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Motherhood, Subjectivity, and Work

# Minoritized mother politicians in Ireland: Subjectivities and subjectivation in the political workplace

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**Abstract**

Minoritized mother politicians that include ethnic racialized minority Traveller (an Irish indigenous community), racialized ethnic minority women, and migrant women face considerable disadvantages as workers arising from the intersection of their maternal status, gender, racialized or migrant and class position. The experiences of minoritized mother candidates and politicians in Ireland are viewed through the lens of subjectivities providing insight into how these mother-workers mediate identities and status positions that place them outside of, or in tension with, a predominantly white masculinist workplace. Empirical data analysis reveals how minoritized mother candidates and politicians respond in strategic ways to forces of subjectivation that may risk affirming idealized motherhood, while obscuring gendered and racialized inequalities in the political workplace. Paradoxically, motherhood seeds political ambition while acting as a material, temporal, and affective constraint, a source of invisible labor and violence in gendered and racialized ways. However, minoritized mothers' presence and representations also offer an important challenge to this white masculinist workplace.

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## KEYWORDS

Ireland, maternalism, minoritized mothers, political workplace, subjectivity

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Studies of politics as an intersectional workplace (Brown, 2014b; Dowe, 2022; Hawkesworth, 2003; Kantola, Elomäki, et al., 2023; Krook & Nugent, 2016) and of motherhood and politics (Deason, 2021; Greenlee, 2015), offer insights into mother worker subjectivities held by minoritized<sup>1</sup> candidates and politicians in Ireland. The Irish political system is predominantly male and white. Women constitute 25% of local representation but make up less than a quarter of the national parliament (IPU, 2024). Minoritized mother politicians are largely excluded from national office and hold a handful of local seats. Adopting a qualitative approach, this article presents minoritized mothers (ethnic minority including Traveller, Roma, and migrant) accounts of campaigning for and holding political office, while negotiating the conflicting demands of their workplace in the context of lived intersectional subjectivities.

While studies have observed a recent “normalisation” of women in political work, women with children face much greater barriers to political careers and, if successful, find advancement more difficult than their male counterparts (Joshi & Goehring, 2021). Motherhood and motherwork are as important sources of politicization yet as a career resource are synonymous with white middle-class mothers (Garbes, 2022). Mother politicians have been studied in other political systems (Campbell & Childs, 2014; Deason, 2021; Fiva & King, 2024), yet subjectivities have not been centered as the lens to examine how maternal-worker identity in this workplace intersects with other identities. The issue is also underexamined in Ireland where data are not collected on ethnicity or parental status of candidates or politicians. This article centers the subjectivities of minoritized mothers in the Irish political system, demonstrating how class, race, gender, and motherhood are assigned worth in affective and social hierarchies, wherein particular kinds of emotional displays and bodies are valorized (Wetherell, 2008). Racialized and gendered subject positions then shape maternal subjectivities and how motherwork is navigated alongside political ambition.

Political work is a relevant domain to interrogate motherhood as a subjectivity and subject position. Seeking and holding political office fulfills important symbolic, social, and individual functions for mothers and, in particular, for minoritized mothers. Politicians who identify as mothers signal congruity or incongruity between motherwork and political leadership communicating subjectivities that may affirm or disrupt cultural and societal representations of motherhood and power (Deason, 2021). A focus on politician mothers also reveals the tensions that lie at the heart of self-governance and societal governance of motherhood at work (Gatrell et al., 2017). A refusal to recognize care underlines the construction of the political actor as “unencumbered”, shaping the design of the political workplace, as exclusionary, for the “encumbered” including mothers (Mackay, 2004). Institutions and organizations not only sustain “gender regimes” but also “inequality regimes” (Acker, 2006) and a focus on minoritized mother candidates and office holders reveals the “raceing-gendering” biases evident in political workplaces (Brown, 2014b; Hawkesworth, 2003; Kantola et al., 2023; Krook & Nugent, 2016). Feminist anti-racist scholarship demonstrates that the gendered and racialized elements of political institutions and cultures work as systems of power that dictate the allocation of political resources (Brown, 2014a, p. 317). Intersectional research originating in black and multiracial feminist activism and scholarship (Crenshaw, 1991; Hill Collins, 1990; hooks, 1984) underlines how minoritized women face considerable additional disadvantages in politics (Brown & Dowe, 2020). Positioned at the intersection of multiple interlinked forces of marginalization, minoritized mother politicians evolve distinctive subjectivities as they navigate a workplace that subjects them to hypervisibility, super surveillance, and abuse (Brown & Dowe, 2020; Dowe, 2022).

Contributions include a focus on minoritized mother workers through the lens of subjectivities in a unique workplace and extending assessment of politics as gendered and racialized workplace beyond assemblies to include campaigning.

The three main research questions posed in this article are as follows: How do minoritized women candidates and politicians navigate motherhood and political work? What subjectivities do minoritized mothers hold as candidates and office holders? How does motherhood intersect with racial/ethnic identities of women candidates and politicians to shape their access to and experience of politics as a workplace?

## 2 | SUBJECTIVITY AND MATERNAL STATUS

Subjectivities arise from singular biographies and collective experiences that emerge from the historical, institutional, and situated injunction to become subjects through processes of subjectivation. Social and symbolic orders act as force fields subjecting individuals to expectations, exploitations, and exclusions along different axes that are gendered, classed, and racialized (Traue & Pfahl, 2022). Maternal subjectivities constitute a specific domain of gendered intersubjective processes where mothers contend with sociocultural constructs of motherhood stratified in intersectional ways. When mothers enter the political workplace, they encounter politics as a domain with specific technologies of power that promote the “subjectivizing dimension” of political work. This subjectivation is constituted in masculinist and care (less) terms that are (racialized/classed, etc.). While it may accommodate curated maternal appeals for political gain, it demands motherwork to be maintained as an invisible, individual, and privatized activity underlining the unencumbered individual trope as central to liberal democracy. The political workplace may tolerate curated public motherhood offered as enterprising, sentimentalized, and intensive (Greenlee, 2015) without regard to the demands of the job nor the lived realities of privatized motherwork.

