HEINRICH BÖLL STIFTUNG
DERNEĞİ TÜRKİYE TEMSİLCİLİĞİ

ART, GENDER AND DISPLACEMENT

Festival-Based Participatory Action Research for Co-Creating Political Expression and Solidarity

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Research Report — REBLOOM II, Istanbul, January 2026

Investigators:
Associate Professor Gülay Uğur Göksel
and
Meriç Çağlar

A Note on Language and Anonymity

This report avoids using "migrant" as a generic label that flattens the diversity of participants' legal statuses, life trajectories, and self-identifications. Where the word does appear, it refers to a structural position — the condition of navigating a city and an arts ecosystem as someone without full citizenship rights — rather than to a fixed identity category. Participants' own words are used wherever possible to describe their situations. The terms "artist with migration experience," "displaced artist," or "internationally mobile artist" are used where greater precision is needed.

All participants are identified by first name or pseudonym only, in accordance with the consent procedures approved by the Istanbul Bilgi University Human Studies Ethics Board. No information that could identify a participant's legal status, nationality, or place of residence is included. Where participants are described as coming from a particular country context (e.g., "an artist who lived under mandatory hijab legislation"), this is done only where they have themselves made this information part of their public artistic statement.

Positionality Statement: As co-investigators, we approached this Participatory Action Research through a deliberately collaborative and non-extractive feminist methodology. Recognising that the ethical production of knowledge cannot be separated from the social conditions of its making, we intentionally cultivated a trauma-informed safe space where any form of xenophobia or homophobia was explicitly unwelcome. Rather than operating as detached observers, we engaged in intentional, care-centric participation, actively "holding the space" to accommodate the emotional, physical, and psychosocial needs of the artists throughout the festival. By prioritising relationality, empathy, and active listening over rigid curatorial outputs, we sought to ensure that our methodological framework moved beyond mere observation to foster genuine intersubjective solidarity and co-create a collective political voice alongside the community.

Participants in this study include: Giti (performance artist and dancer), Ida (dancer), Lila (musician and painter), Tomiris (comedian and corporate professional), Rosalie (stand-up comedian), Paige (visual artist), Olivia (visual artist), Faryal (dancer), Joud (musician), Louise Truc (exhibition curator), Ammar Alhamidi (artist and community organiser), Hara Papadatou (festival coordinator), and Nikos Papakostas (executive director).

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Abstract

This report presents the findings of a Participatory Action Research (PAR) study conducted in partnership with the REBLOOM II festival in Istanbul (January 2026). The research examines how artistic practice creates spaces of political expression, intersubjective solidarity, and psychosocial survival for artists navigating Istanbul's urban landscape under conditions of gendered precarity and displacement. Drawing on in-depth qualitative interviews and a focus group discussion with a total of thirteen participants — including ten artists (the majority women, with several male participants whose engagement with anti-patriarchal themes is integral to the research) and three festival organisers — as well as participant observation and post-festival retrospective analysis, the study generates knowledge through the community it works with.

The report is organised around six thematic clusters: (1) the gender–displacement intersection; (2) Istanbul as both constraint and opportunity; (3) the politics of visibility and invisibility; (4) material memory and object-based testimony; (5) REBLOOM as an institutional actor and care-based experimental space; and (6) the strategic role of festivals in longer-term social change. Findings demonstrate that the festival form, structured around feminist care ethics and collective authorship, can meaningfully counter curatorial extractivism and amplify voices systematically excluded from mainstream public discourse. The report concludes with actionable recommendations for REBLOOM, peer organisations, and cultural-policy actors.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction and Literature Review
   1.1 Problem Statement
   1.2 Brief Literature Review
   1.3 Methodology: Ethical Knowledge Production
   1.4 REBLOOM: A Continuing Space for Artistic Expression and Solidarity
   1.5 REBLOOM II: A Space for Artistic Expression and Solidarity Against Intersectional Dominance
   1.6 Report Structure
2. Istanbul and the Artistic Scene
   2.1 The City as Opportunity
   2.2 The City as Constraint
   2.3 The Artistic Ecosystem: Gatekeeping, Gender, and Foreignness
3. The Gender–Displacement Intersection and Material Memory
   3.1 Intersectional Positioning and Embodied Experience
   3.2 Gender Analysis: Patriarchal Structures, Bodily Sovereignty, and Political Claims
   3.3 Material Objects as Sites of Memory and Political Testimony
4. Visibility and Invisibility
   4.1 The Dual Logic of Urban Anonymity
   4.2 Selective Visibility and Gendered Performance Norms
   4.3 Protection versus Exposure: Legal and Social Precarity
   4.4 Collective Visibility as Solidarity Practice
5. REBLOOM as an Institutional Actor: Reflexivity, Care, and Tensions
   5.1 Care and Safety as Organisational Practice
   5.2 Institutional Reflexivity: Acknowledging Blind Spots
6. The Role of Festivals and Strategic Recommendations
   6.1 Temporal Limits and Long-Term Community Building
   6.2 Strategic Recommendations
7. Conclusion
   7.1 Final Synthesis
8. References

