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'It Matters How They See You': 'Maternal Activation' As a Strategy to Navigate Contradictory Discourses of Motherhood and Neoliberal Activism in the Welsh Homelessness System

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Abstract
Despite increasing attention to the importance of gender as an analytic to understanding neoliberal welfare reform, little attention has been paid to how motherhood operates to structure experiences. We propose the term 'maternal activation' to describe how homeless mothers as a group are subject to, and yet repurpose and resist, specific forms of social control characterising neoliberal paternalistic welfare structures. Drawing on a Critical Discourse Analysis of semi-structured interviews with fifty-four frontline homelessness workers, and eighteen homeless mothers, within the newly conditionalised Welsh homelessness system, we argue that homeless mothers have distinct experiences of neoliberal welfare governance. They navigate contradictory demands of attentive caregiving and economically engaged citizenship, amid devaluation of care created by a neoliberal emphasis on entrepreneurialism. However, performing intense motherhood offers strategic advantage for homeless mothers by enabling them to be read as 'legible'. This highlights the utility of motherhood as a framework to understand welfare citizenship.

Introduction

In 2015, amid rising levels of homelessness amid decreasing resource availability, Wales introduced the *Housing (Wales) Act 2014*, with especial implications for mothers, whose previous rights to access to state housing under prior British homelessness legislation are now conditional upon behaving as engaged, 'activated' (Clarke, 2005) accommodation-seekers. Frontline worker perceptions of applicant deservedness in the UK homelessness system, in common with welfare systems internationally, have long been recognised as critical to applicant experiences of help. For women, and especially mothers, access to welfare is heavily entangled in narratives of deservedness and morality (McCormack, 2005; Henderson *et al.*, 2016). As Mayock and Bretherton (2016) have shown, women's homelessness is a location in which heteronormative discourses of good womanhood play out, with some women able to access greater protection and provisions and others denied these. There are specific ways in which these narratives operate to frame maternal behaviour, with substantially elevated standards of feminine deservedness applied to mothers without a home.

Systemic and endemic sexism manifests itself in relation to women's homelessness, creating potentially greater protections in certain circumstances, but in ways that also distort the nature and extent of women's homelessness in Europe. Being without a home not only deprives women of a space to perform mothering activities, but intensifies surveillance (Henderson *et al.*, 2016; Azim *et al.*, 2019). Early childhood privation, including poverty and homelessness, have also been associated with later negative outcomes for health and wellbeing (Radcliff *et al.*, 2019; Walsh *et al.*, 2019), with an understanding of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACES) as a key driver of adult marginalisation becoming a dominant narrative among service providers (Borgonovi and Huerta, 2009). However, the focus upon parents as a group *capable* of overcoming structural marginalisation to prevent childhood adversity has also been understood as a response which responsibilises those experiencing poverty and economic exclusion, and especially targets mothers (Edwards *et al.*, 2019; Hartas, 2019; Macvarish and Lee, 2019). Yet these disciplinary discourses, operating as a form of capillary power which then successfully *'circulates throughout the entire social body down even to the tiniest and apparently most trivial extremities'* (Fraser, 1981: 278) offer routes through which alternative understandings of, and approaches to, categories becomes visible. Neoliberalism has been argued to be an enrolling ideology, in which resistance is foreshadowed and incorporated into a monolithic, unfalsifiable ontology (Tronto, 2017; Lynch *et al.,* 2020). Yet exploring these subaltern resistances is critical to recognising how neoliberal power operates differentially according to class, gender and caring responsibilities (Tronto, 2017; Lynch *et al.,* 2020). Embodied performances of daily life are forms of discourse enabling resistance to manifest (Butler, 2002). Women are not passive embodiments of femininity or motherhood, but rather involved in active, strategic production of alternative approaches, piecing together different performances of both femininity and maternity to enable survival for themselves and their children (Cruikshank, 1999; Skeggs, 2004; McCormack, 2005; Kamran, 2021). Laws, policy, and media discourse are strategies through which ontological legitimacy is gained, and which then generate logical and reasonable courses of action (Foucault, 1980). We propose that homeless mothers are subject to two separate disciplinary discourses which together both expand and reduce the options open to them. They are expected to become 'activated' – here used following Clarke (2005) to refer to a deployment of performative willingness to take personal responsibility for addressing social problems that previously were addressed by the state. As neoliberal welfare subjects, they are expected to seek housing in the competitive private rented sector. Yet they are also constructed as protectors and maintainers of heteronormative maternal values. We propose that a tension exists wherein homeless mothers must plausibly perform both activated neoliberal subjectivities, while also upholding maternal values. This produces a need for demanding, strategic performance management, but also generates new possibilities for resistive, validating, subjectivities to emerge, a process we term 'maternal activation'.

