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# Mothers Experiencing Legal and Financial Precarity Post-Migration: Solidarity Practices, Everyday Resistance and the Role of Social Infrastructure

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## **Abstract**

Restrictive immigration policies across Europe intersect with socio-economic structures, increasing the risks of precarity, exploitation and abuse faced by many women and mothers. This can be understood as ‘structural’ or ‘slow’ violence, and in the UK particularly affects racially minoritised mothers with insecure immigration statuses experiencing financial hardship. Drawing on my ethnographic research in London, UK, this article explores how precariously positioned mothers engage in solidarity practices which are infused with everyday resistance, and how social infrastructure shapes these practices. I identify six solidarity practices: reaching out and providing recognition; sharing material and financial resources; sharing information and practical help; informal hosting; providing advice and advocacy; and sharing emotional support. The article shows how solidarity practices are entwined with everyday resistance, and highlights how social infrastructure can facilitate mobilisation of intersecting identities, supporting such solidarity practices. It also calls attention to the tensions that can emerge within everyday solidarity practices.

## **Keywords**

Mothers, social infrastructure, solidarity practices, everyday resistance, intersecting identities, insecure immigration status, migration

## **Introduction**

In recent years, national immigration policies across Europe have become more restrictive for people from groups seen by states as ‘undeserving’ or ‘undesirable’. This has produced significant barriers to residency rights, work, welfare support and other kinds of services. In many countries, policies and discourses have become more openly ‘hostile’, in particular targeting people with insecure immigration statuses. Yet national policies both create temporary statuses and ‘irregularise’ people (Düvell, 2011; Menjivar and Abrego, 2012; Menjivar and Kanstroom, 2014; De Genova, 2014; El-Enany, 2020), generating multilayered forms of precarity. In the UK in 2010, the Conservative-led Coalition government proclaimed it would reduce immigration in general and irregular immigration in particular, and in 2012 presented the ‘Hostile Environment’ as its approach (Kirkup and Winnett, 2012). Laws, regulations and rules have since been introduced, creating a confusing and complex system of ‘everyday bordering’ (Yuval-Davis et al., 2018: 230).

Socio-economic structures intersect with hostile immigration policies, with gendered and racialised effects. Women who have moved to Europe from the global South, who face financial hardship and are subjected to insecure immigration statuses – whether they have temporary residency rights or none – are at particular risk of oppression and violence because of their intersecting gender, racial or ethnic and migration identities (Brah and Phoenix, 2004; Erel and Reynolds, 2018). They may be subjected to exploitation and abuse in the workplace, in domestic spaces, and/or in trying to access services. Motherhood can open up new kinds of potentially supportive spaces, but new responsibilities and challenges can create vulnerability and increase risks of oppression. This may be hidden, take multiple forms, and play out over long periods of time. This can be understood as ‘structural violence’ (Vandevoordt, 2021) or ‘slow violence’ (Mayblin et al., 2020). Yet mothers experiencing this can and do find ways to enact belonging and citizenship in everyday spaces and places (Erel and Reynolds, 2018; Humphris, 2019).

To understand how these forms of structural violence affect mothers’ interpersonal relationships and access to support in the UK, in 2018–2019 I undertook ethnographic research in a highly diverse London neighbourhood. I volunteered in several support and advice organisations, and I met with twenty-two mothers one-to-one. Most participants had been living in the UK for more than ten years; all had become mothers in the UK; and all had experience (previous or ongoing) of legal and financial precarity. In 2022–2023, I organised and facilitated a series of knowledge exchange workshops involving a wider range of participants.

This article explores how mothers in such precarious positions and other actors in the community engage in solidarity practices, and it shows how these are entwined with forms of everyday resistance. Importantly, the article examines the role of social infrastructure in facilitating solidarity practices by enabling mothers to mobilise aspects of their intersecting identities, promoting relational belonging and wellbeing. I first outline the concepts of structural violence, solidarity practices, everyday resistance and social infrastructure. Next, I explain the methodology. I then share key findings from the study. Here I focus on six types of solidarity practice: reaching out and providing recognition; sharing material and financial resources; sharing information and practical help; informal hosting; providing advice and advocacy; and sharing emotional support. Whilst the article highlights how certain kinds of social infrastructure facilitate these different solidarity practices, it also reveals tensions which emerge, which mothers must navigate with care in their everyday interactions.

