

# PERFORMING FUTURES

The 2026WOMEN artist methodology to promote gender justice



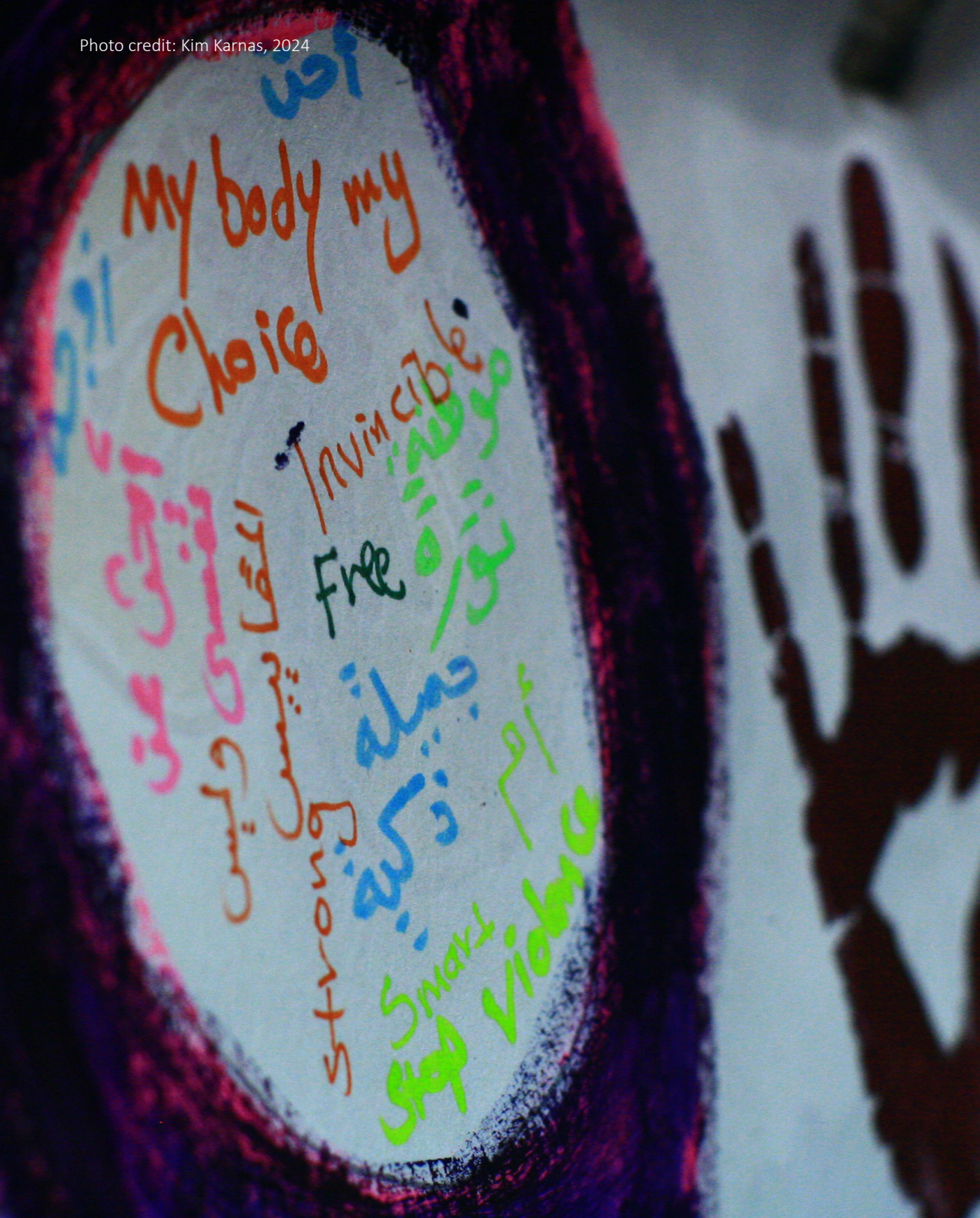
Maria Teresa Braga Bizarria

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I start by thanking [Madam Fortuna](#) vzw for the consistent support over the past four years hosting, co-financing and promoting the activities of 2026WOMEN. On behalf of the collective, we thank the entire team of workers and volunteers who make so many relevant socio-cultural activities possible.

I thank all the participants who accepted the invitation to be part of this collective over the past four years, for the trust in sharing their stories and for listening with care. To be fair and preserve the identities of those who do not want to have their names disclosed, I am not going to list everyone. But you can find some of us – and our vision for 2026WOMEN – at the [‘Portraits’](#) section on our website.

A special thanks to those who make the work of 2026WOMEN possible: social workers, musicians, directors, choreographers, sound and light technicians, video makers, funders. To the many community-based organisations and refugee shelters that gave relevant support and input for our discussions, helping us to advance in our own understanding of different forms of gender-based violence. To the theatres that opened their doors to us – Het Oude Badhuis (2024) and Arenberg Theatre (2026) – allowing 2026WOMEN to showcase our activist work. And to the unstoppable Céline di Maccio, who poured her heart into bringing all these people together, showing that women are more than capable to achieve impressive goals when granted space.

I personally thank Uschi Cypers for their unconditional love and support! Dr Sara C. Motta and Dr Helen Johnson, for expanding art to other departments in academia and showing its relevance for political awareness and promotion of well-being, and for welcoming me in symposiums and conferences. Mirella Moschella for introducing me to the world of activism, which since Newtown Craftivism Collective, became a part of my identity.



## PREFACE

**2026WOMEN** was born from a widespread and disheartening observation: discrimination exists everywhere and, it seems, has done so since time immemorial, following a pyramidal model. Our world and the history that has shaped our continents are filled with countless self-proclaimed groups that have imposed their superiority on others.

This discriminatory principle finds a foundational origin in the patriarchy, which divides humanity into two categories—men and women—and establishes a hierarchy: that of male domination. As Gisèle Halimi pointed out: “*There is someone more exploited than the proletariat: his wife*”.

This multiform patriarchy is a system built on domination as its sole creed, violence—military, political, economic, religious, social—as its only tool, and the fear of being dominated as its only justification for the violence inflicted on those it dominates. In response to this reality, **2026WOMEN** aims to be an experimental space, supported by two pillars.

The first pillar is social: we practice an intersectional feminism that welcomes all people oppressed because of their female gender or because they are perceived as such (trans women, queer, non-binary individuals). Our community is built beyond differences—age, religion, origins, skin color, social class, (dis)ability etc. What unites us is that we are all potential victims of rape, sexual harassment, feminicide, or discrimination and oppression because we are women or perceived as such.

We have already come a long way in four years. Our dream is gradually taking shape: a fairer and happier society, where profit gives way to balance, competition to complementarity, and resignation to creativity. Our community is grounded in shared values: kindness, empathy, mutual respect, patience, open-mindedness, creativity, and love. It brings together people who listen, exchange, participate, and evolve.



Photo credit: Anna Kestens, 2026

The second pillar is artistic practice: writing, music, singing, photography, visual arts, textile work, dance, and theater. The project allows each person to find the artistic medium that suits them best, while also encouraging them to try everything if they wish. As a unifying societal practice, art allows each individual to integrate their personal creativity into a collective work, calling on the imagination of both those who create and those who receive it.

Artistic practice becomes the common language of extremely diverse women. It is a means of expression, connection, joy, transmission, and exchange. Singing, a central element of the artistic journey, is practiced regularly throughout the year, in a renewed joy and communion, in the languages of each participant—Arabic, French, Urdu, Slovak, Dutch, English, Tamazight, Portuguese, Spanish, and more. The songs are all original works written, composed, arranged, interpreted, played, and sung by women.

The process of collective creation also allows each person to develop a sense of community (in this case, the making of annual shows), to reconnect with the idea of a group and a shared goal. It emancipates in the noblest sense of the word—it fosters self-affirmation and provides a serener strength for integration into a group. Beyond their time and participation in bi-monthly sessions and the creation of performances, the women can contribute their talents and skills to the project, thus making it their own in another way.

In 2024, Lies Pelsmakers led a small group focused on creating our website and developing our communication. Maria Teresa volunteered to manage the content of our website for nearly two years. Thanks to her, we have pages where our exchanges are shared: [2026WOMEN Activities](#). When I noticed the quality of her transcriptions and analyses, I asked her to write a book about the 2026WOMEN project. I could not have dreamed of a more precise and nuanced analysis than what she has produced here.

This book, which you are about to discover, accurately describes what we

stand for: **love and care**, which must be at the heart of our practice if we are to escape the oppressive patriarchal system and build an inclusive, emancipatory matriarchy. It is also a transformative read, which has allowed me—a white, European, cisgender, and privileged woman—to more clearly recognise how my mind has been shaped by a centuries-old dominant system, heir to centuries of colonialism. I am infinitely grateful for Maria Teresa's enthusiastic, critical, constructive, theoretical, militant, and committed presence since 2024. This collective owes much to her: 'Performing Futures' is a sensitive narrative, offering a clear analysis of 2026WOMEN's functioning and purpose, and the implementation of our projects.

As I write these lines, I am not certain whether the necessary funds will be found to sustain our initiative. Yet, I can testify to its societal importance—one only needs to recall the exchanges with the audience after our performances or count the growing number of participants and supporters to our projects. Artistic and cultural participation broadens horizons, gives meaning, brings happiness, expands social networks, and has positive effects on physical and mental health. On a larger scale, it helps shape community life, democracy, and social cohesion. And **2026WOMEN** is a vibrant example of this!

*Céline di Maccio*

*Coordinator of 2026WOMEN*



Photo credit: Anna Kestens, 2026



## PROLOGUE

It was November 2023, and I had been in Belgium for less than a month. Pauline Gaeremynck invited my partner and I to join a concert at Madam Fortuna – a participatory art lab in the heart of Borgerhout, Antwerp. We were not sure of what to expect, but she said that it would be a good place for us to meet some like-minded people in this new chapter of our lives. And that unpretentious evening was the entry for one of the dearest experiences of my time in Europe. A couple of months later, I received the invitation from Céline di Maccio, at that time chairperson of Madam Fortuna, to join 2026WOMEN: an ambitious socio-artistic initiative to promote gender justice that she was coordinating.

When I revisit my motivations for joining this project, they lead back to the desire to bring my knowledge and my artwork into service of something fundamental to me. I do believe in the power of love (hooks, 2000) and radical care (Lorde, 1988), as infallible forces to support humankind in reworking and healing ingrained destructive aspects of ourselves. And healthier people, communities and societies are less prone to enact and tolerate violence. I acknowledge that this is hard work and how daunting it can be to imagine disrupting entrenched unjust systems. However, I seize each opportunity to live otherwise. And the proposal of 2026WOMEN seemed to be one of them!

Therefore, authoring this book is a tangible outcome of how being part of 2026WOMEN has affected and supported me. Although I have long worked as a feminist scholar-practitioner and activist, collaborating in this specific kind of art-based methodology for gender justice was an exciting experience. In a way, it added to my previous work with moon circles and feminist collectives by granting me a greater familiarity with my creative potential, and strengthened confidence to be less apologetical for being who I am.

Singing and staging our creations has had a big role on that. Learning to modulate my voice and to stay in tune has carried beyond the sessions as I have become less fearful and more assertive to position myself within and outside the



Photo credit: Anna Kestens, 2026

collective. This shift was not automatic since there is a lot of work I choose to do. But the engagement of rational, subjective and sensory elements in our creative practice has encouraged me to claim space, express my views and show parts of myself that I do not always display. And this opportunity was very synchronous to the moment I was navigating in my personal life.

By immigrating to Belgium, I saw myself exposed to the bureaucracy of integration and deprived from a paid position to keep developing my research. Job hunting as a highly skilled professional without knowing the local language or having connections felt quite disempowering. From a financially independent person, I suddenly went to an unemployed housewife position. I still had a good life, being respected and supported by my partner in all my endeavours to reinvent myself professionally. But it felt noxious to be pushed to live a domesticated life. Being put in an unwanted position of dependency because there is a systemic structure that devalues a person because of their nationality and gender, to say the least, hurts.

