denies their rights'. Insecure immigration status, having no recourse to public funds, and the precarity of support mechanisms created barriers for mothers striving to enact citizenship and belonging through everyday mothering work.

Community organisations, schools, early childhood services and faith groups (specifically churches) tended to be experienced by mothers in the ethnographic study primarily as safe spaces, facilitating access to services (advice, education), material support (clothing, food) and sometimes money (as small gifts or loans). Such spaces also provided opportunities for developing support networks and friendships, which in turn became valued sources of emotional and other forms of support. However, even in sociable and supportive spaces such as these, national policies produced bordering effects. In early childhood settings, for example, families with NRPF were excluded from subsidized childcare. At the time of the study, children over seven whose parents had NRPF were not entitled to free school meals, since these were provided only to children from households on welfare benefits. These forms of bordering affected parenting practices in different ways. Leah, despite having lived in the UK for many years, had been granted only 'limited leave to remain' (temporary residence permit) and was subjected to NRPF, which meant she was excluded from state support with childcare costs and housing. A single mum, Leah worked full time but struggled to make ends meet. Her long hours and reliance on a childminder for wraparound care meant she had minimal contact with her children's nursery and school, which severely constrained opportunities for developing support networks through interactions with staff and other families. Leah wanted to reduce her working hours to prioritise her children's needs and the family's health and wellbeing, but, being on the ten-year settlement route, she was worried that reducing her income would jeopardise her settlement route. In these ways, hostile policies meant that families like Leah's were often excluded from spaces which were potential sites of much-needed support. Opportunities for claiming space and enacting belonging were therefore limited not only for mothers with no leave to remain (Abrego and Schmalzbauer, 2018; Hondagneu-Sotelo and Ruiz, 2013; Sigona, 2012) but for those with only precarious status – subjected to 'permanent temporariness' (Bailey et al., 2002, cited in Hondagneu-Sotelo and Ruiz, 2013).

Faith spaces, and specifically churches, were often experienced as spaces of safety. They were important sites for embedding, creating feelings of belonging to a community (Ryan and Mulholland, 2015; Wessendorf and Phillimore, 2019), emotional attachment to a group and 'feeling at home' (Yuval-Davis, 2006). Joining a church, attending services and participating in groups often provided families with a sense of continuity and connection with co-religious (and sometimes co-ethnic) communities. For some, church

communities opened doors to ESOL classes, women's groups, joining the choir or helping to organise cultural events. Church-based support networks were also a vital source of practical help and care, and of temporary shelter or cash in times of crisis.

Many of the mothers who participated in the study valued their faith groups as an intergenerational community of values, providing opportunities for social interactions, and where the topic of immigration status could be avoided. For example, it was important to Dayo that her young children attended a Catholic school, and that her family regularly attended church services; she also hoped to join her church choir and wanted her children to start Sunday school when they were old enough:

'[my son] wakes up in the morning and he says 'God bless me, God bless mummy' [laughs]. I mean, that's just what I want him to do, so I'm glad I sent them to a Catholic school. When I buy him something new, my son says 'thank you Jesus for my mum' – I mean, that's a good reward for sending him to a Catholic school! It's a Christian foundation – they really imbibe that knowledge into them. [...] The Bible says train your child the way you want them to grow. [...] He's getting the foundation.'

These embedding practices helped Dayo to instil in her children the values and beliefs that she had been brought up with, and to protect them from anticipated community-level risks as they grew older; she was concerned for example about the risks of getting involved in 'gangs'. Embedding her family in her church – which welcomed an ethnically diverse congregation – also enabled Dayo to protect herself and her children from potential prejudice and racism (Abrego and Schmalzbauer, 2018; Reynolds, 2020). She sought to protect and empower her children in the context of hostile government policies and hostile attitudes and behaviours within the wider community:

'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.'

Participating in the life of their church was a means of resisting negative forces within the community and wider society. It allowed Dayo to claim space and enact relational belonging through regular practices and interactions (Glick Schiller and Çağlar, 2016) and served as a site for mothering practices which cultivated positive cultural identities (Erel, 2011; Reynolds, 2020).

