



## **“It was hard work, and it is still hard work”: towards a fluid typology of Black (imprisoned) motherwork**

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# “It was hard work, and it is still hard work”: towards a fluid typology of Black (imprisoned) motherwork

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## ABSTRACT

Although there has been a growing body of matricentric penological scholarship in Britain, there remains a lack of theoretical consideration of the intersections between processes of racialization and motherhood in such contexts. This article addresses this oversight by utilizing the Black feminist concept of motherwork to situate the Black mothering practices that come to be mobilized in response to maternal imprisonment in England. Informed by an analysis of in-depth interviews with Black mothers, a fluid typology of Black (imprisoned) motherwork is subsequently presented. This reflects the multiple, overlapping, albeit distinctive strategies of care employed by the mothers before, during and after confinement, that being: “preparatory”, “connective”, “protective”, “(re)building” and “activist” motherwork. Together, these types of motherwork provide a new conceptual framework for recognizing Black mothering as a purposive tool for survival and resistance, whilst problematizing the racialised-reproductive oppressions found to both *necessitate* and *constrain* such work in carceral Britain.

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## Introduction

You can’t be a mother really in prison, because you can’t manage anything ... You can’t actively be there for your kids, and you can’t do normality ... For me, a parent is being there physically, psychologically and obviously you’re there to provide ... I do do it. But you can’t, no you can’t do it! ... As far as normality, I can’t do what I would like to do until I leave here.

I have decided to begin with a reflection from Malika<sup>1</sup>, a Black mother who, at the time of our conversation, was imprisoned in an open prison in England. Malika’s words illuminate the constrictive nature of imprisonment, with the meanings and expectations she previously attached to mothering standing in stark contention to the reality of the type of mother she was able to “be”, or the types of mothering she was able to “do”, whilst imprisoned (Thomas 2023<sup>2</sup>).

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Pertinently though, when theorizing through personal and collective experiences of Black mothering, it is imperative to ensure Black women are not reduced to passive recipients of state intervention but are instead recognized as active *subjects* of meaning-making and cultural production (Reynolds 1997). As Flowers (2024, 485) observes, Black motherhood has historically been experienced as “a contested site of struggle between the state structures that attempt to surveil, police, and exploit it” and the “Black motherwork” (meaning racialised-reproductive labour) undertaken to ensure survival and empowerment (see Collins 1994). Subsequently, in this article, I expand upon this concept to present a new typology of “Black (imprisoned) motherwork”. This typology analytically frames the purposive labour articulated by nine Black women for *doing* mothering before, during and after imprisonment in England. Importantly, it also problematizes the carceral processes found to simultaneously necessitate and “*limit ...*” (Malika) such work.

But first, some wider context is needed. In England and Wales, the women’s prison estate comprises twelve prisons, all located in England. It is estimated around two-thirds of these women are mothers, with around 17,000 children facing maternal separation each year (Baldwin and Mitchell 2022; Kincaid et al. 2019). This data is not officially recorded, and mothers to adult children, grandchildren and mothers without legal custody are mostly excluded from estimations. Recently, though, the estate has begun to record and publish data surrounding pregnancy and childbirth. In 2024, 215 women identified as pregnant, with 53 births recorded (HM Prison and Probation Service 2025). In the same year, 55 women were accepted onto one of the six prison Mother and Baby Units (MBU) (HM Prison and Probation Service 2025), demonstrating the various contexts in which imprisoned motherhood may be experienced.

Despite a growing body of academic scholarship evidencing the enduring harms of maternal imprisonment in Britain (see, for example, Baldwin and Mitchell 2022), there remains a lack of theoretical consideration for the intersections between racialization and motherhood in this context. What is known, however, is that according to data collated by the Ministry of Justice (2025a), Black women account for around 7.9 per cent of the women’s prison population and are thus disproportionately imprisoned in England.<sup>3</sup> In 2024, Black women were sentenced to an average of 18 months in custody, six months longer than the average sentence length for women nationally (Ministry of Justice 2025b). This means Black women are disproportionately subjected to enforced separation from families and communities, often for extended periods of time. Whilst imprisoned, they then often face further gendered racisms which produce particularly harsh conditions of the carceral (Aiyegbusi 2020) and are likely to shape experiences of motherhood in such contexts.

Beyond imprisonment, Black women in Britain must also contend with pervasive racist narratives that seek to delegitimise their mothering (Reynolds 2020), alongside various racialised-gendered inequities permeating numerous settings such as perinatal health-care, employment and immigration controls. Subsequently, in what follows, I draw together a range of literature that provides a theoretical foundation for contextualizing Black motherhood as a historical site of both oppression and empowerment, before illustrating the significance of this in relation to Black maternal imprisonment. I then provide a methodological overview of the research informing this article. This consisted of in-depth interviews with nine Black mothers with lived experience of imprisonment in England,

whose personal narratives informed the typology presented in the latter sections. This typology represents the unique strategies of Black maternal care developed in response to imprisonment that have been overlooked in existing British scholarship and are given meaning outside the confines of “traditional” motherhood.