This unique experience also allowed me to feel, from a different standing point, what feminist theory has been claiming for almost a century. Emotional labour and care work are depreciated in patriarchal and capitalist societies, though still crucial for their maintenance. And it is not hard to understand why. The value of care exceeds by far the mere guarantee of survival. Care is a fundamental instrument capable of awakening humans about our interdependent role in the spaces we co-habit with all sorts of creatures and landscapes. And that asks for responsibility, reciprocity, love; traits that dominant systems suppress, since

the blind pursuit of power marginalises love, as bell hooks (2000) reminds us.

For so many months I felt tamed down... Thus, being welcome in the caring and creative circle of 2026WOMEN kept me safe. Along with my house garden, the project offered me a space to recover and thrive after falling victim of a masculinist, exploitative and individualist market logic that has beaten my self-esteem and let my spiritedness bleed. Beyond reliving my voice, developing this collective work also made me reflect on all the layers behind what we call 'performance'. I have very high standards for what I do, pushing myself too hard and sometimes ignoring the needs of my body or even my relationships. Being able to witness what we achieved together, moved by mutual support instead of competition has helped me be more compassionate toward myself. I am letting go of this fallacious belief that excelling in meritocratic societies marked by structural violence is the way for equality.

At the same time, being trusted to write about our journey gave me a sense of purpose. I was seen for the ways I could contribute with the skills I bring. That recognition has been an unvaluable part of 2026WOMEN to me. Thus, this book is a retribution to my cohort, and a contribution to the feminist movement in all its complexities, nuances, contradictions, but undoubtful persistence in fighting for more just societies. Whether patriarchal institutions are still creating mechanisms and narratives to steal our freedom of choice, patronise, violate and kill us, echoing Maya Angelou, 'still we rise'!

And, each day, I craft an opportunity to heal by relearning the medicine from the plants, nourishing my body, singing out loud, dancing away the blockages and pain caused by psychological, emotional and physical abuse that I have been a victim myself, and the intergenerational pain that comes from my ancestry. In these pages, I share how the 2026WOMEN collective was a fundamental part of this process, helping me to deepen my activism through art. With this book, I preserve the memory of the collective's genealogy, systematise our methodology and share the outcomes of our pathway so far.

Photo credit: Anna Kestens, 2026





## INTRODUCTION

### Why perform futures together?

In a world marked by growing rates of gender-based violence due to misogyny and transphobia, performing alternative futures is a radical political necessity. Beyond pure aesthetic or passive acts of hope, the organic methodology developed in the 2026WOMEN collective uses art as a blueprint for social change. Art is the instrument that grounds us and is reflected on: (a) the means we use to connect to ourselves, to each other and to the public; and (b) the beacon that keeps motivating us. In this haven, creativity allows us with a space to feel, to process and, eventually, to undergo restorative processes by turning hurtful experiences into self-acceptance and strength.

Thus, to perform futures for 2026WOMEN is to craft purposeful stages to reclaim societies free of gender-based violence. Our 'stages' are dynamic sites of solidarity, based on feminist principles of horizontality and care. This process is founded in a participatory methodology nurtured by the lived experiences of amateur artists, activists and community members who deal with gender oppression in their own contexts. Guided by professional artists, the participants are supported to find their artistic voices through multiple techniques, so that our artwork can convey genuine messages related to sexist violence but without victimising us.

For that, 2026WOMEN values the embodied knowledge of each person. Although most of us identify as cisgender<sup>1</sup> women, over time the collective came to adopt a chosen mix approach that welcomes queer participants, apart from cisgender men. This choice was inspired by the feminist action *Touts aux Frontières*, as we felt the need to first build safe spaces where we could unpack and problematise the toxicity of patriarchy, a system that favours cis men by subjugating women and gender-minorities. Diving deep into the multiple

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<sup>1</sup> People who identify with the gender assigned at birth.



Photo credit: Anna Kestens, 2024

struggles we face due to sexism and finding empathy and support in our groups, we have been able to build a collective strength and reposition ourselves. In this process, we keep questioning dominant narratives that limit our understanding of what is possible to promote gender justice, and propose actions and policies based on our needs and aspirations.

In our collective, we recognise that transformation is also relational. Despite the scale, in each person that recovers their dignity and joy, we are already a step closer to materialising feminist worlds. Saying that, I do not mean that intersectional justice is possible to be achieved in an individualist approach that ignores how systemic oppression perpetuates exclusion. However, I uphold that healthy, awoken and decolonised bodies-minds are significant agents for change. When we experience an inner transformation, inevitably we transform the way we relate to the beings and places that surround us.

2026WOMEN is grounded in an established feminist tradition that understands the personal as political, since the body, the domestic and the ordinary life are legit spaces for political change. Thus, this book weaves together foundational ideas that guided us throughout these years: the power of imagination, the politics of prefiguration and the restorative potential of participatory art. Although not stated in these intellectualised terms, they were

part of the group ethos from the start.

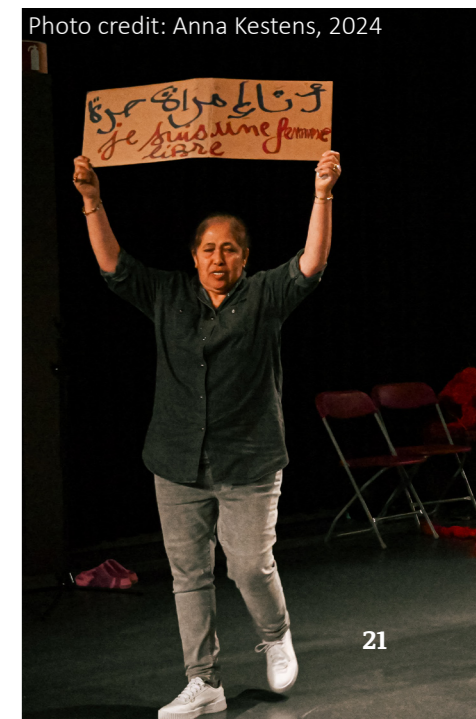
To imagine a world otherwise is to envision futures that break from the patterns of domination that shape so much of our present. Nevertheless, the spark coming from imagination remains underestimated in political efforts. For 2026WOMEN, imagination is a crucial part of our creative journey as it allows us to dream and sense how feminist futures might feel like. It inspires our commitment to craft and nurture spaces and relationships that reflect mutual respect and care.

My understanding of imagination in this case differs from escapism. On the contrary, our co-creative process is embedded in real stories and growing intersectional awareness. It pushes against mainstream narratives and recognises marginalised voices, knowledges and aesthetics that have survived silencing and erasure for generations. By embracing women from different backgrounds, our collective's activism promotes messages that do not generalise women's experiences. In this sense, imagining alternative futures also means questioning linear and progress-driven ideas of history and women's rights themselves.

Along these lines, the politics of prefiguration reminds us that we shall hope for and take action towards collective freedom. Therefore, our methods incorporate the ethos of the futures we want. This means fostering reciprocal relationships by cultivating spaces where divergent perspectives are acknowledged and taken into account.

Far from a utopia, for 2026WOMEN, prefigurative feminist futures acknowledge tensions within collective processes but use them as opportunities for learning and growth. A couple of times we have been confronted with contradictions and were invited to hold trust and self-assessment in a dynamic balance. Through this lens, prefiguration is recursive since the behaviours we nurture today model the worlds we long to live in tomorrow.

Photo credit: Anna Kestens, 2024



In this endeavour, art holds unique power to materialise imagination and prefiguration. It transcends language barriers and creates affective experiences that resonate inside the performers and the audience. Participatory art practices invite collaboration that connects bodies-minds, making space for diverse worldviews and unexpected associations. Whether through theatre, music, dance, or visual arts, we have been able to create tangible experiences of feminist futurity. Our collective artmaking ends up being the process and the outcome of 2026WOMEN's work as it allows us to co-create new patterns of relating.



In place of a manual or an academic piece, in this book I delineate the approach of 2026WOMEN to promote gender justice, as a grassroots socio-artistic collective. For that, I intertwine the underlying principles of our work and the tools we used to enact them, with my personal impressions and those of different participants<sup>2</sup> to illustrate how being part of 2026WOMEN helped us to carry out new forms of relating. It is a patchwork of memories about our history, our

<sup>2</sup>The selection of participants followed ethical guidelines. Since the projects of 2026WOMEN are developed within a socio-cultural organisation, participants are invited to give interviews periodically to undergraduate students that, through internship agreements, develop their final assignment about our work. To avoid overburdening them, I asked those who have not given interviews yet if they would contribute to the book. Some opted to preserve their lived experience to the safety of our circles. Thus, their contribution is not aimed as an extensive account of the impact of 2026WOMEN work in the current and past cohorts – as this was beyond the goal of this book. Participants names were replaced when requested, and all gave consent for recording and use of the material in this publication.



methods, our accomplishments and our limitations. In addition to a record of the collective's journey, this book is also a call to join forces in this movement whether you are already an activist or someone curious about practical ways participatory art can spark social change.

On this note, even though the backbone of our work is promoting women's rights, our activism extends to a broader sense of justice. As an immigrant, gender-fluid and critical geographer, I do not overlook the multiple layers of systemic exclusion and oppression that affect bodies who do not fit the 'norm'. I take the stance that we cannot eradicate gender-based violence without also fighting racism, transphobia, ableism, ageism, fatphobia, colonialism, capitalism, environmental exploitation, and all other systems of discrimination. Thus, in this embodied process of performing futures, we invite those who want to question and adapt these methods to connect and exchange, so we can grow together in the direction of egalitarian communities.

# PART I THE ROOTS





## ALL VOICES UNITE

### Why, where and how we gathered

2026WOMEN started in June 2022 from the meeting of a few women who joined a singing group at Madam Fortuna (Antwerp, Belgium). The choir conductor and project coordinator, Céline di Maccio, aimed for plurality, aggregating women from different lands and backgrounds. Through this process, our collective has embodied voices often omitted from mainstream narratives, 'one woman at a time', in her words. Over time, the women's choir came to be a safe space to share stories about encounters with patriarchal abuse.

Without a preconceived script, the collective emerged in response to a shared sense that the voices of women are dismissed as much as cases of gender-based violence are overlooked and underreported. For so many years they have been that inconvenient truth that we were not allowed to talk about, or felt ashamed to do, risking domestic and public reprimand. The spontaneous dynamic that started on the stage at Madam Fortuna was fertile ground as it encouraged us to open up and also engage with references from the feminist movement. The more comfortable we felt in this safe space, the bigger our courage grew to use our artistic expression to fight for our rights.

In 2023, Céline became aware of the International Tribunal on Crimes Against Women organised in Brussels in 1976 by Diana E. H. Russell and Nicole Van de Ven. In this independent people's tribunal, the first one to address gender issues, women from different nationalities convened to give public testimony about the abuses and violence they

Photo credit: Anna Kestens, 2026



endured. Many women testified about rape, femicide<sup>3</sup>, medical abuse and domestic violence at the Palace of Congress. Sadly, the exhibition about the 1976 Tribunal organised by Milène Le Goff planned for March 2023 was vandalised, resulting in its cancellation.

From that moment, we drew inspiration from the bravery of those thousands who came before us to continue their legacy. Not to replicate what was done in 1976, but to draw attention to the layers of intersectional violence that continue to affect women nowadays and envision alternatives to overcome them. The belief that the victims' personal statements can be political and judicial evidence was radical then and remains radical now. But differently from most historic people's tribunals, this time, art was the translator of our testimonies. And that is how the 2026WOMEN Tribunal (Part III) – the inaugural three-year project of the 2026WOMEN collective in partnership with 45 organisations –



Photo credit: Kim Karnas, 2024

<sup>3</sup>Femicide is a term coined in 1976 by Diana E. H. Russell which specified the murder of women because of their gender. Since then, the term has become part of feminist lex-is worldwide. More recently, due to the high rates of murders of women in Abya Yala (Latin America), Marylène Lapalus and Mariana Rojas Mora referred to these crimes as 'feminicide'. Although used as interchangeable terms, they have different definitions. Feminicide highlights crimes committed based on misogynistic motivations, affecting also feminised people (those forced into the category of 'woman', despite having different gender identities). Feminicide also brings attention to the high level of impunity for these cases, which sign that the lack of institutional response can suggest the complicity of the state for the crime. The term has also been used for when the state itself is the perpetrator of the violence, in cases of population control, for example (see more on "What can we do to stop feminicide!?: a toolkit for taking action against powerlessness and for life" organised by [D-A-CH the Network Against Feminicide in German-Speaking Countries](#)).

began to take on character.

