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Narratives of coercive precarity experienced by mothers seeking asylum in the UK (Wales)

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ABSTRACT
This paper explores the impact of the UK's racialized asylum system on mothers and their children. Asylum-seeking mothers in the UK are treated with hostility and suspicion and prohibited from basic socio-economic rights such as employment yet must also raise their children within this hostile environment. In this paper, based on a Thematic Narrative Analysis of interviews with refugee and asylum-seeking mothers in Wales, we argue that legalized hostility and exclusion are systemic coercive control. Using theories of social reproduction and coercive control, we explore the emotional and psychological impact of coercion on four women and show how this systemic coercive control leads to both the fracturing of families and the fracturing of motherhood. Through the analysis of asylum-seeking mothers' experiences, we show that the coercion exerted on the women has direct and indirect impacts on their children through deprivation, isolation and fractured relationships.

Introduction

In the past twenty years, UK legislation has become increasingly focused on deterring, detaining and deporting asylum seekers. Despite this, the number of people claiming asylum in the UK has increased in recent years, with 35,737 claims made in 2019 (Commons Library 2021). While this is higher than in many of the preceding years, it is significantly less than the record 84,132 applications made in 2002 (Commons Library 2021). Although the media often portray asylum seekers as predominantly men, in 2019, 26 per cent of UK asylum applications were made by women, a proportion of whom were likely to be mothers (Refugee Council 2020). Mothers, like all those who seek

asylum in the UK enter a system focused on deterrence, detention and deportation. Throughout this article, whenever we talk of the "asylum system", we refer to the system of laws and regulations enacted by the UK Government that together Bloch and Schuster (2005) describe as a "hostile environment". It is a system that leaves many living in limbo, through legal precarity, which we define, based on Butler's (2012) work, as vulnerability to harm from the UK asylum system. However, we would argue that it is also a system where those within it face gendered, racialized social constructions of what it is to be an asylum-seeking mother (Anderson 2013). Mayblin, Wake, and Kazemi (2020) describe the UK asylum system as one of "slow violence" and Canning (2020, 262) evidences a system of gendered "corrosive control" which she defines as:

> the banal, everyday stripping of autonomy and humanity that occurs throughout the process of seeking asylum in the UK.

Our work provides further evidence of an abusive and coercive system. We use the term "coercive", rather than "corrosive", to show how asylum-seeking mothers are systemically abused in this racialized, gendered and hostile system. We define systemic coercive control as a system of threats, intimidation and deprivation designed to be hostile, deter and punish asylum seekers as a process to determine who is "genuine". In addition, our analysis also draws on ideas of "everyday resistance" (Johansson and Vinthagen 2016) and "slow resistance" (Saunders and Al-Om 2022) to demonstrate the ways in which the mothers we interviewed engaged in everyday practices to resist the harms inflicted on themselves and their children from the abusive and coercive system we describe in the following sections.

In this paper, we take motherhood as a broad lens and as a family role self-defined by our participants to explore the harm caused to family relationships, including the fracturing of family units and mother–child dynamics. We show this using varying forms of motherhood including lone mothering and transnational mothering. All the mothers included in this paper considered themselves the primary carer for their children, practicing their mothering in extended family networks to varying degrees, prior to their arrival in the UK. Each mother considered the mother–child bond a primary and vital connection, holding the nuclear family as a priority when needing safety. Horton's (2009) work on transnational mothers in the US discusses the relational nature of mothers' experiences and the impact on their children. This paper uses such ideas of relationality and intersubjectivity to discuss reproduced systemic coercive abuse, based on theories of racial capitalism and social reproduction (Bhattacharya 2017, 2018).

Creating a "hostile environment": racialization of the UK asylum system

This paper is written within a framework that legalized precarity and hostility involve key legal and social constructions that combine to form coercive

control and abuse. We, therefore, begin by discussing the ways in which the racialization of asylum seekers and refugees occurs through hostile policies and hierarchies of citizenship. We then move on to discuss the intersectional gendered perceptions and constructions of women seeking asylum.

Garner (2007, 63) argues that all immigration regimes are racialized in some form or another and that all immigration policies use classificatory methods that distinguish between problematic and unproblematic bodies. Anderson (2020) highlights the importance of the concept of citizenship for distinguishing between "citizens' and "migrants'. She suggests that the length of time someone is cast by law or perception as a "migrant" or "refugee" unsettles this binary and that "who retains 'migrancy' as a *social* status is bound up with race, class and gender" (Anderson 2020, 54). Racialization in the UK asylum system occurs through the creation of an immigration hierarchy within racial capitalism (Bhattacharyya 2018), where White British-born citizens are at the top of that hierarchy and asylum seekers at the bottom. Asylum seekers are stripped of a sense of belonging through exclusion from social, political and economic rights and participation, such as employment, education and voting (Anderson 2013) and the dismantling of state support of the right to family life (Gedalof 2018).