## Conceptualizing Black motherwork

Motherwork is a theoretical concept developed by Black feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins (1994). It encompasses the paid and unpaid labour undertaken to negotiate “survival, power and identity” (Collins 1994, 201). This work is often done to mitigate against, and resist, the racialised-reproductive and classed injustices produced by racist, patriarchal and heteronormative capitalist states. As such, the conceptualization of motherwork encourages care to be acknowledged in all its forms, which in contexts of persistent adversity, positions survival as a means of resistance in and of itself (Brantley 2025), whilst also recognizing how mothering can be practised through imagining possibilities of liberation (Debele 2023). Whilst the concept emerged through centering racially marginalized women as situated and valid producers of knowledge (Collins 1994) and is inclusive of people of all genders (Wane 2000), it has been identified as a particularly useful framework for understanding the experiences of women racialised as Black (Brantley 2025).

In recent US scholarship, this has been affirmed by the intentional use of the term “Black motherwork” (Edwards 2022; Flowers 2024), which provides a distinct framework for contextualizing and analyzing the politicization of Black motherhood. This is further emphasized by Reynolds (2020, 3) who, when reflecting on her pivotal scholarship centering Black mothering in Britain, asserts “operating at the intersections of race, class and gender; black women, inhabit and navigate different understanding of motherhood ... [therefore] Black mothering signifies a political act of resistance”. For example, Black mothering is often practised against a social backdrop of racist “controlling images” that permeate many societies (Collins 2002, 5). These homogenizing images have sought to delegitimise Black maternal identities through discursively relating Black motherhood to racist myths of maternal unfitness, irresponsibility, and dysfunctionality, whilst positioning Black women as personally responsible for a range of social harms (Collins 2002; Hamilton 2020).

In Britain, these images have included the babymother (which depicts Black women as single, promiscuous, unemployed and unduly reliant upon the state) and the super-woman (which frames Black women as inherently strong, independent and resilient, and thus particularly capable of withstanding hardship) (Reynolds 1997, 2020). Reynolds (2020) refers to the proliferation of such narratives as a moral panic about Black (particularly single) mothers, which, by essentialising Black motherhood as a risk or problem to be contained, has been used to conceal and excuse the structural inequities experienced by Black women. Therefore, “a central component of Black mothering” becomes developing practices to challenge structural disempowerment (Reynolds 2020, 5). This may include nurturing a critical conscience within children (Das et al. 2022), delaying or restricting certain activities, talking about the realities of racist carceral violence (Brantley 2025), advocating for school places (Cooper 2007), but also the work informed by personal and cultural values that exist beyond, or despite, racist patriarchal structures (Reynolds 1997).

The concept of Black motherwork also subverts artificial boundaries produced by White patriarchal, middle-class and colonial gender ideals (Edwards 2022; Flowers 2024). These ideals restrict women's bodies and their experiences to their "reproductive capacity" (Debele 2023, 136), whilst undermining activities that take place outside of the home or (supposed) normative family structures (Collins 2002; Reynolds 2005). Yet, these ideals are not racially neutral, with expectations of domesticity and subservience reflecting the hegemonic demands of White femininity and the structural privileges that protect the exclusivity of "good" (White) motherhood (Hamilton 2020; Roberts 1991). This affirms Collins' position that for mothers whose experiences are situated at the intersections of racialised, gendered and class-based oppressions, mothering can transcend the rigid binaries of private/public and oppression/liberation. Nurturing one's extended family (as "othermothers") and one's community or imagined futures (as "community othermothers", i.e., as teachers, healthcare professionals, community or youth workers and fundraisers) are thus all recognized as acts of mothering. Furthermore, the lens of Black motherwork demands a more nuanced exploration of the differing contexts that shape this labour (Flowers 2024), such as the prison system.

### **Black motherwork and maternal imprisonment**

Existing Black feminist and abolitionist scholarship has repeatedly named the prison as a site of racialised-reproductive oppression (see, for example, Hayes, Sufrin, and Perritt 2019). Particularly in the US, attention has been given to how myths of Black maternal unfitness and criminality are used to legitimise the various punitive apparatuses that harshly and disproportionately police, control and punish Black women's bodies, as well as their maternal identities both during and after imprisonment (see Hayes, Sufrin, and Perritt 2019; Gurusami 2019; Mitchell and Davis 2019; Ocen 2012; Williams, Spencer, and Wilson 2020). Beyond imprisonment, this literature has also drawn attention to the wider web of carceral controls that the prison is situated *amongst* and operates in tandem *with*, thus disrupting Black maternal connections to family and community (see, for example, Roberts 2012, on the interconnections between the prison and foster care systems).

As pioneering abolitionist scholar Angela Davis (in Gordon 1999, 147) previously observed, "the political economy of prisons relies on racialized assumptions of criminality – such as images of black welfare mothers reproducing criminal children – and on racist practices in arrest, conviction, and sentencing patterns". This is echoed by Kennedy (1992) and Chigwada-Bailey (2008, 39) who highlight the weaponisation of motherhood as an aggravating factor in the policing and sentencing of Black criminalized women in Britain who, when viewed through the "dominant (white) ideology of motherhood", may become framed as particularly undeserving of their maternal identities and relationships, and thus particularly dispensable. However, the lens of Black motherwork not only recognizes the state's power in disrupting (and sometimes permanently ending) maternal relationships but also the work Black mothers do to resist such threats (Flowers 2024).

