

# Invisible Walls in the Digital Welfare State:

How Parents Navigate Marginalization and  
Agency in Digitally Mediated Encounters

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ABSTRACT

This article explores how marginalized parents navigate their digitally mediated contacts with the State. Combining intersectionality theory with Haraway's concepts of cyborgs and string figures, I ask: How do social categories and digital infrastructures co-construct parents' experiences of marginalization and agency? Using two vignettes based on ethnographic data collected through fieldnotes, future workshops, and interviews with marginalized parents, I display challenges, constraints, and moments of agency encountered as parents negotiate complex and interwoven power structures. I draw on key concepts that position digitalization not only as a mediator of citizen-state relations, but also as a structural force that shapes and reproduces social categories. Focusing on the fluidity of marginalization, I find that parents' struggles to assert agency and safeguard their rights are simultaneously shaped by, and push back against, intersecting categories such as gender, ethnicity, race, and class, as well as the digital infrastructures that organize access to welfare services. Due to the digital infrastructure mediating citizen-state interactions, these struggles may be invisible to the institutions responsible for providing equitable access to help, potentially exacerbating marginalization. I conclude by discussing the broader implications for citizenship, social work values, and digital inclusion in a welfare state increasingly governed through technology.

KEY WORDS

**DIGITAL INEQUITY, INTERSECTIONALITY,  
MARGINALIZATION, RIGHTS, PARENTS**

## INTRODUCTION: WHEN INTERSECTIONALITY, MARGINALIZATION, AND CYBORGS MEET

The idea for this article originated in a future workshop<sup>1</sup> with Marginalized parents<sup>2</sup>, where a father reflected on his experience of navigating public institutions and the digital infrastructure in Denmark:

“Digital technologies are like additional walls when you meet the [public] systems. The systems consist of many institutions with different laws. It is entirely up to you to learn how the systems work. When you try to navigate through these systems, you will meet a series of walls. When we do this, we feel alone, without rights, and like second-class citizens. Just look at the Danish Prime Minister’s New Year’s speech [2021], and her statement that ‘some parents get too many chances’ to care for their children. This is just one example of how parents are alienated.”

Danish digitalization policies assume the citizen is *digital by default* and emphasize the citizen’s role as an active participant in managing their case (Schou & Pors, 2019). Yet as many as 17–22% of Danes are classified as *digitally vulnerable* or living in a *digital grey zone* (Agency for Digitisation & the National Association of Municipalities, 2021, p. 11). When public institutions operate under different legal frameworks, they create a complex and potentially marginalizing system that individuals must navigate, often with limited guidance, as the quote above illustrates. When marginalized parents struggle to access or interpret these systems, their struggles may be normalized, depoliticized, or erased from policy narratives, despite the emotional and cognitive labor they invest in caring for their children and themselves.

These struggles resonate with Ahmed’s (2012, p. 26) metaphor of “banging your head against a brick wall”, where the wall represents not just bureaucracy but also barriers that are structurally produced, symbolic, but highly consequential, connected with gender, ethnicity, race, class, and in this case

parental status. Ultimately, this can shape inequitable access to care, compassion, rights, and recognition (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991; Yuval-Davis, 2011). While digitalization may benefit the majority of Danish citizens, it also risks reinforcing existing inequities for those unable to fully access or navigate digital systems, as highlighted in the literature on the *digital divide* (Ragnedda, 2020). In developing this concept, Ragnedda expands the discussion towards a more dynamic notion of digital equity, emphasizing how differences in access, skills, and outcomes can reproduce broader social inequities. This is further complicated by what Ahmed calls the “hard work of diversity.” With this notion, she describes the work needed to ensure inclusion, which is often invisible within the everyday routines of public institutions, as social workers and systems may not recognize the efforts required to accommodate all citizens (Ahmed, 2012, p. 50). This invisibility resembles what Star and Strauss (1999, p. 20) termed *functionally invisible work*: work that is overlooked, ignored, or slides into the background because it is taken for granted. As a consequence of the digital infrastructure, the struggles of marginalized parents to access help through digital systems while safeguarding their rights may sometimes go unnoticed by the institutions that perpetuate their marginalization, despite being essential for ensuring equity.

These inequities raise important questions about how digital transformation in the infrastructure of public institutions reflects the values of social work. What are the costs to marginalized parents when this infrastructure is fragmented and offers only partial perspectives, neglecting the situated nature of their everyday lives? What capacities and capabilities are required of marginalized parents to navigate these challenges? Such discussions call for reflection on how digitalization (re)organizes traditional understandings of citizenship and belonging (Yuval-Davis, 2011), which are typically framed in terms of the “rights and responsibilities of the citizen” (Jørring et al., 2018, p. 12).

## AIM

This article explores how parents navigate their digitally mediated contacts with the State. Combining intersectionality theory with Haraway's concepts of *cyborgs* and *string figures*, I pursue the following research question: *How do social categories and digital infrastructures co-construct parents' experiences of marginalization and agency?*

I draw on ethnographic data collected through fieldnotes, future workshops, and interviews, and use vignettes (Miles et al., 2014, p. 183) to display the challenges, constraints, and moments of agency encountered by parents as they negotiate complex, interwoven power structures. In the theory section, I discuss key theoretical concepts that view digitalization not only as a mediator but also as a structural force that influences social categories. In relation to the fluidity of marginalization, I discuss the broader implications for citizenship, social work values, and digital inclusion in a welfare state that is increasingly organized around technology.

