Chapter 9. Narratives of motherhood: Seeking asylum

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Abstract

Women seeking asylum with their children are amongst the most marginalised and stigmatised women in the UK. Often overlooked in existing research that prioritises the lived experiences of the single, often young, male seeking asylum, little is known about the stories and experiences of women who seek asylum with their children. Focusing on the subjective and relational nature of stories and storytelling, this chapter adopts a feminist narrative approach to understand the way in which narratives of motherhood are constructed through storytelling in the context of asylum in the UK. The chapter pays particular attention to the role of asylum support in the stories told by women and how this creates opportunities and challenges to the construction of the mothering role. Two key and interrelated narratives are highlighted: 'Re-working good mothering', which serves to highlight women's capacity to mother despite the limitations of their situations; and 'Incapacitated mothering' which is storied as a form of protest against the constraints of asylum support and illustrates the associated threats to the mothering identity. This chapter concludes by considering the opportunities and challenges of stories of mothering in the context of asylum.

Key Words

Motherhood
Asylum Support
Narrative
Feminist
United Kingdom

Author Biographies

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Kelly Lockwood is a Criminology Lecturer at the University of Salford. Kelly has research experience working with marginalised mothers and is particularly interested in how mothering is understood and experienced by women when their mothering becomes disrupted. Kelly's work has included research with mothers seeking asylum, mothers living apart from their children owing to international study, but primarily mothers involved in the criminal justice system with a focus on mothers in prison. Kelly's work has involved: evaluation of visiting facilities in a women's prison; explorations of how mothers experience, understand and story imprisonment; relationships between mothers in prison and the carers of their children; and the impact on children of having a parent in prison. Kelly's work has produced recommendations for policy and practice including for the NHS.

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Introduction

Asylum support has become a key concept in immigration governance and surveillance in the United Kingdom (UK), with important social, material and gendered effects. Whilst immigration status has long been used to restrict or formally exclude certain migrants from access to housing in the UK, successive legislation has removed access to all public funds and social housing for those seeking asylum. This means that families seeking asylum in the UK are not eligible for mainstream welfare benefits, have no recourse to public funds and as a general rule are not allowed to work. Under the requirements of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999, Local Authorities no longer have a duty for meeting the financial support and accommodation needs of those people seeking asylum; this became the obligation of a number of different national government agencies, including the National Asylum Support Service, the Borders and Immigration Agency and more recently UK Visas and Immigration. In previous years, asylum support rates varied according to the asylum claimants' age and the composition of the family and household; however, since August 10th, 2015 a standard rate has applied to all adults and children, which has meant that families with children seeking asylum receive a lower amount of support than previously. Significantly, the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 also introduced the policy of compulsory 'dispersal' which meant that *only* those seeking asylum, who are both destitute and accept being dispersed on a no choice basis outside of London and the South East of England, would receive accommodation. This chapter brings to the centre of discussion the stories of women seeking asylum with their children who were living in asylum accommodation and in receipt of subsistence payments in the UK. The research that forms the basis of the chapter was commissioned by a charity that has pioneered women-centred, gender-specific work for more than three decades in the UK, and funded by the Nationwide Children's Research Centre, UK.

Focusing on the subjective and relational nature of stories and storytelling, in this chapter we adopt a feminist narrative approach to understand the way in which mothering identities are constructed through storytelling in the context of asylum. We pay particular attention to the role of asylum support in the stories and how this creates opportunities and challenges to the construction of the mothering role. Whilst the term 'asylum support' can encompass a variety of Home Office measures in the UK (such as healthcare, education), we specifically use the term 'asylum support' to refer to initial and dispersal asylum accommodation and financial subsistence payments from the UK Home Office that some families receive while waiting to receive a decision on their asylum claim[i]. A key concept in immigration governance and surveillance, asylum support has important social, material and gendered effects on women seeking asylum with their children. All of the participants who took part in the research said that asylum support was, or had been, their only means of survival and many of them had spent several years in receipt of asylum support with their children in the UK.