Writing in the context of the US, Gurusami (2019) terms this "decarceral motherwork". That is, Black maternal labour utilized post-imprisonment to mother through continued state-sanctioned surveillance, control and intervention. This may involve "collective

motherwork” (sharing childcare responsibilities amongst women residing in close proximity, such as alternating dinner preparation), “hypervigilant motherwork” (shielding children from potential interpersonal or state-sanctioned harm, such as always keeping children in one’s sights) or “crisis motherwork” (addressing immediate threats to maternal custody or mother-child reunification, such as taking out loans). Though it is recognized, such practices are not always congruent to women’s actual feelings or needs but are often necessary for survival (Gurusami 2019).

The maternal labour of Black women following a period of imprisonment in the US is also highlighted by Mitchell and Davis (2019), who draw attention to the work involved in ensuring the “safety” and “education” of children, as well as securing appropriate “housing” post-release. Similarly, Williams, Spencer, and Wilson (2020) identify practices of “recovery mothering” amongst Black mothers for repairing relationships with children and grandchildren and reclaiming a sense of self. Whereas Campos (2016) research, based on life-story interviews with two mothers imprisoned in Peru, who are described as Black and Mestiza, positions the women’s involvement in illegalized labour (the cocaine trade) as a racialised form of criminalized motherwork. This existing research has advanced an empirical understanding of Black motherwork mobilized around prison walls, largely in the US. In this article, I build upon this knowledge by providing an original empirical account of the mothering practices that take place *in-anticipation of, during* as well as after confinement. By centering the experiences of Black mothers with lived experience of imprisonment in England, attention is also given to the *particular* racialised-reproductive oppressions specific to this context that have been overlooked in much existing scholarship.

### **Methodology, a Black feminist approach**

It is in recognition of Black women as “situated knowers” of their own subjective realities (Collins 2002, 19) that this article engages with the storied accounts of nine Black mothers. These accounts emerged in 2020, through one-to-one interviews with mothers imprisoned in an open prison (Annette, Donna, Malika and Sharon) and mothers with previous lived experience of imprisonment (Chante, Joy, Kayla, Linda and Trish) in England. The research itself was ethically approved by HM Prison and Probation Service’s National Research Committee and Cardiff University (approval: 2019-259; SREC:3350).

In the open prison, interviews were organized with the support of a third sector organization. This organization displayed research posters inside the prison prior to the planned interview dates, discussed the project with relevant mothers, and was also available to provide support during and post-interview. I was then based in a private office during my visit to the prison. It was here that I was able to meet with mothers interested in the research, answer any questions about myself or the research and hold the interviews. As the prison operated in open conditions, the mothers were able to independently visit this office to speak with me if and when they were ready to do so (without the accompaniment of staff), which helped to further ensure consent. In the community, connections with mothers were formed through a third sector organization as well as my family and friends who shared the research poster with their networks. Communication before and post-interview involved emails, texts and phone calls and the interviews themselves were hosted via Zoom. Each mother was also able to decide whether she wanted to utilize her

camera or converse solely through audio, adding another layer of anonymity. More broadly, however, informed consent both in the prison and the community was provided in written form prior to the interview and was repeatedly discussed, thus enabling the mothers to decide if they wanted specific stories or details “left out” from their final accounts.

Returning to the mothers, all self-identified as “Black” or Black “Mixed-Race”<sup>4</sup> and as having cultural heritage that connected them to the African diaspora. Most mothers were born in England and identified as British, with just one mother having moved to Britain as an adult. At the time of the interview, the mothers were aged between 30 and 52. All had children under the age of 18; though Chante and Joy had experienced pregnancy during imprisonment and Donna, Sharon and Linda also had adult children and/or grandchildren. However, they also defined themselves as daughters, sisters, aunties, wives, partners, friends, students, employees, advocates and community leaders; highlighting the multiple contexts in which their mothering was navigated and experienced. Importantly, imprisonment was the first time each mother had been forcibly separated from her children, though some women described having experienced the imprisonment of their mothers, relatives and partners. Apart from Chante, who was remanded and then later acquitted, all had also received lengthy custodial sentences ranging between one-and-a-half to nine years. For mothers in the community time since release ranged between two and 16 years, yet irrespective of time passed, the impacts of imprisonment remained long-lasting and so did the demand for Black motherwork.

To support the mothers in defining and giving meaning to their personal experiences, I developed a semi-structured interview guide, informed by a Black feminist approach. This approach is attentive to both the “personal” and the “contextual” (Nadar 2014, 25) and so the flexibility of this guide offered space for the mothers to share the stories that they themselves wanted to tell, in the manner that they wanted to tell it. This was fundamental for remaining open to the various ways in which motherhood intertwined with other aspects of their lives as Black women (Wane 2000), as well as the subjective meanings they assigned to their own experiences. Furthermore, this also enabled more authentic conversations between the mothers and I, as we explored touchstones and differences between our lives as Black and Black Mixed-Race women that ultimately shaped how and what we discussed, and thus the final narratives that were produced (see Banks-Wallace 2002).

