



Article

A Space for Motherhood? Contact Visits from the Perspectives of Mothers with Migration Experiences

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Abstract: When a child is placed in out-of-home care, parents must adapt their parenting to a unique situation governed by Child Welfare Services (CWS). Contact arrangements between parents and children are particularly important, as they provide the primary opportunity for parents to maintain a meaningful connection and participate in their children's lives. This article explores how mothers with migration experiences navigate their motherhood when it is regulated by the CWS in Norway. Drawing on semi-structured interviews and a photo-elicitation task with eight birth mothers, the study sheds light on how they perceive and talk about staying connected with their children living in out-of-home care during contact visits. Three themes were identified through a narrative-inspired thematic analysis: (1) mothers' active efforts to organise meaningful contact visits for their children; (2) their struggles to maintain family cohesion and belonging; and (3) the constraints they face in their emotional care work due to regulated and limited contact. These findings illustrate how contact visits function as an essential but also challenging space for motherhood. We argue that by recognising mothers' perspectives, resources, and challenges during the limited and regulated contact visits, CWS can offer more culturally sensitive and supportive parental follow-up.



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1. Introduction

When a child is placed in out-of-home care, parents must adapt their parenting to a unique situation governed by Child Welfare Services (CWS) (Syrstad and Slettebø 2020; Aamodt and Sommerfeldt 2024). Contact visits become particularly important, as they provide the primary opportunity for parents to maintain a meaningful connection and participate in their children's lives (García-Martín et al. 2019). However, parents have criticised Norwegian contact arrangements as infrequent and limited (NHRI 2020). This has led to the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) rulings against Norway for violating Art. 8, the right to family life (Strand Lobben and others v. Norway 2019; K.O. and V.M. v. Norway 2019). In addition, CWS contact practices have also been criticised for insufficiently addressing children's cultural rights (Alvik 2021; Stang et al. 2023), and the ECtHR has highlighted the importance of preserving children's cultural and religious connections (Abdi Ibrahim v. Norway 2021). This is particularly relevant considering the significant number of children with migrant backgrounds in out-of-home care in Norway (Bufdir n.d.).

The verdicts from ECtHR have sparked significant debate regarding policies and practices related to contact visits (NHRI 2020). To better understand the implications of these rulings and debates, it is essential that research incorporates the perspectives and experiences of parents. While the intersection of migration and parenting within CWS is not a new phenomenon in research (Berg et al. 2017; Fylkesnes et al. 2015; Fylkesnes et al. 2018; PROBA 2017), there is limited knowledge about the perspectives of parents with migration experiences on contact visits. Based on in-depth interviews with birth mothers with migration experiences, we aim to shed light on how they navigate motherhood in a context regulated by CWS. We do this by exploring how they perceive and talk about contact visits with their children living in out-of-home care. We use out-of-home care to refer to children placed in foster, residential, or emergency care. The term “contact visits” refers to planned face-to-face meetings between the child and birth parents, which are regulated by the CWS and based on the decisions of the Child Welfare Tribunal. In the literature, this could also be referred to as direct contact, access, or visitation (Bullen et al. 2015; Scott et al. 2005).

1.1. Contact Visits in the Norwegian Context

In Norway, children and parents are entitled to contact arrangements unless otherwise has been decided (Child Welfare Act 2021, § 7-1). The purpose of contact visits is to maintain and develop the relationships between children and their parents and, as a general rule, promote family reunification (Bufdir 2023). Contact visits can also contribute to preserving family connections, even in cases where the goal of reunification has been abandoned (Bufdir 2023). In addition, contact visits could support a child’s right to engage with their culture, practice their religion, and speak their heritage language, as emphasised in the Children’s Rights Convention (UNCRC 1989, art. 30).

While the regional Child Welfare Tribunal determines minimum contact visitation rights, the local CWS have the authority to increase the visitation frequency if deemed beneficial for the child (Child Welfare Act 2021, § 7-6). The assessment of contact frequency should be based on a thorough evaluation of the child’s development and need for protection, as well as the child’s and parent’s ability to maintain and strengthen their bonds (Child Welfare Act 2021, § 7-2). The level of contact should not exceed what is considered appropriate for the child’s well-being. In cases where contact is considered harmful to the child, limited or no contact might be concluded (Child Welfare Act 2021, § 7-2). Regulations for contact visits could be set according to the Child Welfare Act (2021, § 7-2). This may include supervision during visitations or conducting visits at a specific neutral location (Haugli 2023). CWS should also emphasise the child’s ethnic, religious, cultural, and linguistic background when planning and conducting the visit (Child Welfare Act 2021, § 1-8; UNCRC 1989, art. 20) and, if necessary, consider the use of interpreters during the contact visit (Interpreting Act 2021, § 6). Observations and reports from these visits often provide an important foundation for CWS decision-making regarding contact arrangements and possible reunification (Aarset and Bredal 2018).