We argue homeless motherhood operates dialectically as a site of specific forms of neoliberal welfare governance through a process we term 'maternal activation'. Drawing on Critical Discourse Analysis of semi-structured interviews with fifty-four frontline homelessness workers and eighteen homeless mothers, we show, first, that homeless mothers must navigate contradictory demands of being an attentive caregiver but also an economically engaged citizen; second, that neoliberal emphasis on entrepreneurial problem-solving devalues the importance of maternal care; and third that performing intense motherhood could offer a route to strategic advantage for homeless motherhood by enabling them to be read as 'legible'.

We make three key contributions to existing understandings of homeless motherhood. First, we demonstrate that homeless and impoverished mothers must assertively and skilfully negotiate contradictory discourses to retain access to support, accommodation, and other resources. Second, we make visible discursive practices among homeless women through which problematisation can be resisted. Third, we advance understanding of how modern welfare states produce specific forms of social control at the intersection of homelessness and motherhood.

This article is structured as follows. First, we consider the recent gendered shift within welfare states internationally. Then, we discuss social constructions of motherhood, exploring homelessness as a site of both intense surveillance and potential resistance. We then outline the study methodology. After presenting the results, we conclude with further discussion of the relevance of this work to understanding homeless motherhood as a location of both social control and resistance.

Feminising neoliberal failure: problematisation, individualism, and resistance

The neoliberal turn within welfare systems internationally has responsibilised individuals for their own poverty, homelessness and economic precarity. This shifts the focus away from the gendered inequalities inherent in a flawed, inequitable system (Miller and Rose, 2008; Lemke, 2010; Schram *et al.*, 2010; Stonehouse *et al.,* 2015). The cornerstone of this approach is the process of 'activation', wherein citizens recognise, embrace, and internalise their responsibility to become 'economic-rational actors' (Stonehouse *et al.,* 2015: 395): to seek out and manage opportunities to move away from state dependence, and do so proactively, and in a way in which the risk to the state is minimised (Peck and Tickell, 2002; McKee, 2009; Joseph, 2013; Hickman *et al.*, 2017).

Women as a group, and mothers especially, are likely to be reliant upon state resources, reflecting, in part, their greater difficulties in operating as independent economic actors (Hall *et al.*, 2017). Yet this relies upon meeting gendered, classed, and racialised standards of legibility of need (Meyers, 2011), which centres passivity, submission, and disempowerment (Schippers, 2007). Dunn (2010) argues that women are subject to complex, contradictory narratives of deservedness, which structure the legibility of their needs and shape their interactions with public services. To be overly passive risks loss of sympathy, meaning that a woman may then be blamed for failing to avert negative outcomes. Yet if she is too assertive she risks being read as not requiring help, or even as deliberately mendacious and deceptive (see also Meyers, 2011; Sweet, 2019). There is also some evidence that neoliberal welfare activation operates in a gendered manner. Writing of domestic abuse interventions, Sweet (2019) has shown that programs of 'empowerment' and 'resilience' responsibilise individual women for resolving structural issues (poverty, poor housing, discrimination), notably by teaching them to perform acceptance of an individualised narrative of these structural issues. This rests upon an implicit, structural understanding of female deservedness in terms of passivity and willingness to accept lack of agency, and understands vulnerability and helplessness as personal properties, rather than a product of structural inequalities (Meyers, 2011; Reppond and Bullock, 2020; Sweet, 2021).