The interviews, which lasted between one to two hours, were digitally recorded alongside hand-written notes and later transcribed. However, conversations did not end once the recording was turned off, with dedicated time given for reflective discussion to mitigate against the mother’s tapping into “painful recollections” before leaving the space (Few, Stephens, and Rouse-Arnett 2003, 213). I also had a list of support services available to share where appropriate (as advised by Few, Stephens, and Rouse-Arnett 2003). In terms of analysis, I then interpreted the mothers’ interview transcripts through a Black feminist lens. This involved identifying similar themes between their accounts, acknowledging unique and differing perspectives, holding space for self-definition and remaining alert to the wider contexts through which they gave meaning to their experiences (Patterson et al. 2016). Accordingly, I read and re-read each transcript to explore how the mothers individually and collectively articulated their mothering practices before,

during and after imprisonment. I then grouped these practices based on their apparent purpose, which led to the identification of the five distinct (albeit fluid and overlapping) types of motherwork presented in the next section.

## Doing Black motherwork

In the ensuing analyses and discussion, I present a fluid typology of Black (imprisoned) motherwork, whilst problematizing the racialised “struggles for maternal empowerment” (Collins 1994, 205) underpinning this labour. This typology offers a context-specific representation of the various possibilities for mothering that emerged through the mothers’ accounts and does not seek to provide a deterministic framework that would contribute to the essentialisation of Black motherhood. As such, although five distinct types of motherwork are identified as forming this typology, these are recognized as overlapping and intertwining with one another, and as being subjectively negotiated in response to the mothers’ personal herstories, immediate environments as well as the wider socio-political contexts in which their lives were situated, as I will now explore.

## Preparatory motherwork

Reflecting on their initial contact with the criminal legal system, most mothers described their pre-existing networks as providing the foundations through which caring responsibilities could be re-negotiated in anticipation of, or in direct response to, imprisonment, albeit in various ways. As Chante noted: *“He understood that I couldn’t come home ... Yeah, he would love to be home, but having my mum kind of softened the not having me”*. It is through the mothers’ articulations of these arrangements that this section introduces the concept of “preparatory motherwork”. This encompasses individual and collective labour mobilized before, or in the early stages of confinement, to emotionally soften and prepare children for the realities of enforced separation.

Whilst on bail, Trish had conversations with her daughter, family and daughter’s school about the likelihood of her receiving a custodial sentence. She viewed this as *“time”* to put things in place and affirm the systems of support that would make the *“transition for [her] daughter a little bit easier”*. This involved arranging where her daughter would live:

It wasn’t an easy decision ... I didn’t want to leave such like a burden on my mum and my mother-in-law, she wanted to have my daughter. She did have more like space and things, and her mobility’s better. But, my mum, she put in calls to everyone in my family and was like ‘Oh my gosh have you heard what she’s thinking of doing? ... ‘How dare she’ [smiles] ... We ended up, literally my mum would have her throughout the week, and then my mother-in-law would just offer support wherever she needed it, and then my big sister ... she was like the teacher ... At the end of the day I really didn’t want [my daughter] to have to be paying for my wrongs.

Trish conveyed this process as a negotiation between familial networks, with the decision for her daughter to live with her maternal grandmother demonstrating a sensitivity to familial emotions, dynamics and expectations, rather than an assessment of *“more”* or *“better”* resources. She also acknowledged the network of othermothers (Collins 1994) – her mother-in-law, big sister, and best friend – who pulled their resources together to fulfil differing caregiving roles in her physical absence. Therefore, Black mothering not

only represents “a site of struggle and survival” but also “a collective and connective space” transcending the boundaries of a single household (Reynolds 2020, 3), which in contexts of imprisonment positions preparatory motherwork as a collective practice.

For Trish, these anticipatory decisions also enabled more hands-on opportunities for preparatory mothering: *“I was able to go to my mum’s house and prepare a room and get it organized for my daughter”*. Sanderson-Mann (2010) recognize decorating and furnishing children’s bedrooms as a practice for doing mothering and creating childhood. By preparing her daughter’s new room in anticipation of separation, Trish was able to embed elements of herself within this physical space, fostering a material sense of connectedness and familiarity for them both within it. Yet, for many of the mothers, particularly those who had been held on remand, as is disproportionately the case for many Black women (Ministry of Justice 2025a), community-based preparatory mothering was not an option. Instead, caregiving decisions had to be made from inside prison. Reflecting on her experience of making such decisions, Sharon recalled:

I have got brothers and sisters, but they’ve got their own family, their own issues ... I even felt bad having him with his sister even though she’s got two young ones, and I just felt really guilty to burden her with this teenage rebellious little boy. But I just thought it’s family so they should stay together and help each other through it. But it was hard work, it still is hard work.