## **Immigration policies and socio-economic structures as structural violence**

In recent years, immigration policies in Europe and much of the global North have increased restrictions on visas, work rights and residency rights in ways which are racialised and ethnicised (De Haas et al., 2020; Ellermann, 2020; El-Enany, 2020). They have reduced access to welfare support by migrants in general and by irregularised migrants in particular,

apparently to deter ‘undesirable’ migration (Ataç and Rosenberger, 2019; Dickson and Rosen, 2020). Access to social welfare is shaped by complex hierarchies resulting from the proliferation of migrant ‘categories’, creating stratified rights and conditions (De Genova, 2014; Menjivar and Kanstroom, 2014; Ataç and Rosenberger, 2019). This creates uncertainty and confusion about eligibility, and reduces families’ access to resources, support and services (Yuval-Davis et al., 2018; Meissner, 2018). In turn, this increases the risks of poor physical and mental health, homelessness and destitution (Berg, 2019; Yeo, 2020; El-Enany 2020). It constrains mothering practices and is detrimental to mothers’ wellbeing (Abrego and Menjivar, 2011; Luibhéid et al., 2018; Benchekroun, 2023).

In the UK, the array of policies introduced since the Conservative-led Coalition government’s announcement of its ‘Hostile Environment’ approach can be understood as forms of ‘structural violence’ (Vandevoordt, 2021; Freedman et al. 2022) or ‘slow violence’ (Mayblin et al., 2020; Dickson and Rosen 2020; Sahraoui and Freedman 2022), targeting racially minoritised women and mothers<sup>1</sup> experiencing legal and financial precarity. A series of Conservative(-led) governments significantly increased application fees for visas and residency permits (JCWI, 2023), putting many families in debt and at risk of losing their residency rights (McKinney and Sumption, 2022). The condition of ‘no recourse to public funds’ (NRPF) was expanded, preventing more families from accessing mainstream welfare benefits, social housing and many public services. This has contributed to financial hardship, homelessness, debt and destitution (Pinter et al., 2020; HoC, 2022; Leon and Broadhead 2024). Parents must often wait for years to be eligible for the ten-year settlement route, an exceptionally costly and complex process, and once on it they are usually subject to the NRPF condition (Mort et al., 2023). Additional legislation has restricted access to housing, non-compulsory education and secondary healthcare on the National Health Service (Harris and Hardwick, 2019; Nellums et al., 2021). Whilst local authorities have a duty to provide necessary support to families with children who are homeless and at risk of destitution (for example in the form of subsistence funding and accommodation), resources are limited: seeking such support can be a very difficult process and many families are turned away (Dennler, 2018; Dickson and Rosen, 2020; Walsh et al. 2022).

Government immigration policies intersect with wider socio-economic and gendered structures which put precariously-positioned women and mothers at increased risk of violence and oppression post-migration. They may be subjected to sexual or other forms of exploitation (Erel, 2018); forced to engage in transactional sexual relations as a survival strategy (Freedman et al., 2022); subjected to abuse in couple relationships (Anitha, 2015; Dudley, 2017; Voolma, 2018), or exploited in the labour market (Menjivar and Salcido, 2002; Price and Spencer, 2015; Freedman et al., 2022). Gendered power dynamics play out in couple relationships in multiple ways, including when relationships end. Mothers who are parenting alone may not receive financial contributions or other kinds of support from the child’s father. High childcare costs may prevent mothers from taking up paid work. Mothers may therefore be at increased risk of being unable to afford to renew temporary residency rights, increasing their precarity and that of their children (Yuval-Davis et al., 2019). The intersection of financial and legal precarity and homelessness can make it exceptionally difficult for mothers to access support services, which can increase their vulnerability to violence and poor physical or mental health (Mayock and Bretherton, 2016; Freedman et al., 2022). Being dependent on their spouse or partner financially or for residency rights can put mothers at increased risk of domestic violence and make it more difficult for them to seek help or to leave a violent relationship (Voolma, 2018).