The UK's racialized approach to immigration policy started at least as early as the 1905 Aliens Act, which sought to restrict entry to Jewish migrants (Bennett 2018). Further racialization of immigration policy was seen in the Commonwealth Immigrants Acts of 1962 and 1968 and the Immigration Act 1971, which gradually restricted the movement of non-White Commonwealth citizens to the UK. More recently, successive Conservative and Labour governments have increasingly treated asylum seekers as "undesirable" migrants who need to be deterred (Schuster and Solomos 2004) and it is through this process that asylum seekers are not just singled out as "undesirable" but also racialized. This is seen particularly in New Labour's Immigration and Asylum Act 1999.

Prior to the 1999 Act, asylum seekers were supported by local authorities, primarily in London and the southeast of England. They were also able to access mainstream welfare benefits. The 1999 act created the National Asylum Support Service (NASS) and also a system of compulsory, no-choice dispersal which saw asylum seekers who required housing support moved to dispersal areas – "spreading the burden" (Robinson 2003). Much has been written about the poor quality of accommodation offered to asylum seekers in dispersal locations (Allsopp, Sigona, and Phillimore 2014), where there is often a lack of support for women who have experienced gendered violence (Canning 2020). In addition to a ban on paid employment for most asylum seekers, the 1999 Act also prohibited asylum seekers from claiming mainstream welfare benefits. Section 95 of the Act created the primary, but separate, housing and financial support system for asylum claimants.

Additionally, Section 98 introduced temporary support for initial claimants and Section 4 was for a restricted list of those who had exhausted appeal rights. Financial support was set at a rate that was equivalent to 70 per cent of the rate paid for basic income support (Allsopp, Sigona, and Phillimore 2014). This rate has increased only slightly over the past 20 years, recently increased to £40.85 per week (The Asylum Support (Amendment) Regulations 2022). Parents of a child aged one to three years of age and pregnant women may receive an additional £3 per week, with parents of infants under one potentially eligible for an extra £5 per week (Home Office 2021). Families with children excluded from support under immigration legislation may be eligible for housing support under the Children's Act 1989.

The policy of deterrence has increased more recently as successive Conservative governments have attempted to strengthen the "hostile environment" approach. In this sense, we agree with Webber's (2019) assessment that the Conservative Government has "weaponized" hostility. This coercive approach sits within a wider context of racial capitalism (Bhattacharyya 2018) with a post-colonial, racialized and gendered immigration system. Mayblin, Wake, and Kazemi (2020) discuss how European immigration systems have become increasingly designed to keep inhabitants of ex-colonial nations from crossing the colonists' borders. Mayblin, Wake, and Kazemi (2020) argue that UK systems are still rooted in racialized and hierarchical worldviews, inflicting a system of "slow violence" on asylum seekers. Those worldviews enable a system that dehumanizes asylum seekers, strips them of basic rights to employment and often leaves them living in poverty, trying to survive or resist (Saunders and Al-Om 2022) deprivation and insidious everyday harms such as social isolation. We see further evidence of racialized hierarchies in work by Bennett (2018) and Anderson (2013) who all discuss the social constructions creating everyday "othering", often based on hierarchical world views. That post-colonial hierarchical worldview is structurally embedded in British legal systems, as discussed earlier. In the next section, we discuss the gendered basis of this coercive system to situate the context of the mothers whose experiences we describe later.

A racialized, gendered and coercive asylum system

In the mid-twentieth century, feminists started to highlight the gendered issues faced by both migrant workers and those seeking international refugee protection, where experiences of women and girls, such as sexual and domestic violence, were often invisible (Freedman 2010). The racialized harms discussed earlier are of particular significance for asylum-seeking mothers and families in intersectional (see Crenshaw 1989) terms of social reproduction and exclusionary borders of belonging (Gedalof 2018). Asylum-seeking mothers are faced with individual responsibility for the

social integration of their families against a system that excludes them from key areas such as the labour market (Bhattacharyya 2018). Reynolds and Erel (2016) suggest that through this process of racialization, migrant mothers are viewed as "benefit cheats", "health tourists" and "welfare scroungers" or as O'Neill (2018, 76) shows "folk devils of the twenty-first century". Elsewhere, Canning (2017) documents in detail the range of gendered harms inflicted on asylum-seeking women, from detention to the separation of mothers and children. These harms are forms of coercion designed to control asylum seekers through deterrence, punishment and hostility. Asylum seekers are often dispersed to areas with no infrastructure for supporting vulnerable migrants and away from areas where they might have an existing family or community connections. Thus, for asylum-seeking mothers, in particular, there is a delegitimizing of the family ties of migrants and a devaluing of the reproductive role of mothers, when this form of social control is exerted (Canning 2020). Hynes (2011) has similarly documented the ways in which the asylum dispersal system has gendered impacts. She reports the difficulties that asylum-seeking mothers face in accessing services in dispersal locations and the ways in which lack of access to childcare impacts on mothers' abilities to access education and other opportunities. Hynes (2011) also highlights the link between dispersal and deprivation and the ways in which dispersal accommodation does not factor in socialization of children or the safety of women.