Sharon described herself as having been the centre of her family prior to her imprisonment. The responsibility for maintaining this family unit had now shifted to her adult daughters and sister, who had taken turns in caring for her son. She explained that he *“struggled a lot, had to change schools, can’t settle. He just misses me all the time”*. This had necessitated new strategies for, and organizations of, mothering to survive the disruptive impacts of imprisonment and protect against the possibility of further familial separation or intervention from the state. Conceptualizing this as *“work”* for everyone involved, the utilization of Sharon’s familial network thus placed a particular burden on pre-existing familial dynamics, expectations and resources, and left her feeling extremely *“guilty”*. This echoes Enos (2001, 64) research with mothers imprisoned in the US, which identified how Black imprisoned mothers would often utilize their existing maternal networks to mitigate against interference from what was recognized as a “White man’s system” (care system), whilst acknowledging the material and emotional costs of these collective practices.

Importantly, though, not all mothers had access to such decisions. At the start of her custodial sentence, Annette’s daughter was placed in temporary foster care, which she described as *“the last thing anyone wants for their child”*. In such circumstances, Annette did not have control over where her daughter would live and was disempowered by both her physical and legal estrangement from her child. However, she successfully advocated for her daughter to be culturally place-matched with a family also of Caribbean heritage so she could *“eat what she’s used to eating”* and maintain a sense of connection to her cultural identity. Reynolds (2005, 5) recognizes how an essential part of Black mothering is the nurturing of Black children’s identity in a society that so often fails to “recognize their worth”. Whilst Annette could no longer do this identity-work at home, advocating for a culturally matched placement meant she still had *some* say in her daughter’s experience of childhood, albeit within parameters determined by the state.

### **Connective motherwork**

Woven through the mothers' narratives were also in-depth accounts of how imprisonment, as well as wider carceral interventions, had the power to disrupt maternal relationships through reproductive interference and enforced separation. Consequently, part of the mothers' imprisoned labour involved developing strategies for staying present within their children's lives and preserving their identities as mothers. This is defined here as "connective motherwork". In closed conditions, this was mainly limited to phone-calls, letter writing and social visits. In open conditions this included days out such as "ice-skating" (Annette) and "bowling" (which Donna had routinely organized with the "mums at the school" to keep things "normal" for her son) as well as more day-to-day activities like washing clothes, helping with homework and cooking:

Cuz like with my daughter and stuff, I'll do her hair, canerow her hair, see her, do her homework with her and everything else like that. That's all I can do. (Malika)

Canerowing hair is a practice closely connected to Black mothering and is "as much about nurturing and instilling a strong identity and sense of community in our children as it is about the art of meticulously interlacing strands of hair" (Meadows-Fernandez 2022, para 18). Both Malika and Sharon mentioned this connective practice when describing their mothering during Release on Temporary License. However, as Malika stressed, this was still bound by the carceral constraints of imprisonment.

Subsequently, imprisonment often necessitated the development of alternative, more innovative, approaches for resisting the boundaries imposed by confinement:

I felt bad because I wasn't there for her education. So, my mum was like 'You can still be there' ... I started communicating directly with my daughter's school. They would tell me what she's currently learning, and I would make up my own little work sheets that I would post home ... Just because I've gone to prison my mum hat doesn't switch off, I'm just now in an environment where I can't be hands-on. (Trish)

This was informed by Trish's own experience of daughterhood:

I come from a big Caribbean family ... My mum had some issues with [my brothers] getting in trouble with the police ... So, my mum was like very open with me. She was like look at what your brothers have got themselves into. Look where they are ... This is why education and that was a very big thing to me and my sisters ... trying to get a job when you've got a criminal record goes against you.

Black mothering often involves preparing children to navigate systems that may place them at a structural disadvantage (Reynolds 2020). For Trish's family, education was valued as protecting against the disproportionate punitive state-intervention experienced by Black Caribbean children in Britain (see Graham 2016). Similar concerns were expressed by Annette, Malika and Sharon whose children's engagement and grades at school had been negatively impacted due to the trauma of maternal imprisonment. Part of connective motherwork thus involved spending purposive time with children and cautiously re-introducing discipline: "*I don't want him to think mummies come back out and all she's doing is telling me off. So, I kinda just do it little, little*" (Sharon). As well as representing connective forms of mothering, such practices also reflect acts of protective and (re)building motherwork explored in later sections, reinforcing the fluidity of the typology being presented here.

Connective motherwork also had a complex relationship with employment. Whilst in open conditions, Annette framed her engagement in paid prison work as inextricably linked to her mothering identity:

£15. That will see me from Wednesday to Wednesday. So, I'll call her in the morning for a few minutes, call her in the evening and as long as she's okay, the £15 will last. If she's having a bad week, I could be on the phone to her and spend £5 in one phone call, and it can be quite stressful because I've got what I earn here which is £15 a week, and that literally covers the phone. Then I've got to have money from my private, which is money people send to help me buy my toiletries ... snacks ... it's very, very difficult.

Through strategically rationing her earnings, Annette maintained consistent contact with her daughter, situating her engagement in paid work as a form of connective motherwork in and of itself (see also Reynolds 2005). Yet, prison wages left little contingency to accommodate for her daughter's changing needs and she was also hyperaware of the physical boundaries of this method of communication: *"she can't call me when she needs me"*. The outbound design of the prison phone, which prevented opportunities for reactive mothering, positioned Annette as unavailable to her child, redefining the dynamics of their mother-daughter relationship. This further highlights the connective motherwork often rendered unavailable to imprisoned mothers, which for Malika shaped her decision *not* to seek employment in the community whilst in open conditions:

If you pick up a job, you have to work those hours. But then that takes time you could spend with your kids ... I've been absent for so long. It's just not fair on them ... that's why I said let me wait 'til I get out.