Disciplinary, top-down discourse is not simply restrictive; it also produces resistance through the process of reproduction to produce location and temporally specific enactments of discourse tailored to the specific situation. This can be seen in the ways in which marginalised women have responded to the narratives deployed against them. They are especially likely to be seen in terms of *pariah femininity* (Skeggs, 2004), reflected in repeated moral panic discourse in which poor women are proposed to be the primary undoers of modern society (Cruikshank, 1999; Skeggs, 2004). Feminist scholars have considered how poor women strategically shape their performances of societal alignment to secure help from multiple, often oppositional, sources amid competing discourses. Kamran (2021) proposes the term 'patchwork femininities' to understand the skilled strategic deployment of different performances of femininity characterising marginalised womanhood. This approach is temporally and spatially contingent, with women moving between different performances of femininity – submissive, docile, and passive, or activated and assertive, according to the different conventions of the setting – to secure context-dependent 'femininity premium' in terms of social capital (Reay, 2004; Ispa-Landa and Oliver, 2020).

Mothering while homeless: stigma, fear and othering

Hays (1996) argues that modern motherhood is characterised by a single-minded focus upon the current and future needs of the idealised, heteronormative child, through normalisation of *'child centred, expert-guided, emotionally exhausting, labor intensive and financially expensive'* practices of mothering (Hays, 1996: 122, see also Edelman, 2004).

Motherhood operates at a nexus of classed, gendered and racialised ideologies. Recognisable 'ideal' or intensive, mothering requires a performance of inexhaustible patience, apparently instinctive self-sacrifice, rendering women consumed by children's physical, intellectual, and emotional needs; a 'good mother' has no significant identity aside from motherhood (Hays, 1996; Douglas and Michaels, 2005; Henderson et al., 2010; Christopher, 2012; Rich, 2021). Legible ideal mothering can be strategically important, offering status which affords women some authority in their interactions with authorities (Lo, 2016; Mayock et al., 2016; Evans, 2022; England, 2023b). In contrast to ideal motherhood, abject mothers – those seen as overly focused on their own needs to the detriment of their children – are othered, and the source of social disgust (Tyler, 2020). Mothers who are in receipt of state support, and who therefore occupy a liminal, contradictory position incorporating both a maternal and a welfare-recipient identity, have been targeted for systematic devaluation over the last few decades (Allen et al., 2014; Jensen and Tyler, 2015; Evans, 2022). Childbearing itself among poor women has been consistently reframed not as a maternal, sacrificial act but as a cynical and calculated attempt to increase their claim upon scarce resources, as seen in repeated moral panics over poor women's access to housing support (Cruikshank, 1999; Davis, 2001). Jensen (2018) suggests that because neoliberalism both individualises and centralises mothering, making it a critical vector for children's success, it opens up a space for the maternal behaviour of 'maternal abjects' to become legible according to middle class values. In demanding that their children, just as middle-class children, benefit from 'maternal time', they assert their identity as mothers, replacing a narrative of them as failed economic citizens with one of successful motherhood (see also Allen et al., 2014). Allen et al., (2014) have shown, in their exploration of the cultural production of 'maternal abjects' through 'poverty porn' television, that maternal poverty invokes two incompatible narratives of their maternal value. Their lack of paid economic activity, unwillingness to prioritise productivity, and apparent disinterest in delayed gratification render their mothering a potential vector of state dependency for their children. Yet they can also be understood as idealised mothers engaging in the intensely heteronormative act of caring for their children and wider community.

The home is well-established as a locale of critical importance to the social value replicatory function of heteronormative, idealised motherhood, with good mothering reliant upon a safe, private, secure, and stable base (Cramer, 2005; Bimpson et al., 2020). To be without a home therefore produces immediate social anxiety over mothering (Cramer, 2005; Bimpson et al., 2020). Becoming homeless brings poor families, especially those headed by a lone female, into the full view of the state, and renders their once-private activities public and subject to scrutiny (Cruikshank, 1999; Henderson et al., 2010; Bimpson et al., 2020). Homelessness is also a location where forms of power enabled by maternal identity can manifest.

Yet there is also growing evidence that mothers facing social marginalisation adopt complex and resistive strategies to protect themselves and their children. Women deploy strategic performances of femininity and motherhood to navigate stigma, for instance by portraying themselves as receptive and engaged applicants willing to modify their behaviour in line with the requirements placed upon them by frontline workers (Silver, 2010; Sweet, 2019). Cruikshank (1999) observes that women are often highly receptive to understanding what is required of them to succeed within welfare systems, since this affords them the opportunity for autonomy. Evans (2022) work adds to literature which demonstrates that women themselves deploy complex and nuanced psychological strategies to reframe the stigma of claiming benefits in order to valorised unpaid maternal care, affording sustaining

strategies to help them and their children survive poverty and economic exclusion (see also Reppond and Bullock, 2020).