1. Introduction and Literature Review

1.1 Problem Statement

Contemporary arts institutions are caught in a structural contradiction: the rhetorical embrace of “diversity” on the one hand, and the extraction of displaced people's trauma for institutional legitimation on the other. Often artists navigating displacement are invited into mainstream arts spaces primarily insofar as they are willing to perform suffering, singularity of identity, and what Tuck (2009) calls a “damage-centred narrative.” Artists are, in effect, asked to confirm the dominant society's pre-existing image of the refugee or the migrant as a figure of pathos, rather than being granted the institutional conditions under which they might exercise greater political agency and aesthetic complexity.

This expectation is further structured through gendered hierarchies of recognition, whereby women and queer artists are disproportionately asked to embody vulnerability as a condition of institutional visibility. Feminist scholarship has long shown that women and queer subjects often become publicly legible through narratives of vulnerability and precarity (Butler, 2004; Ahmed, 2004). Within artistic spaces, this can translate into implicit expectations that women and queer artists embody or narrate vulnerability as a condition of recognition, whereas male artists are more readily permitted to occupy positions of experimentation, critique, or aesthetic autonomy.

This dynamic is particularly felt in Istanbul, a city of approximately sixteen million people that has become one of the world's most significant hubs for artists fleeing censorship, war, and political persecution. The city's position as a liminal space — neither fully inside Europe nor fully outside it, governed by residency regimes that are simultaneously permissive and punitive — creates an uncertain environment for artistic practice. Artists navigating displacement in Istanbul are often simultaneously celebrated for their "freshness" and "outsider perspective" while being denied the structural supports such as stable residency, access to public funding, protection from labour exploitation, that would allow them to sustain independent creative careers.

The REBLOOM II festival, held in Istanbul in January 2026, is designed to disrupt this logic. Grounded in feminist arts-based Participatory Action Research methodology and developed in partnership with artists who have lived experience of displacement, the festival sought not merely to provide a platform but also to co-create, with those artists, the very knowledge categories through which their experiences were interpreted and shared. This report documents, analyses, and critically reflects on that attempt.

1.2 Brief Literature Review

Festival Studies: Liminality and Community Formation

Research on festivals, migration and solidarity has expanded in recent years, but the gendered dimensions of these spaces remain comparatively under-examined. The foundational conceptual vocabulary of festival studies draws on Victor Turner’s notion of liminality and communitas, understanding festivals as “time out of time” where ordinary hierarchies are temporarily suspended and alternative social relations can emerge (Turner, 1969; Falassi, 1987). Building on this, Bennett, Taylor and Woodward (2014) conceptualise festivals as “cosmoscapes”, affective-spatial settings where diverse participants encounter one another and

experiment with forms of coexistence (Bennett, Taylor, & Woodward, 2014, p. 18). Fabiani (2011) similarly conceptualizes festivals as nodes of a "cultural public sphere," in which artistic practices mediate public debate and identity negotiation (pp. 93–96). Pratt (1992) provides a further spatial vocabulary, describing these encounters as "contact zones" in which unequal power relationships are temporarily renegotiated through aesthetic encounter.