Erel, Reynolds, and Kaptani (2018) discuss the impact on mothers of racialized notions of citizenship in the UK, with stereotypes of migrant mothers having ethnically "traditional" values that will be passed onto children. We would argue that "traditional" is often a euphemism in British society for inferior. At the very least, it is a form of false "othering", placing emphasis on migrant mothers to prove that they are more like "us' (a notion of Britishness), whether the perceived differences are accurate or not. Asylum-seeking mothers are excluded from most state support for reproducing British social and cultural values with their children yet are still considered responsible and culpable for their children's social integration by the state. The asylum system is another way in which the state inflicts and reproduces blame through families (Gedalof 2018). Work based on social reproduction theory such as that traced by Bhattacharya (2017) suggests that the social status and social capital of mothers are reproduced with their children. Social theories of racial capitalism and social reproduction (Bhattacharyya 2018) also show asylum-seeking mothers have to survive, through acts of everyday resistance (Johansson and Vinthagen 2016), with their children. Resistance in a system that excludes them as unwanted or surplus to societal requirements.

In the next section, we provide an overview of the methods used in this research and an introduction to the four mothers whose stories we present in the analysis which follows. That analysis demonstrates some ways in

which the hostile and coercive asylum system described here has led to fractured mothering and fractured families.

Methods

The data in this article come from a wider project exploring the experiences of refugee and asylum-seeking mothers in Wales, UK. Twenty-six participants who self-defined as mothers were recruited and interviewed with the assistance of refugee support organizations in Wales. All mothers saw themselves as the primary carers for their children. All interviews were conducted by the first author who identifies as a racialised mother but not as someone from a refugee or asylum background. Through researcher positionality of partial insider status (Ryan 2015), the interviews were conducted with an emphasis on being mother-to-mother conversations. This aided the creation of trust and rapport between researcher and participants by distancing the research "interviews' from Home Office interrogative interviews that the women may have experienced. Some of the participants were interviewed more than once (32 interviews in total) and all interviews were conducted in English.

Each interview lasted between 30 min and 2 h 45 min and was manually transcribed by the first author. The transcripts were subsequently analysed, guided by the systematic approaches for Thematic Analysis suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006). The analysis was carried out deductively and iteratively with the specific aim of exploring racialized legal precarity. The mothers' stories were analysed within a theoretical framework that sees the legal and social construction of asylum-seeking and refugee mothers as a racialized, dehumanized and oppressed group, as discussed in earlier sections (Bhattacharyya 2018; Schuster and Solomos 2004). We deduced that the data showed a clear theme of racialized and gendered coercive control inflicted by the asylum system, harming both mothers and their children. Findings are presented in this paper as a thematic narrative analysis using the most applicable stories, from four women: Munira, Sarah, Mona and Pam. Munira is a married mother with one child with refugee status. Sarah is a single mother to two children with discretionary leave to remain. Mona is a single mother of one who was an asylum seeker when we first met. Pam is a widowed mother to two children who has been seeing asylum in Wales for over a decade. We give more information about each woman in the analysis sections of the paper.

The presentation of the data and the representation of the women and their experiences posed important ethical considerations (Pickering and Kara 2017). Some of the women involved in the project were asylum seekers with difficult cases or family situations and as such, we use pseudonyms throughout the presentation of the findings and are deliberately vague about details of legal cases, professional expertise and countries of

origin. For example, we indicate geographic regions rather than specific countries and do not always state details of asylum claims or rejections. We have sought to ensure that the words and perceptions of the women are at the forefront of our interpretations. We tried to allow the women's words to speak for themselves, with our analysis providing supporting context and focus rather than overshadowing the interview extracts.

Analysis

Fracturing women and families

The typical family separation scenario presented to the British public is of a husband and father forcibly migrating first, with the rest of the family following later as a spouse and dependents (Oxfam Refugee Council 2018; Hopkins 2013). However, that image reflects just one form of family separation experienced by those seeking asylum in the UK. Recent research has explored some of the differing scenarios, such as Madziva and Zontini (2012) on Zimbabwean mothers separated from their children. In this section, we add to that body of knowledge by exploring four individual and differing cases of family separation. Munira was forced to live separately from her husband when his asylum claim was rejected, under the Dublin Regulations. Sarah fled from intimate partner violence. Mona had felt obliged to leave her daughter with an abusive father when she sought political sanctuary in the UK. Pam has been mothering transnationally and living in asylum limbo for over a decade. In each of these situations, the mother has experienced coercion from a hostile legal system, which each woman resists (Hollander and Einwohner 2004) for survival. The focus on their experiences of coercion as mothers enables us to see there is also a relational impact (Horton 2009) on their children.