We begin this chapter with an overview of available mothering narratives and the opportunities and challenges they pose for women seeking asylum. We go on to outline why and how stories of mothering are told in the context of asylum support. Centering on the stories of women seeking asylum with children in the UK, we identify two central narratives that shaped the women's stories: first, narratives of 'reworking good mothering', which function to emphasise the mothers' agency and capacity to make choices in the midst of the disruption, enabling women to speak of their children's achievements and resilience. This narrative allowed women to construct a positive sense of being a mother and validate their mothering role. Second, narratives of 'incapacitated mothering', which serve as a form of protest against the constraints of asylum support. This narrative resists comforting conclusions, emphasising the threats to the mothering role. We finish this chapter by offering

some concluding thoughts about the opportunities and challenges of stories of mothering in the context of asylum and of the importance feminist narrative research.

Storying motherhood and mothering in the context of asylum

Storytelling can enable women to negotiate their roles as mothers (Lockwood, 2017, 2018). The ability to tell recognisable and acceptable mothering stories remains a central feature of motherhood (Miller, 2005; 2017). However, women are not free to tell any mothering story; the articulation of stories is both informed and constrained by the dominant narratives available at the time of telling. Storytellers draw on dominant narratives to tell and shape stories (Woodiwiss, Smith and Lockwood, 2017). These narratives do not simply reflect the world, but are constructed in particular social contexts at particular times. As such, dominant narratives inform both what can and cannot be told of motherhood and mothering (Miller, 2017), not only shaping the stories people tell, but also constraining and enabling certain stories to be told and heard. Serving as a powerful form of social control (Plummer, 2001; Smith, 2017), mothering narratives may be ascribed differently across and within different societies or cultures (Lockwood, Smith and Karpenko-Seccombe, 2019). However, there is a strong expectation to be a 'good' mother regardless of how those stories are told or understood (Pederson, 2016). Storytellers may sometimes protect the listener by mediating their story to accommodate what they think the listener can hear or call on the listener to bear witness to their pain and chaos in order to challenge and compel the listener to acknowledge the situations (Frank, 1995). Consequently, the meanings attached to motherhood and mothering are continuously being shaped and emerge within a complex set of hierarchical structural relations.

Feminist researchers and activists have long questioned the historical invisibility of women refugees in policy and research (Canning, 2011; Donato, 2015; Geldoph, 2007; Hadjukowski-Ahmed, 2009; Holliday and Thibos, 2017; Hunt, 2008), as well as challenging stories of women's passivity in migration processes and their presumed place in the private spaces of home (Boyd and Grieco, 2003). Scholarship about women who migrate *without* their children has facilitated diverse understandings of mothering and motherhood, as well as offering important understandings about the practices of caregiving and transnational mothering from a distance (Baldassar, Baldock and Wilding, 2007; Bohr and Whitfield, 2011; Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila, 1997; Kofman, 2004). However, much less has been written about women who migrate *with* their children (Lockwood, Smith and Karpenko-Seccombe, 2019) and in particular, women who seek asylum with their children remain largely absent from much of the existing literature (Smith, 2017). This invisibility arises, in part, from the particularly problematic dominant narrative of the figure of the asylum seeker, which contains much discussion about the single, often young, male (Turner, 2015), whereby women and their children are largely overlooked. Deeply ingrained in the UK national consciousness, the figure of the asylum seeker has been long synonymised with the vagabond, bogus and criminal, as well as the more contemporary notion of terrorist (Nail, 2015; 2016). These stories have given rise to the widespread problematising and vilification of those seeking asylum, which has led to an expansion of border controls and an increasing use of criminal law measures and immigration policies that stigmatise and diminish the rights of those seeking asylum (Gedalof, 2007; Allsopp, Sigona and Phillimore, 2014; Smith and Waite, 2018).