1.2. Parents’ Experiences with Contact Visits

Contact visits are central to enabling parenting at a distance (de Serres-Lafontaine and Poitras 2024). Although there is limited research on parents’ experiences with contact visits, one Spanish study found that parents generally spoke of good relationships with their children and had a positive view of contact arrangements (García-Martín et al. 2019). However, the parents also highlighted excessive control, dissatisfaction with the visit organisation, unsuitable venues for visits, and a lack of information about their child’s everyday life (García-Martín et al. 2019). This aligns with research showing how practitioners report barriers to meaningful contact, such as an under-strained and under-resourced CWS sys-

tem, unsuitable locations, and lack of flexibility (Healy et al. 2023). Research on parents' experiences with CWS shows that the interaction with the CWS is often stressful and highly emotional (Tembo and Studsrød 2019). Parents report feelings of despair, hopelessness (Broadhurst and Mason 2020), loss (Schofield et al. 2010), and powerlessness (Otterlei and Engebretsen 2022). In addition, they report difficulties interacting with the CWS due to feelings of being punished for neglectful parenting (Höjer 2011) and feelings of being constantly evaluated (Syrstad and Slettebø 2020).

Studies concerning parents with migration backgrounds' interactions with the CWS generally illustrate that they may experience distrust towards the CWS (Fylkesnes et al. 2015; Handulle and Vassenden 2023). For the parents, it can be challenging to make sense of bureaucratic procedures, their rights, and what the CWS expects of them (Fylkesnes et al. 2018; Kikulwe et al. 2023; Tembo et al. 2021; Wathne and Kisuule 2024). Furthermore, parents with migration backgrounds may encounter language barriers and a lack of interpreting services (Buzungu 2021; Maiter et al. 2017). In addition, they often experience socioeconomic disadvantage (Berg et al. 2017) and may navigate complex family relationships across countries (Baldassar et al. 2014). As a result, professionals' lack of cultural sensitivity and failure to fully consider the families' holistic circumstances, including their socioeconomic situations and transnational relationships, can hinder effective collaboration and support (Aarset and Bredal 2018; Berg et al. 2017; Handulle and Tembo-Pankuku 2024). Nevertheless, parents' experiences of meaningful CWS interventions can also lead to trusting and collaborative relations with the CWS (Terrefe 2024).

We know little about the experiences of parents with migrant backgrounds regarding contact visits. However, one Australian study found that refugee mothers with children in out-of-home care struggled to demonstrate their caregiving potential during visits due to limited information and dialogue with the CWS about the purpose and expectations of the visits (Ramsay 2016). Research with practitioners has pointed to a lack of cultural responsiveness when arranging contact visits, further complicating meaningful engagement and collaboration (Healy et al. 2023). Moreover, studies analysing Norwegian court documents have found that children's cultural connection and identity are emphasised to varying degrees, appearing to be random when and how it is taken into account when arranging contact (Alvik 2021; Stang et al. 2023). Furthermore, within the context of out-of-home care, studies have shown that it can be especially challenging for parents if their children lose heritage language proficiency or grow up in care in a different religious community (PROBA 2017; Smette and Rosten 2019).

1.3. Theoretical Lens

To shed light on how mothers with migration experiences perceive and navigate contact visits, we draw upon Phoenix et al.'s (1991) conceptualisation of motherhood. Phoenix and Woollett (1991) distinguish between the meanings, practices, and ideologies of motherhood. Meanings refer to the subjective dimension of what motherhood means to women in terms of "the different ways in which mothers think about, and experience, their lives as mothers" (Phoenix and Woollett 1991, p. 6). Meanings of motherhood are relevant to exploring how the participants experience and feel about their motherhood in the context of contact visits regulated by CWS and how these experiences intersect with ideologies of motherhood (Phoenix and Woollett 1991).