The regular meetings in Antwerp led to a performance try-out in 2023 directed by Alix Konadu assisted by Katja Pire, while Céline ensured the musical direction. The liberating feeling of releasing accumulated silences added an extra layer of motivation in the group to call the 2026WOMEN Tribunal. Through Madam Fortuna's and her personal network, Céline connected with socio-artistic organisations across borders. Her focus was to partner with organisations working with people navigating similar tides of gender-based violence, erasure and structural neglect. Over the years, our activist journey unfolded across four port cities: Antwerp, Marseille, Rotterdam and Barcelona. With their own context and histories, what linked these cities is their role as hubs of international trade, therefore gateways of migration and cultural diversity.



Photo credit: 2026WOMEN Collective, 2025

*"Back in May 2025, I had less than a year in Belgium and it was very tough for me. So, a woman from my country who I met in Antwerp told me about Madam Fortuna and 2026WOMEN, but I couldn't understand clearly how it would be. It was a hard time for me. I was craving creating or saying something. Sometimes I didn't know what I wanted to say, but I had that strong desire to create. She told me: 'There you can create with women, for women'. It sounded nice. I called Céline the next day, I think. I was very excited". (Wiam, 28/04/2026)*



Photo credit: 2026WOMEN Collective, 2024

Not an exception, gender-based violence in homes, streets, shelters and institutions happen daily in these cities. Added to it, racism, xenophobia, classism, transphobia, fatphobia, ageism and ableism collide in the ways violence is experienced and responded to. Shaped by colonialist pasts and neoliberal presents, borders are very tangible here and there. Far from abstraction, the (lack of) intersectional awareness is an embodied reality, as patriarchal violence starts wearing the suit of bureaucracy and unfolds as oppression in name of ‘tradition’ or white liberalism, and even beauty standards, for example. But, still, resistance manifests in everyday individual and collective choices.

*“After my divorce, I didn’t receive all the rights I was entitled to because I was a woman and, on top of that, I wore a headscarf. The medical certificate documenting the physical aggression issued by the doctor was not recognised because he did not write my husband’s name on it. Usually, my husband would verbally abuse me, except on that day when, in response to a provocation, he lost his temper and slapped me”. (Joana, 02/05/2026)*

2026WOMEN, as other collectives and projects led by civil society that resist in the margins of the system, showed that these cities held possibility. Port cities, like metropolises, also bring opportunities for cultural awareness and reinvention. The work we developed together taught me/us that women’s struggle can take many forms. And being open to understand a person’s positionality and how it influences their (lack of) agency and decision power can broaden our capacity to be more empathetic towards the others, instead of Othering them.

Photo credit: Anna Kestens, 2024



And this exercise brings the invitation to also grow self-compassion. In face of an individualist logic that isolates and pushes us to deal with our burdens in the private sphere, 2026WOMEN was a safe space to share the load. As women from diverse backgrounds voiced their struggles and traumas over the months, each story helped us to confront our assumptions and build solidarity

ties. Although not being (and not aspiring to become) a therapeutical<sup>4</sup> site, the upholding atmosphere of our meetings helped us to co-create community and pathways to healing.

*“Coming from Turkey, my initial thought was that Belgium would be better, maybe safer and with less gender issues. But in the first year, I got into a big depression because I realised that it’s not that different. There are still horrible issues here that I had to go through. And when I heard about 2026WOMEN I got really happy. When my friend said it was a full women group and it was about gender violence and solidarity with women, I was like, ‘Oh yes, this is exactly what I want, deep inside’. The first time I attended, Céline opened the door and she was already very warm, she hugged me and I became emotional because I realised, ‘Wow, it’s been a while that I know someone this short of a time who has hugged me and showed me love’. Then I realised that the entire group was affectionate like that, which is really cool”. (Selin, 21/04/2026)*

Feminist activism was the thread that brought and held us together in circles where each of us had a place. By singing, writing, dancing, painting, crafting, we gave shape to feelings and memories that were longing to be released. But as any form of human assemblage, circles are not safe spaces by default. In our collective, the feeling of safety is experienced differently by each participant, but there is a conscious effort to make the space welcoming and respectful through consistency and care. And to let our artistic (and political) voices out, we had to build rapport within the group at our own pace.

<sup>4</sup>We are aware that dealing with hurtful and traumatic experiences in collective groups risks retraumatising the victims. However, the settings of our meetings were focused on offering the space for participants to outlet their emotions using arts to the extent that they felt comfortable to. There was no pressure for people to disclose personal stories. Whenever it happened, it came from the wiliness of the person to share, and the group would hold space. We would neither scrutinise forms and episodes of gender-based violence. In occasions when we had discussions about more sensitive topics, these meetings were usually facilitated by social workers who have training and expertise in presenting the issue. To the best of our knowledge, no former or current participant has gone through post-traumatic distress because of what has been addressed in the group meetings.



Photo credit: Anna Kestens, 2024

*“I remember, in my first session, we had to create some kind of dance. In the session after, we immediately did a workshop on body percussion. And I have no background in arts, so it’s not necessarily a domain where I feel comfortable. But when I saw other people who are also not professionals at all, just doing it for their own pleasure and as a hobby, and that there are all types of people with all levels or links to art who have the courage to express themselves in front of a group, I instantly felt more comfortable. Yeah, and it also just gave me courage to express myself, or to do something that I would normally not do in another context”. (Natalia, 03/04/2026)*

Within this environment of encouragement and freedom, we also had to confront how power operates even in a space that aims to dismantle it. The caring and horizontal approach did not prevent some biased opinions and topics from a liberal white feminist agenda to outstand from time to time, as they were shared by the dominant voices. I have heard racist and sexist remarks a few times, which reminded me that blind spots exist even among groups that are resisting oppression. In these moments, questioning and being open to listen was key in supporting the groups’ processual (un)learning of ingrained assumptions and prejudices. These interactions, handled with respect, brought awareness and invited reflections.

*“Our circle has challenged me to speak up in occasions when I feared to feel exposed or get defensive reactions. A fear that came from many moments over my life when my ideas were suppressed, twisted or discredited. But despite it feeling frustrating to witness the reproduction of biases that, even if not intended, continue to reproduce the binary ‘us-them’ in its multiple variations, our circle felt safe enough for me to question it. The more time we spent together, the more confident I felt to share my perspectives, because I care; and I know that our collective cares”.\**

Underpinning this process, creative practices provided us with time and mental-emotional space to process the effect of our conversations and the feelings that emerged from them. Besides, since we committed to co-creation, the guidance from the workshop facilitators were also a valuable reference for us to exercise equality within the circle. Not standing above the group, they respected the skills, interest and physical capacity of different participants while prompting us to share our inputs. I found that navigating divergence with respect and empathy brought us closer. Our authenticity and personalities began to flow into our creations over time, adding depth and truthfulness to our collective work.



Photo credit: 2026WOMEN Collective, 2025

Aligned with the search for common ground in our conversations and the importance of artistic expression to support our individual processes, mutual care is a remarkable element in our dynamics. From checking-in in our bi-weekly meetings to showing up for one another outside that space, we are gradually building a community. Care is tangible in the apple cakes Céline bakes every time for our coffee break, parallel translations when someone can not follow, holding space when stories are being shared and shaking them off by

\*All quotes in this format are by the author.

singing together. In this process we created a bond and an often-called feeling of ‘sisterhood’, something also perceptible to the audience.

*“In preparation for the performance in 2026, I really experienced a very strong feeling of connection with many women that I didn’t know very much in depth or for a long time, from moments of sharing our experiences, but also of caring for each other, which is very strange for me. Because, usually, I need so much time to open up to people and even to let them be kind towards me. So, that was very eye-opening for me, very impactful”. (Natalia, 03/04/2026)*

These moments of closeness, of daring and listening, nurture our art and group cohesion, tracing the contours of our collective across different countries. Since in a circle no one is above and no one is behind, our collective thrives as a space of resistance and solidarity against patriarchy and against invisibilisation, rooted in the certainty that our claims deserve to be seen and acted upon. This way, we are already modelling a kind of future that we envision and perform.

In sum, the format that preceded the development of our methodology is grounded in a few practical elements: (a) creating safe and welcoming spaces for diverse participants with grounding exercises (stretching, breathing, or a circle of check-ins and check-outs); (b) focusing on art as a vehicle for personal expression, restorative processes and political resistance; (c) bringing in marginalised voices and practicing participatory decision-making to address power dynamics; and (d) balancing a structured agenda with space for organic creativity and partnership opportunities. From this ground, we were able to develop and execute projects to promote gender justice within a framework that I explain and illustrate in the following section.

## PART II THE METHODOLOGY



*“I feel that over my life I’ve created a very strong barrier in relation to what I feel, and I sometimes perceive myself as a wall that has difficulty sharing, even thinking that my experiences might be less important or less comparable to the pain of others. In that process, I realised that I can create deep and selfless connections, and that the right people listen to me when I feel comfortable sharing. In my creative process, I also strengthened my vision of collaboration and the importance of first understanding my physical and emotional limits, especially when necessary”. (Lady, 24/04/2026)*



Photo credit: Emmy Purece, 2026

For the second half of the meetings, we adopted grounding exercises like breathwork or body scans after the coffee break. Then we would follow with the creative workshops, that involved activities such as vocal, dance and theatre improvisation, painting, or interactive techniques such as forum theatre<sup>6</sup>. On one day, we moved as a flock of birds, responding silently to one another’s gestures. On others, we shared intimate poems, wrote song lyrics, or devised scenes from creative writing workshops. By the end of the sessions, no matter how daunting the topics could have been, creativity restored us and we generally left uplifted. The regularity and significance of our meetings made these spaces vital for some of us and that rhythm gave structure and continuity to the project.

*“I felt in my element in dance improvisation workshops. My body responded without hesitation to the music. Singing was harder, but the constancy of our practices and my admiration for other women’s voices encouraged me to try. I embodied the learning that mistakes are companions to even the most experienced artists. Over time, I began to love hearing my ‘singing voice’ and feel that the group held me in it. My feeling of strength and joy after meetings showed me how efficient our participatory art was at creating conditions where new forms of self and collectiveness could emerge”.*

<sup>6</sup>See a full list of the workshops hosted from 2023 to 2026 at the appendix.

Along these lines, but the other way around, another participant shared how she felt about dancing:

*“It doesn’t come easily to me moving freely. So initially, I was very reticent. In fact, when we had the classes in 2024, I was like, ‘No, I don’t think I can do this’, and it just didn’t seem to be something for me. But now in the last week [in March 2026], I really freed up and went for it. And there was you; you leave your intellect aside and just express with the body. And there was something there in that collective which enabled me to just go for it, be myself, just enjoy the moment. And it was very uplifting and freeing. I’m not sure whether it’s something that I would be able to continue, especially in mixed surroundings. I also found that being with a group of women was spectacular. I’m really speechless to what a positive impact this group of ladies has had on me”. (Louise, 30/03/2026)*

This structure was not a rule, especially when we started preparing for a performance. There were occasions when we skipped the talk to have more than one workshop a day or to rehearse our repertoire. Repetition was key to increase the confidence in our skills and our cohesion as an artist collective. Still in these moments, our circles were spaces where mistakes were acknowledged as part of the demanding process of reclaiming our voices. But invariably, we noticed the importance of finding a balance between exchange and practice to make space for attentive listening and assessing our impressions about the process.