The dominant public and political narrative not only stereotypes and criminalises, but diminishes the lives of those seeking asylum, including women and their children, who are at

risk of social exclusion, subject to poor housing, deprivation, disadvantage and poverty in the UK (Hughes and Beirens, 2007; Reacroft, 2008).While people seeking asylum await a decision on their claim, they are separated from mainstream welfare provisions and provided with highly conditional and extremely limited support; this excludes most people from basic standards of living and is characterised by poverty, social exclusion and destitution (Gedalof, 2007; Allsopp, Sigona and Phillimore, 2014). Austerity measures in the UK and immigration regimes of regulation and security, along with the privatisation of asylum support, have had devastating social and material effects, particularly on women and their children (Grayson, 2017). As such, the construct of asylum and the role of UK policy operates to castigate asylum seekers and increasingly call into question the contemporary mobilities of women seeking asylum, whilst simultaneously marginalising their identities as women with children.

Where there are available narratives about women seeking asylum with their children, they are positioned as troublesome and risky mothers, through stories of their role in 'backward practices' (such as forced marriage, gender subordination and domestic violence), as well as being viewed as linguistically isolated, and assumed to have a limited awareness of cultural difference (Geldoph, 2007). Considered to be highly problematic in their struggle to integrate in the UK, women seeking asylum are characterised as finding themselves in situations that are not conducive to 'fully integrate' and subsequently being seen as unfit to prepare their children effectively for life in the UK (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2016). As such, women migrants are frequently viewed as mothers of problematic households and reproducers of problematic families. With responsibilities for the next generation of children living in the UK, Geldoph (2007) has noted there is a one-sided burden of integrating in Britain that is firmly placed on women asylum seekers (and other women migrants), with the associated emphasis of ensuring their children integrate too.

Further stories have been nurtured through 'imperial-feminist' narratives (Mohanty, 1991), that relocate women seeking asylum as vulnerable victims, predominantly casting women as feminised and infantilised subjects of charity (Freedman, 2008; Kapoor, 2004). These narratives provide explicit expectations that shape women's roles and identities as mothers, excluding some women from what is considered 'good' or 'normative' mothering (Lockwood, 2017, 2018). For example, whilst the story of the vulnerable victim can be used to locate women as deserving beneficiaries of protection (Smith and Waite, 2018), some women who seek asylum with their children may find their very victimhood used to construct them as 'risky' mothers who are considered to be unable to support or protect their children, or potentially may abandon children they birth as a result of being raped (Mahmood, 2017; World Health Organization, 2000). Furthermore, the popular grouping of women and children together, as they seek asylum from 'man-made' abuses and persecutions (Carpenter, 2005, 2013; Hajdukowski-Ahmed, 2009), potentially reinforces normative mothering practices on women with children, obscuring any detailed understanding about the decisions women make about their children. Indeed, Shuman and Bohmer (2014) suggest that women's asylum claims have been jeopardised by asylum judges who question women's credibility on non-conformity to expectations about their children when seeking asylum. Marginalised women often have a belief system imposed upon them that constructs them as central to their child's well-being yet simultaneously constructs them as inadequate for the role (McCormack, 2005). As such, dominant narratives simultaneously shape our understandings of the complex, multi-layered and gendered work of raising children and these narratives can place a heavy burden on those women seeking asylum with their children as they negotiate the challenges and take up the opportunities of being both asylum seekers and mothers.

Listening to the stories of women seeking asylum

Adopting a feminist narrative perspective to listen to women's stories, we carried out a focus group with seven women asylum seekers in the UK. The information was used to inform the research design and identify some of the key issues about asylum support arising for women seeking asylum with their children. This approach to developing feminist research can help shift the balance of power away from the researcher toward the research participants, whose social positions actively shape and inform the research process (Stanley, 1993; Stanley and Wise, 1993). Informed by the focus group, one-to-one in-depth narrative interviews, which lasted up to two hours, were carried out with five women. Access and recruitment were negotiated at two non-government organisations in the North of England; every effort was made to reduce barriers of access for participants including offering women-only and breastfeeding friendly spaces. All participants were offered the option of an interpreter; however, none were requested and therefore all women were interviewed in English. The ethical integrity of this research was imperative and the project was conducted following the British Sociological Association (2017) ethical guidelines. Underpinned by the principles of respect for the dignity, rights, welfare and safety for the research participants, consent and voluntary participation were negotiated.