Before outlining my theoretical concepts and methodological approach, I will provide an overview of how digitalization has transformed Child and Family Welfare Services (CFWS) in Denmark, emphasizing its dual role in shaping both access to rights and experiences of marginalization.

## DIGITALIZATION AND DIGITAL INEQUITY IN CHILD AND FAMILY WELFARE SERVICES

Digitalization is not a neutral process; it disproportionately affects Marginalized communities (Hansen et al., 2018; Ragnedda, 2020). Despite Denmark's status as a digital frontrunner (Nirmalarajan & Høybye-Mortensen, 2023), the design of digital citizen interfaces often excludes those who do not conform to normative expectations. For example, reliance on the digital ID system MitID<sup>3</sup> poses significant challenges for people experiencing homelessness, who frequently lose access to essential devices

such as phones or chargers (Nygaard-Christensen & Gamsgaard, 2023). At the same time, the emotional and administrative burdens that digital interactions place on citizens remain underexplored (Madsen et al., 2022). In CFWS, digitalization increasingly shapes how parents apply for support and engage with public institutions. Standardized digital templates often fail to reflect the complexity of marginalized parents' lived realities. Although this project focuses on CFWS, many participating parents had active cases across various public institutions and sectors, each governed by distinct digital systems and legal frameworks established by the State. The result is a fragmented landscape of drop-down menus, checkboxes, and mandatory platforms, such as e-Boks, AULA<sup>4</sup>, and MitID, that do not align with the life situations or aspirations of these families.

This illustrates that Denmark not only anticipates digital citizenship by default but also mandates it through a standardized technological and legislative framework. While these technologies serve practical functions, they also function as normative arenas of citizenship, assuming fluency in Danish, digital literacy, and the ability to navigate legal frameworks, all of which risk reinforcing marginalization. Numerous parents find it challenging to comprehend the written materials related to their cases or fully understand the legal implications that are communicated to them digitally. Dependence on social networks or civil society actors for support is often neither practical nor adequate, especially when resources are limited. The absence of public guidance diminishes many parents' capacity to assert or utilize their rights. Research indicates both overt and subtle ways in which limited *digital* and *bureaucratic skills*, exacerbated by social disadvantage, lead to greater marginalization (Hansen et al., 2018; Nirmalarajan & Høybye-Mortensen, 2023; Nirmalarajan & Hansen, 2024). Meanwhile, a document analysis of Danish digitalization strategies and child welfare legislation reveals a tendency to downplay the conflictual and complex relationships between public institutions and citizens, assuming that the use of digital self-solutions should be as easy as booking a dream vacation

(Nirmalarajan & Høybye-Mortensen, 2023).

This assumption may be naive, as citizens, particularly Marginalized parents, often navigate these self-solution systems more out of necessity than desire. Public institutions have increasingly used digitalization to restructure their relationship with citizens, shifting responsibility onto individuals in ways that may obscure or legitimize institutional inequities (Nirmalarajan & Høybye-Mortensen, 2023). Nowhere are these dynamics more significant than in child protection cases that involve the non-voluntary removal of children, one of the most intrusive legal actions permitted under the Danish Child Act and the European Convention on Human Rights. These citizens remain underrepresented in research, despite the critical need to investigate how digital technologies influence their interactions with the welfare state (Høybye-Mortensen & Højlund, 2024). Ultimately, digital infrastructures risk reproducing and legitimizing marginalization through the very systems designed to deliver care (Carbado et al., 2013).

## COMBINING INTERSECTIONALITY, CYBORGS, AND STRING FIGURES

In this article, I combine intersectionality theory with Donna Haraway's (2016) concepts of cyborgs and string figures. I argue that power operates through the mutual shaping of social categories, digital infrastructures, and political narratives.

Intersectionality theory provides a lens for understanding how categories such as race, class, gender, and citizenship connect to shape Marginalization through patterned social processes. These categories are analytically important for identifying social injustice, particularly in relation to claiming rights (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991), and their relative stability over time is crucial for establishing legal and political interventions. For this reason, I consider them particularly revealing of the unequal ways in which they affect parents' power in their relationships with authority.

Intersectionality remains a key framework for examining how overlapping systems of oppression structure individuals' experiences and rights. Studies of intersectionality (e.g., Yuval-Davis, 2011; Villesèche et al., 2018) have analyzed how structural forces manifest in daily interactions with institutions and technologies, extending Crenshaw's (1989, p. 149) original *traffic intersection* analogy to capture the entanglement of macro-level power and micro-level subjectivities. Moreover, my aim here is to emphasize that intersectionality must challenge stable notions of identity, highlighting how social categories continuously shape one another. Intersectionality, as Carbin and Tornhill (2004, p. 112) argue, risks becoming "unusable" when categories are treated as inseparable in theory yet separated in practice. Their critique, echoed by Christensen and Jensen (2012), warns that structural simplifications can obscure lived subjectivities and agency.