Motherhood has always included tensions between essentialized, sentimentalized, and idealized maternalism and a feminist (particularly black feminist) radical critique of white middle-class motherhood (Garbes, 2022). Minoritized mother politicians “become subjects” in the context of ideologies of motherhood, realities of motherwork, and care-free constructions of political office-holding. The contradictions and ambivalences of such “subjectness” are addressed and re-worked in a context that denies, stratifies and or instrumentalizes motherhood as a subjectivity. This may include self-conduct that draws on maternal appeals to resonate with idealized constructs of good motherhood (Greenlee, 2015) that can convey intelligibility and assert value and worth (Killen, 2019). In this endeavor the labor of minoritized motherwork may be obscured at the same time as it is absorbed.

## 3 | POLITICS AS A WORKPLACE: GENDERED AND RACIALIZED SUBJECTIVATION AS ORGANIZATIONAL LOGIC

Politics is a gendered workplace that shares the characteristics of other male dominated organizations and workplaces (Erikson & Josefsson, 2022: 24). These include norms of masculinity embedded in organizational culture, devaluation of women's work and, the gendermarking of tasks and positions. In addition, informal rules about being a good colleague, entailing working long hours (the practice of holding late-night meetings in which important decisions are taken), and “being seen” in parliamentary bars or clubs make it hard for primary caregivers to participate in informal networking (Erikson & Verge, 2022, p.10). Candidates and office holders are also excluded from most standard formal labor protections for mothers/parents (Erikson & Josefsson, 2022: 25). Politics is a specific form of boundaryless work that is particularly confronting for mothers (Campbell & Childs, 2014; Deason, 2021). Online and offline abuses and harassment are also pervasive with mother politicians subjected to specific threats to their children (Krook & Sani'n, 2019).

Political candidacy can also be conceptualized as a “protracted job interview” where the cyclical nature of electoral contests creates an open-ended and competitive work culture. Akin to other industries that resist security of tenure for employees and workplace norms on gender equality. Mothers (especially, ethnic and racial minority mothers), who may have lower income or intensive breadwinning or caregiving responsibilities, are least likely to convert ambition and interest in politics into candidacy (Bernhard et al., 2021: 379–388). The cumulative impact of these barriers makes politics particularly inaccessible to minoritized women where, as in other careers, mother politicians internalize, absorb, and navigate an additional marginalization based on maternal status (Liddy and O’Brien, 2021).

Research on race and gender in parliaments in North America (Brown & Dowe, 2020; Hawkesworth, 2003; Wright, 2023) and Europe (Kantola, Elomäki, et al., 2023; Krook & Nugent, 2016) and on black women’s political socialization (Dowe, 2022; Killen, 2019; Smith, 2022), is instructive in illuminating the gendered and racialized dynamics of political workplaces. Much of this literature has relevance if not direct applicability to all elements of the Irish case. Ireland does reflect how calls to reform parliaments to make them more gender sensitive and diverse (Celis & Childs, 2020) rarely address intersectional inequalities or race as a factor more broadly that minoritized mother politicians face (Brown & Dowe, 2020).

#### 4 | MINORITIZED MOTHERHOOD AND POLITICAL AMBITION

Non-traditional forms of political socialization in community and voluntary organizations (where minoritized mothers most often find employment and enact community or ‘other mothering’) have been leveraged to scaffold political ambitions and eventual candidacy for elected office (Dowe, 2022, 267). These include maternal subjectivities shaped by experiences of trauma and discrimination. Killen (2019: 638) emphasized motherwork’s role in politicization in the context of maternal loss resulting from police violence. However, the power and potential of motherhood as a political foundation for minoritized women is not evenly distributed, with middle class attributes and respectability politics essential to black mother candidate success (2019: 637). Minoritized women candidates are sensitized to how gendered and racial stereotypes, including about good and bad motherhood, shape voter preferences and subject them to elevated surveillance regarding their maternal status (Wright, 2023). Political workplaces and processes such as campaigning are spaces where the presence of newer groups such as women (mothers) and ethnic minorities interrupt the normative order. Motherhood intersects with racialized and gendered status generating uneven affective burdens of doubt (where they may be subjected to higher standards) and of being positioned as a token that represents an entire group. These burdens require minoritized mother politicians to manage outsider status (Puwar, 2004) in a context where power is unevenly distributed along gendered, classed, and racialized lines.

#### 5 | THE CASE

Ireland is an instructive case to explore mother workers subjectivities in a male-dominated workplace. A modified breadwinner welfare regime compels women to enter the labor force but in the absence of a universal public care infrastructure, mother workers face structural disadvantages (McGauran, 2021). In an international ranking for women’s representation in parliament, Ireland sits in 103rd position (IPU, 2024). The introduction of a candidate gender quota for national politics in 2012 increased the percentage of women from 15.1% to 23% in the lower house of Parliament. Analysis suggests that despite this progress, quota legislation was “layered” onto an existing “highly gendered” framework that still privileges male candidates and has had little impact on minoritized women (Buckley & Brennan, 2021). The first female minister in Ireland to become pregnant in office in 2021 initiated plans for the first time to introduce maternity leave (Government of Ireland, 2020). Ireland mirrors strategies used

elsewhere that aim to support diversity/migrant political integration *and* gender parity in politics, but in practice operate separately in ways that leave minoritized women (and mothers) stranded between the two (Cullen & Gough, 2022; Krook & Nugent, 2016; Tolly, 2023).