This chapter draws specifically on the one-to-one interviews; participants were at different stages of the asylum process, including those who had status as a refugee, still seeking asylum and having had their asylum application refused. The women were aged between late-twenties and late fifties. Having come from five different countries of origin, the participants had been living in the UK for different periods of time ranging between a few months to more than a decade at the point of interview. In total they had thirteen children between them, with eleven children who were living or had lived with them in receipt of asylum

accommodation and financial subsistence from the Home Office. The ages of children living with them ranged from adult children who had been minors at the point of claiming asylum to pre-school children and babies. A number of children had joined their mothers through family reunification.

Interviews were set-up to enable women to talk about asylum support provided by the Home Office in relation to the needs of children and young people. They were facilitated via a series of prompts based on central themes that had emerged from the Parliamentary Inquiry into asylum support for children and young people. These themes were of particular importance because since 2009, there had been no formal review of the asylum support system in the UK. In 2012, the 'Parliamentary Inquiry into asylum support for children and young people' was set out to examine whether the asylum support provided by the Home Office for those seeking protection in the UK met the needs of children, young people and families. Based on a number of parliamentary hearings, including oral and written evidence from individuals and organisations (including local authorities, safeguarding boards and academics) contributed to the evidence which included families with experience of the asylum system. The findings were released in 2013 and a number of themes were identified in the report: 'destitution', 'essential living needs', 'health and wellbeing', 'education', 'worklessness', 'homelife', 'societal and institution attitudes', and 'creating a hostile environment'.

With the women's consent, the interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. Anonymity has been maintained through the use of pseudonyms which the women chose themselves. A thematic approach to narrative analysis (Fraser, 2004) was adopted, using a priori themes (King, 2012), established from the Parliamentary Inquiry into asylum support for children and young people. Looking at the way in which women storied these issues, the

analysis holds a relational ontology at its core, whereby the stories are located within relational, intimate and broader social, political, cultural and structural contexts (Doucet and Mauthner, 2008). This narrative approach enabled us to explore the way in which each woman constructed mothering in the context of asylum support. Our final step of analysis brought the stories into relationship with each other, highlighting similarities and significant differences between them in order to consider why and how narratives create opportunities and challenges to the construction of mothering roles.

Narratives of women seeking asylum

Mothers in this research constructed the asylum support system as inconsistent with and disruptive to their ability do 'good' mothering. Stories of the challenges posed to mothering owing to the constraints of the asylum support system were drawn upon to illustrate the impact on the women's lives, the lives of their children and their sense of self and their mothering role. The women in our research all suggested they had already lost a great deal before they arrived in the UK, including children who they live apart from and loved ones whom they believed were dead or at risk. In this section of the chapter, we consider the way in which mothers constructed and negotiated different narratives to tell their stories. Bringing the stories of women mothering in the context of asylum support in the UK to the centre of discussion, two relational narratives emerged from the analysis; narratives of 'reworking good mothering' highlights the disruption of asylum support, whilst enabling women to emphasise their agency, capacity and achievements as mothers; and narratives of 'incapacitated mothering' highlight the threats to the mothering role in the asylum system, whilst resisting comforting conclusions and protesting against asylum support.

Narratives of reworking good mothering

Narratives of reworking (Smith, 2017) good mothering function to emphasise the mothers'
agency and capacity to make choices in the midst of the disruption and constraints of living
within asylum support. Such stories serve to illustrate the way in which the challenges of
mothering in this context were confronted and negotiated in order to reclaim and rework
'good mothering'.