In this context of pervasive structural violence, solidarity practices and everyday resistance play a crucial role in mothers’ lives.

### **Solidarity practices and everyday resistance**

Although sometimes used interchangeably with concepts such as support, sociality, conviviality and care, the concept of solidarity is widely understood as emerging through co-operation and relationships formed in the aim of challenging and resisting oppression and structural violence. Scholars have tended to focus on forms of collective action seeking to address common interests, increase social or political participation, or ensure equal access to health and education, or on humanitarianism and hospitality (Papataxiarchis, 2016; Oosterlynck et al., 2016; Bauder, 2020; Bauder and Juffs, 2020). But solidarity emerges from multiple sources and takes diverse forms in different spaces and places. It may emerge from feelings of loyalty and belonging (e.g. based on shared religious belief, nationality, ethnicity and/or political experiences) (Kapeller and Wolkenstein, 2013; Bauder and Juffs, 2020); or from diversity, ‘being exposed to the otherness of others’ and a shared focus on ‘issues of recognition, representation and redistribution’ (Oosterlynck et al., 2016: 776); or from reflexivity about relationships, interdependence and reciprocity (Kapeller and Wolkenstein, 2013; Oosterlynck et al., 2016; Bauder and Juffs, 2020).

Importantly, solidarity practices play out in informal interactions in everyday spaces, emerging through ‘proximity and emotional attachment to place’, including places characterised by diversity (Oosterlynck et al., 2016: 774). Attention must be paid to concrete relational practices in particular places (Oosterlynck et al., 2016: 774). Feelings of ‘mutual understanding, sympathy, and empathy’ (Kapeller and Wolkenstein, 2013: 482) help generate interpersonal practices in places where aspects of social similarity – such as gender, family role and migration trajectory – can be mobilised (Benchekroun, 2024). Such places may include cultural or migrant-based associations, faith groups or family-oriented organisations (Christopoulou and Leontsini, 2017; Amrith, 2018). Informational, emotional, practical and material support may be exchanged, and relationships negotiated, through everyday interactions and conversations in these places. These solidarity practices can also be understood as ‘enacting citizenship’ (Erel and Reynolds, 2018), or ‘acts of citizenship’ (Isin and Nielsen, 2008), in that people make connections provide mutual recognition and share resources and care in semi-public spaces, making them ‘visible’ (Oosterlynck et al., 2016). This article shows how the concept of solidarity practices can help extend understanding of the everyday work of belonging undertaken by precariously positioned mothers denied official citizenship status (Kershaw, 2010; Erel, 2011; Erel and Reynolds, 2018).

In the context of hostile immigration policies, insecure immigration statuses and financial precarity, it is crucial to recognise how solidarity practices are entwined with the concept of resistance. Resistance emerges ‘where there is power’ (Foucault, 1978: 95) in the form of action in opposition to that power (Hollander and Einwohner, 2004). The concept of ‘everyday resistance’ emphasises how those who are less powerful resist ‘economic and ritual marginalization’ (Scott, 1985: xviii), seek to protect themselves from oppression by the powerful, and make claims (Scott, 1985; Hollander and Einwohner, 2004). In contrast to more public, dramatic and organised forms of resistance, everyday resistance is informal, low-profile and routine (Scott, 1985; Hollander and Einwohner, 2004; Vinthagen and Johansson, 2013; Murru and Polese, 2020). This conceptualization centres the agency of resisters and the potential of their actions to undermine power in a particular context (Vinthagen and Johansson, 2013). Everyday resistance is often underpinned by a shared need to increase access to scarce resources, requiring cooperation (Scott, 1989) to build ‘small-scale survival techniques’ (Vinthagen and Johansson, 2013: 24-5). Everyday resistance is therefore a central feature of solidarity practices in particular places. I now turn to the concept of social infrastructure, and how it can deepen understanding of the role of spaces and places in shaping such practices.