Separating parents

Munira's family arrived in the UK and applied for asylum together. However, her husband's (Mikael) claim was rejected under the Dublin Regulations. Munira was able to claim asylum for herself (and her son, Max) and was granted refugee status and leave to remain relatively quickly. However, the difference in immigration status between husband and wife meant that Mikael living with Munira would invalidate her claims to social security support and accommodation. Therefore, during the processing of Mikael's claim for a spousal visa, Munira lived precariously as a single parent, while Mikael lived separately, with no recourse to public funds and no right to asylum support, as a refused asylum seeker. The precarious, hostile environment designed to force people to leave the UK involves forcing families apart

to the extent that the systemic coercive control of Munira and her family continued, even once she was deemed "worthy" (Weissman 2016) of protection by the state. Her husband was homeless, while she and her son were forced into material deprivation and isolation, which she talks about in the extract below:

> And in the council house there was, when we slept first night me and my child, we were in jackets and we were on the floor. We didn't have anything. And it was so heart-breaking that every help was in words in only …

> We slept on floor in council house. There was no gas, there was no electricity, there was no carpet, there was mould everywhere. The upstairs was wooden. Second day I managed to get £20 from a charity organisation in town … When I found her, she said, well, you are not still with me anymore because you are a refugee. I work with asylum seekers only. I said … " I don't know where to go!"

This extract shows the precarious deprivation that Munira and her son faced when she was first awarded refugee status. Munira simultaneously needed to adapt to becoming a single parent (temporarily) and the rapid withdrawal of asylum support that occurs 28 days[1] after being granted refugee status. Those changes were imposed, reflecting the oppressive and coercive hostility of the UK's asylum and immigration legislation (Canning 2020; Webber 2019). Munira and Max were entitled to social housing support under the 1989 Children's Act. However, the accommodation Munira describes is very basic, without adequate flooring even. Munira was proactive and sought help but could not get it from any "charity organisation". In her case, the legal distinction between asylum seeker and refugee excluded her from third sector service provision beyond assistance with applying for social security benefits. We argue that Munira's description of no support and no choice about sleeping on bare floors covered only by coats is clear material deprivation for her and her son. Additionally, Munira explained she and Max were caused emotional harm through separation from their husband and father. Munira was powerless, in her eyes, to change the situation.

Despite a sense of powerlessness, Munira demonstrated acts of everyday individual resistance (Saunders and Al-Om 2022). She decided that education was the route to a better future for her and her son and enrolled in university. Yet she faced intersectional discrimination as a refugee and a visibly Muslim woman when trying to finance her degree:

> I had to be super careful about what I'm wearing about what I'm going to say. There was a lot about presentation at that time/attire. It shouldn't be like that. So I had to take my university ID with me and I always introduced myself as a student first and then say that what was my problem instead of starting with refugee

The result of such discrimination was misinformation leading to overpayments and mis-paid childcare support that left her in thousands of pounds

worth of debt. Munira's small acts of adjusting her attire and choosing how she introduced herself first are small acts of embodied everyday resistance (Johansson and Vinthagen 2016). Munira's experiences reveal an existence in a state that abuses systemically but leaves the individual responsible for recovery in addition to the gendered issue of systemic harm of children that mothers are responsible for repairing (Bhattacharyya 2018). Despite these challenges, Munira has now graduated from a Welsh university, her full act of resistance.

Intersecting systems

The impact of a forced shift in immigration status has a gendered aspect to it, partly as women are more likely than men to need to claim asylum for reasons of intimate partner violence once already in the UK (Reehal et al. 2019). The systemic harm to mothers (and their children) may be exacerbated when asylum systems intersect with other areas of law (Canning 2017; Reehal et al. 2019) such as divorce and children's law. These issues all affected Sarah when she left her abusive husband.

Sarah described flight from intimate partner violence that took her into the precarity and hostility of the asylum system. Her right to reside in the UK came from her spousal visa linked to her husband's, then, Tier 2 visa. Divorcing her abusive husband left Sarah unable to return to her home country (cultural reasons) and the only option for staying in the UK was to claim asylum. Sarah's story shows some of the intersectional (Crenshaw 1989) gendered issues of dependence on spousal visas (see also Canning 2020).

> Sarah: But I need the money, you know. So, it was just survival, you know. You find yourself in situations and you just - where do you turn to? You've just left an abusive husband who is supposed to be supporting, and he refused to carry on supporting the children, so I had to do it myself. So, I worked three nights and looked after myself and those children. So, the money that came from that could only pay the rent for this room. This woman allowed me to rent a room in her house. And pay for the lady who looked after my child and that was it. [laughs] …
>
> Laura: Survival!
>
> Sarah: … So that was my first experience of working and being a mother, in a foreign land, knowing no-one but I just had to do something because returning back to [country name] was not an alternative because of the issue of that was behind the domestic.