Practices refer to how women practice mothering "within the circumstances in which they live" (Phoenix and Woollett 1991, p. 5). What mothers "do" can illuminate how they create, understand, maintain, and sometimes redefine family life over time (Morgan 2011; Morgan 2020). In addition, following Finch's (2007) argument, mothering practices need to be displayed to confirm the family relationships. Placing a child in out-of-home care

entails changing the family structure and dynamics (Boddy et al. 2023), including the possibility of displaying family. Furthermore, family practices are shaped by the out-of-home care system, such as the timing and experiences of the placement, legal frameworks, and regulation of family involvement through contact arrangements (Boddy et al. 2023). As such, contact visits represent a unique context to display and practice mothering.

Ideologies are the underlying ideas about motherhood, producing and shaping theoretical work, discourses, and practices (Phoenix and Woollett 1991). The meanings and practices of motherhood thus hinge on underlying socially constructed normative ideas about parenting, which influence how we think about the “good” and the “deviant” mother (Phoenix and Woollett 1991). In Norway, parenting ideals have been found to be child-focused and dialogue-based (Hollekim et al. 2016), building upon Western middle-class values (Kojan and Fauske 2011).

Boddy et al. (2023) utilise Phoenix and Woollett’s (1991) conceptualisation of motherhood to explore the perspectives of young adults with experience from out-of-home care. This theoretical framework has been useful in illuminating diverse understandings and experiences of motherhood across different contexts, including child welfare governance (Boddy et al. 2023). In line with the work of Boddy et al. (2023), we propose that the distinction of motherhood can provide insights into our study participants’ experiences of contact visits.

2. Methods

To explore contact arrangements from the perspectives of mothers with migration experiences, we used semi-structured interviews and a photo-elicitation task with researcher-brought photos.

2.1. Recruitment and Participants

Participants were recruited through several CWS offices, professional networks, and non-governmental organisations from January 2023 to February 2024, resulting in interviews with eight participants conducted by the first author. Initially, we aimed to recruit both mothers and fathers. Despite our various efforts, we were only successful in recruiting mothers. Consequently, this article focuses on mothers’ experiences.

The participants were eight mothers with migration experiences, seven of whom had migrated to Norway, and one was a mother to a child who had migrated to Norway. They originated from countries on the African continent, Southern America, the Middle East, and Central Europe. Mothers who had migrated themselves had resided in Norway for 5 to 19 years at the time of the interview. The mothers were 25–50 years of age, six of them were single mothers, and they all had two to five children. Four held work, one sought work, and three were students (one attended language courses for immigrants, one was an apprentice, and one was an undergraduate student). Several reported struggles with low income, housing, and small networks in Norway.

Regarding CWS experiences, four participants were reunified with some or all of their children at the time of the interview. Five had experienced emergency placements previously. At the time of the interviews, the children of two participants were living in emergency foster care; four had children in regular foster care, and one had a child in residential care (previously in foster care). Several participants had children residing in different out-of-home placements. Two participants had consented to the placement, whereas the remaining six had undergone care orders. The foster homes were primarily Norwegian-speaking, except for one foster home that included a foster carer who spoke the child’s language of origin. The foster carers usually had a different religious affiliation than the children’s birth parents.

2.2. Data Collection

Interviews were held in a place of the participant's choice. Four interviews were conducted in the first author's workplace, and four were video interviews using digital platforms such as Microsoft Teams and WhatsApp. The interviews lasted between 62 min and 146 min. Six of the eight interviews were interpreter-assisted: three telephone interpreters, two video interpreters, and one present interpreter. To encourage storytelling, the participants were asked to talk about contact visits with their children as freely as possible. An interview guide gave directions to the interviewer's questions, following the themes: (a) background and context, (b) contact visits, (c) contact with CWS, (d) family's background, and (e) parenting at a distance and collaboration with the foster family. A sample of researcher-brought pictures, including images of food, religious symbols, toys and activities, emotions, and personal items, was shown to the participants. They were asked if the photos could describe something important for them when having contact with their children, or if not, explain what a picture could look like. The researcher-brought images functioned as a communication tool, allowing for participant responses and insights by using photos as stimuli (Copes et al. 2018).

2.3. Analytical Approach

We have used a thematic narrative-inspired analysis from a social constructionist point of departure. In the thematic narrative-inspired analysis, the content of what was being said is in focus (Riessman 2008; Sørly 2024). A text and translation agency transcribed audio recordings of the interviews, and the first author then listened to all the interviews to ensure the quality and accuracy of the transcriptions. Upon listening to the interviews, the first author noted that interpreters sometimes rephrased participants' responses and alternated between using the "I" form and speaking on behalf of the participants. Therefore, the transcriptions were carefully examined to ensure we correctly understood the participants' intended meanings. To ensure a systematic analytical approach, we combined the use of data analysis software (NVivo 14 (QSR International/Lumivero) with manual coding techniques (Braun and Clarke 2022).