### **Social infrastructure and intersectional identities**

Urban sociologists and migration scholars have expanded the notion of infrastructure beyond its physical and material connotations to focus on social networks, spaces and places, and everyday practices of accessing and sharing resources (Simone, 2004; 2021). Whilst ‘migration infrastructure’ focuses on macro and meso levels (Xiang and Lindquist, 2014), the concepts of ‘arrival infrastructures’ (Wessendorf, 2022) and ‘migrant infrastructure’ (Hall et al., 2017) draw attention to the role of both places and people at the local level as informal support structures for new migrants. The concept of ‘social infrastructure’ (Klinenberg, 2018) – or the more widely used notion of ‘social networks’, if attention is paid to place and space (Small, 2009; Kathiravelu and Bunnell, 2018) – is invaluable in highlighting how local public or semi-public places within a neighbourhood provide spaces for connections and access to support and resources, and shape the development of friendships. Different types of social infrastructure, such as early childhood settings or churches, enable mothers to resist intersecting forms of oppression by facilitating the mobilization of intersecting identities. In different contexts, people may ‘emphasise certain identities and downplay others’ (Vinthagen and Johansson, 2013), such as gender, nationality, ‘race’, ethnicity, language, education level, class, family role, faith or belief. Emphasising certain identities in particular spaces facilitates solidarity practices: connecting with others, disclosing needs, offering or accessing resources, providing recognition, enacting citizenship and generating a sense of belonging.

### **Methodology**

My ethnographic fieldwork took place in a London neighbourhood whose population is highly diverse in terms of ethnicity, religious belief, first language, country of origin and immigration status. The neighbourhood comprises diverse types of housing, shops and cafes, and a range of support and advice organisations. I volunteered in several such organisations during the fieldwork, which helped me to understand the everyday and longer-term barriers and challenges mothers faced and how they navigated them.

Through my researcher-volunteer roles and through snowball sampling, I recruited twenty-two mothers to participate in the study. I spent time ‘hanging out’ with each participant, in most cases meeting up multiple times. I joined in with their everyday activities, whether at home, going to family drop-ins, attending appointments or picking up children from school. In these ways, I gained insights into mothers’ day-to-day interactions, witnessed their complex trajectories toward gaining ‘status’, and gradually developed nuanced understandings of their experiences and perspectives (Sinha and Back, 2014; O’Neill and Reynolds, 2021). When we met in private spaces, with mothers’ consent I audio-recorded our conversations (lasting about an hour on average) and later transcribed them. To better understand mothers’ support networks, I asked each participant to draw a sociogram, representing themselves and the people who were important to them. This process generated shared understandings of how mothers developed relationships and accessed support (see Benchekroun, 2020; also Ryan et al., 2014; Tubaro et al., 2016; Ryan, 2020). I also interviewed five frontline advocates and public sector workers, and wrote descriptive and reflective fieldnotes following interactions with participants.

The mothers who took part in my study all had experience of insecure immigration status and ‘no recourse to public funds’. Most had arrived when they were in their twenties, and all had become mothers in the UK. The majority of them had been living in the UK for at least ten years. Many had either lost or been refused residency rights, and were struggling to obtain or regain them. Some, often after many years, had been granted temporary residency rights (usually for 2.5 years at a time) and were on the ‘ten-year settlement route’, but were still struggling financially and had no guarantees about their future rights to reside in the country. A small number had been granted refugee status and permanent residency rights. The participants had migrated from ten different countries across the Caribbean, Latin America, Africa and Asia; the majority were from countries in West Africa. Most identified as Christian, from a range of denominations, including Orthodox, Catholic and African-led

Pentecostal churches. The mothers' ages ranged from late twenties to late forties. All but one spoke good English. I was able to build trust and rapport with them through my volunteer roles in respected community organizations, my identity as a mother, and my interest in policy impact on mothers' lives, which many participants were keen to discuss with me. However, there were differences in our social identities (e.g. ethnicity, citizenship status), some of which more apparent or significant than others. Following the original research, I facilitated a series of knowledge exchange workshops in 2022–2023 to discuss research findings with mothers (and a small number of fathers), practitioners and volunteers. These workshops brought together a wider range of perspectives, including those of mothers from eastern Europe and parents who had moved to the UK more recently. To protect participants' identities, I have used pseudonyms.