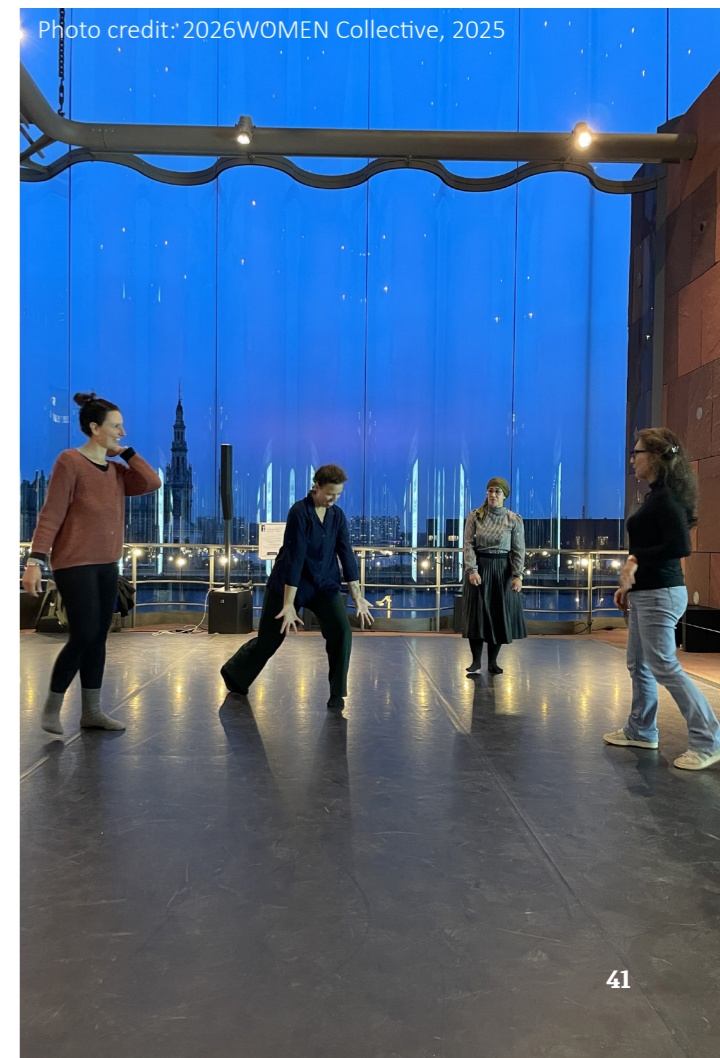


Photo credit: 2026WOMEN Collective, 2025



Photo credit: Iraide San José Vega, 2025

Our practices also gave us the means to build bridges across difference inside and outside our circles. The making of our performances connected us across intergenerational and intercultural stories, allowing us to listen with the whole body and make space for commotion without rushing to resolve it. As a result, the intimate composition of voices, movements and presence brought us closer to ourselves and the public. When performing, our pieces offered the audience, whether familiar with or far removed from the realities of violence against women, a chance to connect to topics that might otherwise remain neglected.

*“I got a reaction of a colleague who came to see the performance that made me very pleased. I know him very superficially, and he doesn’t even live in Antwerp. I was actually very surprised that he bought a ticket and came. [...] Some days later, he sent me a work email just to say congratulations, that he really enjoyed our whole performance. And what made me very happy to see is that he said, ‘You know, I was actually not very sensitive to the issues that you worked on, but after having seen your performance, I will try to inform myself better, because it seems an important cause, and I’m not so aware of it’. And I was so surprised and happy to see that, because it’s also a person that you would not necessarily expect it from”.(Natalia, 03/04/2026)*

Our messages and search for allyship are, therefore, also addressed to men. As feminists, we often hear defensive remarks such as ‘Not all men are violent’. While not incorrect, such statement overlooks how patriarchy legitimises gender injustice by granting (cisgender) men countless privileges. Complicity and omission in face of sexist behaviour further reinforce impunity. Thus, through our art – sharp, yet respectful – we invite(d) the audience to witness how this violence shapes our lives and what is possible when we are emancipated from it. Thus, art walked hand in hand with activism as our creative pieces call for the end of gender-based violence and the restoration of knowledges and forms of social organisation free of sexism.

Photo credit: 2026WOMEN Collective, 2023



*“In my upbringing, singing and dancing in public is a real taboo. I had that education not only from home, but especially from the community. Men may do lots of things, but a woman, a mother, cannot talk loudly and she must follow behaviour and dress codes. The first time I attended the group meeting, I was so afraid to sing but then seeing Céline coaching us I thought, ‘It’s a therapy, we’re learning to sing and that’s all’. For me it was special because I used to sing at home, but you would never hear me singing outside. It was phenomenal for me. When I come to Madam Fortuna, sometimes it gets hard to hear difficult stories, but we sing for peace, freedom and against violence. Why not to be then a feminist? I’m not a bad woman. But because I was afraid, I felt unsure, so sometimes I came, sometimes not.*

*The day we sang on stage, I was shaking. I wanted to run away, but I stayed. And I’m still here. What I have done was for my children. I don’t want to pass it on to them that anxiety ‘You may not do that. It’s forbidden’. And, also, for the artistic, the out of the box, the feminist parts of myself. Now, I don’t care about judgement that much because singing and dancing in our group is not criminal. It’s peaceful. I came out of my comfort zone, but I didn’t hurt anyone. As a Muslim woman, I’m very proud of myself to be open-minded. Even my children are proud of me because they see the same person, but a brave one. I still pray, I love God, I am good and kind, and I love myself. And I want to do this also with other Muslim women who may be hard for the work of 2026WOMEN to get to; to dance with them, to play with them, create a space to be themselves. To bring the inner child and don’t feel ashamed.*

*The taboo is because if a woman sings, she can sing about love, self-respect, divorce, for example. And many people think this is haram (forbidden act). It was something big for me to do it, still. After we sang, there was an old man who came to say, ‘thank you’, because our presentation touched him. And he told me something about my hijab. He was happy to know that there are also progressive Muslims. That’s what I wanted to show; maybe I wear a hijab, but I’m not a terrorist. I only want love, peace, harmony, and no judgment from both sides”. (Nadia, 21/04/2026)*

In terms of governance, the collective is hosted by Madam Fortuna under the approachable and gentle leadership of Céline di Maccio who carries most of the responsibility for planning and administration (beyond musical direction). The execution of the projects, in turn, is possible due to the collaboration with professionals, volunteers and co-coordinators. Decisions are decentralised as much as possible and made after discussion with core groups responsible for different areas, such as communications, scenography and production. In terms of creative direction, horizontality is also praised, as the directors act as guides, not imposing their will.

*“The dance workshops with Katia left a strong impression on me: the way she explained things, the physical work, taking up space... She was certain she could achieve something with us. Her choreography, which represents symbols of womanhood, was very powerful. It helped me overcome my shyness and the fear I used to have of speaking in front of people. I really gained the confidence I needed to move forward. It was truly therapeutic. Céline, Katia, and Alix did a truly wonderful job with us”. (Amy, 02/05/2026)*

On a similar note, both in our gatherings and in preparation for the 2026WOMEN Tribunal, we took time for necessary and sometimes unsettling reflections. We asked how race and class shape access to safety in the city. We debated how to invite trans and non-binary participants without tokenising them, and how to honour women from many backgrounds without translating all demands into Western terms. At times these conversations surfaced frustrations, exposed internalised biases and demanded humility. But they also nurtured accountability. They reminded us that feminisms are plural and require courage to hold difference.

Through this layered process, a collective movement larger than individual growth emerged. Gradually, being part of 2026WOMEN did not resume to attending workshops or preparing a performance anymore. It meant participating in an ongoing act of becoming that unfolds through art, diversity and a shared commitment to change. We joined actions from other collectives

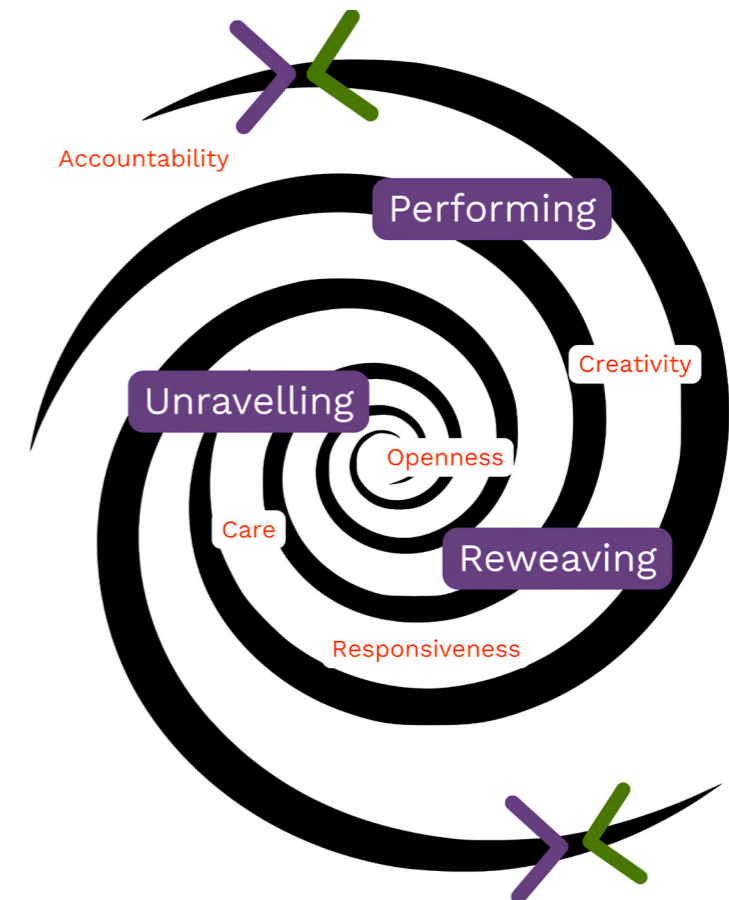
to promote gender justice, started and promoted parallel artistic and activist projects that share the same values as ours. And through each participant who finds and nurture their inner artistic voice and re-access their personal power, our activism paves the way for grassroots feminist futures.

Photo credit: Iraide San José Vega, 2025



The diagram below provides a didactic synthetises of the dynamic of our methodology, which I envision as concentric spirals that move both inward and outward. That means: (a) the effects of being part of 2026WOMEN are asynchronous and heterogeneous for each participant, involving both expansive and reflective movements; (b) embedded by the values that constitute the ethos of the collective, the three stages – unravelling, reweaving and performing – are also spiralling, which indicates a that they do not happen in a linear and exhaustive way, as I show in the following sub-sections.

Figure 1 Diagram of flux and principles of the 2026WOMEN methodology



Credit: Diagram created by the author.





Photo credit: 2026WOMEN Collective, 2025

wrote personal testimonies in the format of poems and letters. The act of reconnecting with memories of violence carried for decades and reading them out loud worked as a method to map and somewhat to communicate emotions without having to make sense of them to an external audience. The vocal improvisation session that happened in parallel offered a fluid and non-verbal path for some of us to slowly digest, modulate and amplify the sensations stirred by the reminder that women’s rights are still a fragile and not widespread achievement, systematically violated.



Photo credit: 2026WOMEN Collective, 2025

Similarly, Rotterdam’s textile sewing sessions provided a material way of touching colonialist violence and reclaiming their heritage through colour and patterns. Writing workshops prompted letters written from younger selves to the present, bringing up reflections that needed room to surface in a safe space. In their themed conversations, they were able to reassess their relationship to political institutions and public participation as immigrants, and struggles and strategies to achieve financial independence, for instance. Racial pride and self-determination became a pathway to stitch their history in a new land, one thread at a time.



Photo credit: Lady Autonauta, 2024

Unravelling in Marseille carried another powerful gestural intensity. The women pulled red threads to weave a collective fabric during the ‘Sangre de mi Sangre’ sessions. Each strand also carried the remembrance of countless victims of femicide and kidnapping in Mexico and across the world – an initiative started by Colectiva Hilos, from Mexico. Alongside the symbolism of blood-red yarn, handcrafts offered the women a way of unloading their own pain as the stitching turned into a witness and herald of their grief and protest. In Antwerp, we knitted during some discussion moments. Crafting kept us in the moment and literally gave us something to hold onto when stories grew too heavy. In a way, handcrafts also honoured the unpaid and undervalued care labour of women throughout history: (grand)mothers, weavers, healers whose discrete and persistent work has long held communities together.