Initially, the first author read all the interviews, noting thoughts, reflections, and interesting themes. Subsequently, we distributed the first four interviews among ourselves as authors, ensuring that each of us read the same interview in addition to one other individually. This process was undertaken to familiarise ourselves with the interviews, gain an overview, and form initial impressions. We then discussed the commonly read interview collectively before discussing the individual interviews. Based on these early reflections, the first author identified stories within the material, exploring what events and thoughts were made relevant by the participants (Selseng 2024). The process entailed working with the data material as a whole, first by maintaining an individual focus on each interview and thereafter exploring patterns and variations between several interviews and narratives (Selseng 2024). Contact visits were identified as the narrative unit and the point of departure in the analysis (Riessman 2008). We thereafter coded different experiences and selected some cases to illustrate general patterns in the material (Riessman 2008). In each narrative theme, examples are presented to illustrate the patterns in the material and show the context and complexity of the participants' experiences. We acknowledge that knowledge is co-constructed and that narratives are circumstantially shaped (Gubrium and Holstein 2009). The interviews were conducted by a female Norwegian researcher whose experiences, age, and background inevitably influenced both the process and the interactions with the participants. Other researchers might have elicited different insights. Similarly, the diverse experiences and backgrounds of the participants shaped the process.

This underlines the importance of reflexivity as a tool for recognising our preconceptions and the intricate dynamics and complexities of our multi-positionalities (Ryan 2015).

2.4. Ethical Considerations

The study has been assessed by the Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research [number] and adheres to research ethics guidelines. We informed participants about the purpose of the research and emphasised that their participation would not affect their family matters or interactions with the CWS. Written information about the study was translated into the participants' first language when necessary and explained orally by an interpreter. Participation was entirely voluntary, and we emphasised obtaining free and informed consent. Participants were also informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time. An overview of the study's participants is provided earlier in the article, and we have provided some context around the examples used in the findings section. To ensure the participants' right to anonymity, we have not included information about the participants' ethnic background, age, citizenship, or family size in the narratives presented in the findings section. We also distinguish between lengths of residence in Norway: less than 10 years or 10 years or more.

3. Results: A Space for Motherhood?

In the following analysis, we explore how motherhood was perceived and navigated in the context of contact visits across three narrative themes: (1) efforts to organise meaningful contact visits, (2) struggles to maintain family cohesion and belonging, and (3) emotional care work under constraints. First, we present the analysis and discuss central issues within each theme. We then discuss meanings, practices, and ideologies of motherhood in the context of contact visits (Phoenix and Woollett 1991).

3.1. Efforts to Organise Meaningful Contact Visits

The first narrative theme, efforts to organise meaningful contact visits, refers to accounts of the participants' practical work—what they do to plan and organise the contact visits to make them meaningful and enjoyable for their children. This theme was present in Layla's and Ana's accounts. At the time of the interview, Layla had been in Norway for less than 10 years and was recently reunited with her children. They were granted contact visits once a month before reunification. In the interview, Layla described her first contact visit, which took place a month after the children were abruptly placed into out-of-home care:

I didn't know what to do. The CWS had rented the place, and I didn't know we could go outside for walks and stuff like that, so we were there for six hours. It was way too boring for them (children). But, when I got to ask (the CWS about the rules for the visitation), I started planning activities that could last for six hours. We went to the aquarium, play centres, and trampoline parks; we went to the beach, fed ducks and played on the soccer field. I could organise such nice activities with them once I learned it was okay for us to go outside. (...) It made the contact visits much better. We could play together, look at things together, and experience things they had not experienced before.

To organise the visit meaningfully, Layla needed to understand the CWS conditions, such as what activities were allowed and where they could go. In her experience, the lack of information from CWS made it up to her to figure out the limitations and opportunities within the frames of the visit and to plan the contact visit. Thus, she talked about her role as central to the quality of the visits. She continued, "A contact visit costs a lot, but when I only see the children once a month, it's worth it". As such, Layla was responsible for bearing all the expenses related to the visit and its activities.