By protecting her time, Malika sought to reconnect with her children who she had not seen for the entirety of her time in closed prison conditions, a detail I will return to later. This meant foregoing paid employment, which she had always valued and been *"proactive"* in, and *"deprecating all of [her] savings"*. Therefore, whilst connective motherwork seeks to maintain a maternal bond with children in direct challenge to the reproductive interference of imprisonment, such labour is inevitably bound, complicated, and in Malika's case, chastised by the carceral conditions in which it is located. This reflects Gurusami's (2019, 139) acknowledgment that when mothering through precarious contexts of state surveillance, control, and in this case immediate imprisonment, *"love becomes one of the few guarantees"*.

### **Protective Motherwork**

As well as the trauma of enforced separation, all mothers were hyperaware of the carceral conditions in which they now had to raise their children, and the implications of this for their safety and survival. *"Protective motherwork"* encompasses the racialised-reproductive labour employed by the mothers to shield themselves, their children and families from exacerbated or wider state-intervention. In prison, this involved performances of self-censorship and compliance to mitigate against racialised threats of further punitive intervention, gain or maintain access to opportunities for mothering and progress more easily towards reunification with children. This work often took place against institutional expectations associating Black womanhood with risk, dangerousness and disruptiveness (see Aiyegbusi 2020), resulting in the mothers having to mask their actual

feelings and needs and repress their true sense of self. This is exemplified through Joy's recollection of her time on a prison Mother and Baby Unit (MBU).

Joy found out she was pregnant whilst imprisoned and was accepted onto an MBU. As a Black woman classified as a "foreign national", she recalled feeling pressured to prove she was doing everything "*right*" to maintain an appearance of "*coping*" so her baby would not be "*taken*" away, thus representing an act of protective mothering. This resulted in a persistent embodied state of anxiousness, which had extended to her baby who "*felt how stressed*" she was. Subsequently, she and her family "*decided*" it would be best to leave the MBU early:

I knew it was going to be difficult for me, but instead of him being there I'd rather him be outside you know. But then, no matter how you look at it, it was still going to be very hard as well, because not having him meant that I wasn't complete. I really felt [exhales]. Yeah, felt like you've got something, but you've lost it.

Given the limited choices available to her as an imprisoned mother, maternal separation was considered the least harmful option for Joy and her baby. This decision represents a purposive struggle against the intrusive power of the prison that was traumatic for mother and child. As Roberts (1992, 309) distinguishes, choice "means more than the abstract ability to reach a decision in one's mind. A true choice means an uncoerced selection of one course of action over another".

The labour of negotiating systemically coerced choices was also evident in accounts shared by other mothers. For example, some mothers described suspending all physical contact with children (Malika) and grandchildren (Sharon) to protect them from the immediate environment of the prison, as well as wider social stigma (see also Lockwood 2018):

I don't want them [the grandchildren] to have that memory. My son was of age ... [but] I don't want them to [say] 'nanny was in that place with all the police mans' [laughs]. You know how they talk, and I just thought, I don't want them to have that memory at all. They just know nanny lives far. That's all they know, and nanny phones all the time ... two, three, four times a week they hear nanny. (Sharon)

Beyond suspending contact, both Sharon and Malika expressed the importance of withholding information about their circumstances from younger children. This act of protective mothering was framed as an intentional decision for maintaining the innocence of childhood despite their own needs, thus also reflecting their own understandings of "good" mothering: "*I put them first*" (Malika). Returning to Joy's account for a moment, this ideological protection of childhood also extended after release:

He's growing, maturing ... But I'm still anxious ... I think it's guilt of not practising what I preach. Because, due to my experience I'm very strict of saying this is wrong, not wanting – trying to mould him and tell him this is wrong, don't do this ... But then I guess another thing in my head is telling me what if one day he hears from somebody ... So that's what I'm trying to weigh which is best. Is it now? Tomorrow?

Baldwin (2018, 53) defines this as the "emotional legacy of the guilt and shame", which Joy had previously described as being heightened by the stigma associated with imprisonment in her culture. Concealing this information thus became a strategy for shielding her son from the reality of their past, whilst protecting the identity she had since

formulated for herself as his mother. However, this decision was laden with guilt as Joy acknowledged how “*strict*” she had been in a direct attempt to guard him from the threat of criminalization. Such threats are documented as heightened for Black children, who are disproportionately excluded from school, overpoliced and imprisoned in British society due to institutional racisms (Graham 2016). It is perhaps unsurprising then that similar concerns were also expressed by Sharon, Annette and Kayla, with Kayla purposefully engaging in open conversations with her children about the realities of incarceration: “*I don’t hide nothing from them cuz I believe it will teach them*”. As such, protective motherwork includes a wide range of practices mobilized in response to immediate or potential threats against Black childhood.