To address the tension surrounding whether categories are stable or fluid, I draw on Haraway's concepts of cyborgs and string figures, which I use to unpack the complexities of agency and struggle in relation to digital technologies. In *Staying with the Trouble*, Haraway (2016, p. 104) reconceptualizes cyborgs not as simple hybrids of machine and organism, but as "imploded entities, dense material-semiotic 'things'..." Cyborgs are constituted by partial, asymmetrical connections rather than stable wholes, offering a way to interrogate how digital technologies potentially distribute agency unevenly and reinforce marginalization, for example, through expectations of being digital by default (Schou & Pors, 2019).

In the context of digital governance, the cyborg concept helps us grasp how individuals are positioned in their encounters with institutions and digital infrastructures. The metaphor of string figures illustrates how technologies, bureaucracies, and discourses are knotted together in relational patterns. String figures are not simply about connection; they encompass the rhythm of giving and receiving, of making and unmaking attachments that carry consequences for how threads are picked up or dropped (Haraway,

2016, p. 3). This emphasis on relating makes it possible to trace how practices of sharing and caring are co-produced across human and non-human actors, including in the small, situated, and imperfect ways in which digital exclusion is reconfigured.

In the CFWS context, legal frameworks stabilize categories in order to define rights and responsibilities. Yet, following Crenshaw, oppression risks becoming invisible when categories are not stabilized clearly enough to make injustice legible. Conversely, too much stabilization reifies boundaries and reproduces the very distinctions that sustain marginalization. This paradox is at the heart of Carbin and Tornhill's critique. Crenshaw underscores the need for stability in categories for political and legal recognition, but Haraway (1991, 2016) reminds us that these categories are porous, shifting, and hybrid. Her ontology destabilizes rigidity, drawing attention to the sociotechnical entanglements through which marginalization and agency are enacted. Here, categories are historically configured and can be destabilized through semiotic relations, leaving them provisional and always open to reconfiguration.

Drawing on Haraway, I argue that individuals interface with public technologies as hybrid beings and, when we insist solely on stable categories, there is a high risk that these connections become functionally invisible or marginalized to the system. By combining Crenshaw's and Haraway's concepts, I argue that digitalization in public institutions not only reflects social inequity but also actively sustains and reshapes it through the design and functionality of systems. I consider the ontological tension in this approach as a productive feature rather than a flaw, because it enables me to analyze marginalization both as a condition anchored in structural categories *and* as an unfolding process shaped through hybrid relations. While Crenshaw grounds the analysis in the stability of legal and institutional categories, Haraway helps unpack how these categories are lived, negotiated, and destabilized in practice.

## **METHODS: MAPPING THE EXPERIENCES OF MARGINALIZATION THROUGH ETHNOGRAPHIC FIELDWORK**

The article draws on empirical material and insights from a research project called “*Involving Families in Vulnerable Positions with Digital Technologies*” (2022-2025). The project was carried out using a combination of qualitative methods and ethnographic fieldwork at multiple sites.

## **INVOLVING PERSPECTIVES OF MARGINALIZED PARENTS THROUGH FUTURE WORKSHOPS AND FIELDWORK**

The project began with five ‘future workshops’ involving 22 parents, recruited through two service user organizations that support families with special support needs, a category defined in the Social Service Act (§46). The category of ‘special support needs’ can be understood in both a stable and fluid sense, as discussed above. These workshops aimed to generate empirical material and collaboratively shape the research design. The focus was on how the digitalization of public institutions impacts parents’ everyday lives (Nirmalarajan & Hansen, 2024). Using a sequential research design, I later collected empirical data from four Men’s Centers and four additional service user institutions representing parents, two of which specifically focused on ethnic minorities. These sites were deliberately selected to address the underrepresentation of men and ethnic minority groups in family engagement research (Villumsen & Strandby, 2023).

The data consisted of transcripts, post-its, and photos from the five three-hour workshops, which led to 23 in-depth interviews with 26 participants. Eleven interviews were conducted with parents, while twelve were conducted with social workers, many of whom acted as intermediaries helping marginalized parents assert their rights. All parents gave written consent, while all social workers gave their consent

verbally. The additional data comprised 178 pages of field notes, including first impressions, settings, and key incidents that highlighted what contributed to their creation (Emerson et al., 1995). I kept a logbook, where I detailed how my research, professional (as a social worker), and personal experiences impacted my relationships with the participants and the process of knowledge production (for additional detail, see section “Intersecting Social Positions” and Nirmalarajan, 2023).

## DATA ANALYSIS

I analyzed the empirical data in two stages to explore the experiences of marginalized families facing digital inequities. The first stage followed Braun and Clarke’s (2006) thematic analysis, where I developed a codebook with the three key themes: (1) (non)participation in digital opportunities, (2) digital skills, and (3) bureaucratic navigation skills.