Traveller, Roma, and migrant women experience economic exclusion, structural racism, and sexism in Irish society (Cullen & Gough, 2022). People born outside Ireland now account for 20% of the population (CSO, 2023) and Ireland accords migrants the right to run and vote in local elections. While Ireland's political parties have in the main avoided anti-pluralist ideologies, neither have they historically sought out or embraced minoritized groups. More recently, far right political actors holding xenophobic and anti-gender equality views have emerged (ISD, 2021). Under-representation of migrant communities in the party ranks and as voters shape political parties' posture toward migrant candidates (O'Boyle, Fanning & Di Bucchianico, 2016; Pszczółkowska & Lesińska, 2022). Perceptions of foreignness, triggered by language and culture-related factors also suppress migrant political engagement and candidacy (Erodocia, 2023). The formal and informal rules of political candidacy in Ireland favor incumbency contributing to this lack of diversity in candidacy and office-holding (Keenan & McGing, 2022). Overall migrant networks are smaller and less deep-rooted (Sanbonmatsu, 2015). Migrants and ethnic minority groups can be fragmented and may not provide the necessary support especially if gender norms disavow women's participation in politics (Hussain, 2022; Tolley, 2023). Travellers, ethnic minority, and migrant women experience different forms of oppression and vary in their levels of historical exclusion, racialization, and citizenship status. Yet they share the experience of being grossly underrepresented in local and national politics. Notably migrants can vote and seek local office. In the 2019 local elections, 28% of candidates were female (562), five identified as Traveller (three were women), and 56 were migrant-identified. Three men and six women migrants were elected. In June 2020, the first Traveller woman to hold office, Eileen Flynn, was appointed to the Irish Senate. In February 2020, a general election resulted in 34 co-options to vacant local authority seats. Just two migrant women were co-opted. Ethnic minority women have fared slightly better than ethnic minority men. Research suggests that they may be of specific value to political parties in allowing them to satisfy demands for diversity, including gender quotas, while being the least "threatening" to incumbent white male politicians (Mügge & Erzeel, 2016). Any 'double advantage' that migrant or ethnic minority women may leverage to access political office often disappears as intersectionality becomes a source of disadvantage, stereotyping, and differential treatment (Hussain, 2022; Tolley, 2023).

## 6 | METHODOLOGY

This article draws on data collected for a broader study of minoritized women's access to politics.<sup>2</sup> The analysis is based on 28 semi-structured interviews with politicians, candidates, and political operatives from migrant (EU and non-EU origin) communities, and indigenous ethnic minority (Traveller) and Roma women. All interviewees were mothers and were actively seeking political office, had worked to support minoritized women's access to politics, campaigned in the past and or were current office holders. Feminist anti-racist research ethics informed the research that included ongoing collaboration with advocacy organizations led by minoritized women on the project formulation, execution, and dissemination. Given that the researcher does not belong to a minoritized group, strong forms of reflexivity guided the research process. Participants are detailed in Table 1. Given the small number of minoritized women who have been elected and that some interviewees are current candidates or office holders at local and national level identifying demographic details are not included. Interviews were conducted in person and online and ranged from one to 2 hours in duration. Data were collected between March and September 2021.

Semi-structured interviews covered a range of topics associated with early lives, genesis of political socialization, migratory trajectory (if relevant), as well as education, employment, and activism within the gendered and racialized political workplace. Familial and community dynamics featured in central ways and while the intent of the broader research project was not to interrogate motherhood status, mothers and motherwork emerged in an abductive approach as core elements of participant experiences. While deductive coding on constructs of political

TABLE 1 Minoritized mother participants.

Non-EU migrant mothers	Traveller and roma mothers	EU migrant mothers
3 office holders	1 office holder	3 office holders
7 candidates	4 candidates	3 candidates
2 employees advocacy in leadership in politics	5 employees advocacy in leadership in politics	2 employees advocacy in leadership in politics

ambition and subjectivity, motherhood status was also clear as a significant factor in seeding ambition, shaping political preferences and constraining the enactment of the careless political subject status required to secure and maintain office. Interviews were then deductively coded in a second round drawing on concepts from the literature on motherhood and politics. Themes emerged from this round of coding that included mother role models and maternal status as shaping calculations around political ambition and politicized maternalism as a currency to communicate values, worth and intelligibility as candidates and politicians. Social media profiles and media coverage of politicians feature in contextualizing such maternal appeals.

All interviewees cited here had more than one child, the majority were of school-age. Women from specific racialized and ethnic minority communities may share some common experiences that shape their ideas about politics and their interest in and/or motivation to access political office. However, shared experiences cannot and do not produce identical effects (Xydias, 2023). Some women participants have been historically excluded and continue to face racism and discrimination. Specifically, Traveller women are significantly socially marginalized, racialized, and stigmatized around their motherhood. Others face discrimination as part of their experience of seeking legal status and membership in a new society, with those visibly racialized encountering the most explicit forms of gendered racist abuse. White identified migrant women also experienced othering.

## 7 | FINDINGS

Maternal subjectivities were a source of political ambition and shaped participants' calculus in weighing up the costs and benefits of entering this workplace. While minoritized politicians acknowledge the affective, temporal, and material demands of motherhood, they also absorb its associated mental and physical labor as they navigate the demands of the political workplace. They engage in processes of self-conduct, self-governance, and self-responsibilization, balancing political ambition with motherwork while bearing guilt about having less time to be mothers. Paradoxically, participants value motherhood as a reason to become a politician as well as acknowledging it as a constraint on the advancement of a political career. Notably, motherhood also amplifies the gendered racism, abuse, and harassment experienced by all participants. Participants also act strategically at points by enacting a public good motherhood to generate rapport with constituents in ways that seek moral standing, status, and recognition of the minoritized mother as a political actor and to compensate for outsider status.