Data and methods

Context: Gender and homelessness in Wales

Recent changes to the Welsh homelessness system have removed previous statutory obligation to address family homelessness and replaced it with a duty conditional upon the applicant's apparent engagement (England, 2022a, 2023a, 2023b). For women, and especially lone parents, their relatively lower incomes compared to their need for relatively large accommodation places them at substantial disadvantage in securing private rented accommodation (Rhodes and Rugg, 2018). To qualify for direct state provision of housing they must now demonstrate that they are willing to resolve their own homelessness (Mackie *et al.*, 2017; Ahmed *et al.*, 2020). As other welfare systems internationally, the Welsh homelessness system is characterised by intense scarcity, with discretion critical to resource allocation (Alden, 2015; van den Berk-Clark, 2016). The interactions taking place at the frontlines of homelessness are therefore a key location from which to understand how high-level policy shapes the experiences of applicants themselves.

The study

This article draws upon semi-structured interviews with fifty-four workers and eighteen homeless mothers within the Welsh homelessness system, a subset of a data corpus comprising over one hundred interviews, ethnographic observations, mapping and documentary analysis. A Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach was used in design and analysis of interviews, to facilitate identification of how ideas across different organisational contexts operate dialectically to uphold, create, and justify exclusion (Wodak and Meyer, 2015). CDA recognises discourse as a productive output which operates dialectically amid wider organisational, policy, and practice context (Fairclough, 2005). In understanding discourse as a radical, resistive output of assertions of power and knowledge, it is of especial use in visibilising erased, overlooked and marginalised voices. Using CDA meant that interviews were extended, led by applicants, with analysis attentive to complexities of power, control, and resistance.

Interviews were conducted between September 2018 and January 2020, at a location of the participant's choosing. Interviews were recorded (with permission), with analysis of anonymised transcripts following an iterative thematic analysis approach (Terry and Braun, 2016).

Frontline workers

Fifty-four individuals working within the Welsh homelessness system with regular direct client contact and influence over homelessness decisions were recruited, mostly at their place of work. Two-thirds were female; the remainder male or non-binary. Interview questions explored perceptions of systems overall, expectations of applicants, and role constraints.

Applicants

Eighteen mothers to dependent, resident children were recruited, primarily from hostel sites with a few (n<five) via snowball sampling. Making a homelessness application in Wales is a multi-stage process. Most applicants with dependent children will be eligible for temporary accommodation while the outcome of their application is decided, typically in hostel accommodation, but applicants can and do often leave hostels in the often-lengthy period before their application concludes. Applicants were asked to talk about their perceptions of the homelessness application

process, with questions probing how they understood the system and the choices open to them within it.

Researching marginalised groups creates an obligation to recognise their heterogeneity, yet this must be balanced against the ethical importance of anonymity and confidentiality (Healy *et al.,* 2011). Because homeless families face high levels of institutional surveillance, protecting their privacy becomes especially important. Additionally, the nature of interviews themselves, and especially the difficulty in securing private space, meant that questions which could be considered sensitive or disclosive were not asked. For this reason, information given about participants is deliberately broad and offered at a group, rather than individual, level. Participants ranged in age from late teens to early fifties. All had become homeless in Wales, and most were currently living, or had lived, in a local authority hostel targeted at families experiencing homelessness. Participants had a range of often overlapping national and ethnic identities, including Eastern and Central European, South Asian, and North African national identities, Gypsy/Traveller, 'Black Welsh', and 'Black British'. No mother in the study had a current female partner but a number (n>five) identified as other than heterosexual (e.g. 'bi', 'pan' (sexual), 'queer'). No clear differences emerged based on these participant characteristics at the coding stage.

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Most participants were still homeless at the time of interview, making their mothering apparent, and meaning that it formed part of the interview interaction. Children were often close by. Interviewees often shared care of each other's children to enable interviews to take place, and interview locations were chosen to enable children's needs, especially for mobility (for instance, several interviews took place at the edge of a playground).

Ethical approval
Ethical approval for the study was granted by the School of Geography and Planning Ethics Board, Cardiff University.