I found examples of these three themes across the data, and based on this, I began the second stage of analysis, where I drew on situational analysis (Clarke et al., 2018). At this stage, I employed analytical mapping to capture the complexity of participants’ experiences. This involved selecting key situations where they expressed feelings of either being marginalized or experiencing agency in digitally mediated public encounters. To explore relational patterns (as outlined in the introduction) and then identify significant human and nonhuman actors, institutions, and discourses in this situation, I used situational analysis to examine the complexities of parents’ experiences. Some parents co-created visual maps of technologies, public institutions, and other key actors during interviews. When maps were not produced as part of the interviews, I constructed them afterwards based on what people had shared. This stage of analysis helped me understand how social categories, as well as historical, cultural, and geographic factors, intersect with digital infrastructures and shape parents’ experiences of marginalization and agency. Lastly, the maps allowed me to make entangled complexities more visible during data production and analysis.

The analysis led me to three central insights. First, marginalization is not a stable category; rather, it is fluid and context-dependent. Second, lives are not lived along a single axis, but through intersecting strands and string figuring of experience: ties of kinship and friendship, categorical labels assigned in different institutional encounters, and everyday negotiations with public institutions. As an example, many parents described how their rights were not adequately supported by public institutions, prompting them to seek assistance from informal sources such as Facebook groups, crisis centers, and non-profit or private organizations. Third, these dynamics also involve my own position as a researcher. The project and the lives I engage with are entangled, and my position(s) in research and life matters.

## VIGNETTES AS ANALYTICAL DISPLAYS: SITUATING EXPERIENCES

To convey these insights, I crafted two vignettes drawing on Miles et al. (2014, pp. 185-187). I wanted the vignettes to illustrate the complex and emotionally charged experiences of marginalized parents with digital infrastructures in public institutions. Unlike standalone quotes, vignettes as data displays can draw on several types of empirical data, including insights from the researcher’s experiences, and illustrate the richness of context — all elements that can be relevant for showing the dynamics of marginalization and agency during everyday interactions. This method effectively maintains contextual depth while displaying how institutional structures (such as public institutions), technologies, and lived experiences interact.

I began by selecting situations in which marginalized parents navigated digital systems and institutional encounters in ways that directly spoke to my research question. I then drew on Haraway’s concept of the cyborg to trace how parents appeared as hybrid beings: dependent on and shaped by digital technologies and institutional structures, while also resisting them. As I read through the empirical data with this focus, I could see how such navigations

were constructed through entanglements of digitalization, marginalization, and agency. Finally, inspired by Haraway's metaphor of string figures, I explored the connections between people, technologies, and institutional practices, paying attention to how these ties distributed marginalization and agency. I then focused my attention on selected fieldnotes and transcriptions from interviews with parents that contained such experiences in rich, nuanced ways, which allowed me to show both shared and particular aspects of this. I then wrote two vignettes based on these fieldnotes and transcripts, supplemented with perspectives from other data sources from future workshops, and carefully crafted the vignettes to protect anonymity while preserving experiential density.

The vignettes are based on my interpretation of recurring patterns across the data. They are designed to illustrate how social categories and digital infrastructures co-construct parents' experiences of marginalization and agency while providing insight into experiences of everyday life by displaying what I see as meaningful moments and connections (e.g., Emerson et al., 1995). Writing about research in this way reflects a "deliberate moral perspective; [it] examines inequities and power struggles to achieve social justice and to empower the oppressed" (Miles et al., 2014, p. 328) and carries with it a hope for partial healing (Haraway, 2016, p. 71). Although each vignette is presented as the story of an individual, they are an amalgam of people I have encountered in the course of my work. The incidents and opinions they recount are typical of those reported to me during my research, but they did not necessarily all occur to a single person. In line with Miles et al.'s (2014) argument, the vignettes should thus be understood not as literal case histories, but as analytic devices that condense and illustrate broader patterns in the material.

## **INTERSECTING SOCIAL POSITIONS: REFLECTIONS ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN RESEARCHER AND RESEARCHED**

While Clarke et al. (2018, p. 128) advocate for including "everything you think might matter," Haraway (2016, p. 12) reminds us that "it matters what ideas we use to think other ideas with." Taken together, these orientations support an analysis of how categories and string figures emerge, both in the production of knowledge and in the empirical material. In this context, I see myself as part of the equation: my experiences as a social worker, service user, and researcher shape what becomes "emphasized, prioritized, or disregarded" (Nirmalarajan, 2023, p. 6). My perspectives are shaped through technological, ideological, and bodily-biological lenses (Haraway, 1992, p. 295), which influence the conversations I enter (Haraway, 1991, pp. 200–201). More metaphorically, it matters what string figures I can recognize and recount, as well as how I respond to the experiences of marginalization that parents shared.

My professional background as a social worker both enabled and complicated my role in the study. At times, it allowed me to advocate for participants' rights. Yet my identity as a social worker also provoked tensions in the future workshops. Parents frequently described alienation from social workers, and my use of the word *citizen* was met with mistrust, arising from their perception of themselves as "second-class" citizens (Nirmalarajan & Hansen, 2024, p. 85). While my professional position afforded certain privileges, parents also positioned me as a minority individual, referring to my skin color. My own experiences of marginalization, through race, ethnicity, and as a service user, shape the string figures I connect with. These enactments are informed by my past, entangled with participants' pasts, and oriented toward our shared present and possible futures.