Sarah fled violence for safety but entered a state of "*just survival*"; she and her sons were not living but just coping from one day to the next. Her case highlights the intersecting issues of an insecure immigration status and motherhood (Crenshaw 1989; Reehal et al. 2019). Sarah had to support her children by herself as her ex-husband "*refused*" to help and her spousal visa was (as is typical) conditioned with "no recourse to public funds' meaning

she could not claim state support (Reehal et al. 2019). Yet staying in the UK and claiming asylum was, arguably, an act of resistance against domestic abuse. The situation left her in a financially vulnerable and precarious position, as described above. Until her spousal visa expired, Sarah worked nights to pay for a single room for her and her children, for food and for childcare. She was unsupported as a migrant mother who had left an abusive husband, leaving her children also living in a state of material deprivation. The situation did not improve as Sarah navigated the systems in family and immigration law simultaneously:

> It's not funny. Well, imagine 8 years, you're not allowed to work. What is happening to your experience? What is happening to your degree? It's getting older. What is happening to your confidence? It goes to the floor. And that is what happened to me. So, instead of being able to lift myself up, I went back to the floor, and I was just there. Now two boys to look after, so one home office house after another one home office after another … and that's how I ended up in [city] … My first boy has been to [several] schools. You know and even today, he's [age of a young adult] he tells me "what's the point in making a friend? Because you make a friend, every time I made a friend we had to leave, we had to go." So, I don't … . you can see the impact!

Once Sarah's spousal visa expired, the intersection of family and asylum law made her situation more precarious. The transition from "spouse" of a voluntary migrant to asylum seeker, stripped Sarah of a legal right to work in the UK. She moved down the immigration hierarchy of "deservingness" and of legal status (Bennett 2018). Sarah was further stripped of independence and autonomy when, as an asylum seeker, she was no longer allowed to try to financially support herself and her children. She became eligible for section 95 support under the 1999 Immigration and Asylum Act, but she and her children found themselves living in the asylum limbo of claims, appeals and fresh claims for eight years. Reehal et al. (2019) highlight how the Home Office repeatedly fails to recognize the intersectional issues of intimate partner violence and the dangerous cultural issues women such as Sarah would face on return home. In the extract above Sarah describes this impact on her self-confidence, sending it "to the floor". She was aware that she was becoming less employable as her skills and experience were forced into disuse. In her words, we can see the psychological impact of the loss of the right to work for those pushed to seek asylum. We argue that Sarah suffered slow psychological "violence" through the loss of core human rights (Mayblin, Wake, and Kazemi 2020). The emotional impact on Sarah's eldest stopped him getting close to people and making friends. Even now, when the family has some stability through discretionary leave to remain, her eldest still asks "what's the point?". The isolation imposed by the asylum system (see also Juang et al. 2018) has left him with a sense of pointlessness in forming attachments outside his family unit – a clear emotional harm.

Sarah expressed a strong sense of the responsibility on her shoulders as a single parent and asylum seeker. Sarah had to find a way to cope, in ways that could be seen as everyday resistance (Saunders and Al-Om 2022). Sarah and her children faced ongoing precarity, isolation and deprivation (Butler 2012) and economically exclusionary laws (such as the prohibition from working as an asylum seeker). The challenges she faced did not end with leave to remain, they changed, as she explains:

> It's about you as a woman and what you, the society put you through, and for the sake of the children what you have to do to make them responsible adults because it's my hands to help these boys to be what they can be. So, my plight is, is nobody … you know she got her leave to remain, now she can work. but else comes after that?

Sarah says she must ensure that her children grow up to be "responsible adults" despite the impact the asylum system has had on them. Once again, we see the challenges, of social reproduction highlighted by Bhatta-charyya (2018). Sarah is a mother shouldering responsibility alone with no support from the system that caused harm. Taking that responsibility is, therefore, everyday temporalized resistance (Johansson and Vinthagen 2016) against temporalized coercion for her children. Sarah's partial re-acceptance into society's systems when she was granted leave to remain, returning to her the right to work and earn money. However, her new immigration status does not confer support to overcome inequities or repair the harms inflicted on her children by the dehumanizing hostile environment (Webber 2019; Canning 2020). The impact of, and resistance to, a coercive system is to add to Sarah's extensive load (Christopher 2012) as a (now working), single mother.