Maternal time: exhaustion and activation
Capitalist systems demand physical dedication from citizens, with psychological submission achieved through exclusive, exhaustive use of human bodies and devaluing activities deemed irrelevant to economic citizenship, such as care (Foucault, 1979; Tronto, 2017). This double problematisation faced by working class and poor women requires navigating contradictory discourses of passivity and activation (Skeggs, 2004; Dunn, 2010). This section argues that homeless mothers must navigate contradictory demand of being an attentive caregiver but also an economically engaged citizen.

Mothers' performative commitment to activation is essential to being read a 'good mother'. However, activation demands time and resources and compromises their ability to provide the quality and extent of maternal labour that their children need. One woman articulated a sense that she could never fully commit to being present with her children because she had to remain alert to opportunities. The week previously she had cancelled an anticipated, needed family trip to respond to an agent.

> You're caught in two directions, never good enough . . . can we go to the swings, cos all they wants is to get out of here . . . I had us all packed up and then last minute I got this [text],

This disappointment negatively impacted their emotional wellbeing significantly '*We needed a bit of space . . . I had them scrapping, whinging, I'm banging my head on a brick wall, crawling up them walls I am.*' Her friend, a young mother with a toddler[1], echoed her sense that the precarity of

homeless mothering rendered their family time less important than neoliberal activation. She articulated a sense that being homeless undermined her ability to provide the stable, secure base that she associated with family life, but also her own mental and emotional peace.

> I been there, I been there. It's like our lives [are] on standby. I've stood there looking out the window, people going by with their lives going on . . . All I want is a little house and shut my door and it's me and my kids and we ain't got to worry about nothing then, we can just breathe a bit.

Mothers felt that hostels dismissed the long-term disruption to motherhood bonds caused by the imperative to seek accommodation. They felt that their maternal labour was regarded as substitutable, with little importance placed upon their *specific* bonds with their own children, or the work that went into creating and sustaining them. For instance, the anxiety they felt over depriving their children of maternal time was dismissed as resolvable through use of hostel childcare support. But, as discussed, this ignored their sense that homelessness meant that their children had an *amplified* need for mothering, which meant that simply providing physical safety, and distraction, was not a satisfactory alternative to maternal time. One mother explained how she felt encouraged to frame her instinct that mothering intensively to compensate for the trauma of homelessness was a personal choice – satisfying her naïve, and potentially selfish, desire for connection with her children, but irrelevant to them.

> [caseworker], she goes, think of it, in here, think of it like it's a holiday camp! They do a little, you know, arts and crafts . . . I was on hyper alert, every second . . . I was snapping . . . [at her children]. [I'd] feel bad then cos it's worse for them . . . they don't get it really . . . .it weren't Butlins . . .

Responding to their children's urgent emotional and psychological needs arising *from* homelessness was widely felt to be a natural and logical priority by homeless mothers, reflecting an intense mothering prioritisation. Intense, child-focused mothering was seen as an essential protective mechanism to avoid, or at least minimise, trauma. In this, they often drew upon their own early experiences: a high proportion mentioned having experienced homelessness or other forms of housing insecurity in their early lives. One young homeless mother articulated how her children's experience of homelessness – which she found distressing and saw as evidencing her own maternal failure – made proactive, protective, time-intense mothering – as she put it *'being a 110 per cent mum'* essential if long term trauma was to be avoided.

> I was in [hostel name], I was three years of age . . . you carry that [childhood homelessness] with you, you do, it's like a cut, it's like a cut that don't go away . . . I'm a mama bear . . . my job, my only job as I see it, first things first, hold onto them up here [indicates head].

Decision making around maternal time then brought into relief the impossibility of neoliberal activation for those engaged in caring responsibilities, reflecting Allen *et al.'s* (2014) observation that poor women must defend their children's rights to their time against the demand that, as poor women, their priority should be to maximise their economic productivity. In the next section the failure to recognise or validate maternal care is explored further by considering how maternal care was understood by workers responsible for processing applicants through the system.