Yet this literature tends to treat participants as undifferentiated "publics", with limited attention to how gender and migration experience shape who can access these liminal spaces and under what conditions. Quinn (2005) cautions against over-romanticising the transformative potential of festivals, noting that many ostensibly inclusive events reproduce the social inequalities of the broader contexts in which they operate. Waterman (1998) similarly argues that the politics of who curates, who funds, and who gains access to festival spaces are at least as important as the artistic content itself. Finkel (2010) and Gibson and Connell (2012) have further demonstrated how festivals may serve neoliberal urban branding agendas that exploit marginalised communities while appearing to celebrate them. This critical tradition informs the present research's sustained attention to REBLOOM's institutional dimensions.

Furthermore, feminist scholarship on cultural labour has highlighted that participation in artistic and festival spaces is shaped by gendered inequalities in visibility, labour conditions, and access to institutional networks. Research on the cultural and creative industries shows that women and queer artists and practitioners are disproportionately concentrated in precarious and care-intensive forms of cultural work while remaining underrepresented in positions of curatorial authority and decision-making (Gill, 2007; Conor, Gill, & Taylor, 2015). These dynamics suggest that festival "communities" cannot be understood as neutral publics but rather as spaces structured by gendered divisions of labour, care and recognition, reflecting the gendered power hierarchies of the social contexts in which they are embedded.

Festivals and the Politics of Representation

Scholarship on migration, culture and the arts has begun to address the omissions of mainstream festival studies by analysing how artists with experience of displacement challenge dominant narratives and claim cultural agency. Martiniello (2022) argues that arts and culture are not marginal to migration studies but central to understanding how belonging, citizenship and social change are negotiated in "post-migration" societies. Work on refugee arts in Istanbul also shows that artistic initiatives allow displaced people to redefine themselves beyond victimising frames and to interact with locals as cultural producers (Karakose, 2025). However, even within this literature, gender is often treated as implicit rather than explicit: women artists frequently appear as emblematic figures of vulnerability, but their specific experiences of gendered labour, care, and bodily regulation are rarely analytically centred.

The counter-model proposed by Bishop (2012) and Bourriaud (2002), variously described as "participatory art", "relational aesthetics" or "collaborative practice", emphasises artistic processes in which authorship, interpretation, and political voice are shared between institutional facilitators and community participants. This tradition directly informs REBLOOM's methodological commitments, though the present research also documents the significant practical challenges involved in genuinely democratising curatorial power.

Participatory Action Research: Feminist and Arts-Based Approaches

Participatory Action Research (PAR), rooted in the work of Paulo Freire (1970) and Orlando Fals Borda (1987), seeks to dissolve the boundary between researcher and researched by positioning community members as active agents in the production of knowledge about their own lives. Feminist PAR, developed by Maguire (1987), Fine (1994), and Torre (2009), builds on this foundation by foregrounding the political dimensions of knowledge production by asking not only who produces knowledge, but in whose interest, and with what consequences for those whose lives are being studied.

Arts-based PAR extends the methodological toolkit by treating creative practice such as performance, visual art, writing, and music, as legitimate and politically powerful modes of inquiry (Cahill, 2007; Leavy, 2015). Rather than treating art as an "illustration" of findings arrived at through conventional social-scientific methods, arts-based PAR treats the making of art as itself a form of analysis, a way of knowing that can access dimensions of embodied, emotional, and political experience that resist capture in language alone.

1.3 Methodology: Ethical Knowledge Production

Research Design and Phases

The research was conducted in four phases corresponding to the festival's own programming logic. In the pre-festival phase (October–December 2025), the team conducted preparatory workshops with participating artists and organisers to establish trust, clarify the feminist and non-extractive ethos of the research, introduce participants to the PAR framework, and begin the "Object–Memory–Materiality" process. The workshops also functioned as spaces for collective discussion that informed the subsequent qualitative data collection conducted during the festival phase. The second phase covered the festival itself (January 2026), during which in-depth qualitative interviews and a focus group discussion were conducted with a total of ten artist-participants and three festival organisers, alongside participant observation across all events. Third phase involved the collective dialogue circle, where artists, researchers, and participants came together to discuss their reflections arising from the artistic encounter and to form a collective political voice. The fourth phase consisted of post-festival retrospective analysis drawing on field notes, interview transcripts, and strategic review meetings with the festival's organisational team.