Fractured mothering

Mothers fleeing to safety without their children are another scenario not typically described in British policy reports or media depictions of separated asylum-seeking or refugee families (Oxfam Refugee Council 2018). As discussed earlier, however, forced transnational mothering is not rare and occurs in the UK (e.g. Madziva and Zontini 2012). In this section, we explore the experiences of Mona and Pam, who both hoped to reach safety and then bring their children to join them via a safe route. Instead, they found themselves enduring prolonged separation from their children, denied their human right to family life as asylum seekers in the UK (Gedalof 2018; Mayblin, Wake, and Kazemi 2020).

Mona and Pam both arrived in the UK as single mothers. They both stated clearly that separating from their children was not a choice. Continued separation by the legal restrictions of the asylum system was distressing for them, impacting their personal mothering roles. Moorhouse and

Cunningham (2012) liken the impact on a mother–child relationship of a separation in such circumstances to the breaking of a bone and, as we will show, fracturing does seem an appropriate term to describe the impact on Mona and Pam's relationships with their children. For Mona, the separation was longer than she anticipated but it was temporary as she was granted asylum about a year after we first met. Pam, however, has now been separated from her children for a decade with no indication of when her "temporal limbo" (Canning 2017) may come to an end. Her relationships with her children may be permanently fractured, particularly as one child is now missing.

Temporary fracturing

In Mona's story, we again see the intersecting issues of gender, immigration status and motherhood with experiences of both domestic and state-led abuse. Mona was a successful businesswoman in her home country but fled in fear of state persecution after speaking publicly about human rights abuses. She is also a mother to a daughter (Maya), divorced from an abusive man with no wider family support, due in part to being divorced. Initially, she was reluctant to leave her country as she did not want to leave Maya but also did not want to expose her child to the risks of an unknown and potentially perilous journey to safety. Mona explained during the interview that she knew some routes to safety might expose her to sexual abuse from traffickers (see also Shahrokhi 2010; Freedman 2016). Mona was prepared to risk that for herself but not her daughter. Eventually, feeling she had no choice, she fled the country, hoping to bring her daughter to join her via a safe route later. Mona's ex-husband threatened to force their daughter to marry as soon as she was legally old enough, if Mona was not successful in bringing their child to the UK. However, Mona's initial asylum claim was rejected. She cried when she explained: "I say all this true, but Home Office don't accept me". She was completely unsure if she would ever see her daughter again and was fearful of what would happen to her daughter. In the extracts below, we can see the impact of such precarity (Butler 2012) on Mona's identity and wellbeing as a mother.

> Laura: So, what would you like to do here? If you could have the life that you wanted here?
>
> Mona: Only my daughter … [cries] if my daughter not here, I can't, um, I can't living good. I like, I have a good life. Mmmm I'm not here alone. Errm and my daughter be safe with me. This very important. But now I alone, I can't see my daughter and this very bad that I know my know my daughter not safe … It's very bad for me. I'm mother [cries], you know that your child maybe [sniffs pause]. Sometime my daughter five day is in his house alone. I don't know what she eat. I don't know what she do.

Mona cried while explaining that she "can't living good" while separated from her daughter. Mona's life was in a precarious state of limbo, following the rejection of her asylum claim. Being refused asylum, resulted in a continued separation from her daughter with a significant emotional impact on Mona, particularly as she knows Maya is "not safe". Mona's personal mothering role with her daughter was fractured while she was not able to physically care for and protect her daughter as a transnational mother (Madziva and Zontini 2012). Mona had been honest about the risk to her life in her home country, yet her claim had been rejected; seemingly as part of the hostility and mistrust at the core of the asylum system, where UK policies in the past three decades have been based on notions of needing to deter, find and remove "bogus" claimants (Reehal et al. 2019). Therefore, Mona faced the uncertainty and fear of whether her appeal would be accepted and whether she would ever be able to bring her daughter to safety. Mona explained that this put her daughter at risk of a forced marriage and further abuse from her father, as neither he nor his family wanted Maya living with them. Policies of hostility and suspicion towards asylum claimants left Mona and her daughter in a precarious situation; it has kept mother and child apart, temporarily fracturing that relationship.

Mona's daughter finally joined her, over a year after our first interview, bringing fresh adjustments for them both. Mona and Maya's reunion, however, further highlighted the trauma they had both experienced and the individual burden on mothers of social reproduction in racialized systems that scholars such as Bhattacharyya (2018) discuss. Mona carried the responsibility, trying to move their lives forward from that trauma, with little external support. For example, Mona explained that Maya needed the almost constant physical presence of her mother. Additionally, Maya was worried about racism and discrimination, that she would never be accepted by other children in school because of her nationality and lack of English language skills. Neither mother nor daughter received help or support in finding Maya a school place or for Maya's concerns about school. Mona found this very difficult, saying: "I don't have any idea, and nobody speak with me here to what's going on". However, Mona had to find a way forward and did so using simple acts of unintentional, everyday resistance (Hollander and Einwohner 2004) as acts of survival. She used Google to find information and then devised a plan to help them move forward and get Maya enrolled in a school. Those small steps of building a new life together are, for us, an example of everyday resistance (Johansson and Vinthagen 2016) to the coercion and slow violence experienced.