Minoritized motherhood is evoked by participants as a source of special knowledge, expertise, and leadership that includes constructs of communal mothering, community ambassador, and intercultural broker. For some, these versions of maternal subjectivity are rooted in long traditions of anti-racist and collective mothering that evolve from sustaining and caring for marginalized families and communities.

Yet such maternal appeals or politicized motherhood also carry the risk of naturalizing subjectivations of maternal labor that downplay the racialization of minoritized motherhood and the costs of motherwork for mother politicians. While constructions of good mothering when politicized acted as a resource for some, they were less available to visibly racialized and minoritized mothers that include Traveller and Roma mothers. Strategies that include outsourcing and absorbing motherwork and its associated penalties and violence fail to challenge the

absence of “family friendly”, diverse political workplaces (Bohn, 2020). Nevertheless, the presence of minoritized mothers as embodied, affective political actors in a masculinist majority white workplace carries symbolic power and disruptive potential, rendering visible what passes as the uncontested norm (Puwar, 2004).

## 8 | MATERNAL SUBJECTIVITY, POLITICAL AMBITION, AND MODELING A DIFFERENT FUTURE

Modeling a different future for children was a core objective. Limitations placed on their own mothers and contemporaneous frustration with poor progress for their own children were the key elements of maternal subjectivity that strengthened minoritized mothers' political ambition. For Traveller aspirants, candidates, and politicians communal mothering and other motherhood (Killen, 2019; Lawson, 2018; Lewis & Craddock, 2020) shaped their childhoods, as women collectivized mothering to stretch resources and maintain intergenerational networks. They recounted strong gendered norms of mothers as moral guardians and keepers of the home and the community. Traveller mother candidates and politicians did benefit from the developmental resources generated from the women-led Traveller community development sector. Politicization included a commitment to address path dependencies in poor educational and employment prospects for children. An obligation to address gender and racial inequalities *for children* is a rationale for pursuing a political career:

I am a Traveller mother, ... you know my daughter is a Traveller, she identifies ... fully as a Traveller. I want to be able to see that she can access those spaces in years to come, that she can access all spaces. Part of that was me then putting myself out there looking for a role in politics.

Several Traveller women who had successfully entered paid work and were considering a career in local or national politics were lone parents. Given their limited resources, and strong community norms around intergenerational care for children, childcare was more complex than for other mother-candidates and politicians. If a decision to run for politics was not supported by their own families, then familial care was absent. Decisions about how to “do motherwork” while seeking or enacting a political role were also shaped by feelings of liminality and guilt, influenced by anticipated judgment from both their own community and from the majority community as to their “standards” of mothering as well as their professional capacities. This guilt was tempered by the desire to role model a different future especially for daughters. One Traveller mother recalled standing in the count center waiting for the results with her daughter:

the day of, when the voting was being called, I had my daughter with me and I was gone every evening, I was gone every day on the campaign trail. And I missed, things with her and I was actually, on the day of the, I was, you know when I was getting those high numbers, I was actually in the back of my head going I hope I don't get elected here, it was too much for me as a mother you know to be constantly gone all the time. I knew what my own family might be thinking that too. And really my first priority was always my daughter and is always my daughter but my point, what I was doing was, the reason why I run was to make a point for her.

Maternal subjectivities were also evoked in accounts of maternal responsibility to enact practices of protective nurturing and adaptive parenting aimed at scaffolding young children to survive in a hostile, racially stratified society (Brant, 2020). Children's experiences of racism were noted as motivating factors for many mother politicians. A non-EU migrant mother reflected on the experiences of living in a rural community aware of racist attitudes including in the context of schooling:

Because you know, as a worker, as a mum, there are so many things that I can't control and protect myself and my kids from without engaging you can't have a stab at influencing and addressing. So that was another reason why I kind of got involved in politics, to try and address this issue (of racism), and highlight it as well, to start conversations. And again, to be an inspiration as well for the next generation that are coming up.

She indicated that it was her children's future and their opportunities for social mobility on equal terms with others that acted as a key motivation:

My eldest has gone into university, so he's going to graduate, I want him to have equal opportunities as his peers who are native and non-native. And so, the more I engage as a public representative, the more I interact, the more I try to influence policy, the easier his life will be when he gets into the workforce.

For many participants, motherhood was itself a site of deep trauma, rooted in racial and gender discrimination detailed in interactions with the state. This was particularly evident for Traveller women in their experiences as children discriminated against in education and broader society. They recalled how their own mothers had been subjects of intense scrutiny, management, and judgment and denied the status of good motherhood. Attuned to surveillance in retail settings and/or denied service, their mothers coached them in strategies to avoid the attention of authorities:

When I was growing up, I was aware of going to the shop with my mother and being watched. My mother was always trying to give the staff in the shop reassurance that her children didn't rob.

These experiences were described as painful and shameful. They are reminiscent of research on indigenous and black motherhood in other contexts including efforts to socialize children to avoid conflict (Collins, 2000; Kill-  
een, 2019; Smith, 2018). For Traveller women shaping their own ambitions to enter political careers was:

to make a difference, to break that cycle, to show how as mothers we won't accept this treatment.

While all women and especially mothers who enter politics weigh up specific gendered penalties associated with a public career (Deason, 2021; Stalsburg et al., 2016) the most visibly racialized mothers (women of color, Traveller, and Roma women who were identifiable or choose to be identified) encountered significant additional affective burdens associated with their children in calculating the costs of working in the public eye. These calculations provoked feelings of guilt and anxiety as well as pressure to align with maternal subjectivities that prioritized children's wishes to de-emphasize their racialized status. This was illustrated by the pleas of one child who feared his mothers' campaign as a self-identified Traveller, would "out" him at school. Such pleas from children to their mothers indicate how racialized maternal subjectivities are considered high risk. Similar stigmatization was evinced in the experience of a Roma mother working on a political campaign. She noted the difficulty for mothers who seek a political role when children are eager to de-emphasize their Roma identity:

some Roma children ask their mothers not to collect them from school.