Ethical Framework

The research was approved by and operated under the Istanbul Bilgi University Human Studies Ethics Board. No legal or demographic data (nationality, residency status, immigration documents) were collected. All participation was fully voluntary and no recordings were made without explicit consent. In keeping with the trauma-informed orientation of the research, no participant was required to narrate traumatic experience as a condition of participation. These ethical commitments reflect a substantive political conviction: that the conditions under which knowledge is produced are themselves dimensions of the gender and displacement justice the research seeks to advance.

Participants are identified in this report by first name or pseudonym only. Where a participant's artistic or political public statements have been widely shared in their own name, they may be referred to by first name; where a participant has requested additional anonymity, a pseudonym is used instead.

1.4 REBLOOM: A Continuing Space for Artistic Expression and Solidarity

Held at Postane from January 23-25, 2026, the REBLOOM II festival functioned as a Participatory Action Research (PAR) space where artists navigating the intersection of gender and displacement built practices of political expression, intersubjective solidarity, and psychosocial survival. Acting as a structural counter-model to the curatorial extractivism of mainstream arts institutions, the festival provided the necessary conditions for participants to reclaim their artistic identities away from damage-centred narratives.

This second iteration builds directly upon the foundational work of the inaugural REBLOOM festival, which took place in December 2024. The first festival established a crucial precedent by creating a dedicated space for displaced artists to step out of a precarious "survival mode" and celebrate their unique artistic identities. Through multimedia exhibitions centred on symbolic personal items, film screenings by local and migrant artists, and open academic discussions exploring movement restrictions and urban precarity, REBLOOM I demonstrated the vital need for connection between migrant artists and the local community.

The festival's concept and methodology were developed by Inter Alia, in the context of Outcast Europe and the event was co-organised through a transnational partnership between Inter Alia (Greece), the Association for Migration Research—GAR, Urban.koop, and the migrant-led initiative HUBBAN, with support from the Heinrich Böll Foundation Istanbul Office. Together, these organisers have cultivated an ecosystem where the risks of individual exposure are replaced by a practice of collective visibility and mutual solidarity.

1.5 REBLOOM II: A Space for Artistic Expression and Solidarity Against Intersectional Dominance

The festival's core exhibition featured 11 artists and utilised an "Object-Memory-Materiality" approach, demonstrating how ordinary personal items transform into collective political testimony. Photographs, collages, and installations were displayed alongside a government paper restricting women's mobility, a military notebook, a carpet, and a feather symbolising bodily freedom. Together, these objects embodied plural and resilient narratives of displacement.

Performance and public space were central to the festival as practices of liberation. Dance performances by Ida and Rana—the latter dedicated to the resistance of the people of Iran—proved that artistic practice functions as an ongoing reclamation of bodily autonomy and a political claim to bodily sovereignty after prolonged periods of state surveillance. *The Very Conditions*, directed by Giti and performed alongside Ammar, staged a powerful metaphor for gendered dominance within romantic relationships. Furthermore, documentary screenings directed by Ammar (*I Am Dancing* and *Focus Point*) examined artists' visibility politics and their struggle for survival while using the city as a stage.

REBLOOM II also brought together diverse forms of resistance from across geographies. The short film screenings, in collaboration with the Positively Different Short Film Festival (PDSFF) (*Not Today*, *On my Father's Grave*, *Hi Mom, It's Me, Lou Lou*, *Left Handed*), opened profound discussions on care labor, queer identities, and patriarchal boundaries. Defying the masculine dominance often found in the comedy and music scenes, DJ JOUD's set centered feminine voices in Arab hip-hop, Ritimhane Pera delivered a dynamic percussion performance,

and comedians Rosalie and Tomiris subverted gendered expectations during their stand-up routines.

The "Collective Harvest" dialogue circle, functioning as the festival's primary space for knowledge production, brought researchers and artists together to formulate a collective political voice from these artistic encounters. Concluding with a musical jam session, REBLOOM II successfully amplified systematically excluded voices through a structure grounded in feminist care ethics, creating a transformative ecosystem where the risks of individual exposure were replaced by a practice of collective visibility and mutual solidarity.