Maternal failure: interpreting caring as disengagement

Reflecting the broader devaluation of care and affective labour within neoliberalism (Tronto, 2017) maternal care itself was poorly anticipated within homelessness services, and often implied

to be frivolous or even an obstacle to resolving housing issues. This section argues that the neoliberal emphasis on entrepreneurial problem-solving devalues the importance of maternal care. A positioning of mothering labour as an indulgent, irresponsible, distraction was summed up by one worker as *"sitting around all day in pyjamas watching Teletubbies while the landlord is knocking the door down."* These staff were frustrated by a sense that mothers were inclined to focus upon their children's current, immediate, needs, and to prioritise time with them. Poor mothers were seen as having an especial responsibility to overcome their homelessness to enable their children to have a home, to the extent that they equated good motherhood with indefatigably seeking somewhere to live. While acknowledging that women faced hardships and difficulties in seeking private rented accommodation, this was seen as an obstacle which a good mother needed to overcome. To be unwilling to assert oneself to the detriment of their children – for instance, by failing to engage proactively with the process of looking for housing – was explicitly conceptualised by some workers as a form of parental neglect. *"If you can't be bothered to look for housing and you've got kids, that's not taking good care of them, is it? How's that right?"* Workers pointed out that homelessness legislation was supplemented by additional protection for children from homelessness and that parental failure to secure or maintain a safe home could be grounds to increase state surveillance of parenting.

> . . . if you have a child and their needs are not being met and you are a mother of that child and you are not meeting their needs . . . I hesitate to use words like abuse, abuse is a strong word . . . but at the same time . . . we have scope to involve social services, we can and do involve social services . . .

Neoliberal activation extends beyond simply performing a series of prescribed actions, but rather demands that individuals operate entrepreneurially, taking responsibility for solving problems creatively and flexibly. Considerable frustration was articulated by workers toward applicants, particularly mothers, who were seen as failing to take ownership of the process of looking for housing. They were characterised as *'doing the bare minimum'* or *'going through the motions.'* This was surprising because these women were, on the face of it, highly compliant, appearing to be willing to engage, and yet, in practice, they did not seem to make progress with finding accommodation. Workers attributed this to a reluctance to take responsibility for decisions, and operate independently and without close instruction, as self-centred and selfish, undermining their commitment to their children.

> You've got to wonder when they're sat there, oh yes, oh yes of course three bags full, but it takes more than that and if I've got to stand over them . . . "I can't do it on my own." I'll say to them, a hostel is no place for a child, and sometimes that does get them going, works wonders, but some of them, it's like they can't get going, I don't understand it.

Motherhood therefore created an expectation among caseworkers that applicants *should* be motivated to become activated, with searching for forms of accommodation which were *specifically* difficult for homeless mothers to access reframed as a necessary part of good mothering. As accounts from mothers themselves demonstrated, however, the behaviour read as passivity in fact often arose from their own commitment to the principles of good mothering, and especially from a desire to protect time with their children, and resources they needed to continue to mother their children to their own satisfaction.

Maternal submission: Securing legible deservedness

In this section we show that performing intense motherhood could offer a route to strategic advantage for homeless mothers by enabling them to be read as 'legible'. Extending Lo's (2016)

observation that idealised motherhood can operate as a form of social currency in its own right, with value across different settings enabling poor women to access authority and power that would otherwise be denied them, mothers curated performances to highlight their own alignment with good motherhood. This was evident in descriptions of direct confrontation, where mothers described using their maternal status to justify assertiveness. One mother described how a careful production of maternal supplication centred her *motherhood* rather than her *homelessness,* enabling her to frame her demands as an understandable desire to protect her children. Amid a careful cultivation of idealised middle-class motherhood, she was also strategically assertive. This involved directly challenging the authority structure of the homelessness office, requesting that her case was dealt with by a more senior staff member, but contextualised this within her concern for her children.

> It was gone five... and we'd been sat there all day... I went up to the glass and <mimes knocking> to the young girl there 'I've been here all day with them and I'm not being funny it's no environment for a child'... my boys are sat there good as gold right beside them [other applicants] kicking off... and I said I'll speak to your manager please. Well she laughed but she could see, I was serious, and he did come out and I was able to say then, we've been here all day and I don't care what you give us but we're not safe where we are, and [charity] did send us. That's how we ended up here [hostel] then.