Like Layla, Ana talked about her central role in planning and organising the contact visit. Ana had lived in Norway for more than 10 years. At the time of the interview, her children lived in emergency care. She met them monthly and was allowed digital contact once a week. As with Layla, the contact visits occurred in a specific physical space. When asked to describe the location, Ana said, “It’s a playroom, but the toys are for young children”. It was a lot for Ana to prepare for contact visits, and she brought supplies to the visit to make it a positive experience:

I always bring two big bags, one with equipment for activities like football, badminton, or frisbee, and another with food. Then, the children can decide what they want to do. We usually draw and sing together, and I give them massages and other stuff like that.

Ana also described how she planned the next visit with her children. This included asking her children what food they wanted, if she should make something for them, if they needed anything, and what activities they wanted to engage in on their next visit. However, it did not always go according to their plan. When the children got sick or had other activities, visits were cancelled, and Ana had to wait until the next scheduled visit: “They (CWS) say changing the visitation time is impossible, even if the child has something else to do”. Thus, Ana experienced CWS contact plans as inflexible and challenging to navigate.

For Ana and Layla, regulations from the CWS also included having a supervisor present during the visits. When asked how she experienced supervised visits, Layla said, “You were constantly monitored, and things that were said were misinterpreted”. The experience of being misunderstood or not listened to was recurrent in the narratives of Layla and Ana. Both described situations where they felt disregarded by the CWS. Ana explained that she became worried during visits, as her children were often hungry and dirty; when she raised her concerns with the CWS, she was told that it was “not my business since the children did not live with me”. The child welfare worker had told Layla that she “did not have the ability to be a mother”. These experiences illustrate situations where participants felt unrecognised by the CWS, resulting in a sense that the CWS did not acknowledge their contributions as mothers.

Overall, the participants in our study emphasised their role in organising the contact visits by planning activities, bringing toys and food, and displaying their commitment to practical caregiving. CWS governance and practical aspects of the contact visits significantly shaped how the participants performed their mothering practices. This aligns with research indicating that factors such as the physical space, fixed visitation plans, and presence of others can influence parents’ opportunities to engage in meaningful interaction with their children (García-Martín et al. 2019). Additionally, studies have found that when parents feel recognised and respected, it can lead to a better collaborative environment and, thus, a better situation for both children and their parents (Höjer 2011). Therefore, how the CWS understands and acknowledges the mothers’ roles and contributions to the quality of contact visits could further influence the parents’ ability to facilitate meaningful interactions.

3.2. *Struggles to Maintain Family Cohesion and Belonging*

This narrative theme refers to accounts of family cohesion work—what participants do to enhance coherence in their family life within the frame of contact visits. Sofia, Hanna, and Maria, who have lived in Norway for 10 years or more, illustrate this theme. Each has several children living in different foster homes.

Efforts to help their children maintain their heritage language was a task the mothers emphasised to maintain family cohesion and belonging. Several shared that their children were in the process of forgetting their heritage language. The participants highlighted

limited contact, having to speak Norwegian during contact visits due to supervision, and the lack of focus on the significance of heritage language maintenance by the CWS as possible reasons. Hanna said: “The CWS believed that the children needed to learn Norwegian first and that my background could come later. Now it’s too late. They have forgotten it”.

Another mothering practice highlighted by the participants was to help their children maintain contact with their extended family. Sofia had contact visits with her children once per month, and phone calls with extended family were important when they met: “Only I can do it (maintain family contact). Because none of them (children) understand their [heritage language]”. Sofia experienced that her children’s contact with extended family depended on her efforts, and she tried to build bonds by mediating contact and interpreting for her children.

In their efforts to maintain family cohesion, participants emphasised the importance of bringing food to the contact visit. When asked why food was important, Maria said: “My children are very fond of traditional food from [country of origin], such as [different dishes]. We make different kinds. They love it. (...) I think food is a part of their identity”. She also shared how setting up the table and cleaning after dinner was important to the meal activity. Hence, Maria used meals and food practices during visits to enhance her children’s connection to family and cultural heritage. However, CWS regulations and limited contact could make transmitting family and cultural values, practices, and knowledge difficult. Maintaining family cohesion over time within the frames of the contact visit could, therefore, be a struggle, as illustrated by Maria:

We wanted them (children) to learn (heritage) language. To learn their religion. In religion, you fear God, and you respect the elderly. We wanted the children to bring these values with them. It’s not only to teach children about religion but also to show them these values. Through their parents and by practising religion, the children can learn. When we grew up, our parents taught us by showing and practising religion and our culture. But now, telling our children what to do is very difficult. I feel that they have a very disturbed identity. Their identity has become very weak.