1.6 Report Structure

Following this introduction, the report unfolds across six thematic sections that critically examine the intersection of artistic practice, displacement, and gender within the urban context of Istanbul. Section 2 explores the city's dual nature as both a landscape of creative opportunity and a site of profound legal and social constraint, detailing the gatekeeping mechanisms of its artistic ecosystem. Section 3 delves into the intersectional realities of gender and displacement, highlighting how material objects and embodied experiences function as sites of memory and political testimony. Section 4 analyses the complex politics of visibility and invisibility, unpacking the dual logic of urban anonymity and the strategic use of collective visibility as a solidarity practice. Section 5 turns the analytical lens inward to critically reflect on REBLOOM as an institutional actor, evaluating its application of care ethics, institutional reflexivity, and the tensions of internal power dynamics. Finally, Section 6 offers actionable, strategic recommendations for long-term community building and institutional support, while Section 7 synthesises these findings to underscore the vital role of feminist, non-extractive arts frameworks in fostering political agency and social change.

2. Istanbul and the Artistic Scene

2.1 The City as Opportunity

For many of the artists who participated in this research, Istanbul represents the first place in which certain kinds of creative and personal freedom became materially possible. This is articulated most directly by Giti, a performance artist and dancer who trained extensively in her country of origin but was unable to perform publicly there:

> *"I was interested to become a dancer, to become a performance artist, to go on the stage all my life… And I could not do that simply because there was not any field, any space to express yourself. There was always a censorship."* — Giti

Arriving in Istanbul produced a specific, embodied experience of liberation:

> *"When I came to Turkey… I just discovered myself because here I could at least not have hijab. And that was enough for me, just not having a forced hijab to be able to go on a stage, to be able to perform, to be able to express myself."* — Giti
>
> *"Istanbul gave me peace for dance. I came to Turkey, I could dance without stress. Without hijab, without fear"* — Faryal

Participants frequently conceptualise Istanbul as a space of unexpected possibility, precisely because of its relative lack of rigid institutional categorisation. For several migrant artists, the city's density and informality produce what might be described as a "productive urban ambiguity". Giti evokes this through small sensory encounters "the tea, the seagulls, and the possibility of sitting anonymously by the seaside" which allow newcomers to "get lost" in the city and momentarily step outside the surveillance regimes that structured their previous lives. This capacity to become a stranger is not merely a social convenience but a psychological condition for rebuilding artistic practice after displacement.

Participants repeatedly contrasted Istanbul's improvisational administrative environment with the more tightly regulated systems of Northern Europe. As Ammar describes through the notion of a "positive error," the fact that the city is "not really systematic" allows artists to work for extended periods without formal permits, carving out lives in the interstices of regulation. In this sense, Istanbul's urban environment functions through what urban scholars describe as infrastructures of informality, loosely organised systems that enable everyday survival and creativity despite bureaucratic uncertainty (Simone, 2004). For many participants, this informality is not experienced solely as precarity but also as a form of creative latitude that shapes the tempo and intensity of artistic production.

Ammar introduces the concept of the "positive error" in the Turkish administrative system:

> *"Istanbul is not really systematic… that allows you to work for years without formal permits, carving out lives in the cracks of the system. The "beat" of Istanbul is a vital catalyst for creativity."* — Ammar

This non-systematic quality produces what several participants describe as a "sense of luck" — an experience of living in the productive gaps of regulation, which artists from more tightly governed contexts find genuinely liberating. For Rosalie, Istanbul's diversity functions as a specific artistic resource:

> *"Istanbul has a really great advantage of meeting anyone from everywhere. Like you don't normally have back at home… when I enter a community, I deliver something fresh and people are naturally curious with me."* — Rosalie

Lila captures the affective contrast between Istanbul and her city of origin with characteristic directness:

> *"Here there are people coming and going… there is these communities and it's so alive… you get rid of depression easier."* — Lila

These narratives position Istanbul as a paradoxical site of artistic opportunity emerging from institutional ambiguity. For many participants, the city's chaos, diversity, and administrative informality create conditions that make artistic experimentation and personal autonomy materially possible in ways that were not available in their countries of origin. The ability to move relatively anonymously through the city, to build networks across heterogeneous communities, and to operate within the "cracks" of migration systems enables forms of creative and personal reconstruction after displacement. At the same time, the very features that produce this sense of possibility, informality, improvisation, and the absence of rigid institutional structures, also foreshadow the structural uncertainties that shape migrant artists' long-term lives in the city. The opportunity Istanbul provides is therefore inseparable from the precarity that accompanies it.