Permanent fracturing

Pam has been living in legal precarity for a decade with no end in sight. She has been separated from her children the whole time, fracturing her role as a

mother in a way that echoes both McGuire and Martin's (2007) findings on fractured migrant families in the US and Gedalof's (2018) arguments that migration policy in the UK borders reproductive roles. Pam's mothering role had involved (jointly) supporting her children financially and physically caring for and nurturing them. She fled her home country after her husband was murdered for political reasons, leaving her children with family. She intended to bring her children to join her once she got leave to remain in the UK. Instead, she has been living in asylum precarity; of claiming asylum, appealing a rejection, fresh claims, fresh appeals and even looking at alternative legal routes to getting leave to remain. As such, she has had no legal option for bringing them to join her. During that time her son has gone missing, and no one knows where he is or if he is still alive. The legal limbo of asylum mean she has not been able to bring her children to join her nor able to work and provide for them financially as a transnational mother (Madziva and Zontini 2012). In the extract below, we can see the full impact of a decade of precarity on Pam and her children.

> Pam: I left my children back home too. They were a bit small. The girl has now finished university … The boy, go to disappeared. Now five years, I don't talk to my … I don't know where he is!
> Laura: : Oh God!
> Pam: Yes, there were two. The boy was the first one, the girl was the second. And shhhh, that's how I go through. My husband was killed because of politics. So, that's the life we are going through. Yes, I don't have babies here but …

Pam's relationship with one of her children is irreparably fractured and her relationship with the other may never heal fully. Pam's son is missing, and her daughter ("Petal") has lost all her immediate family. The coercive system has treated Pam with distrust and hostility (Weissman 2016; Nayak 2015) and has refused to grant her security and safety. The result of such structural discrimination has been an enforced separation of children from their mother, during which one child has disappeared. Family reunion is not possible for asylum seekers; they are excluded from the right to a family life by the asylum system. That right only comes once the legal system has found an individual (in this case Pam, a mother) sufficiently "deserving" of such rights and has granted leave to remain (Sales 2002). Such systemic hostility and temporal limbo is coercive and "weaponized" as Webber (2019) argues. The British asylum system has affected the lives of Pam's children irreparably, by keeping the family apart.

Pam talked a lot about how she resisted what could be described as coercive slow violence (Saunders and Al-Om 2022); over a decade living in limbo, separated from her children. We can see the coercive nature of the asylum system and its impacts in Pam's coping strategies. She explained that she keeps herself busy and uses social interaction, saying "I survive on people".

Pam's use of the word "survive" suggests she is existing and coping, not living. Her resistance is a survival strategy that enables her to maintain a thread of hope that her situation will change:

> And even if there is a time, because of our status we are going through, immigration, there is a time they ask, they want to know what you have been doing all this time and do you know, do you have people who can support you, they know you are a person, you deserve to be a citi, to be a citizen of this country or whatever …

The asylum system has, for two decades, combined deterrence and fear of deportation with political rhetoric of "genuine" asylum seekers who are deserving of refugee status (Schuster and Solomos 2004). Pam continues to do short courses and voluntary work in the hope that her efforts will help her case. She is consciously opposing (Hollander and Einwohner 2004) the oppression, isolation and negative perceptions with which she has to navigate her daily life which in turn would give her the option to reunite with one of her children. Yet, asylum decisions should not be made on that basis. So, as Canning (2020) has evidenced, this is a coercive system of legal controls and hostile pressures in which women like Pam have no autonomy, trying to prove themselves worthy, in the way a citizen by birth never has to do, of the right to a family life (Gedalof 2018).

Discussion and conclusion

In the introduction to this article, we described the asylum system in the UK as a "hostile environment" which creates a form of legal precarity that acts as a form of coercive, or corrosive, control by harming people deemed "vulnerable" through deprivation and fear of detention, deportation or detainment (Butler 2012; Canning 2020). Much of the existing literature treats asylum seekers as a homogeneous group and provides general overviews of the impacts of dispersal, destitution and detention that form the core of the "hostile environment" (Bloch and Schuster 2005). In this article, we have built on this existing research through a focus on the intersecting identities of gender, race, immigration status and motherhood to provide an in-depth analysis of the ways in which the UK asylum system impacts asylum-seeking mothers and the ways in which these "harms' are reproduced for their children and through mothers' shouldering the responsibility for resisting those harms. We have argued that the asylum system uses immigration and citizenship hierarchies within racial capitalism in ways that oppress and discriminate in racialized and gendered ways. The hierarchical and hostile system (Bennett 2018) is one in which the roles of asylum-seeking mothers are abused, exploited and used. That systemic abuse is intersectional (Crenshaw 1989); it happens in ways that could not happen with British citizens and is only possible in a society where mothers are primarily considered

both responsible and culpable for outcomes with children (Bhattacharyya 2018). The state inflicted harm adds further burdens to individual mothers. Through the combination of systemic abuses, legal precarity and expectations of individual responsibility, coercive control of mothers impacts the day-to-day lives and relationships of the mothers, their children and families.