A few mothers did also use mothering narratives to demand access to maternal time, drawing on awareness of risk of trauma and the moral imperative to protect their children's innocence (Hays, 1996) to assert their children's need for *additional* mothering time, asserting their role as protectors. One young mother described how she framed her anger at being told that the help available to her family was limited as an insult to her children's needs – *"I'm not fussy for myself but for them two, there's a minimum I'm prepared to accept, and I don't think that's unreasonable."* She had initially been told, by a frontline worker, that help would not be forthcoming, to the extent that they were not offered supported accommodation and were to be left sleeping on her mother's sofa[2]. Couching her anger within a rejection of the idea that her children's homelessness should compromise their right to safety and security offered her a route to threaten involvement of external authorities in her case. Stating that her aim was to be *"just the best mum I can be to these kids"*, she drew on her awareness that although her motherhood was stigmatised within the local authority homelessness office, it also afforded her some symbolic capital, power, and authority in the wider world, which she could use judiciously to protect her children (Lo, 2016) by, as she put it, *"just going up to the next level"*. This relied upon an awareness that her performance of motherhood offered her legibility which potentially enabled her to transcend bureaucratic rules (Silver, 2010). This approach was successful, and the family was offered a space in a hostel where they had access to support.

Invoking maternal identity was, however, risky. As observed above, frontline workers were extremely wary of women profiting from their motherhood status. Lo (2016) has observed that where mothers cannot relate their requests back to advancing their children's needs, they are more likely to be unsuccessful, and to attract approbation. Homeless mothers who were assertive about their children's needs risked being read as mendacious and manipulative, as shown above.

> I'm sympathetic, I'm all for, you know, the benefit of the doubt but we get played sometimes. We're at risk of being played... What do I mean by that? We find, I find, the young mums have all the excuses under the sun. I'm soft as butter but I don't appreciate being taken for a ride. You can bend over backward to help someone and all it is, they don't want to do the first thing to help themselves.

At the same time, workers were surprisingly receptive to aggressive, angry behaviour from mothers. If it was contextualised within frustration at an inability to address their children's

homelessness, shouting, crying, and even threats could become legible to workers as evidence that a mother was *'at that point, at the end of her rope'* and so could, paradoxically, communicate exhaustion to the extent that workers recognised women as good mothers *'a young mum trying her hardest, I can sympathise.'* While workers stressed that these encounters were sometimes unpleasant, and upsetting, they seldom blamed the women themselves. Rather, these cases produced empathy, often in the form of a generalised frustration with systemic obstacles. As one worker put it, *"Having to tell a young mum there's still nothing [no housing] ... I've had them crying and shouting ....it's the worst situation ... so sad."*

This section has provided further evidence that performances of *good* mothering could offer a strategic advantage in securing legible deservedness and so access to scarce homelessness resources. This had to be carefully managed by women, demanding strategic, translational work to relate their difficulties back to their mothering. It demanded an acquiescence to and with restrictive narratives of maternal worth, and a willingness to perform, to an extent, 'passive victimhood'. Yet it demonstrates the complexity of the subject position of homeless mothers: highly aware of, and skilled at strategically redeploying, narratives, some power could be exerted through strategic willingness to conform to apparently problematising stereotypes (Cruikshank, 1999). Welfare workers were also shown to valorise the motherhood of homeless women *especially* in moments when they were most demanding, provided that this was clearly related to their mothering activities. In these moments, 'motherhood' becomes legible within a wider context of child welfare. When viewed as a mechanism through which the wellbeing of children can be achieved, homeless motherhood becomes valued, and mothers are able to access maternal capital. Yet, as Lo (2016) observes, in this situation *women's* value is entirely contingent upon their maternal behaviour, to the extent that, if their behaviour is read as 'non-maternal', they were at risk of being viewed highly critically.