Many of the mothers who participated in this research told of struggling to meet the essential
living needs of their children owing to the financial limitations of living on asylum support.
The provision of food was often central to these stories. What children eat remains a highly
moralised issue, with mothers' legitimacy bound up with feeding children (De Brun et al.,
2012). Yet, living on asylum support can limit mothers' agency and capacity to make choices
about the food they provide for their children (Carter, 2017). Consequently, constraints
around food resources and associated shame (van der Horst, Pascucci, and Bol, 2014) were
often strongly articulated in the mothers' stories. However, narratives of reworking good
mothering also enabled women to tell of the way in which they negotiated such constraints to
provide and make decisions about food for their children, this functioning to (re)claim the
status of 'good mother'.

For Jane, having choice around what food she bought for her children and where she was able
to buy food was important to her sense of being a good mother. She told of wanting her
daughter '*to know her culture*' but suggested that she struggled to buy culturally specific
foods in the designated retails outlets associated with her payment card. Also, she suggested
that such outlets were '*expensive*'. Jane told us; '*I'll be able to buy things where they are*
cheap. Tesco is expensive, so you are not able to buy things…'. Similarly, Shanaz suggested

that owing to the voucher scheme, she was unable to *'go to the local shop'* and therefore had to *'go much further'*. Shanaz suggested that *'mothers need cash',* and referred to vouchers as *'poison covered money'*.

In order to increase capacity and agency in relation to providing food, some mothers spoke of exchanging their vouchers for cash. Vouchers were often traded with family or friends, but also relied on women selling their vouchers outside designated retail outlets. Despite the increased choice this may have facilitated, Wahid explained that mothers would often not receive *'the same money [as the voucher]'* and Jane suggested that she would sometimes experience abuse when attempting to exchange them; *'he [security guard at the supermarket] said "go away, you are a bad woman…, it was so shame"'*. Therefore, whilst the narrative of reworking good mothering functions to highlight the mother's attempts to increase mothering autonomy, this sometimes proved difficult to reconcile with the complexities, oppressive practices and attitudes associated with mothering within the asylum support system.

In her critical analysis of mothering ideologies, Hays (1996) highlighted that 'good mothering' requires large investments of both time and money. Mothers in this research narrated an awareness of such expectations and spoke of a multitude of challenges to their ability to provide for their children. Consequently, in order to reclaim the status of 'good mother', the women in this study went to great lengths to narrate how they made choices and sacrifices in order to provide resources such as clothes, hair treatments and social activities for their children, despite the constraints owing to low levels of asylum support. Whilst such stories serve to enable mothers to illustrate their awareness of and commitment to dominant understandings of 'good mothering', the stories of some women suggest that their desire to

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'provide' was to avoid some of the stigma associated with low income families and particularly families in receipt of asylum support; this was expressed in everyday practices, such as ensuring their children were presented well in terms of their appearance. Shanaz spoke of the challenges of ensuring her son had the required school uniform; *'clothes is difficult, it is difficult always'* but went on to insist '*I have to manage'*.

Some of the mothers spoke of their children's hair needing particular care and treatments, with associated costs an ongoing challenge. Jane suggested: *'Her hair, 'cos it's so thick , I couldn't manage to do her hair. I can't take her. I don't have money to do it'* and consequently spoke of a great sense of shame; *'How she look like?... you can't able to hide your problem'*. This study highlighted that the inability to provide resources for hair treatments was a particular issue for mothers of daughters. Reynolds (2005) suggests in some cultures, women's hair is symbolic of success and is a source of self-esteem and self-worth. As noted by Joseph-Salisbury and Connelly (2018), hair stylisation is both a practice of self-expression and an embodiment of cultural norms and expectations, impacting how people feel about themselves, as well as how they are identified and understood by others. Consequently, for some mothers, their daughters' untreated hair was constructed as a problem, as expressed by Yai; *'I cannot just let her to like that; it will affect her education'*. Stories of how women responded to such challenges functioned to demonstrate responsible parenting and emphasise their role in protecting their children's well-being and future success. Illustrating the prioritisation of their children's needs and the lengths went to in order to meet such needs was therefore a consistent strategy within the narrative of reworking good mothering. One mother told of travelling long distances to friends/family who could style her daughter's hair for limited or no cash. Similarly, another mother told of making

choices about how they spent the limited money they had in order to prioritise their children's needs;