My relation to citizenship is therefore not only analytical but also political. Having lived without formal citizenship until the age of six, due to my parents' status as refugees from the civil war in Sri Lanka, I approach the concept with a heightened awareness of the relationship between marginalization and agency. These experiences help me recognize forms of marginalization that may remain invisible from other

perspectives (Star & Strauss, 1999; Ahmed, 2012). In sum, my position is not external to the research but entangled with it, shaping how marginalization and agency become visible.

## **DIVERGENT EXPERIENCES OF MARGINALIZATION AND AGENCY**

The vignettes of Aisha and Anders illustrate two distinct yet widely resonant experiences of marginalization, showcasing two different ways of enacting agency. Aisha's story reflects the struggles of living with a refugee background, economic precarity, and experiences of an opaque bureaucracy. Her mental health issues are not recognized, and even the cost of a bus ticket becomes a meaningful stressor. Yet her agency is not absent: it is relational, quiet, and persistent. She seeks community-based support through District Mothers<sup>5</sup> and WhatsApp groups, and she continues to care for her daughter despite limited resources and recognition. Anders, by contrast, experiences marginalization through gendered expectations about emotions, experiences of alienation, and digital misrecognition. His prior financial stability masks his current vulnerability, and his mental health struggles are misread as disengagement. Still, Anders enacts agency through peer networks, anonymous online platforms, and moments of direct resistance, such as calling the Men's Center supervisor to assert his rights. Both parents struggle to understand letters from the State, revealing how bureaucratic systems fail to accommodate diverse life situations. Their stories show that while marginalization is widely experienced, agency is also widely exercised, often in ways invisible to the institutions meant to support them.

### **AISHA: INVISIBLE MOTHERS IN A DIGITAL STATE: BUREAUCRATIC BURDENS AND THE POLITICS OF ACCESS**

I began by searching for a location where participants would feel safe and comfortable during interviews. I worked with a service user organization and

a volunteer to arrange several carpools to the site where I planned to conduct the future workshops. It was just before Christmas, cold and snowy, when a volunteer generously offered his apartment near the metro for our meetings. He also helped prepare coffee, snacks, and sandwiches, creating a welcoming atmosphere.

That's where I met Aisha for the first time, following a brief phone call. She arrived about half an hour late, visibly stressed, and immediately apologized. At the time, I was in the early stages of my Ph.D., still learning to navigate the many responsibilities of qualitative research. I felt torn between adhering to formal academic guidelines and drawing on my prior experience as a social worker. I had worked with service users like Aisha before, refugees with families, who often needed help with transportation and reassurance in unfamiliar settings.

Feeling slightly unsure about how much of myself to share, I told Aisha how I, too, found Copenhagen's public transport confusing. Growing up in Jutland, where there was only one bus route, I wasn't used to the complexity of a capital city. I recalled my first time in Aarhus, when I bought a bus ticket but accidentally boarded in the wrong direction. I ended up at the last stop late at night with an expired ticket, not realizing that buses could travel in both directions. Aisha laughed and shared her struggles with public transport, explaining how her irregular work hours often clashed with transit schedules.

When I mentioned that I often conducted interviews in the evening to accommodate participants' availability, she immediately responded: she wished municipal meetings were more flexible. Reading Danish was difficult for her, and she often needed help. "I'm not the only one," she added, emphasizing that many others she knew faced similar challenges. Attending these meetings, she explained, was a balancing act between work, finances, and anxiety.

During the interview, Aisha described her frustration upon receiving her first letter in e-Boks. "I really did not understand a word of it," she said. I shared a

quote from another parent, whose first language was Danish, who had also struggled:

“Most of the time, we find that things are written in a language we simply can’t understand. Whether it’s three pages or 300 pages doesn’t really matter because we can’t see the relevance of it. If it’s so important to document, maybe they could consider writing more to us and not only about us.”

Aisha looked relieved. We sat in silence for a moment. I then showed her photos from Politiken’s series on the “digital underclass,” which prompted her to open up about her own negative experiences with what she called “the public system.”

She recalled baking a cake for her downstairs neighbor, hoping to ask for help translating a letter. But the neighbor also struggled to understand it. The letter informed Aisha that her daughter was being placed in an institution. Sharing such personal information with someone she barely knew made her feel exposed and uncomfortable. As she spoke, Aisha became emotional, recalling past traumas and losses. We slowed the conversation.

Her only family in Denmark was her daughter. She acknowledged that her psychological and social challenges had contributed to the CFWS’s decision. While she understood how these issues affected her ability to prioritize her daughter’s needs and best interests, she also expressed deep shame and guilt. Financial stress and social isolation weighed heavily on her. The area she lived in offered few opportunities to connect with others, so she joined a service user group called “District Moms,” located an hour away. She hoped to learn how to use the library to access e-Boks. With help from another member, she visited the library, only to find the IT café closed during her off-hours. Frustrated by the wasted trip and cost, she realized the library’s schedule would never align with hers.