Maria illustrates the difficulty of transmitting cultural and religious values within the limited space of contact visits. The context of out-of-home care implies that mothers are deprived of daily interaction with their children, significantly limiting their ability to convey and pass on cultural and religious values. As such, several participants worried about the possible consequences of not maintaining family cohesion and knowledge of cultural background and identity. Sofia pointed out how language loss could be a barrier for her children later in life:

I wish my children could speak their heritage language. Because for example, when my children want to travel, they cannot speak Norwegian in [country of origin], and they do not speak English perfectly there either. Therefore, they (children) must speak [heritage language] to learn my culture. And food and clothes and celebrations. That is important for my children as well. They have lost it. (...) Because the CWS is not good at this.

The interviewer asked Sofia if this was something CWS had discussed with her, to which she responded:

Never. The last time I spoke with the court judge, he asked why the CWS didn’t discuss this with me. She (the child welfare worker) replied: “It’s because she (Sofia) has a Norwegian passport, speaks Norwegian well, and thinks in

Norwegian". Yes, I am Norwegian, but I am both (Norwegian and [country of origin heritage]). I keep both, that is very important.

In this case, Sofia experienced that her child welfare worker overlooked the value of her heritage and cross-cultural identity. Hanna also worried that the lack of attention to their heritage and family identity over time could hinder her children's opportunities to explore their background and identity later in life. She said, "All children, all people, have the right to know who they are and where they come from. Our ethnicity is so important, and they (CWS) have taken that from them".

Sofia's, Maria's, and Hanna's narratives illustrate how the participants worked to maintain family cohesion and belonging. Mothering practices, such as preparing and sharing foods from their country of origin, connecting with extended family, and transmitting values that were important to them, were essential during the contact visits. However, limited time, the presence of supervisors, children's language loss, and structured visits made it a challenge "to mother" as they wished. In addition, some experienced that the CWS did not sufficiently support their efforts to maintain family cohesion and belonging. Consequently, they voiced concerns about the long-term impact on their children's familial, cultural, religious, and linguistic ties when living in out-of-home care. This resonates with other Norwegian studies indicating that parents believe CWS does not sufficiently support preserving children's heritage language and cultural and religious connections (PROBA 2017; Smette and Rosten 2019). This lack of support may, in turn, negatively impact communication and relationships between the child, parents, and extended family (PROBA 2017).

3.3. Emotional Care Work Under Constraints

Emotional care work under constraints refers to accounts of the participants' emotional work—what they do to connect with their children, give love and affection, build and maintain relationships, repair previous difficult events, and take emotional care of them. This theme also refers to narratives of how the participants handled their own and their children's emotions during contact visits. The CWS played a central role in regulating the visits, affecting the participants' emotional care work possibilities.

We explore and interpret this theme through Emma's and Layla's narratives. Emma had lived in Norway for over 10 years and was recently reunited with her child. Before reunification, they had weekly contact visits. Emma described how she tried to support and reassure her son by providing emotional care and comforting him during the visit:

My son was very worried. He could say things like: "Mom, I have lost my family, I am lost". It was difficult. He said: "You don't know the language, you can't... who will help me?" He was very depressed. But I told him: "My son, I understand you, and I understand that you are worried. But it's not like this. They (CWS) just want to help us, especially you; the best for you". (...). I supported my son and made him feel safe, not stressed and thinking negatively.

To be able to support her child, Emma highlighted how she experienced trust from the supervisors to spend time alone with her child:

We also had freedom. For example, we sat together (with the supervisor) for a while, and then we were free to walk together without the supervisor present. (...) The freedom was very important. (...) It helped us talk together. (...) I was trying to reassure my son. When you are alone, you have that opportunity, but when you are supervised, you get nervous. (...) They (supervisors) gave me time with my son.

Emma underlines how the supervisors gave them space, which was vital for her to feel secure in her care practices and to support her child. Layla, as introduced earlier, had a different experience. She narrated how rules during the visit affected and limited how she could care for her children:

After the first contact visit, I was told many things; for example, I cried when the emergency caretaker picked up the children. That was not allowed. (...) I was not allowed to say that they would be moving soon. I was not allowed to say that I wanted them to live with me. So, I had to adapt to what they wanted me to say, and I should not show emotions in front of my children. I should rather say, "I look forward to next time". So, I did, but I cried inside. My heart cried. It felt like a fake feeling. I was lying to my children, and they got confused by it. They were unsure whether I wanted them or if I was very happy they left. (...) So, because of that, they lost their attachment to me. I think there were many mistakes, but I couldn't say anything because everything I said was used against me. So, I just had to keep quiet and write it down to say it in court.