### **How social infrastructure facilitates mothers' solidarity practices and everyday resistance**

My research indicated that social infrastructure that was experienced as safe, welcoming, accessible and family-oriented enabled mothers subjected to legal and financial precarity to connect, build trust and develop support networks with other mothers/parents, acquaintances, advocates and advisors. Social infrastructure included places such as advice centres, churches, adult learning classes, children's centres, nurseries and schools, food banks and family drop-ins. These places enabled mothers to engage in six types of solidarity practice: reaching out and providing recognition; sharing financial and material resources; sharing information and practical help; informal hosting; providing advice and advocacy; and sharing emotional support. This section addresses each of these in turn, and shows how everyday resistance is incorporated with them.

#### ***Reaching out and providing recognition***

Mothers in legally and financially precarious positions tended to find themselves living in small, shared, overcrowded, temporary spaces with limited privacy, and sometimes in poor condition, whether in someone else's home or in a house in multiple occupancy. Public, commercial spaces, meanwhile, such as coffee shops or shopping centres, were often inaccessible, partly due to lack of resource. Domestic and public spaces therefore often further marginalised precariously positioned mothers by reducing opportunities for social interactions and solidarity practices. On the other hand, safe, sociable and freely accessible spaces – social infrastructure – facilitated regular encounters amongst mothers and children (Ryan, 2007; Small, 2009; Vincent et al., 2017; Klinenberg, 2018; Erel, 2018). The intersection of gender, motherhood, 'race'/ethnicity, language, migration trajectory or faith in these spaces meant that mothers could mobilise aspects of their identities, allowing them to be recognised and to recognise each other, as women and mothers from a particular group, for example as Nigerian Pentecostal mothers, or Spanish-speaking Catholic mothers. This mutual recognition enabled mothers to reach out and connect with one another, creating a sense of belonging (Ryan, 2007; Cronin, 2015; Vincent et al., 2017). Kesandu, originally from West Africa, was mothering alone and had two primary-school-aged children; her visa had expired and she was waiting to hear if she would be granted temporary residency rights. She attended a weekly drop-in based in a church hall, along with many mothers and children with insecure immigration status like herself. 'You meet a lot of parents like you', she explained. 'People that are down like you, you see a lot like that who don't have their status. You sit with them, you talk.' Mothers' more or less regular attendance at the drop-in facilitated mutual recognition based on tacit understandings of shared intersecting identities linking motherhood, 'race'/ethnicity and immigration status. Reaching out and chatting to each other in this space was therefore a form of solidarity. It was inherently bound up with elements of everyday resistance in opposition to everyday bordering and structural violence experienced in other spaces.

***Sharing material and financial resources***

Precariously positioned mothers faced significant challenges in providing for their children and themselves. At school, children become aware of disparities between themselves and their peers in relation to material possessions and wider opportunities; this increased the pressure on mothers to provide not only necessities but certain items and brands to help their children 'fit in' (Croghan et al., 2006). Couple relationships were important sites for material and financial support, but when relationships ended, support from ex-partners often became sporadic, or ceased completely. Friends and extended family members sometimes provided significant support too, but in many cases were similarly struggling (Fernandez Kelly, 1998). Social infrastructure played a crucial role in opening opportunities to engage with acquaintances and practitioners who could provide material or financial support. Voluntary sector-run or faith-based spaces providing free food, clothes or toys were valued sources of day-to-day essentials. Attending church facilitated contact with co-congregants who, without needing to know the details of one's immigration status difficulties, had some understanding of the precarity mothers could be facing, and might offer small amounts of cash (or shelter, discussed below). Cleo, a single mother of two from West Africa, whose residency rights had expired, told me that at her church, 'they can give you free stuff sometimes'; one particular churchgoer would help by giving her '£10, £20' when he saw her. Within different kinds of social infrastructure, giving what you could spare was a vital solidarity practice which also incorporated everyday resistance: it enabled families to survive in the context of the structures which contributed to their destitution.