> *she [daughter]needs her hair done. So, if she keeps her hair for three months, just to save money because it is very expensive the braiding, she needs to do her hair to go to college… the minimum I pay for that is £20. You know those are things that I have to provide for her, because she is a teenager, she is growing up (Yai).*

Narratives of reworking good mothering, also function to enable women to reclaim their mothering identities by speaking of their children's achievements and resilience. Whilst asylum support continued to be constructed as a site of adversity, the personal growth of their children and their potential in the future served as evidence of the women's capacity as mothers. Despite the overall adversity experienced by mothers and their children owing to the asylum support system, some women identified the ways children had positively adapted. One of the mothers highlighted the capacity of her daughter in her educational achievements:

> *… she's clever. She does well in the education. She is able to count since year two. Got a lot of good certificates, 16 we count. She is proud for the school, for the school she is doing very well (Jane).*

Jane's story also serves to put a distance between the stigmatised identity of the asylum seeker and the pride of a school child in education. It was not just stories of younger children that validated the mothering role, but also the achievements of children as they grew up in the asylum system and went on to become adults. For example, Wahid told of her children's

educational achievements; *'My son is qualified ..., and she [daughter] had finished her first degree...'*. Wahid suggests that despite the challenges faced in the asylum support system, her children had worked hard and become successful in their adult lives: '*Now they [children] became, really, stand up by themselves... I am happy because they pushed themselves to be educated'*. In highlighting their children's achievements, the stories served to demonstrate the women's mothering success. Showing an interest in her children's future, Wahid's story also contained a vision of the future and the potential of her children's lives; *'...they are good state now for the future... whatever comes to them, they concentrate on, because the answer is to show they can do it, it pushed them inside'*. Similarly, other women told of their thoughts for their children's futures, including the ways in which their current difficulties might affect their futures. Constructing a positive sense of being a mother and a validation of the mothering role, women demonstrated knowledge of and an interest in their children's lives and future opportunities, as an indicator of their ongoing commitment to mothering (Lockwood, 2013).

Narratives of incapacitated mothering

Standing in some contrast to narratives of reworking good mothering, narratives of incapacitated mothering construct asylum support as a threat to mothering practices and draw heavily on the pains and suffering of the mother and their child. The listener is called on to bear witness to the multiple threats of the asylum support system. In telling these stories, women do not accept the conditions of asylum support passively and their stories function to question the legitimacy of asylum support.

Through narratives of incapacitated mothering, storytellers engage the listener and ask them to acknowledge a painful, chaotic lived reality (Frank, 1995). A number of the women said

they lived in shared accommodation with people who were not family and were previously unknown to them and their children; women considered this to be incompatible with their mothering responsibilities towards the wellbeing and nurture of their children. In their analysis of asylum housing, Dickenson and Grayson (2018) note that women with young children seeking asylum are routinely placed in shared hostels and multiple occupancy accommodation where they experience intimidation and racist abuse. Indeed, the Home Affairs Committee (2016-2017, p. 14) reported that '[asylum accommodation] does not adequately support women [who] were being placed in mixed-sex accommodation with no women-only or safe spaces and in accommodation that is well-known to traffickers, with little or no measures taken to mitigate risks posed by them'. Consequently, in our research, women told of feeling unsafe in shared accommodation and some of them lived in fear of being harmed. For example, other people who lived in the accommodation would have male guests to stay in the night:

> *... people always coming, four people, eight people, ten people, like this,*
> *they are taking men... mans can come at night time..., can you imagine my*
> *situation, I cannot sleep... robber can come, highjacker can come. I don't*
> *know the man; he is a murderer or a killer? The door has no locker..., no*
> *locker (Shanaz).*