One of the core aspects of a hostile and racialized asylum system is the fracturing of families and motherhood, which as we have shown here has a gendered impact, where the burden falls disproportionally on mothers. In the example from Munira, we showed how a system which leaves asylum seekers destitute leads to not only financial, but also material deprivation that is experienced by the mother and her child. We showed how this takes place simultaneously with a fracturing of the family unit and the added difficulties of coping emotionally with forced separation from husband and father. As we discussed earlier, the UK asylum system is predicated on making life as difficult as possible for those claiming asylum, with the aim of encouraging them to leave the UK. The enforced separating of parents that we see in Munira's case appears to be a good example of how this happens. Through Sarah's experiences, we similarly show how the gendered issue of domestic violence intersects with the UK asylum system, further creating fractured families. Sarah is explicit that her experience as an asylum-seeking mother is a precarious life in limbo. Due to the policy of dispersal, moving when and where the Home Office dictated, this has had a long-term impact on Sarah's children with her eldest child finding the notion of forming close attachments pointless due to the lack of permanency they face. Whilst the dispersal system has been criticized by both academics and third sector organizations, particularly for housing asylum seekers in areas of deprivation in the UK that are often unfamiliar with supporting refugees and asylum seekers, the liminality of this experience (Hynes 2011) and the risk of being moved to other dispersal areas is much less discussed. However, as we have shown here, it acts as a form of coercive control for mothers and their children living within a system of hostility and legal precarity.

We have shown that it is not just families that are fractured within the UK asylum system through forms of coercive control and legal precarity, but also the experience of being a mother and mothering itself. With Mona and Pam, we demonstrated the impact of both a lack of safe routes to the UK and the effects of additional hostility that requires asylum seekers to prove they are not "bogus'. Mona's experiences are specific to her position as a woman as she did not want to risk exposing her daughter to potential sexual exploitation or sex trafficking during her journey to safety. At the same time, she also knew that her daughter was at risk of forced marriage if left for too long in her home country. Yet the hostility Mona faced through the asylum system, with the presumption she was not genuine, did just that, leaving her daughter living in her home country with an abusive father and the real risk of forced marriage. With

Pam, we saw a woman who has yet to convince the Home Office that she is genuine even though her husband was murdered for political reasons and her son has since disappeared. Pam's situation, like Mona, has left her unable to mother children in person and unable to support them as a transnational mother. The inability to bring her children to safety has resulted in one child going missing and the other child having to grow up without either parent, and living in the knowledge that her sibling is gone too.

Through these experiences, we can see a range of ways in which hostility and legal precarity have directly harmed mothers and more indirectly contributed to harm of their children. Because the hostility and precarity of the UK asylum system are deliberate and targeted strategic policies by the Home Office, we argue that they are a form of systemic coercive control. Coercion is a recognized form of abuse that impacts children exposed to it when it is inflicted on their mothers, be that domestic or systemic violence (Canning 2017). The targeted nature of this coercion that places asylum seekers at the bottom of a racialized hierarchy is therefore also a form of racialized abuse. As mothers are often the primary carers of children, which was true for all the women involved in this project, the systemic coercion is also gendered.

However, we have also shown the ways in which the mothers interviewed for this study also engage in resistance against these forms of coercive control, often at great emotional and psychological expense to themselves. Saunders and Al-Om (2022) have referred to this as "slow resistance" in response to what they term to be the "slow violence" that asylum seekers face as a result of the hostile environment. They too point to the, often small, ways in which asylum seekers resist becoming docile subjects despite the imbalance in power they experience. Indeed, they highlight a multitude of forms of resistance, similar to those described by our participants. There is, however, also a danger that the experiences described here could be worsened further by the Home Secretary's recent announcement of a new plan for immigration, which may lead to asylum-seeking mothers in particular having to engage in further resistance to protect themselves and their children. Whilst these propose the introduction of safe routes to allow for individuals to make a claim for asylum in the UK, they are still predicated on the racialized notions we have discussed here of deterring entry and making life as difficult as possible for those seeking asylum in the UK. We would argue that further consideration of these plans needs to take account of the specific gendered harms of these proposals and the implications not only for the fracturing of mothers but also the ways in which these harms are reproduced on their children.

Note

1. Asylum seekers who are granted refugee status are given 28 days leave their NASS accommodation and find alternative housing and financial support.

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