However, at times churches were experienced as sites where bordering effects circulated to produce feelings of exclusion, shaping parenting practices. Some mothers described being ostracised for not conforming to expected

behaviours (for example, attending more than one church), criticised for not contributing enough money to the weekly collection, or excluded from conversations by other congregants for not being 'like them'. Mariama, her husband and their children attended church every week, but there they felt marginalised not only by their precarious immigration statuses but also by the lack of understanding shown towards her son's learning disability. Hostile behaviours had led them to physically position themselves at the margins of the church: '*We don't really go inside the church, we just stand outside the door, we see what the priest is doing and we're bearing him. We stand outside.*' Mariama recounted how her son's crying had led to other members of the congregation rebuking them, telling her to take him outside. Mariama had tried her best to soothe her son: '*I keep on talking to him, talking to him, until... Then I finally just hugged him, I was holding him. We stayed like that until the mass finished. Then we left.*' Whilst the church was an important part of the family's social identity and sense of belonging to the community, it was also experienced as a space which literally marginalised them. As a racially minoritised mother with insecure immigration status, Mariama dealt with these micro acts of rejection by making sustained efforts to protect and create belonging for her family through such acts of care and resistance (Erel, 2011; Kershaw, 2010; Reynolds, 2020).

## **Family as a site in the micro-politics of immigration control**

Hostile environment policies shape migrants' intimate relationships inter- and intra-generationally and within couples. Complex and changing rules and regulations produce mixed-status families, creating sensitive power dynamics. Ruth, who, before becoming a mother, had spent her early adult years living with her step-sister's family (who were all UK citizens), felt that her loss of residency rights during this time marginalised her within the family. Whilst family members provided her with shelter, resources and varying degrees of support, she also felt she was subjected to exploitation, controlling behaviours and on occasion harsh treatment. The frequently hostile atmosphere within the home created tensions and at times distress for Ruth, and led to her seeking refuge elsewhere. The family was therefore experienced not as a space of respite from hostile immigration policies but as an additional site of control.

Leah, the only member of her wider family without UK citizenship and subjected to the NRPF condition, could not afford market rents (on top of energy bills, transport, school lunches, full childcare costs and Home Office 'leave to remain' applications) despite working full time, and was not eligible for social housing. Whilst her adult siblings had been able to develop their careers and enjoy their own homes, she and her young children had spent

years sofa-surfing, alternating between friends' homes and her parents' living room. Staying for long periods in other people's homes required adapting family routines and behaviours to their hosts' needs and expectations. For Leah and her children, staying in her parents' living room meant late nights (not being able to sleep until both of her parents had gone to bed) and an absence of private space. For Leah as a mother, it required continual efforts to contain her children's exuberance to avoid upsetting her parents and jeopardising their precarious living arrangements. Her insecure status created a reliance on her parents' (and siblings') goodwill, which constrained their everyday interactions and produced significant inequalities in relationships across the family (Sigona, 2012). In Leah's words, her parents' home was itself a 'hostile environment'.

Hostile policies shaped parenting practices and intergenerational relationships between parents with insecure statuses and their UK-born children in diverse ways. The financial precarity and homelessness which often resulted from insecure status and NRPF constrained parents' ability to provide their children with adequate accommodation, food, clothing, resources for school and access to cultural activities. Mothers sought to find ways to meet their children's needs, whether as co-parents, or with regular or intermittent support from their estranged partners, or mothering alone. Some mothers turned to food banks and clothing banks, exchanged items with friends or shared material support through faith groups. Children's awareness of their relative lack of material possessions or access to other kinds of resources tended to become more acute when they started primary school, and led to their questioning why they could not have the toys, games, clothes, holidays, or extracurricular activities that their friends did. Mothers managed this by responding in ways which were both reassuring and vague (Benchekrone, 2023). As their children appeared to become increasingly aware of their relative poverty and limitations on mobility, mothers continued to offer reassurance that the family's situation would improve in the future, without sharing details of their insecure immigration statuses or the complex bureaucratic journey to settlement. This ongoing mothering work was an important strategy in protecting children's self-esteem and their sense of belonging.