***Sharing information and practical help***

Linked to this was a willingness to share useful information and practical help. Mothers were often happy to tell other precariously positioned mothers about – or even accompany them to – places which might be able to help them, such as food banks, immigration advice centres, support groups for women experiencing domestic abuse or for families with a child with a disability. Kemi, a mother of three from West Africa with only temporary residency rights, told me she would take other mothers along to the clothes bank: 'If I find good stuff, I drag a lot of people', she added. 'I'm not greedy, I share. I just want people around me to be happy like I am happy.'

Mothers also shared practical help, such as collecting a friend's child from school or nursery. Ginika, a single mother from West Africa with no residency rights, no support from her ex-partner and no extended family in the UK, had befriended several mothers through her two daughters' friendships at school. She told me that if her children ever missed a day at school, her friends would phone to check she was okay, and would offer to take them to school if she was ill. These practices reassured Ginika that 'people are beside you'. 'They brighten you up', she told me, 'like a family'. The practical help and emotional support she received from the friends she had made through her daughters' school, and which she reciprocated, were vital to her wellbeing, enabling her to resist the multilayered and intersecting forms of oppression she experienced in her daily life.

Other kinds of information-sharing included sharing understandings of cultural norms in the UK, which could shed light on new ways of doing things. This happened in places like ESOL classes<sup>2</sup>, which brought together people from diverse migration backgrounds, enabling mothers to develop broader networks and to access information less available in closely bounded family or co-ethnic networks (Coleman, 1998). Daphne, for example, originally from central Africa and a mother of three, who had been granted refugee status some years previously, recalled how participating in classes at her local college not long after her arrival in the UK had connected her to people from different cultural backgrounds with diverse experiences and perspectives:

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<sup>2</sup> English for Speakers of Other Languages



I'm meeting different groups, you learn different things. [...] 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. [...] 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.

Making connections through regular contact with other women and mothers in social infrastructure such as schools and colleges enabled information and practical help to be shared, aiding day-to-day survival and supporting mothers' mental wellbeing. These kinds of solidarity practices could be transformative, for example by facilitating the process of applying for residency rights, or, as in Daphne's case, increasing awareness of women's rights, with implications for lived experiences of couple relationships. Such interactions were tightly bound up with everyday resistance, in that they creatively resisted not only hostile state policies but also gendered social structures. Sharing useful information and participating in such discussions were also a powerful form of enacting citizenship and belonging for racially minoritised mothers experiencing multilayered forms of exclusion (Erel and Reynolds, 2018).

### ***Informal hosting***

Research on hosting, framed in social sciences literature as hospitality (Dikeç et al., 2009; Gunaratnam, 2020), has tended to focus on middle-class people hosting refugees through established refugee organisations. But my research showed that hosting is a form of solidarity in much more informal contexts, often by people who are not affluent. Individuals, couples and families opened their homes to mothers experiencing legal and financial precarity. Connections were usually made within social infrastructure which mothers frequented as part of their family routines, such as churches, where faith, country of origin, gender and motherhood were important intersecting identities mobilised by mothers. Shelter took the form of a spare room, a bedroom made available by existing household members doubling up, or a shared living space. Arrangements usually lasted for a few weeks or months, meaning that mothers and children had to move frequently from one household to another ('sofa surfing'). For example, Onyeka, a single mother from West Africa with two young children, had been staying with a friend, but when this arrangement broke down, she approached the pastor at her church, who helped identify a congregant willing to let her stay in a room in their rented flat. 'They let us use the living room too,' Onyeka told me. 'They made us part of the family.' This lasted for a few months, until the hosts' own tenancy agreement expired and they had to move away, forcing Onyeka and her children to find another friend to move in with.