Women constructed these situations as 'distressing' and as risky and unacceptable in their roles as mothers. The issue of shared accommodation and the negative impact of other people in the accommodation was central to stories of how mothering was debilitated through asylum support. As noted by Hall (2017), it is often assumed that parents (and frequently

mothers) play a central role in regulating the sleep of children and young people, who are considered to need a regular and adequate amount of sleep to protect their mental and physical health. For Shanaz, being unable to ensure her child had the sleep he needed was hugely detrimental to her mothering role: *'... my son is not able to sleep, they are making noise..., they are dancing, singing every night..., my son is crying, again and again, until 4am, 5am..., "Mama I cannot sleep"'*. Similarly, for Wahid, the constraints of the space, along with the ways in which other people in the accommodation complained about and criticised her child, was constructed as a painful and distressing problem that she could not control: *'... the baby doesn't have any space to feel it is my home because... people will complain, "can't you control the baby?"'* Such stories enable mothers to claim an awareness of dominant understandings of 'good mothering' through their understanding of the needs of children for sleep and safe uncritical spaces, but also highlight that shared accommodation is incompatible and irreconcilable with their mothering role. Asylum accommodation not only infringed on the women's abilities to meet expectations of 'good' mothering, but was exemplified as a place where protecting their children became impossible.

Narratives of incapacitated mothering were actively used to emphasise a number of high risks associated with the living conditions of women and their children. For example, of great concern was the issue of infestations of dying rats which one of the women identified: *'We are living with the rats..., dead, dying, smelling, dying in the house'* (Jane). As reported by Embury-Dennis (2018), women and their children have been forced to live in asylum accommodation that has rats, bed bugs and infestations of cockroaches. Furthermore, Grayson's (2017) research in the Yorkshire and Humber region (UK) suggests that asylum accommodation frequently exposes mothers and their babies to filthy and dangerous living conditions. Consequently, women repeatedly drew on narratives of incapacitated mothering

to suggest that accommodation was woefully inadequate, a danger to their children and therefore a threat to their mothering. For example, being unable to keep their children warm in their accommodation was constructed as particularly painful for several of the women. Shanaz describes *'…two months, no hot water in my house…'*. Similarly, Jane suggested: *'I remember we stayed for one week, in a house that was freezing, no heater'*. These stories emphasise the multiple ways in which mothering autonomy is severely restricted by the women's subordinated relationship to the asylum system.

Several of the women spoke of the emotional distress they faced on a daily basis on asylum support and how this negatively affected their relationship with their children. As with findings from previous research carried out by Haynes (2013, p. 150), some women seeking asylum with their children find it hard to be emotionally available to their children, whilst others find themselves overwhelmed by stressors. In an overview of the literature pertaining to the construct of emotional availability in studies of children and mothers, Bornstein, Suwalsky and Breakstone (2012, p. 123) have noted that mothers' emotional availability is widely considered to be necessary for a child 'to thrive, prosper, and achieve his or her full potential'. As a result, several of the women spoke of being overcome with anxiety and distress about asylum support, which they felt was adversely affecting their relationships with their children. Jane told us: *'I am always distress… as mum is always distressed, even the communication, talking, shouting …, is affected in the relationships…'*. Shanaz echoed these sentiments, suggesting her relationship to her son had been negatively affected: *'If my mood bad, if my emotion bad, it is affecting my son as well… My son sees, on a night time, I am crying, I am feeling so lonely'*. As such, narratives of incapacitated mothering function to highlight the breakdown in the emotional relationship and the emotional unavailability of mothers to their children, due to the inadequacy of the asylum support system.

Narratives of incapacitated mothering enable women to tell of the multiple ways in which asylum support is incompatible with mothering practices. However, they also serve to refute passivity and helplessness. By suggesting that the current asylum support system and mothering are irreconcilable, women resist comforting conclusions about their situations and their stories serve as a form of protest. As Lockwood (2013, p. 256) suggests, the listener is required to 'be present with and acknowledge their own discomfort with hearing these stories'. Harder to tell and harder to listen to than narratives of reworking good mothering, narratives of incapacitated mothering are constrained by pain and chaos (Frank, 1995), but they also call on the listener to bear witness to the teller's distress. Stories about the inadequacy of asylum support and threats to the mothering role only question the legitimacy of asylum support for women with their children, but can be told in order to compel the listener to challenge the current system. In such ways, narratives of incapacitated mothering are extremely powerful.