2.2 The City as Constraint

Against this backdrop of opportunity, participants' accounts also reveal Istanbul as a site of intense constraint, precarity, and what many describe as "everyday negotiation." The city's legal regime for foreign residents is experienced as arbitrary and punitive. Lila describes the material barriers that have restructured her artistic practice:

> *"The problem is with the residency permit… before it was so easier to make this residency permit but now it's not."* — Lila

After returning from a period abroad, she found that street performance, which had previously been a source of income, "wasn't allowed anymore," forcing her to take restaurant work to pay rent. Ammar notes that his own mobility within Turkey is also severely curtailed due to migration regulations that restrict travel outside the city of registration:

> *"I cannot even travel… out of Istanbul."* — Ammar

These accounts suggest that the opportunities described in the previous section are embedded within a broader structure of legal and social precarity. Participants repeatedly emphasise that artistic possibility in Istanbul is inseparable from a constant process of negotiation with bureaucratic uncertainty, informal labour markets, and shifting regulatory frameworks. Rather than stable inclusion within the cultural sector, migrant artists often occupy a condition of institutional liminality in which access to work, mobility, and public visibility remains fragile.

The public sphere itself emerges in participants' narratives as a highly regulated and sometimes securitised environment. Creative interventions that might appear spontaneous often require multiple layers of approval from municipal authorities and police, illustrating the extent to which artistic expression in public space is embedded within broader systems of urban control. Participants therefore describe performing not only artistic labour but also continuous bureaucratic navigation in order to access the city as a stage.

Language constitutes a further dimension of urban constraint. Tomiris describes her early experience in Istanbul in terms of social erasure:

> *"I felt invisible when I didn't speak a word in Turkish. Like, not any person in my normal life, a taxi driver at the shop, it was very difficult. So I had to learn the language to be visible. I had to learn to speak loud Turkish at work."* — Tomiris

Giti adds the dimension of xenophobic hostility, recounting being told directly by locals:

> *""You Iranian people coming, getting our jobs.""* — Giti

This hostility is not merely individual prejudice but reflects a broader political climate in which artists navigating displacement are caught between the state's restrictive residency policies and rising local resentment of their economic presence.

Economic insecurity further compounds these pressures. Participants repeatedly describe the artistic field in Istanbul as characterised by irregular income, limited access to funding, and intense competition for a small number of opportunities. As Nikos observes, many artists remain in "bad shape financially," lacking the initial capital necessary to plan strategically or invest in long-term artistic projects. In this context, migrant artists frequently combine artistic practice with informal or unrelated labour simply to maintain basic economic stability.

Migrant artists in Istanbul navigate a landscape defined simultaneously by possibility and constraint. The same urban informality that creates openings for experimentation also produces conditions of ongoing negotiation, exhaustion, and uncertainty. Legal ambiguity, economic precarity, linguistic barriers, and gendered risks in public space shape the everyday realities of artistic life. Rather than a stable environment for cultural production, the city emerges as a terrain in which opportunity must be continually improvised within structures that remain fundamentally unstable.

2.3 The Artistic Ecosystem: Gatekeeping, Gender, and Foreignness

Participants' accounts of Istanbul's artistic ecosystem reveal a landscape that is simultaneously dynamic and hierarchical. A recurring theme is the gendered structure of gatekeeping. Olivia, an artist, describes the art school environment with unsettling specificity:

> *"All the teachers were men while the students were women… even though women are overtaking the field right now, I feel like the female artists are not being taken seriously. [A teacher] said about a female student: "She'll get pregnant anyway, so it doesn't really matter what she does.""* — Olivia

Feminist scholarship on cultural labour has long documented how creative industries reproduce gendered hierarchies even within spaces that present themselves as progressive or meritocratic (Gill, 2002; Gill, 2014; Conor, Gill, & Taylor, 2015). Women are often highly visible as students, performers, and cultural workers, yet remain underrepresented in positions of authority such as curatorship, institutional leadership, and artistic gatekeeping. Olivia's account illustrates how these structural inequalities are reproduced not only through formal exclusion but through everyday forms of dismissive paternalism that undermine women's artistic credibility. This incident encapsulates the dismissive paternalism that female artists encounter even in ostensibly progressive environments.