As she explained this, Aisha recognized that her anxiety around e-Boks was not just about technology; it was connected with her social challenges. The

chronic nature of this anxiety had become a response to persistent instability.

Aisha felt isolated and burdened by traumas she couldn’t escape. CFWS had assessed her as showing significant PTSD symptoms from the civil war she had fled. But she was reluctant to revisit the past. “You know, the body just shuts down,” she said. “I don’t even react to gunfire anymore.” When she did want to talk, she turned to a WhatsApp group in her native language, where others shared similar stories.

She also expressed anger and frustration toward CFWS. While they focused on her perceived inability to care for her child, she felt no one acknowledged her past struggles or showed compassion. This lack of recognition made her hesitant to engage in collaboration.

Her self-criticism deepened. She said she was doing her best to meet her family’s basic needs, which, for her, took precedence over emotions. “It’s almost Christmas,” she said. “There’s no one asking how I’m doing – or if someone could help me, for instance, with helping my daughter.”

I referred her to someone who could inform her of her legal rights, including her entitlement to a support person.

## **ANDERS: STATE SLAVES AND SECOND-CLASS CITIZENS: DIGITAL EXCLUSION AND THE GENDERED POLITICS OF WELFARE**

I met Anders during my fieldwork at the Men’s Center. The social workers had arranged a quiet meeting room and set out coffee to create a welcoming space. Before agreeing to participate, Anders disclosed that he had ADHD and preferred not to talk about his children. To ease into the conversation, we began with a walk outside. When I asked if he smoked, and assured him it was fine if he did, he looked surprised. “That kind of flexibility is rare,” he said. “It helps.”

As we returned to the Men's center, Anders asked about my background, where I was from, and whether I had children. I told him I had a wife and two kids. Then he asked, "Do you ever wonder what life would be like without them?" I was caught off guard. Before I could respond, he added, "That's my situation. I have two children." He hesitated, then asked if I was sure I wanted to hear his story. He warned me that he might not like social workers. I reminded him that participation was voluntary and explained that the project aimed to explore men's perspectives on family engagement, voices often missing in research. He nodded but seemed puzzled. "I thought you were interested in digitalization."

I explained that I saw digitalization and the welfare state as deeply connected. He asked if I was an expert on platforms like AULA. I admitted I wasn't, but said that I used it. That moment revealed the gap between our experiences. Anders was frustrated that his ability to use digital tools like MitID, AULA, and e-Boks (self-service systems) was constantly questioned and implicitly criticized. His lack of digital engagement was often interpreted as a lack of engagement in his children's lives.

He shared that he had once earned a substantial income and had trusted his wife with access to his MitID and bank accounts. She managed their finances and digital platforms while he focused on work. After their breakup, she emptied the accounts. Only later did Anders realize he had been a victim of violence – something he said no one had ever explained to him. "For me, it was just everyday life," he said. At the same time, he felt that social workers showed compassion for his situation and had substantial expertise in the vulnerabilities connected to being a victim of violence. Furthermore, a psychologist spoke with him every week about his trauma. He felt both grateful and ashamed: grateful for the help, knowing it was only temporary, but ashamed of his lack of insight and digital skills.

Anders described his isolation. He didn't talk much with the other men at the Men's Center. None of his

friends knew he had moved out. He feared judgment. Online, he was active in Facebook groups like "Fathers," where members supported each other with parenting advice and questions about children's healthy development. More recently, he had joined "Coercion and Power," where people shared experiences of feeling oppressed by public institutions. He often posted letters from CFWS to get advice. Sometimes it helped. Sometimes it made things worse, increasing mistrust of public institutions. He did not fear judgment online, as he always posted anonymously when showing things like letters from CFWS. It helped him assert his rights, as the group provided information about rights and sometimes even offered legal assistance.

He felt hopeless about the future. He and his wife were living in separate crisis centers. They couldn't communicate. Their children might be placed in out-of-home care. He was certain the social workers would favor his wife; she was better at presenting herself. His anger and sadness made it difficult for him to speak clearly. He worried that his past focus on work would be seen as neglect. Like others in the study, he called it "e-Boks anxiety", the dread of opening messages that only brought bad news.

Despite being confident in his ability to earn money, Anders felt powerless navigating digital self-service systems like e-Boks and MitID. When he failed to respond to legal proceedings regarding visitation rights, the family court interpreted his silence as a lack of interest. He found out on a Friday afternoon. "They think I don't want to see my kids," he said. "But I didn't even understand the process." He relied on Facebook groups or called the Men's Center supervisor directly. The supervisor ensured that a social worker could assist him with the letter.

Anders felt alienated and without hope, and asked me critically, "Are you also helping to educate State slaves? People who can't, or won't, help citizens with anything?" He described himself as a "second-class citizen" because of his social struggles. He noted that children were rarely seen at the Men's Center:

“Is this even a place for them?” he asked, questioning whether it would be a suitable environment for them. On a sidenote, he added that he was dyslexic.