*“In the discussion groups we had, I tried to show my interest in listening more than in sharing my own experiences. I listened to very difficult stories and situations; I felt enormous empathy and love for those who shared, as well as admiration for their courage in speaking up. And I, still silent, reflected and mentally revisited things I’ve experienced, and that made me feel less alone”. (Lady, 24/04/2026)*

In Marseille, they also walked and clicked the everyday spaces that they transit on the city, with cameras attached on their shoulders and wrists. With this movement, they reclaimed space through the soft act of photographing it from women’s perspectives. The images, later part of the exhibition ‘En corps en

ville – 'نن يدم لاي ف ةثج' (A body in the city), aimed at bringing attention to public safety through presence and stance. As seen, unravelling often found shape in metaphors and materiality. During these practices, we were able to notice 'knots' that needed to be recognised inwards while the groups were finding their synergy. These same knots were the traces of what brought us together into the circles.

But we had more than our personal pain to unravel. This process also asked us to honestly look at how exclusion lives inside our own circles and deal with the threads we inherit and set aside. Our collective was built on feminist values, but feminism – in practice – is not immune to power imbalances. Born in Western Europe and greatly influenced by the historic feminist movements from France and Belgium, our collective had its limitations. There were moments when whiteness, as a normative perspective, dominated conversations that othered migrants as the ones who bring disruption to acquired rights and established

social norms without a more careful outlook to the colonial roots of migration waves to Europe. Or when judgmental comments about racialised women's compliance over structural violence dismissed the institutionalised lack of freedom some face in their countries of origin, and the risks and costs of backlash from their communities.

These moments weighed, and some participants were proactive in tending to them by problematising what had surfaced. Other times, it required bringing in facilitators from outside to hold conversations we could not navigate alone. It was challenging

at times, but discomfort is part of unlearning. And by discomfort, I mean refusing to pretend that good intentions were enough and, instead, taking real steps to create room for those who had often been pushed out of feminist spaces, theories and 'waves' in the past. These choices may not have dissolved structural discriminatory views manifested in the group. But they helped to keep trust in our collective endeavour to approach these apparent contradictions with openness to clarify biased perspectives.

By encouraging the attendance and expression of participants from different countries, generations, races, religions, sexualities, and queer, the construction of our groups' narrative is processual and mutable. It regularly invites us to face internalised hierarchies and reflect on which messages remain at the centre of feminist discourses, and which remain peripheral. Back to the image of a tangled yarn, unravelling is a demanding and non-linear political process. It represents our refusal of normative composure, making space for what was unspeakable not so long ago. To hold that complexity, we anchored our unravelling in care, fulfilling our gatherings with honesty and willingness to listen. And through listening, we learn what needs to be voiced on the stage, in the Tribunal, in textile installations and exhibitions.

Photo credit: 2026WOMEN Collective, 2025



Photo credit: 2026WOMEN Collective, 2024



*“Before my first meeting, I was anxious and stressed from overthinking, because I didn’t know what Madam Fortuna was. That day, there was a presentation about feminist photographers. I started to observe the environment and how those women reacted to subjects like sexuality, immigration, colonialism, and a lot of issues that were discussed that afternoon. And then I thought ‘Okay, we have a ground to start from’. I heard new information, and it was very tough. But by the end of the presentation, I realised that we could do a lot of things together and that we have the same struggles and the same limitations but in different formats. So, it was nice. And the moment we sang together, ‘Wow’. It was very joyful and powerful! It gave me a boost of energy”. (Wiam, 28/04/2026)*



Though I place unravelling as our first movement, we experienced it as recursive. Even as we moved toward reweaving, new knots surfaced during our creative process: uncertainty, divergent worldviews, different priorities, tiredness. At the same time, the bravery to acknowledge and elaborate on these episodes with the support of art, helped us to release emotional distress, making space for our personal and collective power to flourish. Added to it the fact that, as an ongoing initiative, different people joined or left the collective throughout the years due to changes in life circumstances. So, the spiral, with its forward and backward motion, mirrors how becoming is generative precisely for its return loops but that never find us in the same spot as before.

## Reweaving

Despite the stories and statistics that continue to shock us, our artistic practices have connected us to a source of energy that keeps us aware and motivated to challenge gender-based violence. If unravelling loosens the threads of fear, shame, self-doubt and inherited biases, reweaving is where new patterns and textures begin to take form. Reweaving meant tying those threads and layering them differently, so that stories and memories could find new patterns collectively, but also internally. In this process, small gestures were sometimes enough to rescue our dignity after episodes marked by repression and damage to our body-minds.

There were cases when our gatherings extended beyond our regular groups, to reach women that were unable to join us. In Antwerp, for instance, we partnered with two refugee shelters to create the Cape of Good Hope. Sewing flowers, we found a language and a flow that wove the unspoken into fabric. When the women could not find words to translate their narratives, crafting connected us and them to our personal journeys. In most of those colourful flowers, the resilience of women from a refugee background met the liveliness of their hope for what must be carried forward. The Cape was not used as a garment, but as a textile collective archive. Both





Photo credit: Anna Kestens, 2026

malleable and sturdy, it was adorned with the widespread creative power of the women who allowed their brightness to emerge from opaque circumstances. Although a fixed prop, the Cape is another example of relational practice: a costume that can symbolically protect and offer a sense of belonging. And for those who see it, it is a reminder of the ongoing life-death crossing of millions of not just women, but populations surviving the exploitation and massacre of their bodies-territories.

Like the Cape, the music repertoire stitched our voices together. The texts created each year inspired our vocal improvisations and our songs. Many Saturday afternoons we sat in circle, instruments scattered among us, pages filled with multilingual half-formed strophes. We experimented with collective techniques such as lines written by many hands, single-authored poems, call-and-response pieces. At times we read in our mother tongues, letting the meaning rest in tone. 'Her Body' (February 2024) emerged from this process: a question-and-answer improvisation where a poem was converted into lyric and melody.

Photo credit: Emmy Purece, 2026



### **HER BODY**

*I'm the musical instrument of your resonance.  
In my mirror, I'm powerful, magical.  
Do you see me as soft, fragile, and emotional?  
I don't train for beauty or belly.  
All choices are mine.  
I blossom, I bloom even when I'm tiny.  
I carry difficulties in my soul.  
Ssssst... Let's shush stereotypes.  
You are the cause of my mood swings.  
Your affection for conception  
Keeps my sensuality at bay.  
You try to restrain me,  
While my chosen femininity is the only way.  
I'm her naked body,  
And you don't have a say.*

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Whereas not everyone felt comfortable writing or speaking, something shifted when we were invited to sing. Through multiple variations of vocal improvisation (one voice beginning, others joining), we experimented being heard and hearing ourselves. It was a gentle but effective way to release what was held inside while receiving an affirmation from the group. We learned that there is space for every single one in the choir, and that the more varied the voices, the richer the sound. When searching for the melody of 'Her Body', our voices met through resonance. They turned ingrained reproductive bias and insecurity from body-shaming into rhythm and claim.

*"I like the creation of collective writing because it has ups and downs. We discuss a lot of things while we are writing. And that helps with overcoming a lot of negative voices in our mind. So, I like it very much, everything: the kind moments and the challenging ones". (Wiam, 28/04/2026)*



Photo credit: Emmy Purece, 2026



Photo credit: Clément Vial, 2024

In Marseille, reweaving took another form. Exploring theatre practice, the women chose the mortar and pestle (a kitchen tool for grinding) to retell colonial history from another standpoint. The script carried the weight of family memories, enslavement, forced migration and resilience. As they tapped the pestle, rhythm emerged, giving foundation to a cohesive narrative staged at *La Criée – Théâtre National de Marseille*. Their activism was a feminist practice of attunement, letting their bodies vehicle intergenerational memories that words could not contain.

Marseille's example shows how reweaving and performing were intertwined. On a similar note, the textile workshops in Rotterdam inspired the women to develop an actual clothing line that blended traditional motifs with modern design. Each piece carried artistry and livelihood, offering women means for creative expression and steps toward their financial independence. To share their creations, the participants organised a fashion show at De Doelen, entirely choreographed by them. Dressed in culturally appropriate fabrics, they transformed the runway into stage, reweaving painful colonial pasts into living narratives of pride and freedom.

Alongside the creative workshops, reweaving also included looking

for alternatives to make our lives more secure beyond our creative circles. Another way to co-envision futures free of gender-based violence was through partnerships with academics and practitioners that work on this agenda. In Antwerp, participants were once asked: ‘What would make our city safer?’ Most of the answers converged to connection. Many women suggested green and blue spaces that allow outdoor activities where we can experience community beyond our bubbles. Safety was envisioned as breathable space, places to linger together, infrastructures for care. However, dominant discourses of individualism and control still surfaced in calls for surveillance cameras and walls around schools. These tensions were themselves part of the reweaving process since safety was contested and stretched between visions of control and of connection.



Among the myriad of methods and possibilities we experimented, it is clear that reweaving requires patience and attentiveness. We cannot rush toward coherence, as the process requires us to hold together and handle our threads long enough for new patterns to be created. In every case, reweaving asked us to recognise that the future is made by threading rupture into relation. As we shift our attitude in face of patriarchy through feminist participatory art, at the same time we rework the social fabric itself.

Photo credit: 2026WOMEN Collective, 2024

## Performing

In the pursuit of our collective’s vocation, we step into the third aspect of our methodology: performing. For 2026WOMEN, the performances start with our refusal to accept ongoing oppression and need to share this message. On stage, our narratives are both a demand to live in a world free of intersectional gender-based violence, as well as our visions of alternative feminist futures. Scaling up our local reach, on this ‘stage’ we bring all the groups together to co-create one performance. The previous experiences with local presentations and try-outs facilitate the process of merging those textures into coherent storylines embodied by around 40 women.

For that to happen, we concentrate in intensive week-long artistic residencies. Reunited in the same city, participants from all the groups are invited to bring their input to the scenes, and the direction, so far co-led by Alix Konadu, Céline di Maccio and Katja Pire, is an admirable example radical horizontality in the process of collective creation. This respect for each participants’ positionality and subjectivity is what makes our activist performances possible as real evidence and not just pure spectacle.

*“Before the first residency in 2024, we met every two weeks to create and practice, but while there was space for sharing and group discussions, personal interactions were still a bit timid. But during the mobility week, spending full days together from morning to evening, sharing meals (for some even accommodation), and preparing for the performance made it all much more intense and immersive. Listening to testimonies from the 1976 Tribunal, I began to see links between those stories and things I had lived through myself, or that others in the group had. Some people shared details about occurrences I had not known before. It was powerful to witness that kind of sincerity and the sisterhood among the groups. I think that is when I really started to see other sides of the women around me. Those long days together brought us closer and encouraged me to be more spontaneous within the group”.*



Photo credit: Anna Kestens, 2026

The stories from the stage are tied to the processes of unravelling and reweaving. They were those same threads carried into public space to touch people beyond our circles. And the audience responded in the most different ways. While many supported us with applause, others sat in silence; their unease, palpable. That, too, was the effect of our work to call out gender-based violence by its name. Sara C. Motta (2015) once wrote that entering a text in our nakedness is an act charged with fear. To speak from the body and to carve ourselves into being is to risk rejection and misinterpretation. For some, it is to confront the



Photo credit: 2026WOMEN Collective, 2025

shame that trauma planted inside us. But it is also an opportunity to allow vulnerability to shift into strength. Motta's words echo the trembling threshold we cross each time we step on stage.

Moreover, performing was also where we could safely taste freedom, even for those who were not that confident on their artistic skills. Far from flawless sequences, our previous spectacles were emotionally charged. The quiver of a voice and unscripted tears carried more truth than any polished product could. Sometimes emotions aroused from the rhythm of a



Photo credit: Kim Karnas, 2024

drum, from layered references of solidarity in a tableau, or from reclaiming sovereignty over our violated bodies. These moments touched parts of us that had been pushed down, and forged scenes built on honesty and trust. As rites of passage, performing enabled many of us to release hurtful memories and claim space in the collective.