Conclusion

Analysis of welfare regimes have faced criticism for their failure to adequately consider the importance of gender as a differentiating experience (Sevenhuijsen and Švab, 2004; Tronto, 2010; Hung and Fung, 2011; Mayock and Bretherton, 2016; Mayock *et al.,* 2016; Bretherton, 2020; England, 2022b). This is especially evident in homelessness, where the extent to which financial and societal exclusion not only places women at elevated risk of homelessness but makes it harder for them to exit it has been, until recently, largely overlooked (Bretherton, 2020). Motherhood can be understood as a disciplinary narrative which structures gendered societal control at both an abstract and real-world level (Rich, 2021). In this article we have highlighted how discourses with which homeless mothers are forced to contend, and the strategies they use to navigate these contradictory narratives, proposing that this distinct process constitutes 'maternal activation'. They are welfare subjects, and hence subject to an intensifying set of demands that they become activated, empowered and resilient self-solvers of their own homelessness. They are also mothers, and so understood in terms of how well their actions align with heteronormative notions of ideal, self-sacrificial, mothering. These discourses are, to some extent, exclusive. Welfare activation requires assertiveness and self-reliance, while ideal mothering is passive and docile *except* where the welfare of children is concerned. Both are also exhaustive in terms of time. Welfare subjects are expected to dedicate their lives to seeking housing and employment, while evidence of good mothering is found, in part, in the sheer quantity of time spent on and with children. The demands upon homeless mothers, and their reactions and resistance to them, incorporated the contradictory, exclusive nature of the twin discourses to which they were subject. Motherhood was shown not to be recognised by workers as providing an exemption from activation. Rather, activation was, to some extent, seen as *especially* important for mothers because of their elevated responsibility for children's welfare. Yet choice-making over deployment of resources, and especially time, demonstrated that activation and homeless mothering were functionally

incompatible. However, homeless mothers did have some scope to resist and repurpose disciplinary narratives, through actively demonstrating that they were prepared to become activated to the extent that their mothering values remained centred.

The article makes three key contributions. First, it advances recent recognition of women's elevated risk of homelessness (Bretherton, 2020) by demonstrating how motherhood operates as a primary disciplinary discourse for homeless women with children. In resolving the contradictory narratives of neoliberal activism and motherhood, they were most likely to be successful by justifying their non-compliance with neoliberal activation through their need to mother. Indeed, a failure to become activated attracted criticism because it was seen as compromising the quality of mothering. Neoliberal activation can amplify the demands placed upon mothers, forcing them to align with functionally impossible demands for success in a competitive, market-based sphere. However, motherhood also offered alternative narratives, which could be used both to make mothering behaviour legibly deserving to workers, and to provide narratives for women themselves which reinscribed the importance and value of their mothering. This demonstrates the utility of using motherhood as a framework to understand welfare citizenship.

Second, it demonstrates that motherhood can be, and is, deployed strategically in ways which anticipate and retool narratives of idealistic mothering which are inaccessible to homeless women. This extends existing work examining different strategies through which women can produce valorised femininity (e.g. Ispa-Landa and Oliver, 2020; Kamran, 2021). It demonstrates the importance of considering forms of formal power specific to socio-economic context. For homeless mothers narratives of (un)deservedness both obstruct and enable access to resources such as help with finding accommodation and financial support. The disciplinary narratives applied to them are specifically political and linked to a wider problematisation of poor women's economic and social vulnerability and a neoliberal unwillingness to provide financial protection for them (Allen *et al.,* 2014). In this context, mothering became a cultural resource which did not simply afford access to social valorisation but could enable a family to exit homelessness.

Finally, by exploring the thought processes of homeless mothers, it highlights the sheer amount of cognitive and emotion work performed by homeless women to mother well *despite* the complex set of discourses they are disciplined by. The psychological and emotional labour demanded of poor mothers to navigate modern welfare bureaucracies is rendered necessary by these bureaucracies due to their failure to protect children. These systems rely upon maternal willingness to engage in self-sacrifice to the point of exhaustion for the wellbeing of their children. This advances Cruikshank's (1999) work in recognising poor women as highly resourceful, yet operating within a confusing, contradictory, value-laden system, by demonstrating that motherhood itself is strategically enabled, and rewarded, by systems themselves, through tacitly valorising performances of homeless motherhood which meet a threshold level of system engagement. The importance of this extends beyond homelessness systems, offering insights into how problematisation and categorisation of poor mothers, and conditional valorisation of their maternal activities subject to forms of activation, is critical to the operation of broader civil society.

Notes

1 This participant was also separately interviewed and gave consent for her contribution here to be included in the data corpus. As noted in the methodology section, fluidity and flexibility was an essential part of interviewing these homeless mothers, and shapes the data collection.

2 Homeless families are usually eligible for access to temporary accommodation during the homelessness application process. However, in this case, as with a number of other families involved in the study, there was dispute over whether the family was in fact homeless. This related back to difficulties with demonstrating that the family had been *legally* evicted from their property, despite the presence of police reports showing clear evidence of intimidation and harassment.

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