For many women, mothering activities and capacities were beyond their abilities and control within the asylum support system, leaving them unable to resolve the situation for themselves or their children. Yet in talking of their frustration with the inadequacy of asylum support, women also indicated what they would like to see in order to support their capacity to mother their children. For example, in a challenge to the restrictions placed on the participants' right to seek employment, the benefits of working were highlighted; *'I definitely would love to work, to support the children'* (Yai). This was also echoed by Wahid: *'Well if they [mothers seeking asylum] are working it would be great, because, they will give money to spend with for their children'.* As such, women's stories not only represent a form of protest at the current asylum support system, but also offer future possibilities. Of great urgency are the

changes needed within asylum support for women to reclaim their mothering practices that become restricted and subordinated in the asylum system.

Concluding thoughts

Women seeking asylum with their children are amongst the most marginalised and stigmatised women in society. As with mothering in the wider community, the way in which women seeking asylum with their children negotiate, understand and construct mothering is mediated by dominant narratives which can offer meaning, facilitating the construction of a more positive sense of self. Even in the most limiting environment of the asylum support system, women are able to tell stories that assert themselves as 'good' mothers and construct positive mothering identities. Indeed, we have shown how narratives of reworking good mothering function to emphasise women's agency and capacity to make choices in the midst of the disruption. Enabling women to speak of their children's achievements and resilience, narratives of reworking also allowed women to construct a positive sense of being a mother and validate their mothering role. However, this is not where the stories end. Indeed, women also told stories that drew on the narratives of incapacitated mothering, whereby asylum support was positioned as a threat to mothering practices. Drawing heavily on the pains and suffering of the mother and their children, narratives of incapacitated mothering resist comforting conclusions and protest against the constraints of asylum support by emphasising disruptions to the mothering role.

Emphasising the multiple ways in which asylum support meant they were unable to meet the needs of their children, women utilised narratives of incapacitated mothering to suggest that the system is profoundly challenging and creates adverse situations in which women are unable to meet important mothering expectations and fulfil their mothering role. Suggesting

there are aspects of the asylum support system that women are unable to mitigate for their children, narratives of incapacitated mothering contribute to our understandings of the devastating effects of asylum support which women find unacceptable.

By bringing greater visibility to the opportunities and challenges of stories of mothering in the context of asylum, we aim to ensure that women seeking asylum with their children do not continue to inhabit the margins and periphery of stories of either motherhood or asylum. This chapter also acknowledges the prominent role that narratives and storytelling play not only in the lives of individual women seeking asylum with their children, but in broader aspects of social, cultural and political life. Adopting a feminist narrative perspective to listen to women's stories, we suggest that the distinctiveness of feminist narrative research is not simply about women, but is about understanding and potentially improving the lives of those who identify as women. Feminist narrative research can offer some imperatives for questioning the kinds of stories that can and are told about women seeking asylum. Providing examples of how stories and narrative frameworks inform the stories women seeking asylum are able to tell, we have explored how those frameworks can be constraining as well as potentially liberating. Making a specific distinction between narrative research and other forms of qualitative research, we also hope to draw attention to the importance of recognising the context of contemporary stories and acknowledge that stories are differentially available to different individuals both in terms of being told and being heard. This chapter therefore contributes to the ongoing dialogue among and between feminists researching the lives and stories of women, a dialogue that we believe is important if we are to expand the possibilities for all women to tell their stories.

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Highlighted in green are the following key concepts and key theorists:

Motherhood
Mothering
Asylum support
Seeking asylum
Narrative
Feminist
United Kingdom
Doucet, A. and Mauthner, N. 2008.
Frank, A. (1995)
Hays, S. (1996)
Woodiwiss, J., Smith, K. and Lockwood, K. (2017)

Notes

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[i] Asylum Support - https://www.gov.uk/asylum-supp