*“This creation week really helped me to feel more comfortable voicing what I think. And because a lot of people felt comfortable saying what they thought, it definitely gave me some confidence. When I feel more connected or closer to people, it becomes easier to be open with what I think, or to take some space. In other contexts, I tend to make myself small, but now it became easier to express myself if I had something to say. It was somewhat empowering as well. In an individual level, but still empowering. [...] Also, the response of my friends was super positive. I think some of them were indeed a bit surprised that I had the courage to be on stage, because maybe in private, I don't look like I would like to do that. But it seemed to them that I felt comfortable. Also, what many of them told me was that it was very visible that we, as all of us on stage, had some connection with each other. Because there were many scenes where we would hold hands, or we would caress each other or dance together, and that it all felt very genuine, and that it was obvious that we created some connections together. So, I was actually very happy to hear that they could also see it. I think it was really a byproduct of the creation week. [...] So I think that makes it even more powerful, and conveys the message even more”. (Natalia, 03/04/2026)*



Photo credit: Anna Kestens, 2024

At the same time, this process is intense, sometimes overwhelming. Side by side with the adrenaline after performing, the aftermath can bring physical and emotional exhaustion, asking us time to recover and process. Yet this intensity is also what gives the experience its depth and feeling of fulfilment. There is a shared awareness that what happens is contingent since it depends on people's availability, funding and a certain willingness to 'go for it' without guarantees. But because of this, it is experienced as meaningful, since it leaves a trace in skills, in relationships, in confidence and in the sense that we are investing in something that adds value to the world.

*"Joining 2026WOMEN made me feel like I levelled up in a sense. I can show people something other than just negative news about gender-based violence, like the creative things we've done as a group. How we raised awareness, or a song we wrote about the issue. It made everything more concrete and constructive. It also gave me a sense of achievement. Doing these projects and being part of this group makes me feel more grounded and more confident. Starting and finishing something affects the human, it makes you grow confidence. I can look back at this group and say, 'I've done that, so I can do this too'. It made me feel overall way better as a person. It felt awesome on stage. I haven't done an artistic performance for a long time. Being able to do that again for this purpose was something that I wished I could do in my life before I died. And I did it, so I'm really happy. I felt important, and I felt what I was doing was important". (Selin, 21/04/2026)*



Photo credit: Anna Kestens, 2026

Unlike written pieces, a performance cannot be fully captured in photographs or descriptions. Still, we document our processes to preserve and remind us of some ephemeral elements: the smiles, hugs, focus, tension and boldness that filled the room. We felt and heard feedback of how this authenticity created openings for understanding that transcends language barriers. In the next sub-sections, we follow the thread from patchy creations to our two 1-hour music theatre pieces (so far). I share memories of the potency of these performances in more detail and how they reflect 2026WOMEN's mission of performing feminist futures.



Photo credit: Anna Kestens, 2026

## Simawe | See my Way

Our first collective performance – ‘Simawe | See my Way’ – was scripted in an unconventional way. It derived from fragments of personal stories, improvised sketches, songs and the legacy of the 1976 Tribunal as a guideline. In November 2024, the groups from Antwerp, Marseille and Rotterdam gathered in Antwerp for a week-long residency. We began by sharing what we had created separately among the different cities. Over the week, all the participants learned and rehearsed the songs composed in Antwerp, arranged by Céline. We also had the chance to join weaving, painting and collage workshops in-loco to create artwork for the scenario and our visual exhibition<sup>7</sup>. These pieces were, then, pasted into scenes and sequences by Alix and Céline. Intertwined by acting, music and dance, the cohesion of the performance emerged from the restlessness and fiery commitment that each of us carried to stand up for our rights.

*“During our first experience, we had no idea what to expect. We arrived in a city we didn’t know, with people we didn’t know, and a different language... For the first two days, we were a little lost, but after that we got used to it. We entered the arena like a bull”. (Charlotte, 02/05/2026)*

Presented and sold-out twice at the end of an intens(iv)e week, ‘Simawe | See my Way’ was powerful and rough around the edges. For us, as amateur artists, this performance was about raising awareness by refusing denial and invisibilisation. Many of us had never stepped on a stage before. Some had fled from regimes where women’s freedom of speech is punished. And all of

<sup>7</sup>Alongside our artistic practices, we also ran a more practical participatory workshop, where we had the opportunity to reflect, name and categorise multiple forms of violence we face nowadays, and think through possible alternatives on how to address them from our point of view. As a complimentary activity, this grassroots exercise of political participation disclosed more layers of how gender-based violence permeates our lives. In addition to offer material for policy briefs, it also enabled us to develop a greater understanding of intersectionality.



Photo credit: Anna Kestens, 2024

us were targets of patriarchal violence, publicly exposing our shared vulnerable spots. And the potency of this bricolage lied in its ability to shed light to the struggles of millions of women through remembrance, empathy and resistance. Still, performing stories rooted in trauma also carries ethical responsibilities. To preserve the participants, we worked with published testimonies from 1976, and we were free to choose how far to engage in certain scenes. This careful guidance upheld dignity, prioritising that the collective’s work remained an act of empowerment rather than consumption.

*“At times when I wasn’t feeling well, I decided not to take part. [...] I found it interesting to realise that my most significant contributions to the two performances, regardless of the overall participation, were two specific, very intimate moments. In ‘Simawe | See My Way’, I read a testimony, provided it wasn’t a very violent story, because I don’t feel that such accounts are suited to my voice; I feel I cannot take the place of those who have lived through them”. (Lady, 24/04/2026)*

Our songs, on their turn, set healthy boundaries. The word ‘simawe’ itself, invented from vocal improvisation in one of our jam sessions, came to symbolise our common language that holds together some melancholy and possibility. The alliteration in our theme song evolved from something simple, turning into an invitation for the public to see and properly listen to each one and all of us. On stage,



Photo credit: Anna Kestens, 2024

we overcame the labels that reduce us to statistics. We were occupying our rightful place of protagonists of our lives, as women who seek for justice and respect.

*“Through that process, I discovered I love being on stage. I still don’t know how to read music. At times I fall off pitch. But I sing. And in singing, I take space. I do not sing with that much anger anymore. I sing with confidence: ‘See me when I say’. It is less of a command, and more of an invitation to look at the routine violence women endure AND the extraordinary force we find when we face it together. My newfound pleasure about the ‘stage’ relates to recovering my joie de vivre in response to a society that every so often invisibilises me”.*



Photo credit: Kim Karnas, 2024

The Cape of Good Hope (see more on ‘Unravelling’) was displayed next to the theatre’s entrance door as a host. Around the foyer, collages with pictures and photographs of our protests and political engagement set the tone of our artistic intervention. Exhibited both inside and outside the theatre hall, the ‘Silhouettes’ (participatory collective paintings based on the original concept of the visual artist Els Renate Aerts) highlighted the potency of our bodies. Although with different aesthetic, these art pieces shared the same impetus to celebrate and claim our right over our bodies, reproductive choices, and physical and psychological integrity. Recalling the ancient goddesses of matrilinear cultures, we reconnected to a pre-patriarchal imaginary and exhibited our silhouettes to be appreciated together and to spread messages of the feminist futures we desire.



Photo credit: Kim Karnas, 2024

On stage, we placed the chairs in semi-circles evoking a community atmosphere as we wove the ‘Sangre de mi Sangre’ red threads (see ‘Unravelling’). As we moved, listening to poems, singing, and declaiming devastating true stories of violence against women, we connected to distinct places within our body-minds. That meant making space for contradictory feelings: sorrow and rage, beauty and horror, silence and noise. We sought recognition and did that by avoiding a narrative that would represent trauma and evoke pity.

In the face of underreported escalating gender-based violence cases, the

red fabric symbolising the blood from mutilated and murdered women was laid out as a tribute. Everyone in the audience became a witness, though they watched it from the most diverse backgrounds. Many were victims themselves, recognising fragments of their own stories being honoured in our performance. Others did not relate to the testimonials, but they shared the same longing for visibility and for justice. Simawe conveyed the 2026WOMEN's intention to be a transformative artistic and political intervention, and also an act of rebirth.

*“When I came inside, I was in the public, it was very emotional. I thought, ‘This is something big, everyone should watch this’. It is something you can talk about with your children, grandchildren. For me, there was a link between the testimonies: it’s not only the Muslim women who are under pressure, but also women from Brazil, Norway, Morocco... I thought ‘Wow, the women in the whole world have scars like me’. It was also for seeing the women dancing. And the hijabis, also the elder ones. When I came outside, I was crying”.* (Nadia, 21/04/2026)



The multiplicity of narratives unfolded in various scenes, such as ‘Janaína’, a song written and performed by Autumn Elis. Her original poem, written in Portuguese, speaks of an Indigenous Black woman navigating a reality shaped by sexism, class disparities and racism, but who carries a lightness and docile sight. Over our creative process, Elis expanded the song to encompass challenges from migration and the layered experiences of Latin American and Caribbean women. Being a Brazilian immigrant myself, I felt drawn to the song, and opted to collaborate on the scene with a choreography.

*“While Elis was not aware of it when writing the poem, Janaína, in Afro-Brazilian cosmology, is one of the names to refer to the spirit of the ocean. And the Atlantic Ocean itself came to represent for people in the diaspora the Kalunga Grande. In Kongo religion, Kalûnga is the water threshold between the world of the living and the dead. Hence, some Afro-Brazilians see the Atlantic is a ‘great cemetery’ that holds the countless bodies of enslaved people thrown into the waters during the transatlantic slave trade. Somewhat, the ocean cross also speaks to immigration waves from Europe and Asia to Brazil, people who flee their home countries because of wars, including my ancestors. On stage, this history intertwined with the handcrafted piece from ‘Sangre de Mi Sangre’, connecting feminicides in Mexico with global struggles of racialised women. Having that symbolic ‘ocean of blood’ at the centre of the stage added depth to the choreography. But the song was a message of hope and freedom. So, I invited an elder participant from Suriname to join that moment. I proposed her to sit at the front of the group circle so I could bow before her – bowing simultaneously to the spirit of Mother Ocean and to the griot, the wise elder Black woman, who embodies resistance with a bright eye and sweet smile”.*

During that scene we also saw Elis, born on the day of Kianda – the Angolan goddess of the waters and the ocean –, debuting on stage. Performing in a country with a violent colonial history against African lands, the orchestration of our words and gestures were a deliberate acknowledgement to the value of racialised women and to the ancestors carried in each performer’s body. Hence,

Janaína became a scene where some personal and structural histories met. I felt proud to co-create that collective narrative through my dance, blending it with the lyrics and the life stories of those of us performing on stage.

In this atmosphere of sisterhood, the ‘Vulva’ scene emerged as the climax of our show. There was an interstice during the spectacle when almost all participants left the stage to prepare. Then, the drum began its martial rhythm, and we processed slowly, poles striking the beat as we walked. At the back, a few women carried a large vulva prop handmade by Els Renate Aerts from fragments we had knitted and crocheted. It was stitched shut. When we hung the vulva, the atmosphere was tense.

Whereas inspired by the work of a partner organisation that advocates for the end of female genital mutilation (FGM), this scene resonated far beyond. When the woman at the front stepped on the ladder to untie it, her gestures and her scream were a true act of reclaiming the sovereignty over our bodies, our voices, our sexuality, our rights. The scene felt like a rite of passage, with the vulva at the centre, the performers as the officiants, and the audience as the community holding space for our transformation. With her, we climbed our way toward emancipation, rescuing our dignity by challenging the ways our bodies are read, disciplined, targeted and violated by society. And following it, we celebrated this freedom singing ‘Her Body’.

*“This scene felt powerful from the first rehearsal. But during the performances it became something else. For me, someone who had not lived that specific violence but carries others against my body, standing there holding the prop steady while we performed and released our emotions without shame, without fear, felt like collective catharsis. In those scenes, I understood the 2026WOMEN’s methodology as a pathway for performing feminist futures. While I was ‘performing’ a scene, I was also embodying and witnessing the transformation of the pain from inflicted abuse into freedom and empowerment. Within the spiral of collective becoming, this experience facilitated a shift within me. And the holiness that unfolded on stage – before the eyes of an audience – has potential to reweave the feminine and the masculine beyond the confines of gender. It spoke directly to our shared humanity, offering a raw invitation for everyone present to take part in turning the dream of a just society into lived reality”.*



Since ‘Simawe | See my Way’, I am even more convinced that social justice is less-likely to be achieved through top-down policies. It happens through healing oneself and our communities. By building true solidarity ties not just among women, but among all those whose rights and bodies keep being violated every day. And that includes the support of men who are also impacted by the toxicity of patriarchy. And our activism serves that purpose.