Mothers felt strongly that their children should not feel different or unequal to their peers: they were creative and resourceful in seeking out what their children needed. They signed their children up for after-school activities which were free of charge, and were hopeful about the possibility of being granted residency rights in the future, which would open up a wider range of opportunities for their children. In these ways, hostile environment policies constrained intergenerational relationships yet were simultaneously resisted through everyday caregiving practices which sought to transmit cultural values and to cultivate positive identities and cultural

capital. Mothering practices such as these, in the context of hostile immigration policies, represent ‘political acts of citizenship’ and ‘caregiving for identity’ (Kershaw, 2010: 396; Longman et al., 2013: 387).

## Negotiating ambivalent couple relations

Couple relationships are shaped in diverse ways by insecure statuses and NRPF – whether in mixed status couples or in couples where both have insecure statuses – with implications for parenting practices and family dynamics. In the study, Jamila and her husband, a mixed-status couple, were united in their resistance to, and critiques of, the effects of the hostile policies they had experienced and that shaped their lives. They pointed out the ways in which they were penalised and excluded from social protections as a couple and as a family, such as childcare subsidies and support with housing. They supported each other in practical, everyday ways, pooling resources, sharing information and making plans; they also supported each other emotionally. Their frustration and stress appeared to have strengthened their supportive bond and generated practical survival strategies. However, in many cases, the continued efforts to regularise the status of one or both partners put pressure on couple relationships, impacting on family dynamics. In the case of one couple in the study, apparently caring practices by one partner – taking control of the asylum-claiming process – had been experienced at times as a loss of autonomy by the other partner. In other cases, the complexities and financial costs of trying to regularise the status of one or both partners, with the longer-term aim of gaining ‘indefinite leave to remain’ via the ten-year settlement route, contributed to couple breakdown. This in turn led to homelessness and destitution for mothers and children. These significant changes in circumstances impacted on parent-child relationships, notably necessitating the re-organisation of parenting roles and responsibilities and reshaping contact with non-resident parents (fathers, in this study).

In some cases, unequal status within a couple relationship led to exploitation, controlling behaviour and abuse. Needing to escape the controlling dynamics within the home of her wider family, Ruth had sought refuge in a new couple relationship, moving in with her partner; she later became a mother. Yet this relationship shifted from being characterised by care and trust to being based on control and abuse. Ruth’s partner, who had full residency rights, exploited her lack of legal status and fears of deportation to exert power over her and erode her self-esteem (Anitha, 2010; Voolma, 2018). He controlled her everyday life, including all aspects of her mothering and her relationship with their child. Ruth’s home was, once again, a site of unbelonging and feeling unsafe. As a mother, she recognised the need to protect herself and her child, but felt trapped and unable to seek help,

believing she was not entitled to any form of state support. Protecting and providing for her child during this time required additional resourcefulness, careful planning and the support of a small number of friends. Eventually, Ruth was able to find refuge with the support of informal support networks and frontline professionals.

Hostile environment policies thus percolate through couple relationships, affecting practices and feelings in diverse ways, and consequently shaping mothering and fathering in the short and long term.

## Conclusions

Migrant families encounter the hostile environment in a multitude of sites in their daily lives. They navigate these encounters by drawing on the support of their social networks; however, we argue that dramatic and rapid shifts in immigration rules and regulations negatively impact on the capacity of mothers to navigate the policy environment. The speed at which immigration rules and regulations are introduced and implemented creates a chaotic and hardly intelligible policy environment for migrant parents, affecting their ability to adjust and adapt to circumstances, as well as to shield and mitigate the impact of the hostile environment on their children.

Mothering practices are heavily policed, and the presence of children and the role of mother become a morally charged terrain and a site for immigration control in which opportunities for support (such as Section 17 support and access to school) also create pressures to perform to fulfil normative expectations, subjecting family members to the scrutiny of welfare providers. The picture that emerges from the ethnographic data also shows how the diffuse and expansive nature of hostility is produced and experienced not only at the border or in the encounter with immigration authorities, but also in sites where children and parents expect to be safe and go for support and protection, like churches, schools, and homes. Within families, uncertainty surrounding immigration status, complex and changing rules and regulations, and fear of detection, detention and removal affect relationships among family members, particularly where different legal statuses exist. Mothers and their children draw on a range of symbolic and material resources from different sites and relations, to carve out limited spaces for contestation, resistance and freedom from the constraints of the hostile environment.

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