Pressures were also placed on mother candidates from within their own communities. A lack of support from within minoritised women's own communities can depress their chances of electoral successes (Tolley, 2023: 392). One Traveller participant had been asked to abandon her campaign by her wider family who were unhappy at the

racist attention they perceived it had garnered and concerned that she was placing her children at risk. Her political career constituted an open challenge to accepted maternal subjectivities within her community.

Another mother candidate weighed up the options stating that:

I could pass as settled, and maybe that would be easier for the kids. But what would that really teach them in the end, that their mother is ashamed of who she is?

Persistent forms of subjectivation are in tension with the desire to politicize the maternal subject position (Collins, 2000; Garbes, 2022; Smith, 2018). But politics is necessary to achieve transformative change and in particular the possibility of de-stigmatizing negative identities that children have internalized.

## 9 | MINORITIZED MOTHERHOOD AND MATERNAL APPEALS

Maternal appeals or politicized motherhood (Deason et al., 2015) where female candidates appeal to popular ideas of motherhood to garner support for their political agendas were a key campaigning resource. Maternal appeals can work to establish a shared reference point with voters to counter assumptions that minoritized candidates will serve only their own communities (Wright, 2023). Alignment with constructs of universal white motherhood offers rewards for some mother politicians (Williams, 2021). Faith-based and majority community links are essential for racial minority mother politicians as they serve as an anchor “to further their intelligibility to white public voters” (Smith, 2022: 350). Prospective politicians can be assessed on their ability to integrate and conform to middle class standards. Mother candidates who meet these demands have the most electoral success (Smith, 2022: 348).

Most participants who posted biographical profiles on social media led with one word: Mom, Mum, or Mammy. Asked to reflect on the genesis of her interest in local politics, non-EU politician responded:

I am a mum of three. I'm married. And I suppose I've been, you know, raising my kids and just being about you know, family and you know, participating in local activities. I'm on the school board. I am on the parish pastoral council. I, you know, engage with people in the community to be able to, you know, interact, learn about the Irish culture so that I can, you know, assist my kids to adapt to the Irish and African culture as well so that, you know, their experiences will be a good blend of both cultures. When I was asked to run I considered it another opportunity to further engage with people and blend cultures in the town.

This minoritized mother politician showcased family stability, faith, racial pride, and public service to build a profile and become a facilitator of integration in her community and national party organization. Migrant mother candidates and politicians in their expressed intent to work as “cultural brokers” between their communities and the majority population differed from Traveller mothers. Migrant mother politicians were also tasked with leading migrant and intercultural equality and diversity networks within their political parties and constituencies.

Another non-EU migrant mother politician used her status as a “mother” figure in her community to develop leadership and mentorship programs including a “boys to men” program aimed at “raising a generation of good men.” In response to the death of George Floyd and in reaction to controversial policing of black youth in Ireland, she also initiated a campaign in 2020 entitled #saveourchildren, cited in media coverage “as black mothers uniting to try and stamp out racism in Ireland and make the country more inclusive for their children.”<sup>3</sup> Media reportage quoted this mother as saying that her campaign originated in the hard fact that:

We have all experienced racism in Ireland and unfortunately so have our children. This was our own way, as black mothers in Ireland, of showing that we are committing to positive, enduring change that would outlive us, for the good of, not just black Irish children but the entire Irish society.<sup>4</sup>

This serving politician sought to communicate black motherhood as good motherhood, a universal signifier that transcended her own racialized identity. Such maternal appeals are linked to the “black maternal grief” (Killen, 2019: 638) evident in the Black Lives Matter movement, while proffered as a public good in the context of Irish society’s racialization.

Motherhood also acted as a resource for some migrant mothers to compensate for a lack of masculinist business or party-political networks. Human capital sourced through networks developed in local schools and sports organizations enabled migrant mothers to create a support structure for canvassing and navigating political office. This strategy further afforded opportunities to reinforce their maternal subjectivity as a local “good” mother:

I connected initially with children and mothers to play with my children and then that brings the neighbourhood, you know the parents with the relationship with me. And with their help I started my first course at the woman’s centre and then as time went by I raised my profile and made the networks. As a mom, those networks then supported me to recruit supporters later on

While establishing credentials as a local mother was considered an important asset for a Traveller mother, it was viewed as out of reach:

the locals, when people are living here, families for generations and their kids are going to the local school you know the catholic church, kids are going to local groups and that kind of thing. And their faces are seen, it’s a clique kind of town all the mothers together. And if you’re not involved in that clique, you know it’s not going to happen. Like my child as a Traveller child doesn’t play any sports, like we’re not embedded in that kind of culture.

Maternal subjectivities are evident across different communities as a source of political ambition and maternal appeals appear in campaign materials and media coverage. For migrant mothers, motherhood is communicated as a source of community-building and as a bridge between communities. Motherhood is an important currency in terms of interculturalism, school, volunteering, and faith-based contexts. Other or community mothering was constructed as an expertise, essential to the achievement of migrant integration and teaching majority communities about multiculturalism. Racialized “good motherhood” was curated and translated into a professional project leveraged to access opportunities, build a profile, and become facilitators of integration in communities and in national party organizations.

For Traveller women other mothering-led community-building may catalyze interest and ambition to enter politics but it has much less currency in light of deep-seated anti-Traveller gendered racism and systemic poverty. Maternal appeals have been less evident on the part of these women who face difficulties in deploying their expertise and networks including their status as mothers to access political careers.