Layla and Emma show how they engage in emotional work directed towards their children by trying to reassure and comfort them. They also manage their own emotions due to separation from their children. Emma experienced the supervisors as supportive, as they gave her space and trust to speak to her child without their monitoring everything. For Emma, it was essential to create trust and build a good dialogue with the supervisors to have the space and opportunity to exercise her motherhood as she wished. On the other hand, Layla noted that she felt the CWS regulations were confusing for her children and limited genuine interaction and attachment. This aligns with research showing that CWS regulating parents' emotions can create emotional distance between children and their parents (Handulle and Tembo-Pankuku 2024). In addition, supervised visitations can be challenging for parents, often experienced as intrusive, restrictive, and violating privacy (García-Martín et al. 2019). Layla also highlighted the relevance of the power imbalance in CWS encounters, feeling that she could not do anything about the difficulties she experienced, other than waiting until the court case to get assistance from a third party. This aligns with research showing how parents can feel powerless when facing CWS governance (Otterlei and Engebretsen 2022; Tembo et al. 2021). Consequently, CWS plays a significant role in interpreting and regulating parental emotions (Tembo 2022).

4. Discussion

This study sheds light on how birth mothers with migration experiences perceive and navigate contact visits with their children living in out-of-home care, with a particular focus on how they do and redefine their motherhood in this context. Through a narrative-inspired thematic analysis, we found that the participants talked about how meaningful contact visits hinged mainly on their efforts. This includes making sense of CWS regulations and preparing for and organising activities with their children. A second important theme was how they struggled to maintain family cohesion and belonging due to limited opportunities to transmit linguistic and cultural knowledge to their children within the scope of the contact visits. Lastly, the participants emphasised how they strived to care for their children's emotional needs and to build and maintain relationships with their children. However, they also had to control their emotions in accordance with the expectations of the CWS. In the coming sections, we discuss meanings, practices and ideologies of motherhood (Phoenix and Woollett 1991) in the context of contact visits.

Firstly, their motherhood was significant to our participants, and our analysis shows how the participants had to renegotiate the meanings of motherhood when their children were placed in out-of-home care. This aligns with research demonstrating how parents

adapt the meanings of parenthood when separated from their children (Broadhurst and Mason 2020; Memarnia et al. 2015; Morriss 2018). Furthermore, the participants displayed various mothering practices to maintain and redefine their family life within the space of contact visits (Finch 2007; Morgan 2011). According to our participants, they wanted to make the most of their contact visits, as the visits were rare and limited opportunities to practice their motherhood and demonstrate their care. They tried to engage with their children meaningfully, and their mothering practices revolved around what they believed was best for their children. This can be understood as the participants adopting prevailing ideals of motherhood, such as displaying a child-centred, emotionally absorbing, and financially expensive parenting style, described by Hays as “intensive mothering” (Hays 1996). Being evaluated and constantly observed during contact visits represents unique and challenging environments for demonstrating highly regarded mothering practices. Displaying a child-centred intensive mothering style could be considered particularly important for these mothers, as they are constantly under the supervision and evaluation of the CWS. However, despite their efforts, many felt their contributions and role as mothers were overlooked. This suggests that the mothers’ efforts displayed through various mothering practices during contact visits may be invisible to the CWS, raising the question of whether the CWS recognise mothers’ agency, potential resources, and strengths.