Despite the significant challenges (discussed below), hosting was an important solidarity practice, providing a relational form of shelter and safety. It incorporated everyday resistance in enabling precariously positioned families to resist the hostile immigration policies and socio-economic structures which denied them social housing, welfare support and sufficient wages to afford market rents.

### ***Providing advice and advocacy***

As discussed earlier, precariously positioned mothers navigating official systems encountered major structural and interpersonal barriers. Reliable and free or affordable advice was vital, but in scarce supply. In this context, the provision of advice, advocacy and support by (largely voluntary sector-based) frontline practitioners in spaces that felt safe and trustworthy were a form of solidarity practice, even if undertaken as part of a professional role. Specific actions included helping mothers complete long and complex forms; providing legal advice; referring mothers to specialist organisations for additional support; accompanying mothers to meetings with officials; and supporting families to claim their

rights. As indicated earlier, mothers' willingness to signpost other precariously positioned mothers to places where they could access such support was an equally important form of solidarity. These types of engagement enabled mothers to resist the multilayered forms of oppression they faced by helping them take practical steps to attenuate their precarious circumstances.

### ***Sharing emotional support***

Managing the significant daily challenges of mothering in the context of insecure immigration status and financial hardship can be emotionally exhausting. Sharing emotional support is important for mothers' wellbeing (Cronin, 2015), and by extension for their children's wellbeing. Whilst the risks of disclosing details of personal circumstances to friends or acquaintances constrained mothers' sharing of emotional support (Bencheckroun, 2023), such support was shared in diverse ways within different types of social infrastructure. In churches, for example, co-congregants provided support without necessarily knowing information about mothers' multilayered precarity, for example through weekly fellowship groups. Meanwhile, mothers would occasionally turn to faith leaders in times of severe stress. For example, Abeba, a mother-of-one from East Africa whose abusive husband had left her, avoided discussing her situation with other women in her co-ethnic community (who she felt viewed separation as 'shameful') and instead turned to the priest at her Orthodox church. 'With others sometimes in our culture it's hard,' Abeba explained. 'But with the priests, it's very easy. They are listening to you. They are very, very helpful. They are kind.' She told me that the priest would call her, reassuring her: 'Don't worry, tomorrow is another day. Be faithful, just pray.'

Similarly, mothers often perceived frontline advocates and advisors in voluntary sector (or certain kinds of public sector) organisations as 'someone to talk to' (Small, 2017) in a safe space about topics which might be off-limits with friends. When seeking legal or health advice, for example, mothers had to be open about aspects of their personal circumstances. This facilitated trust and enabled mothers to talk honestly about their struggles, their fears and the impact on their mental health. Advocates and advisors usually responded with empathy as well as practical help. This was experienced as an important form of solidarity.

Other mothers, often in similarly precarious positions or having had similar experiences, were sources of emotional support in different ways. This often happened through everyday sociabilities within different kinds of social infrastructure, such as the school playground, children's centre groups or family drop-ins – which several mothers described as 'just saying hello'. Sometimes, through regular encounters in these spaces, mothers formed friendships over time. Even within friendships, however, mothers were exceptionally careful about sharing details of their immigration status. Some mothers avoided telling anyone. Others had shared this information with one or two close friends, usually with personal experience of similar precarity: this enabled deeper conversations where they could confide their worries, listen and provide reassurance.

Whilst not always easy to do, accessing and sharing emotional support was therefore an important solidarity practice which helped mothers to cope with hostile policies and wider structures – whether by engaging with trusted frontline practitioners, through everyday sociabilities with acquaintances, or mutual confiding between close friends.

### ***Navigating tensions in everyday resistance and solidarity practices***

The solidarity practices explored above, entwined with everyday forms of resistance, and shaped by social infrastructure, played a significant role in sustaining mothers' personal wellbeing and sense of belonging. Yet tensions emerged within these solidarity practices and had to be navigated within day-to-day interactions.