## 10 | MOTHERWORK AND POLITICAL CANDIDACY

Minoritized women are more likely to be discouraged from running for political positions than their white or majority population counterparts and are also less likely to be recruited reflecting assumptions about electability held by political parties (Dowe, 2022). Motherwork, in the absence of professional credentials and an employment

record outside the home, was rarely understood as adequate preparation for a political role (Deason, et al., 2015), a view challenged by a non-EU mother politician:

Women, we are nurtured to be leaders. And because we're told, okay you're going to be rearing the kids. You have to look after the family. You have to look after the home. You have to, nurture the children and fend for them, and make sure the home is stable. And that is leadership. But then, when it comes to authority it's a man's world. We have been reared to say "this is your responsibility but not paid for it." So in government, in authority, it's a paid role. So you shouldn't be there.

An essentialist construct of motherwork is defined here as a form of feminized leadership. Mothering engenders special skills that include maintaining the hearth and home. At the same time, motherwork is contested as unpaid and misrecognized, seen as incompatible with authority and power. The respondent seeks to reconcile the contradictions that lie between maternal and political subjectivities. Normative idealized motherhood is aligned to black maternal responsibilities, which are undervalued, yet also aligned with the creation of valuable leadership skills which remain unrecognized by masculinist models of political practice.

The timing of candidacy is also shaped by motherhood (Bernhard, et al., 2021). All participants reflected on how life course stage shaped their decision, especially if children were very young. One minoritized politician, a single mother with no family resident in Ireland, described being asked to step back and delay a bid for office by local party representatives concerned that she was not ready and available to take on what was required. This was communicated to her "as a good idea as her kids were so young." Party operatives encouraged her to engage and paid her in a part-time capacity to translate party political materials. When she broached the possibility of seeking an elected role, rather than suggest supports for the would-be politician reinforced, instead her own doubts and anxieties rooted in her maternal subjectivity about the timing of a bid. Existing roles such as part-time work for the party and volunteer work were perceived as more flexible and aligned with motherwork than the demand of the political workplace:

[Politics] is something that I want, but I don't know whether it's feasible with the age of my children. So, whether I need to spend some more time doing some social justice work and community work that is more flexible. And then do candidacy in 2028.

Minoritized women, who may lack familial and community support, resources, and confidence to enter an occupation where few role models exist require encouragement (Dowe, 2022). A political role requires a future where less intensive motherwork is demanded since acting like a non-mother is the optimum condition to succeed in politics. Maternal and political subjectivities are positioned as oppositional reflecting commonly held ideas about good motherhood as well as the basic incompatibility between politics and care (Campbell & Childs, 2014: 491).

A successful minoritized politician echoed this incompatibility sentiment:

And another reason why I was happy enough to get in, to become a public rep. as well is my kids are older now.

She explained that as a migrant mother, she could not rely on extended family networks to provide care and the political party did not provide resources to cover the costs of childcare. The material realities of motherwork are acknowledged especially for the migrant mother, as are a maternal obligation to decline a boundaryless job when children are younger. Mother politicians enter politics later than father politicians with consequences that include a dearth of younger female perspectives, shorter political careers and correspondingly less access to seniority and power in the political workplace (Bernhard et al., 2021). These respondents appear resigned to this postponement. While lack of childcare support is lamented, the accomplishment of a core aspect of maternal subjectivity in having

raised a family signals “good motherhood”. Some minoritized mother politicians bucked this trend entering or contesting office with younger children. Yet they struggled to reconcile this choice with the material, affective, and temporal load of motherwork. They engage in self-governance to minimize their “difference” from other candidates and to challenge perceptions that they may lack resilience. An EU migrant mother candidate underlined how motherwork disadvantaged her *vis-à-vis* other candidates in terms of her capacity to build a public profile and enhance her credibility and visibility:

It is just so difficult, especially women that have families to run and households to run. Like I said I was coming home after an evening of canvassing, you know and sitting at the computer till 3 o'clock in the morning answering emails because they had to be answered you know. Because if they weren't answered or you didn't reply or you didn't accept an invitation to such a meeting, that would hit back on you negatively because then they'd say the only candidate that's not here today is me the 'mam'.

Rather than asserting the requirements of motherwork, this candidate worked long hours to absorb additional labor and conform to the care-less demands of the role. Her motherhood could be weaponized to undermine her perceived capacity to do political work and her absence would impact her visibility and name recognition, all vital to a successful campaign and career. Maternal subjectivity here privileges the demands of politics over those of maternal status, a strategy that risks maintaining motherwork as invisible.

Another successful local mother politician from a non-EU country, recounted how she had to have her mother and sisters come from abroad for several weeks to take care of her children while she contested and secured her seat. Without their support she would not have been able to proceed:

I had family coming ... to help during my campaign so that was very helpful because I didn't have to worry about the kids you know being fed or going to bed at a reasonable time. You know struggling with their homework or anything like that.

For many participants this was a common theme: despite their venture into the political workplace, maternal responsibilities remained a mental load, arrangements to “cover the kids while I was at the evening meetings” remained their responsibility.

Proximity to extended family, legal status to travel, and access to resources were key stratifying elements across the sample of minoritized mothers.

Motherwork was largely experienced as incompatible with the extraordinary demands placed on politicians to maintain evening clinic hours and physically meet and greet significant proportions of their electorate. Canvassing required face to face engagement on the doorsteps and physical presence at local and national events, as well as presence at important sport, cultural, and community gatherings. This political work was especially difficult for mothers when it occurred outside of school and/or childcare hours. It also required local knowledge to assess the salient events to attend, a form of political, intelligence that circulates in networks that were difficult for some minoritized mothers to access (Cullen & Gough, 2022). Another non-EU migrant mother politician contrasted her lack of networks with other mother politicians:

We can't call Granny.. I'd say a lot of the women have families in Dublin that are, you know, look after the children, yeah when you go in the council chamber with your baby and your sister. Oh that's great, you have your sister holding your baby, like you know. Nobody is holding my baby like so it's so different.