## DISCUSSION

A critical reading of the two vignettes reveals how marginalization and agency are dynamically reconfigured at both macro and micro levels. The vignettes illustrate not only the structural constraints faced by marginalized parents but also their capacity to resist, adapt, and reimagine roles as both parents and citizens. These moments of ambiguity and negotiation highlight that, even within systems that often reinforce marginalization, parents retain agency and capabilities.

Crenshaw’s concept of intersectionality is crucial for understanding the multiple axes of identities, such as race, gender, class, and disability. It allows us to explore how assumptions of ‘digital by default’ and digital technologies can distribute agency unevenly and reinforce marginalization. Digital infrastructures are not designed for those whose life courses differ markedly from conventional norms of family life. The technologies mentioned in the vignettes are built upon assumptions that users are fluent in Danish, possess digital and bureaucratic skills, and follow a conventional family structure. This not only fails to reflect lived realities but also actively erases the situated struggles (e.g., traumas or stigmatization) of those occupying precarious social positions. Thus, systems like MitID, e-Boks, and AULA function not only as administrative self-service solutions, but also as mechanisms of social classification, leading already marginalized parents to perceive themselves as “second-class citizens.” Lastly, intersectionality provides a framework for understanding how the design of digital technologies in practice often diverges from the principles of inclusion by design. When parents cannot or do not engage with digital technologies, they become vulnerable to moral judgment regarding their parenting, thereby reinforcing gendered assumptions about care and responsibility and challenging the notion of citizenship through the notion

of being digital by default. When these barriers arise and are functionally invisible, they can manifest as chronic ‘e-Boks anxiety,’ closely tied to human rights, particularly the right to family life, and intersecting with various minority statuses, increasing the risk of unequal access to those rights.

Haraway’s concept of the cyborg offers another layer to the theoretical framework for understanding how marginalization and agency emerge and are mitigated through digital infrastructure. Moreover, it allows us to explore how social media platforms can occasionally function as a protective measure when public institutions generate marginalization without acknowledging it. Through such engagements with other parents, parents can construct alternative networks of support that can be understood as a form of cyborg agency.

Thus, parents who experience marginalization can be seen as cyborgs, not entirely by choice, but by necessity. To gain voice and access support, cyborg engagement becomes a strategic response, trying to navigate the politics of belonging. Digital participation, even when undertaken under pressure, offers opportunities for peer connection, empowerment, and visibility. While their cyborg identities are shaped by marginalization, they also provide a platform for adaptation and resistance, enabling people to redefine what it means to be a parent and a citizen capable of asserting rights in a digitally mediated society. Such acts of redefining reflect that the struggles to belong somewhere are shaped by intersectional inquiries that are also mediated through digital infrastructures. Even in times of struggle, their negotiations serve as examples of seeking alternative modes of agency.

The metaphor of string figures serves to trace the co-produced, situated practices that unfold across human and non-human actors. This occurs in practices with particularly digital infrastructures, public institutions, and informal networks, where marginalized parents attempt to access rights and recognition. The stories of Aisha and Anders illustrate how entanglements occur as parents’ lives interconnect

with digital infrastructures, public institutions, and social networks, while they attempt to access rights and recognition. Through informal networks, they mitigate the risks of marginalization while simultaneously coping with personal challenges such as trauma and disability. Their experiences resemble the game of *Cat's Cradle* (Haraway, 2016, p. 35), where meaning is made not in isolation, but through relational and iterative struggles. My conversations with parents were saturated with this interplay, where voices were presented through collective experiences carrying hope for partial healing through justice and empowerment.

### **STRING FIGURING MARGINALIZATION AND AGENCY: NAVIGATING DIGITAL CITIZENSHIP AND INSTITUTIONAL INVISIBILITY.**

In this last section, I outline four main points arising from my work.

First, the discussion shows that marginalization tends to occur more frequently than agency when citizens fail to meet expectations of being digital by default (Schou & Pors, 2019). These expectations can exacerbate existing inequities and risk becoming barriers to accessing help and safeguarding rights. Instead, citizenship becomes contingent on digital and bureaucratic skills (Nirmalarajan & Høybye-Mortensen, 2023), which can be difficult for many minority groups (Hansen et al., 2018; Jørring et al., 2018; Ragnedda, 2020). These intersections shape how parents are seen, or not, by public institutions, and they often require what Star and Strauss (1999) call functionally invisible disembedding work: the emotional, time-consuming, practical, and interpretive labor required to navigate fragmented public systems. Yet this labor is often unrecognized, as it is simply expected that all citizens can and will manage these systems. What remains obscure is that people have very different starting points and resources for doing so, while the power to define what counts as legitimate participation or competence lies elsewhere. As Ahmed (2012, p. 26) describes, navigating

these systems often feels like “banging your head against a brick wall,” where the emotional and symbolic labor of being included remains invisible.