### **(Re)building Motherwork**

Throughout the mothers’ narratives, imprisonment was largely constructed as having destabilized, pulled apart, and at the very least redefined many of the foundational blocks of their lives. This included access to their homes, everyday routines, relationships with children and wider familial networks, employment and higher education. As such, “(re)building motherwork” comprises paid and unpaid labour towards the end of a custodial sentence or following release, for reuniting with children and regaining a sense of stability, security and purpose in day-to-day life, whilst sometimes creating this completely from anew. This was often depicted through imagined (and thus anticipated or hoped for) experiences, as well as lived realities post-release, as explored in many of the mothers’ reflections surrounding the concept of home.

The “*home*” was largely positioned as a physical space or “*hub*” (Donna), central to nurturing children and/or grandchildren. However, most mothers had lost their housing due to imprisonment. This had meant Kayla being released from prison with “*nowhere to go*”, Linda living with her “*daughter for two years*” after release and Trish being given “*temporary accommodation*” she was still in “*two years down the line*”. Securing stable housing was thus constructed as an essential, but often prolonged, aspect of Black (imprisoned) motherwork, which must be understood within the wider context of racialised disparities surrounding access to housing post-release (see Bozkina and Hardwick 2021). Expressing her response to this impending precarity, Sharon shared:

I’ve been [looking into housing] two years in advance because I’m out next year and I haven’t got a home for me and my son when we leave. But I was already gathering the information of private or council? And when can I go to the council? When can I start looking for somewhere? Because I want somewhere the day I leave. I have to have my own key. Can’t go to a hostel – I’ve got a teenage boy and plus I wouldn’t have that.

The help’s not been that great ... But in my head my plan is further down the year I will do the work myself ... I will call the council whichever area I choose to go to.

For Sharon, having her own key would mean access to a private and personal space – a home – in which she could mother her teenage son. Housing was not just about shelter but also providing an essential space for rebuilding a home. Whilst Sharon did name several third sector housing organizations based within the prison, she believed that “*they normally put [people] in hostels ... And deal with girls that are ex-addicts, ex-alcoholics*” and she was “*none of those*”. As a result, she had been left to “*crack on by*

*[her]self*”, a sentiment also expressed by other mothers in relation to housing, employment and education. This demonstrates how controlling narratives of Black motherhood and expected resilience often require Black women to advocate for themselves in the absence of wider systemic support (Aniefuna, Aniefuna, and Williams 2020), highlighting racialised-gendered processes of responsibilisation.

The need for purposive labour in direct response to the precarity caused by imprisonment was also expressed by Kayla:

I am qualified ... Before I was even [engaging in crime], or whatever, I worked in an [office] and when I’ve come out and done the interviews, I had about ten interviews, and as soon as I said I’d been to prison yeah, I aint got the job ... I couldn’t get a job for long. Then I gave up and that’s why I ended up doing what I was doing again.

Kayla’s experience reflects the social stigma faced by women with criminal records. It also shows the barriers to employment, which are often exacerbated for Black women due to gendered racisms, despite the value often placed on paid employment by Black women themselves (see Reynolds 2005). Working Chance (2021), an organization supporting women seeking employment after imprisonment in England, states that 35 per cent of the women they support are Black. Through their practice, they report having “seen a clear correlation between ... gender, race and chances of securing meaningful and sustainable employment” (Working Chance 2021, 4). In circumstances of severe crisis and deprivation, an engagement in illegalized work may therefore become necessary for survival (see Campos 2016).

However, (re)building was not only discussed in relation to material security and stability, but also the nurturing of relationships and self-identity:

So obviously coming out my daughter is having to get used to a new mum. I’m having to get to know a young girl ... I’m taking time ... not just assuming I know what she likes and is interested in because I’m her mum. I’m taking time like ‘What do you like? Do you actually like that?’ – and you know it’s really good cuz I’ve just forced pink on her all of these years ... and she’s like ‘Mum I cannot stand pink I’ve never liked it’. I’m like ‘Oh gosh I thought you loved it!’ [laughs]. (Trish)

This demonstrates the *relative* unfamiliarity initially experienced between Trish and her daughter due to enforced separation, and the maternal labour involved in carefully relearning and attuning to one another after release (see also, Williams, Spencer and Wilson 2020). In this sense, Trish was working to redefine and reclaim her identity as a mother despite the trauma and disruption of imprisonment. However, for Donna, who could only imagine what life might look like after release, emphasis was placed on holding onto aspects of her previous life, free from the abusive coercion and control of her ex-partner:

I’m gonna be creating a new life but I think there’s parts of my old life which I had created for myself without my ex-partner’s influence and why should I have to give them all up? And they were really good for our son, and I think that’s really good for him to have parts of our old life that really worked, that continuity.

### **Activist motherwork**

Beyond (re)building their own immediate lives, some mothers described partaking in, or wanting to partake in, voluntary or paid labour to advocate against, and protect others

from, systemic injustices. Here, “activist motherwork” describes the work undertaken to imagine, nurture and advocate for the liberation of oneself, one’s children and society more broadly (see also Naples 1992 on “activist mothering”). This builds upon a range of existing Black matricentric scholarship that has recognized practices of caring for community as motherwork in and of itself (see Collins 2002; Edwards 2022; Gilkes 1994; Reynolds 2003).