First, solidarity practices generated access to resources and feelings belonging; however, by definition these did not extend to everyone. Therefore, the sense of belonging

created and shared within a particular place or space was in perpetual tension with the question of who was excluded. This rested on explicit or implicit criteria, such as motherhood status, children's ages or religious belief. Sometimes, however, it played out in insidious ways. Several participants in my study had experienced hostility and hierarchies within their church, where they had been made to feel that they did not belong (whether by the church leader or co-congregants), either through subtle means of marginalization or through more confrontational approaches.

Second, solidarity practices were often underpinned by unequal power dynamics, which could come to the fore over time, leading to risks of exploitation (Erel, 2018). This affected hosting or guesting arrangements, where hosts' goodwill tended to diminish over time, and behaviour could become exploitative or hostile. For example, Kesandu had been conscious of her host's limited space and resources, and was worried about being asked to leave, and having limited means to reciprocate. She had noticed her host's changing attitude and had to navigate her situation with care: '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 kicked out with the child, because I don't have nowhere to go.' Power dynamics within such relationships had significant consequences for mothers and their children.

Third, mothers experienced a perpetual tension between the need for connectedness and openness on the one hand, and the need for autonomy and privacy on the other (Benchekroun, 2024). Material, financial, informational, practical and, not least, emotional forms of support were difficult to seek without divulging certain details about one's personal circumstances and level of need – yet sharing such information created risks of gossip, exploitation, and, for those without residency rights, detention or deportation. To avoid trust being broken, many mothers avoided reaching out to others, making new friendships, and confiding certain kinds of information even in people considered to be good friends, as discussed above. The limited degree of self-disclosure increased the weight of worry that mothers had to carry.

Fourth, friends and acquaintances within mothers' support networks were likely to be in similarly precarious positions, so were limited in the material and financial resources they could share (Fernandez Kelly, 1998), as well as the emotional support they could provide. This meant that mothers had to make 'subtle calculations' as to whom to ask for help and when (Spencer and Pahl, 2006: 66). As Cleo remarked, '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.'

Fifth, there was a concern amongst some that sharing useful information too widely might reduce access to valued and limited resources for those already enjoying access to them. Kemi, who had underlined the importance of sharing information about food and clothes banks (discussed above), was also conscious that overdoing this might reduce access to resources for herself, and commented that other mothers had rebuked her for bringing too many new people to these places.

Sixth, as indicated in the previous section, a cause and consequence of mothers' multilayered precarity was unstable accommodation and frequent moves. This limited mothers' access to social infrastructure and supportive relationships. Binta, for example, recounted the immense efforts required, each time she and her children had to move home, to 'find a new church, find a new GP, find a new school for my son. The downs of moving. Start again.' This complicated the process of building trust with other mothers and other people:

Sometimes people feel that, well, you've been here for two months, we don't really know you. So I just go to church and pray, and that's it. Sometimes I make friends, but when you have to leave them behind... [...] It takes a long time to build trust.

### **Conclusion**

In response to hostile immigration policies and socio-economic structures which drive multilayered and intersecting forms of precarity and oppression, women and mothers engage in diverse forms of solidarity practices with other women and mothers and frontline advocates. The article has shown how these solidarity practices are entwined with everyday resistance, enabling mothers to push back against the structures which oppress and precaritize them. Calling attention to social infrastructure as safe, accessible, public or semi-public and often family-oriented spaces, the article has underlined how it enables and supports these practices, providing spaces in which mothers can mobilise certain intersecting identities. By exploring six types of solidarity practice which came to the fore in my ethnographic research, I have shown how such practices can be a vital means of enacting relational belonging and citizenship by women and mothers without UK citizenship status, supporting individual and family wellbeing. However, I have also identified tensions which emerge within such interactions in apparently supportive spaces. Further attention needs to be paid to how women and mothers continually navigate these tensions to sustain positive relationships and protect their economic and emotional wellbeing and that of their children. It is vital to recognise the work involved in doing so, and the toll this may take.

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### **Conflicts of interests**

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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