Some non-EU migrant mother politicians generated support from involvement in community organizations with other migrants who acted as campaign teams and offered in-kind support. Supports from political parties were not

routine and had to be sought and or negotiated on a case-by-case basis. Some expressed worry that asking for such support would be viewed as an extra cost associated with the mother candidate. Outsourcing care to families, partners, and to paid carers allowed minoritized mothers to minimize their “difference” from other candidates and to challenge perceptions that they lacked resilience. Yet it obscures the invisible reproductive labor that upholds politics.

## 11 | MOTHERING IN PUBLIC: ABUSE AND HARASSMENT

Research highlights the intersectional nature of political violence, particularly directed at minoritized women on the basis of race, ethnicity, age and sexuality (Collignon & Rüdig, 2021). Yet, while largely unexplored as an intersecting aspect of violence against women in politics, motherhood itself amplifies such harms, as the mother candidate is indivisible from her children. A non-EU mother and visibly racialized candidate recounted her experience of a sustained campaign of racial and sexist abuse:

Egging my house, people calling me names on social media you know I even got a threat of somebody saying that they were going to kill my kids. When I come home, I'll find them dead at home you know that kind of way. Social media became a place where I am petrified of going to put my story out, to put what I'm doing out, or anything like that.

This abuse deterred this mother-candidate from social media use, an essential communicative tool for electoral campaigning. A minoritized mixed race mother candidate was targeted by what she characterized as far right actors, who graffitied her home with sexualized content and used social media to threaten to kill her children. Another migrant mother-politician recounted:

For example, my Twitter is where I get it worse the most. I would have left it on there and not reacted. But the day my daughter read one of the messages and asked me about it. I thought no, no, no I don't want my kids seeing this. I don't want my kids thinking if they ever want to step into a leadership position, they will have to be worried. Or to worry for me.

A non-EU mother politician was the target of abuse and personal physical threats aimed at dissuading her from taking up her post. Despite reporting the abuse to the police, they continued to escalate and included threats to her children so much so that “I didn't let my kids out to play on the field.”

Most participants desisted from engaging with or reporting the abuse fearful of further reprisal or a “political” cost to complaining. However, the most common refrain was anxiety that their children would be upset or the direct target of abuse, and that if they engaged in or publicized the matter this would traumatize their families further:

So that's another thing. I don't want them (my children) to happen across my page and see me, you know, fighting. I don't even block it or report it, it will make it worse, I just try to ignore it.

Minoritized women experience a disproportionate level of racialized and sexist abuse compared to other politicians (Collier et al., 2018) and mothers have additional affective burdens in the management of this harassment vis-à-vis their children. Maternal subjectivities shape responses that reveal vulnerability and fear about the implications for their children's safety, as well as guilt in exposing children to the “ugliness of what people will say”. Self-responsibilization is evident to protect and insulate children from racialized and sexist abuse and harassment.

While parties have begun to respond to these issues, mother-politicians still carry the burden of managing such threats (Keenan and Buckley, 2022). Minoritized women's political work attests to the operation of a social politics of emotion where not talking too much about racism, sexism, classism, etc. is demanded in majority population and white dominated political communities (Emejulu & Sobande, 2023). Motherhood intensifies the pressure to absorb and downplay abuse. These accounts indicate processes of self-conduct and self-governance that reveal the tensions between minoritized maternal status and assumptions of what is required for political work, namely the capacity to tough it out, to develop a thick skin and deal with the "cut and thrust of politics" that obscures real gendered racialized harms.

## 12 | TALKING BACK: RESISTANT MATERNAL SUBJECTIVITIES

At the same time as acknowledging the challenges mother politicians face, participants engaged in intensive self-conduct and labor as they navigate the tensions between maternal and political subjectivities. However, their embodied presence in the political workplace does represent a source of "talking back" to both the idealized constructs of motherhood and the unencumbered political actor. In other words, the literal presence of minoritized mothers in parliamentary workplaces (especially when accompanied by racialized children) disrupts the prevailing normative white masculinist culture.

Minoritized mother politicians did bring their children to work and, in this act, deploy their maternal subjectivity strategically to contest the absence of support for mothers in political employment. A high-profile ethnic minority national politician (and mother to two young children) was among the first women in Ireland to bring her child to work in the national Parliament in 2022. This act garnered media attention as her daughter accompanied her while she made a contribution underlining racism experienced by her community. In her speech, she stated:

My child is here beside me and she cannot help that she is a full member of the Traveller community and a full member of the settled community.

Media coverage suggested that the presence of babies in parliament had acted to raise the profile of the speech as well as the broader issue of poor childcare infrastructure in Ireland (Loughlin, 2022). Another media report (Coyno, 2022) led with a description of their internal struggle to mother as a political representative:

Struggling to focus on the minister in front of her, the young senator was standing in the chamber of the upper house, trying to grill the Government on the issues of the day, but her mind was many miles away. Back home, her toddler had a fever.

This coverage continued with the politician's own statement:

This job can be mentally draining because you are living with those levels of guilt, you are living with demons in your head because you're leaving your child.

She suggested that she "overdoes it" with extra bedtime stories and playground trips on her return. While entitled to 6 months leave, she took a portion of this but states "I felt so guilty, because I'm a public representative, so I felt like I didn't have a choice only to go back to work." This public motherhood is constructed as good motherhood under difficult conditions and aligns her with other mothers as her statement continued: "It's not just me, it's the same for other women." Establishing credentials of good motherhood as a racialised woman requires maternal appeals that generalise her maternal experience beyond her ethnic minoritized community. Yet for this mother-politician the end goal is political as she draws on her maternal status in the media interview to show her sacrifice is worth it if she can

build a better future for her child in addressing the racism experienced by her community. She ends calling for a publicly funded childcare system to ease the strain on all working mothers (Coyne, 2022).