Through our art, we braided past and present into a place where stories could be both spoken and felt, held within a collective consciousness. Even after months, the song remained like a mantra that anchors us, an uplifting prayer connecting us to those who came before, offering ground and strength as we walked towards the 2026WOMEN Tribunal. At the same time, it urged us forward, pushing us to keep imagining and performing more just worlds for the generations yet to come. And the creative process continued as we [launched the recorded song](#) and a [videoclip](#), while working on new pieces for ‘يتوص | *Mijn Stem*’, our 2026 performance.

Simawe  
Hit the road, Pat!



Simawe  
Behind the scenes



## يتوص – *Mijn Stem*

The creative process that led us to ‘يتوص – *Mijn Stem*’ was held in a different atmosphere for our groups since our debut in 2024. The tone of the musical creations for that new performance was now coming from a place of celebration of womanhood. This time, instead of feeding our creations mainly from pain, we carried an achieved confidence in what is possible when we cooperate. And I reckon that this self-assurance was developed over the spiralling process of meeting and creating together consistently, and also influenced by the cathartic and empowering process of presenting ‘Simawe | See my Way’.

For this piece to come together, we had a little less time over the year, as some of our meetings were also used to rehearsals for the recording of previous songs, such as ‘[Revolution is Female](#)’, written by Petra on Fire, and the videoclip of ‘[Simawe | See my Way](#)’. Interestingly, even on the clip, we see the same song who stood our ground in 2024, being re-interpreted by us from a place where sisterhood and solidarity brought back our colours and hope. The co-creative process during 2025 was also diverse as we opted to cross-reference workshops held in different cities the year before, experimenting with other forms of arts. For instance, where in Antwerp we tried feminist photography, Marseille has composed the music and lyrics of ‘Taxawal’.



We still made space for one particular co-creation, which was the hymn of the 2026WOMEN Tribunal: 'United Voices'. This composition took us a long time, as we created the chorus and three strophes collectively, text and melody. Because we still needed to have a certain number of songs for the show, Céline took charge of composing more songs. Some lyrics merged material from our collective creative writing, while others were based on poems written by participants individually.



Photo credit: Anna Kestens, 2026

'Ma Voix' – a multilingual song expressing the power of my/our voices in breaking with the suffocating domination of patriarchy – stood out. It was our emblem in a couple of teaser presentations when we were promoting the 2026WOMEN Tribunal. Every time it would evoke a sense of pride and excitement among us to wear our white capes and sing a capella for unexpected audiences in feminist events organised by partners of the Tribunal. Céline, in her geniality and positive attitude, gifted us a song with strophes in four different languages: French, Spanish, Arabic and Dutch! And each strophe brings rhythmic and melodic elements that are so characteristic of the regions where these languages are spoken. It makes us travel to different atmospheres and cultures, somehow, showing how this message is urging to be spread worldwide.



Photo credit: Anna Kestens, 2026

*“Ma Voix is one of my favourite songs of our repertoire. The song has a potent and not so easy text. And that highlighted something quite special about the process of learning it. First of, not all of us had previous knowledge of all of those languages, demanding willingness to learn. Second, for those who do knew them, we speak with different accents according to the dialects and pronunciation from our countries of origin. And it was a big lesson to see how Céline dealt with those differences while teaching – not imposing her way but granting us freedom to say it how it resonated within us. It was a subtle but efficient way to show respect for our effort, but even more for our backgrounds, as the diffusion of most of these languages is a byproduct of colonialism. And it was beautiful to hear, afterwards, how the choir carried all those voices spreading words of a peaceful future of freedom”.*

This level of consideration was not restricted to 'Ma Voix'. The different pieces we co-created and learned over the year were, once more, blueprints of how art can be regenerative. Céline's trust in us was also displayed in the musical arrangement. In a crescendo since 'Simawe | See my Way', when we had more solos, 'يتوص - Mijn Stem' prompted us to be more active in the different songs, and combined singing with choreography. The transition of the scenes happened in a faster pace, fluidly but very dynamic, in a common rhythm that invited everyone to take ownership of the show. The successful outcome reflected the commitment and potential of the participants, hand in hand with the competence and professionalism from the direction team. Their horizontality

allowed participants to step forward when they felt ready, and to trust that the group intelligence would hold even when individuals hesitated.

*“The leaders of those creation days were all women; they were not afraid to lead and to guide and to express what they wanted. That’s something that I really love to see, because when I think of people in a leading position, I tend to think of power, firmness, decisiveness, and maybe aggression. [...] Whereas here [in preparation of ‘يتوص – Mijn Stem’] it was balanced with care that I constantly felt. This is an element that I really find important in my life as someone who is not very dominant as a person; to see examples of people who lead, not only by power, but also by being gentle and still expressing that you matter. [...] I really came home very full of intense emotions, but also this richness. It was very, very enriching”. (Natalia, 03/04/2026)*

Added to it that we had four days to put the piece together. This creative process was, for many of us, a leap into the unknown. Most of us were not used to building a performance of this scale and yet kept our focus despite moments of frustration and tiredness. Some mentioned that the lack of time to process overwhelming emotions was a challenge, but also evidence of how the work resonated within us. Under these circumstances, improvisation and vulnerability became part of the artistic language on stage rather than something to hide.

Photo credit: Anna Kestens, 2026



*“I love the humility among them [creative direction team]. They have this leadership quality, and this is one of my strongest observations. It has really taught me a positive lesson. It’s not easy to actually lead people from different backgrounds, different mentalities... But I never saw them insult anyone, not even once, and I love that. I appreciate them for it”. (Josephine, 15/04/2026)*

Among many beautiful moments we had during the show, the climax, this time, happened when we took up space on the stage of Arenberg Theatre and shared 28 remarks of how gender-based violence takes place in different parts of the world. Blending voices from the elders who gave account of incidents from 1976, with occurrences and statistics from the 2020s, we made it unquestionable why a women’s tribunal was still needed in 2026. Afterwards, ‘Taxawal’ started a capella, our hands marking heartbeats on our chests, while we sang about the importance of having each other’s back, embracing and holding each other up, while we continue with resilience, but moving side-by-side towards freedom and recognition. The solemnity and depth of that moment was followed by togetherness. Comoved, Céline declaimed our statement while we were nesting in each other’s arms, absorbing the impact of that moment.

Photo credit: Anna Kestens, 2026





Photo credit: Anna Kestens, 2026

A moment of silence preceded the lively beat of the percussion, introducing ‘Ma Voix’. Then, we sang at plain voice the messages of hope and love for the futures we are building here and now! While I could delve into details of how each scene had its challenges and rewards, the reminiscent feeling from ‘ي ت و ص – Mijn Stem’ is that of synergy, courage and unity in difference. And this connection was boosted because we created the music theatre that inaugurated the activities of the 2026WOMEN Tribunal in Antwerp. The project we prepared for three years was finally happening, and we walked our talk: we shared our testimonies using art as medium. In the following section, I explore how our activist practice shaped this pivotal event and helped envisioning and performing futures rooted in love and collective freedom.



Photo credit: Anna Kestens, 2026

### صوتی – Mijn Stem Trailer





## PART III THE 2026 WOMEN TRIBUNAL



## FIFTY YEARS LATER

The culmination of years of work and creative resistance, the 2026WOMEN Tribunal stood as a historic manifestation of feminist activism. In this chapter, I explore how our methodology was at the core of the Tribunal in 2026, building a platform where art and politics converged to confront gender-based violence and demand justice. Different from most traditional civil society's tribunals<sup>8</sup>, which adopt a court-setting style or a tribune where attendants can speak from (like in 1976), we consciously chose to underpin this edition in participatory artistic expression. Evolving from that lineage of testimonial politics, the 2026WOMEN Tribunal mixed creativity and community-engagement to build a variety of formats where stories could be expressed artistically, so we could reach people who might not be moved by sharing or hearing a typical testimony. Our debates and roundtables were intertwined with music, painting, dance and poetry.

Alongside months of preparation co-creating the elements for the opening performance 'ميتوص - Mijn Stem' on the 27th of March, we gradually involved more than 40 socio-cultural organisations<sup>9</sup> to make the event possible. Together, coordinated by Anna Cooper, we engaged activists, academics, policymakers and citizens to ensure the Tribunal would provide this space for awareness and solidarity to overcome struggles related to gender-based violence and their intersections.

The process grew in a horizontal way, where the multiple partners decided how their local groups would like to participate and engage the attendees. The result was a mosaic of activist and activist interventions, each providing a different angle of feminist pedagogy and building spaces where people could feel welcomed in their needs to feel safe and connected. Still within limitations (mainly caused by budget constraints), most of the activities were offered with informal real-time translation.

<sup>8</sup>If you are interested in knowing more about the structure and history of people's tribunals, check the research of Madlyn Sauer and Milène Le Goff.

<sup>9</sup>See the full list of partners, funders and sponsors at the Appendices.



Photo credit: Anna Kestens, 2026

One of our guiding principles has been honouring the multiplicity of experiences and backgrounds present at Arenberg Theatre. This required proposing formats of interaction that could bring the attendees closer to the facilitators and the performers. We embraced polyphony, hosting different workshops and academic panel sessions on Friday afternoon, so attendees could choose the format and approach to gender justice that felt most appealing to them. The performances, on their turn, were also interactive and open to the public to be involved and literally join the chorus in different languages and choreographies.

Among multiple activities, the 2026WOMEN Tribunal had, for instance, a forum theatre session to involve the public in the search for alternative ends to struggles faced by women with disabilities. Simultaneously, attendees could join a multi-lingual poetry writing workshop; a singing circle to get them ready for the closing ceremony; yoga and self-defence sessions for those willing to outlet their emotions in a more physical way; documentary screenings with debates; panel discussions with academics; and immersive exhibitions of feminist photography and the artifacts and props from the 2026WOMEN collective.

Aside from this socio-artistic mosaic, the Tribunal also hosted a special session on Saturday, TRIBU26 (organised by Beweging.net), where the attendees had the opportunity to share testimonies anonymously which were compiled around five spheres: private, public, political and institutional, cultural and economic violence. From those stories, the organisers raised overarching questions so the people present – targets and victims of those forms of violence – could brainstorm grassroots answers on how to address those issues and implement

effective change. In this scenario, we also had a quiet self-care zone for rest and processing. And, importantly, the organisation also held a workshop for cis men outside the theatre. Its purpose was to seek for allyship, not to instruct men on feminism, but to help them better understand how women navigate daily threats to their integrity and autonomy.



Photo credit: Anna Kestens, 2026

*“The event responded to the reality where it was situated. The effort to bring international participants was valuable, but the search for solutions to gender-based violence are still context specific. Even though it was a consensus among us that women rights are human rights, there are many socio-economic, political and cultural layers that do not allow a universal solution for those cases. Yet, the value of these debates on my perspective – more than serving to policy briefs – was, in first instance, to bring that diversity of participants and sensitise each other that women’s struggles are not the same everywhere”.*



Photo credit: Anna Kestens, 2026



credit: Anna Kestens, 2026

The levels and formats of how violence against women happens are crossed by other forms of structural oppression that go beyond gender. While we have the right to equality as patriarchy oppresses us, we also have the right to self-determination among ourselves when the argument of ‘equality’ oversimplifies intersectionality, overriding different needs. On this note, the space to hear the personal and collective struggles women are facing around the world was a unique opportunity to see why it is urgent that we stay together in diversity.

Through debates, exchanges or activist interventions during the Tribunal, we were still referring to many same issues brought up in 1976, despite laws being created to refrain gender disparities. Additionally, misogyny persists in new forms such as transphobia, online harassment and the exposure of women and girls to extreme situations caused by climate change. And still, the system continues to discredit the victims or scrutinise their pain. Although we did not go for a legalist approach in the 2026WOMEN Tribunal, we were still fighting for gender and social justice.