However, in the context of this research, the immediate prison environment was framed as necessitating *particular* forms of advocacy to question and challenge the harms experienced *within* the prison environment. This included engaging in collective petitioning, prison focus groups, complaint processes and offering collective communal support to other imprisoned women regarding a range of issues, as well as individually fighting for one’s rights and entitlements. For example, both Joy and Annette described having to navigate the end of their custodial sentences against racialised threats of maternal deportation. Joy in relation to the state’s attempt to deport her without her child, which she fought to not “*let happen*”, and Annette in relation to her mother, who was also imprisoned, and as part of the “*Windrush generation*”, was now having to fight “*her right to stay*” in the country.

As well as producing the need for personal and collective activism, imprisonment also rendered some forms of community-based motherwork completely inaccessible. During her custodial sentence, Trish – who had been a “*community leader*” prior to imprisonment – was prevented from taking part in a youth mentoring scheme with young people who “*look[ed] like [her] and spoke like [her] and came from the same kind of experience as [her]*”. This disempowerment extended post-release, as had also been prevented from returning to working with children in her community. Nonetheless, at the time of our conversation, she was working multiple jobs, one of which was based within a charity:

I would like to be of support to mothers in prison, you know ... when there’s a will there’s a way. Like, I can’t do it the way I’ve been trained to do it, but there’s still ways of getting ... involved with it.

What I love [about the charity] is they will come to me and be like ‘Trish, you’ve got lived experience ... do you wanna take that on? ... [Recently we] was literally looking into support for women in prison ... The reason I was so for it was there is still a major failing happening with the ethnic community ... I say the ethnic community, but I would say more so Black communities ... In the Black community ... When you ask for things [in prison] ... You were made to feel like ‘Oh you’re not special cuz you’re Black.’

Collins (1997, 183) argues that although motherhood may be experienced as an “oppressive institution” the “experience of motherhood can provide Black women with a base of self-actualization, status in the Black community, and a reason for social activism”. Although Trish could not continue youth work, she found value in advocating for imprisoned women and their families, particularly in relation to challenging anti-Black racism.

So, activist motherwork represents a desire, or a feeling of responsibility, to protect other families from having similar experiences to oneself. Another example of this can be seen in Chante’s description of a “*scare*” she experienced in the early stages of pregnancy, which resulted in her attending hospital:

[The officers] were saying in the car 'If it's not meant to be it's not meant to be' and that's not really what you want to hear ... I felt like they lacked empathy, they were rude and very intrusive ... They were saying their shift was ending and they wanted to get out, so that was upsetting. They were blaming me for inconveniencing their evening ... But he was fine, thank God.

Imprisonment produced a particular experience of reproductive intrusion and violence which extended to the hospital environment. With the officers' lack of care directly demonstrating how the needs of Black women pertaining to perinatal health are so often dismissed and invalidated due to structural racism (Birthrights 2022). Consequently, after her release, Chante had been involved in a project looking into disparities in perinatal care. A fundamental concern given the significantly disproportionate maternal mortality, neonatal mortality and stillbirth rates of Black mothers and their babies (Birthrights 2022; MBRRACE-UK 2024):

We're looking at why we're getting different care because when we was looking at the figures it was just like, wow. Even like a normal birthing experience before I became a prisoner, the first time wasn't great either. So not very shocked.

Therefore, activist motherwork is not solely centred around challenging injustices relating to imprisonment, but also the wider forms of racialised-reproductive violence shaping the mothers' lives.

## Concluding remarks

In this article, I have presented a new fluid typology of Black (imprisoned) motherwork illustrative of the strategies articulated by nine women for doing mothering through penal contexts of surveillance, confinement and oppression, and the maternal networks that may take on, or create entirely new, methods of care as a direct response. This has encompassed five distinct, albeit overlapping, types of maternal labour defined as preparatory, connective, protective, (re)building and activist motherwork. Beyond illustrating these purposive types of mothering, I have also drawn attention to the various ways in which the mothers and their families were rendered responsible for mitigating against carceral violence in the absence of care from the state. As such, I have repeatedly shifted attention back to the harmful systemic processes that necessitated, constrained and at times completely prevented this work. This has further affirmed the complex relationship between oppression and resistance that has long demanded the politicization of Black motherhood globally (Collins 2002), whilst demonstrating its particular applicability to the women's prison estate in England.

Returning to the earlier assertion that mothering can be practised through imagined (not yet realized) possibilities of survival, identity and empowerment, it is thus fitting to conclude in the words of Sharon as she envisions life after release:

I just can't wait for this horrible experience to be over ... I'll make sure I'm never coming to a place like this again. Yeah, and just worry about my family and building back my relationship with them and building up my home ... It's gonna be a little bit of work, but the main work is with my teenage son – and I'm sure he'll be alright **eventually**.

## Notes

1. Pseudonyms are used for anonymity purposes, whilst retaining a sense of identity for each mother.

2. This article is derived from my doctoral research cited above. As such it includes, but also builds upon, content presented in my final thesis.
3. Black women account for 4.2 per cent of the general population of England and Wales (UK Government 2023).
4. Whilst the term Mixed-Race is not without contention, it represents how some of the mothers in this project (and I as a Black Mixed-Race scholar) self-define.

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