Resistant maternal subjectivities can be located within the embodied and often othered and stigmatised gendered and racialized minoritized mother. The fact that she claims the status simultaneously of good motherhood and politician, in itself constitutes a subversive and disruptive act. This may include making strategic efforts to instrumentalize aspects of idealized motherhood, that are often out of bounds for minoritized mothers. However, linking the professional status of an elected official with minoritized maternal status relies on making visible the tensions that lie at the heart of maternal and political subjectivities. Nevertheless, in politicizing her embodiment of both subject positions she also highlights their links to the patriarchal norms of the political workplace and the ideological constraints of good mothering. Ambivalence or disavowal of idealized motherhood has in reality high costs for minoritized women especially those seeking to enter a profession where they have little presence and are subject to gendered and racialized super surveillance. Risks remain in affirming idealized motherhood. Yet the presence and performance of minoritized motherhood suggests agency in claiming good motherhood as they navigate the incompatibilities that lie at the heart of motherwork and the demands of the political workplace.

### 13 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Motherhood shapes political ambition and crucially the timing of a candidacy as minoritized mothers weigh up the costs and risks for their children (that are gendered and racialized) of adopting a public persona. Yet it is the imperative to improve the lives of their children that is frequently cited as a reason to enter the political workplace. Traditions of communal mothering and other motherhood influenced Traveller and migrant women to recast their maternal status as a source of expertise and professional competence. Responsiveness, availability, and reputational capital are key attributes demanded by the political workplace, traditionally coded in masculinist terms. These attributes are difficult for minoritized mothers to accrue, especially those most distant from resources, supports, and networks. Minoritized politicians experience hypervisibility especially if visibly racialized, yet they struggle to access valuable forms of political visibility especially at the local level.

Reputational capital as a “good mother” in local school, faith-based, and sports contexts is key to proving “localness” and attaining political office. Motherhood in some circumstances was a resource for candidacy where other mothers were activated as networks and human capital to compensate for the lack of a masculinist network. For migrants in particular, investment in majority population motherwork in community and voluntary contexts including commitments to act as intercultural brokers and facilitators was essential to counter their outsider status. Motherhood and associated maternal appeals worked as a currency to transcend the minoritized and majority population divide. As evidenced in other contexts (Deason, 2021) motherhood is invoked by minority candidates as a broad-based identity that lends itself to appeals across the political spectrum to build support for candidates and policy issues. Such strategies were less available to the more stigmatized minoritized mothers whose affiliate parties were less supportive, and whose community and family withheld approval and support. Overall, candidates and politicians with the least material resources to pay for childcare including Travellers and non-EU migrant mothers lacking familial networks or legal status were most disadvantaged by their motherhood status.

Feminist political theorists have called for greater attention to the concrete, embodied specificities of women as carers and (re)productive laborers beyond a universal, disembodied conceptualization of citizenship and a public/private binary (Manchin, 2022). Minoritized mother politicians directly challenge the normative masculinities and whiteness that characterize political workplaces. Their presence mitigates against the exclusivity of this elite workplace in symbolic terms, constituting minoritized women and mothers as leaders. Yet how they frame their maternal and minoritized status in the political workplace matters.

Participants engaged in affective and emotional labor to comply with the working conditions of office holding, resigned for the most part to the demands of a job largely incompatible with motherwork. Political parties were

characterized as, hesitant, or contingent in their support of minoritized mothers. Participants experienced sexist and racist abuse and violence, and threats to children were identified as a tipping point. Yet most participants drew on their maternal subjectivity to protect their families when possible, and downplayed associated harms to avoid the political costs of complaint. As a result, motherwork and its physical, emotional, and affective labors were largely absorbed or outsourced by participants. Self-conduct aimed at minimizing disruption, including self-management of racialized and gendered abuse to maintain credibility and career prospects.

Minoritized maternal subjectivities are also a site for “talking back” to patterns of subjectivation, exemplified by the public performance of motherhood in the public political arena and calling out racism in Irish society. While aimed at politicizing a careless state and its posture toward minoritized mothers, this form of public motherhood also risks alignment with idealized motherhood. Participants engage in intensive strategizing to manage minoritized motherhood and political work yet also seek value and worth as political actors by communicating how minoritized motherhood seeds valuable leadership skills, commitment to communities and broader public service. This infers strategic and agentic action from subjectivities and material contexts that reflect intersectional disadvantages. However, navigating the incompatibilities between minoritized motherhood and public office includes alignment with existing maternal appeals in ways that may fall short of demanding that the political workplace (including candidacy) address gendered and racialized realities and accommodate those more broadly who care (Campbell & Childs, 2014). Provision of childcare, economic supports for minoritized mother aspirants, commitments to anti-racism and legislation to confront violence against women in politics may capacitate minoritized mothers to pursue political careers. Such structural reforms may also expand the pool of minoritized mother officeholders engendering resistant subjectivities that may contest maternal ideologies and gendered and racialized practices that restrict mothers from engaging with work in a predominantly white and masculinist domain.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

I declare no conflict of interest.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The term “minoritized” refers to how people are actively minoritized by others rather than naturally existing as a minority. The terms “racially minoritized” or “ethnically minoritized” confirms that minoritization is a social process shaped by power.
- <sup>2</sup> The research draws from a project that included 48 interviews with state officials, stakeholders, and advocates for improving minoritized women's representation in local politics in Ireland.
- <sup>3</sup> <https://www.irishmirror.ie/news/irish-news/five-black-mothers-unite-stamp-22182278>.
- <sup>4</sup> <https://www.irishmirror.ie/news/irish-news/five-black-mothers-unite-stamp-22182278>.

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