That brought up reflections about the consequences of state neglect in delivering timely justice due to deferred reforms, fiscal austerity or inaction.



credit: Anna Kestens, 2026

When accountability is postponed and preventive systems are inadequately financed, the exposure of the victims to their perpetrators even when legal frameworks are in place (but work inefficiently) can cost their lives. And the costs of delay are transferred back to the social reproduction sphere where the community, particularly women, pay for them through unpaid care work and the depletion of their health and economic security.

Moreover, bureaucracy and judicial coldness are designed to reproduce the binary reason/emotion, prioritising pragmatic and protocolar mechanisms that push empathy aside. By dismissing emotional responses as irrational, excessive or ‘hysteric’, institutions tend to reinforce a depreciation of emotional intelligence, dismissing the suffering of the oppressed. This is why we enacted a women’s tribunal in 2026. In 1976, the audience was already engaged as witnesses, and the testimonies shared fuelled legal and social change. In 2026, we embraced the artistic aspect to streamline this connection with emotions, looking for a balance that equalises thinking, feeling and acting.

In fifty years, feminist theory has been diffused, questioned, adapted and expanded. Same with the notion and spectrum of gender itself. Therefore, while calling the Tribunal in 2026 was a need due to the alarming scenario of backlash women are facing globally, it was also an opportunity for attendees themselves to look inwards.





Photo credit: Anna Kestens, 2026

Nevertheless, it comforts me to know that our circle is a space where we are open to embrace divergence and inhabit the strains of intersectionality and decoloniality. Within what was possible, we achieved to extend the safe space of our circle to the 2026WOMEN Tribunal for those who we have been able to reach and that were willing to listen. And as Madlyn Sauer (2025) wrote about the NSU Tribunal in 2017, listening when grounded in care can be transformative and generative, as it helps to build alliances and alternative visions of justice.

In the case of 2026WOMEN Tribunal, I assert that performing – as a method and aesthetic – was a catalyst of the transformative listening civil societies tribunals aim for. That was evident during the closing ceremony on Saturday evening (see the highlights in this [short video](#)). Multiple activist interventions have mobilised, touched and united us in a profundity that individual testimonies may not have reached a couple of hours before. The binding power of artistic expression, in its capacity to make our voices sound as one, is a remarkable aspect of how the methodology of 2026WOMEN facilitates the embodiment and performance of feminist futures in the here and now.

As a feminist archive in motion, the 2026WOMEN Tribunal boosted us to continue the activities of the collective, persisting in our activist journey to co-create new realities based on feminist ethics grounded in openness, responsivity,



Photo credit: Anna Kestens, 2026

care, creativity and accountability. In claiming this space for three days, in a ‘marathon of sisterhood’ as Céline called it, we assert our right to be heard, seen and believed. And I trust this movement will continue until we can live in societies shaped by collective responsibility, reciprocity, empathy and love. A sign of it is our support to the upcoming tribunal in Berlin in a couple of years, when violences against the queer community will be at the centre. Feeling fulfilled and hopeful about 2026WOMEN’s next steps, in the following section I offer my final reflection on how I envision feminist activism as the safety net that will keep sustaining our everyday resistance and our community.



## CONCLUSION

### Weaving feminist realities through love

As we stand at the crossroads after 2026WOMEN Tribunal, my final remarks turn toward the original question that motivated this book: ‘How does our activist methodology promote gender justice?’. For me, the most direct answer is through our decision to keep imagining and building futures shaped by love. bell hooks (2000) framed love as an action and that honesty, when rooted in the care for our community, is a tool for liberation and growth. And building community is a commitment not exempted from conflicting views. The search for justice, on its turn, is also a choice to go through continuous challenges and readaptation. Our methodology reflects this ethic and praxis, as we commit to transformation from within, on the way we move together, as well as what we aim to achieve in societal level.

Imprinting love and care in our activism, we envision feminist futures as tangible realities we can enact even in small actions. When these principles guide our interactions, our relational agency moves us towards settings where power is regained and distributed. And more important, power is approached as a tool for emancipation in place of submission. But it takes risk to assert presence in a structure whose fundamental engine is the oppression of women, feminised and racialised people, to name a few. And because of that, the process of finding our artistic voices, working in cooperation and performing our polyvocal compositions on stage is a radical act.

For us to get to a diverse and coherent narrative on stage that does not generalise all women’s struggles, our circles welcome freedom of expression and discovery. The conversations and embodied artistic expression using different techniques give us room to engage with intimate experiences as well as a more comprehensive understanding of the roots of sexism and how patriarchy has overpowered and hurt us. Grounded in empathy and respect, both our meetings and our performances create space for dialogue and invite the connection to

our emotions and wounds we carry. And in this same caring space, the outlet of emotions walks side-by-side with the sharing of plural perspectives. These dynamics sometimes reveal that we have gaps in our knowledge, leading us to count on the support of academics and social workers for interdisciplinary workshops that help us to ground our activism while also putting it into perspective within an intersectional debate.

The process of listening and questioning each other helps us to elaborate on our own personal understandings of meanings and pathways to achieve gender justice. While these interactions allow us to revise and reassure our collective's shared horizon, it does not impose a doctrinal or rightful understanding of what feminist futures should be. In our circles, that commitment is kept alive due to inspiring leaderships that guide by example. Céline, in the position of coordinator, embodies the ethic of love with no demagogy, making her an admirable and cherished leader. Holding technical and soft skills, we can sense her coherence and care in practice. And while she creates the means and build bridges for the work of 2026WOMEN to happen, she shares the floor with every person who wants to take ownership of the multiple activities we develop and contribute with their ideas and talents.

This way our activist work creates a space where transformation is imagined and achieved from within. Echoing what I introduced before, joining the collective and embracing its methodology was an act of reclaiming voice and agency for many of us. Our activism is the base where our visions of ending



Photo credit: Anna Kestens, 2026

gender-based violence can go beyond a rational aspiration and be set into motion. In this newfound community, we exchange books, films and articles, opening up new reflections on why and how societies might change toward an end to hierarchical systems of domination. The possibility to be truthful in a space of deep acceptance changed how some of us saw themselves and their possibilities, restoring a sense of dignity and self-love. Many participants refer to the collective as a space of growth and intimate personal transformation.

*“About the meaning of 2026WOMEN, what comes to my mind is transformation. The experience is a transforming one. Since I came back [from the Tribunal], some of the songs keep ringing in my mind and in my mouth. And they work internally for me. Before that, I was almost losing my stability as a woman. But after the encounters, I became stabilised and I stood my ground. I’m taking some action already based on what I learned from there that I feel are good for me”. (Josephine, 15/04/2026)*

As artistic practice keeps guiding us in the path of the spiral of collective becoming, over the past four years, we could see how the effect of our methodology in different people is processual and witnessed shifts both subtle and visible in different aspects of their lives. Change showed up in overcoming the fear to set boundaries by saying ‘no’ without guilt to a partner or a parent. A choice that



Photo credit: Anna Kestens, 2026

may look small from the outside, but for those who carried them, it marked new ground by breaking ingrained patterns of submission. Some of us gained the confidence to redirect their careers. Others, to seek legal help to leave abusive relationships. Some invested more in their own artistic path, creating and showcasing their artwork. And many felt less alone in the daily weight of life.



The role of 2026WOMEN in participants' lives appears as a catalyst. The collective accelerates processes that were already latent such as the desire to create, to express, to connect, to belong. And the methodology provides a format within which these desires can materialise. Making collective art combined with intentional discussions has been helping us to develop new artistic and social skills.

Moreover, we are creating networks that are proactive in implementing feminist values in personal and collective endeavours. By helping us to identify and name the violence in safe spaces and processing these wounds in cathartic and political artistic practices, our methodology is already successful in furthering grassroots spaces of solidarity from body and local to global scale.

Feminist collectives like ours are often established in principles of solidarity and justice, yet the reality is far more complex. Despite our commitment to intersectionality, we face some limitations that go beyond our capacity. Advertised as a women's group, it might have influenced the absence of non binary participants despite their affinity with the cause. Immigrants without English or local language skills did not express themselves so often during the discussions. We also lack participants with disabilities, and parents of small children were often absent, a reflect of how biased gender roles and caregiving responsibilities

still falls disproportionately on women.

Acknowledging these gaps required necessary conversations about power and privilege within feminist spaces. And awareness, combined with this same love, drives us to take our methodology to groups of women being articulated by other socio-cultural organisations. This responsiveness allows us to move forward with a renewed commitment, knowing that the work of inclusion is ongoing and demands self-assessment and humility. What we carry forward is the confidence that collective creativity and feminist principles remain essential for resisting violence and



Photo credit: Anna Kestens, 2026

reworking dynamics to achieve equality in our time. And although that can only be possible out of people's willingness to change, what sustains us is the feeling of sisterhood and understanding that we find within the collective.

*"The collective helps you to develop a higher level of patience and tolerance for other people and their situations, given their cultural backgrounds, ethnicities, religious beliefs, and I think it's a great process of personal growth. Today, I really feel like I've evolved. I'm a new person. I really feel good. The feeling of togetherness that I got from this and the absolute non judgmentalness that I have managed to imbibe, makes me so impressed that I've actually done that. I finally feel like I've reached a nice stage in my life, and I've come to terms with the fact that the five fingers are not alike. We're all different. We all come with our own quirks and fancies and all and that. But yet we come together for a cause, and we all just end up loving each other through that collective expression of our deepest desire. And it's an unforgettable experience. I hope that I can only grow from this more and more and more". (Louise, 30/03/2026)*

Different from top-down policies that are often coercive and not well enforced, our activism brings the need for gender justice to the subjective level.

Art can touch and sensitise in a particular form, allowing for depth and nuance, making the need for equality visible in a way that statistics and exposure to blunt violence may flatten. People in the audience probably do not shift their behaviours overnight, but they are inevitably affected by what they see. Some might feel moved, outraged, angry... Whether attracting or repelling, our activism and message avoid a position of resignation and inspire us to promote change from within.



Beyond workshops and performances, the methodology has also fostered transnational networks of feminist activists and activists. These networks serve as spaces of resource-sharing and community-building, strengthening the social fabric necessary for the sustainability of our movement. Alongside a common purpose, adapting these practices to different circles requires flexibility. Yet this fluidity is a strength since it embodies the organic and horizontal ethos that underpins the collective's core principles and acknowledges that the groups are situated in different political landscapes. Each circle can adopt different techniques since what matters is resonance, so we can continue using activism

to allow stories to surface in circles where creativity and love stimulate us to become otherwise.

Everyday acts of resistance through small acts of care and creative expression that challenge oppression are the heartbeat of feminist futures shaped by gender and intersectional justice. They are a thread in the new social patterns we are weaving together, and that we invite you to join in collective dreaming and doing. May the work of 2026WOMEN inspire you to find your voice and act with love so we strengthen infrastructures that uplift plurality. And that by doing this, the future generations can grow in healthier communities where respect and safety are the rule, not the exception.

Photo credit: Anna Kestens, 2024



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## APPENDICES

Links to 2026WOMEN's artistic productions



Creations



Gallery



Revolution  
is female



Videoclip  
Simawe

## Workshops and activities

Textile workshops (sewing, crafting and patchwork) with Pauline Gaeremynck

Dance workshops with Lara Groeneweg

Plastic and visual arts workshop with Els Renate Aerts

Scenes improvisation with Alix Konadu

Singing workshops with Céline di Maccio

Vocal improvisation with Céline di Maccio

Song writing with Céline di Maccio

Rhythm and body percussion with Sarah Van Impe

Creative writing with Valerie Van Himschoot (Rebelle)

Acting (tableaux vivant) with Katarina Antunovic

Poetry and songwriting with Cleo Klapholz

Weaving workshop with Lady Quintero and Ariadna Chavez (Sangre de mi Sangre)

Textile workshops with Amina Hussen

Forum Theatre with Giulia Ledda

Feminist photography workshop with Valerie Van Himschoot (Rebelle)

Intuitive drawing with Maya Van Treeck

Visual arts with Pauline Gaeremynck

Body-mapping with Maria Teresa Bizarria

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