Second, while much of the literature on digital citizenship highlights its marginalization dimensions (e.g., Ragnedda, 2020; Madsen et al., 2022), the metaphor of the cyborg offers a more nuanced perspective on how marginalization can be fluid, also enabling agency. Digital infrastructures beyond formal public systems, such as Facebook and WhatsApp groups, function as counter-sites or counter-institutions where implicit or invisible barriers are translated, made visible, and shared. They also allow for the possibility of not declaring certain categories that parents are entangled in, due to the default settings of anonymity (e.g., not declaring gender, ethnicity, or race). These digital infrastructures, while operating outside formal public institutions, are also co-constitutive, as they become spaces where diversity matters, enabling alternative forms of recognition and support. Civil society organizations, such as District Mothers and the Men's Center, play a crucial role in this process. In Haraway's (2016, pp. 166–167) framing, cyborgs are not merely hybrids of human and machine, but dense, materially grounded, and semiotically rich entities that emerge through historically situated entanglements, constantly reconfiguring the relationships between humans and technology.

These entanglements involve human beings becoming entwined with the practices and artifacts of technoscience. Through their display of partial connections, the vignettes do not illustrate a unified or stable social world; instead, they show stratified, webbed, and non-optional worlds that appear and disappear in and out of people's lives. This reflects how design choices in the digital and legislative infrastructure of the Danish welfare state can marginalize certain voices. In the vignettes, the string figures emerge in specific, relational moments and carry real consequences for them. The concept of cyborgs helps capture how marginalized parents may fall through the cracks in the system, while also engaging in tentacular practices of resistance and

care. Although digitalization can be a barrier to the exercise of rights, it simultaneously offers avenues for connection and enables forms of agency that might otherwise be inaccessible. As Haraway (2021, p. 62) notes, citizenship is increasingly exercised electronically. Belonging, meanwhile, is spatial, temporal, and context-dependent, emerging when parents' collective string figuring enables them to claim recognition within a political community that upholds their rights (Yuval-Davis, 2011, p. 69).

Third, string figures offer opportunities to explore how tentacular thinking creates attachments and detachments in the stories of marginalized parents, how they form cuts and knots, and how they are both open and knotted in some ways and not in others. Given the string figures we relate to, careful consideration is necessary regarding how we, as researchers, declare our positionality, as this can lead to discrimination. According to Haraway (2016, p. 114), worlding is the act of opening the narrative of entangled life to the insistent multiplicity of being and the inescapable challenges it brings forth. I believe that my past experiences also provide opportunities for partial reparations and healing, integrating different types of knowledge through utopia, which can be utilized in collaboration with future workshops (see Nirmalarajan & Hansen, 2024). I also believe that these tensions between researcher and researched constitute an engagement with institutions and

an attempt to transform them (Ahmed, 2012, p. 173). Offering advice about rights when conducting research is also a way to provide marginalized parents with a ladder that helps them overcome the brick walls of public institutions. In this way, diversity work is both a practice and a process of collaborative string figuring. It is a healing way of not just thinking of categories as phenomena that hinder movement, but also as something that can be reworked and transformed.

Finally, echoing Ahmed (2012, p. 187), this work has led me to reflect on solidity and partiality, about how string figures, though they appear fleeting and mutable, can nonetheless maintain their shape. This insight has shaped not only the analysis but also my sense of how movement and stability coexist in the worlds we study and help bring into being. And yet, if we are to get anywhere, we might first need to get in the way, to become the "blockage points" by naming them, to resist the smooth flow of interpretation to "stay with the trouble", as Haraway (2016) suggests. Sometimes, it is precisely in the interruption of the expected that new forms of understanding begin to take shape. In doing so, this article contributes to scholarship on how institutions (re)produce injustice (e.g., Christensen & Jensen, 2012; Villesèche et al., 2018) and offers new ways to trace discrimination, agency, and resistance in contemporary welfare governance.

## NOTES

[1] A Future Workshop is a participatory method developed by Jungk and Müllert (1984) to facilitate collaborative problem-solving and the envisioning of alternative futures. For details on how this research method was deployed in this project, see Nirmalarajan & Hansen (2024).

[2] I recruited participants according to the target group defined in §46 of the Danish Social Services Act. This political and legal definition rests on a relatively stable understanding of who is considered "vulnerable children and families." I combine Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality, which highlights stable and institutionally anchored axes of inequality, with Haraway's more fluid ontology, where categories are understood as relational, changing, and situated. This combined perspective enables me to capture both the institutional stability and the practical fluidity through which marginalization is experienced and negotiated in

digitally mediated encounters between citizens and the State. Inspired by Crenshaw (1991, p. 1244), I use *Marginalization* (capitalized) to refer to the institutional and legal definition in §46 of the Danish Social Services Act, whereas marginalization (lowercase) refers to the situated, relational, and lived processes of parents.

[3] The Danish National eID is Denmark's digital ID that residents will use to access their public self-service solutions

[4] A Danish platform to communicate between public institutions and parents, e.g. day care or school

[5] District Moms (Danish: "Bydelsmødrene") were volunteer women, often from minority backgrounds, who supported families and children in local communities and acted as bridges between citizens and public authorities. They received education to prepare them for proactive community engagement and bridge-building roles. The Danish Agency for Digital Government had a long-term national collaboration with the District Moms to reach this target group.

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