Secondly, our findings indicate that it was important for the participants to support their children’s connection with their familial, cultural, religious, and linguistic heritage in the short and long term, fostering family cohesion and belonging. Several participants experienced their children’s language loss, difficulties maintaining familial ties with extended family, and struggles to transmit familial and cultural values and practices. They also experienced a lack of focus on family cohesion and belonging from the CWS and worried about the long-term consequences. This reveals a potential tension between what the participants think of as meaningful motherhood and what the CWS assess and evaluates as “good motherhood” for mothers separated from their children. The state (in this context, the CWS) significantly influences parenting practices based on underlying norms and ideologies for child-rearing (Hennum 2010; Hennem and Aamodt 2021; Kikulwe et al. 2023; Tembo-Pankuku and Studsrød 2021). Research has shown how parents with migration backgrounds often sense a discrepancy between their child-rearing practices and those expected in Western societies, feeling that their parenting practices are viewed as inadequate and undervalued (Fylkesnes et al. 2018; Smette and Rosten 2019; Tembo-Pankuku and Studsrød 2021). Hence, awareness of the cultural understandings that inform CWS decision-making is essential for providing good practices when engaging with families (Sommerfeldt and Aamodt 2024). A central question, therefore, is which ideological understandings of culture dominate within CWS. A study of foster care policy papers by Tonheim et al. (2025) found a tendency to assume that everyone shares the same norms and values based on Western ideologies and parenting standards that focus on the individual child. Failing to acknowledge children’s diverse identities and backgrounds and neglecting to consider these factors in a life-course perspective may cause less reflective practices (Baldassar et al. 2014; Tonheim et al. 2025) and barriers to family contact (Healy et al. 2023). The way CWS understands and addresses the child’s familial, cultural, linguistic, and religious ties can, therefore, have significant implications for safeguarding children’s cultural rights (Sommerfeldt and Aamodt 2024) and for the parent’s ability to support and practice these aspects during contact visits.

Overall, an essential question for CWS is how to weigh parents’ wishes in decision-making, since children’s views and best interests also must be considered. Research finds that parents and children in migration may have different views on the meaning of heritage language, religion, and culture, and it may even be a topic of negotiation and conflict within

families (Daniel et al. 2020; Renzaho et al. 2017; Vathi 2015). In addition, discussions around the value of cultural sensitivity emphasise the risk of overlooking or overemphasising the importance of children's and families' cultural backgrounds (Rugkåsa and Ylvisaker 2021; Stang et al. 2023). An important question is, thus, whether emphasising cultural heritage in contact visits is in the child's best interest. However, studies indicate that children in foster care feel a sense of belonging to their heritage background (Degener et al. 2020; Ni Raghallaigh and Sirriyeh 2015; PROBA 2017). Loss of language and connection to cultural heritage can impact the child's identity and family relationships, which may affect the contact arrangements and the possibility of reunification (Stang et al. 2023). Therefore, assessments of contact between parents and children must consider how the migration context shapes dynamics in the family and how this can change over time. We argue that by recognising the mothers' life-course perspectives, resources, strengths, and challenges within the limited and regulated space of contact visits, CWS can better provide parental follow-up in a culturally sensitive and supportive manner.

5. Strengths and Limitations

The strength of our study lies in the in-depth exploration of mothers' experiences with contact visits. Given the limited knowledge in this field, our study offers valuable insights. To ensure rich data, we employed method triangulation by combining interviews and photo-elicitation exercises. However, we acknowledge the limitation of a small sample size. Future research, including quantitative approaches, could benefit from larger samples to better understand variations and commonalities between different groups of migrant mothers' experiences with contact arrangements. Additionally, longitudinal studies could provide deeper insights into how mothers' experiences evolve over time. Language barriers and the use of interpreters influenced the co-construction of knowledge during interviews, potentially affecting the meanings conveyed and the nuances in the data (Squires 2009). We mitigated these challenges by employing qualified interpreters, ensuring mutual understanding during the interviews, and, in one case, having the participant review the audio recording afterwards. We have also taken steps to systematically reflect on how language shaped the conversations when we interpreted the data.

Furthermore, we acknowledge that motherhood does not occur in a vacuum. Including the perspectives of fathers, children, child welfare workers, and foster carers could have offered additional insights and further enriched our understanding of family dynamics. We focused specifically on contact visits as a space for motherhood. However, contact and the relationship between children in out-of-home care and their parents extends beyond regulated physical visits and are influenced by factors such as the relationship with the CWS, collaboration with foster carers, the placement context, and their interactions with communities locally and transnationally (Handulle and Tembo-Pankuku 2024). Future research should explore these broader contextual factors to provide a more comprehensive understanding of contact between children with migration experiences in out-of-home care and their parents. Additionally, this can strengthen CWS efforts to facilitate and enhance the quality of contact arrangements.

6. Conclusions

While our analysis does not allow for definitive conclusions, this article provides valuable insights into birth mothers' experiences of motherhood during contact visits. Contact visits are crucial in maintaining parent-child relationships and serve as an essential space for practising motherhood from a distance. Hence, recognising and building on the mothers' contributions and desires for their children is essential for fostering good

collaboration and enhancing the quality of contact visits, ultimately strengthening the relationship between children and their parents.

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