Participants also describe gendered power dynamics extending beyond formal institutional settings into the everyday organisation of artistic production. Giti notes that in technical setups and performance preparation, men often "take everything fast," instinctively assuming control over the physical architecture of the performance space. This produces what several artists describe as a pervasive "male energy" within artistic environments, where women must actively assert their presence in order to be included in decision-making circles and project leadership.

In the comedy scene, Rosalie identifies a parallel hierarchical exclusion organised around dedication and social capital:

> *"Especially in the comedy community, if you're not doing enough shows, they don't give [opportunities]. There's a bit of favoritism as well. Hierarchy is always there… And as a migrant… I can only do it like twice a week… So then they have like this: "Oh, you don't have enough dedication as much as we do.""* — Rosalie

This passage reveals how structural disadvantages such as the need to hold a day job and the constraints imposed by visa regimes and economic precarity are reframed within the arts community as individual failure of commitment. The "meritocratic" logic of the arts scene systematically misrecognises structural inequality as personal deficit.

Such dynamics echo broader critiques of the cultural sector, where access to artistic careers is often structured through informal networks, unpaid labour, and expectations of total availability that disproportionately disadvantage migrants, women, and those without

economic safety nets (Gill, 2007; Conor, Gill & Taylor, 2015; McRobbie, 2016). Under these conditions, what appears as meritocracy frequently masks deeper inequalities in access to time, resources, and institutional support.

Ida offers the most trenchant critique of the broader art market's gatekeeping structure:

> *"I haven't been able to enter the art scene in Istanbul… it's like a mafia everywhere anyway, you know, the hierarchy and the connections. Men can take advantage of women and their position because they have the power."* — Ida

Ida's use of the term "mafia" reflects a metaphor commonly used by artists to describe tightly knit networks of influence within cultural fields. Sociological analyses of cultural production have long highlighted how artistic recognition is structured through informal networks, patronage, and the distribution of symbolic capital rather than purely meritocratic evaluation (Bourdieu, 1993). Feminist analyses of creative industries similarly demonstrate how these informal power structures often reproduce gendered hierarchies, enabling gatekeepers to control access to exhibitions, funding, and visibility (Gill, 2002; McRobbie, 2016). In such environments, access to opportunity frequently depends less on the formal evaluation of artistic work than on proximity to influential networks and the ability to navigate closed circles of cultural authority.

At the same time, "foreignness" is not simply a liability. Lila observes a specific dynamic in the art world where foreignness is positively capitalised upon:

> *"In the art field, the more you're like not related, the more attractive it is… being an Iranian artist… It's something good, I think."* — Lila

Participants also note that the value of foreignness within the artistic field is unevenly distributed and often racialised. Giti describes how certain forms of foreignness—particularly appearances associated with Slavic or "Russian" identities—can be perceived as culturally desirable within dance and performance circuits, occasionally translating into greater visibility or employment opportunities.

Yet this same foreignness becomes a liability in other contexts:

> *"Here now they see foreigners as competition for making money… if someone's working some simple job, they're taking, eating their food… So with the art field it's good to be visible, but with the simple life, it's not good to be visible."* — Lila

The structural double bind is clear: celebrated as an artist, targeted as a worker. The "foreignness" that generates symbolic capital in one register of Istanbul life generates hostility in another.

Participants therefore describe Istanbul's artistic ecosystem as a fragile and stratified environment in which recognition is unevenly distributed. While established actors within the cultural sector maintain influence through networks, institutional access, and social capital, migrant artists often remain positioned at the margins of the ecosystem, operating in what several describe as an "underground" sphere of informal collaboration and experimentation while continuing to struggle for broader legitimacy and institutional recognition.

3. The Gender–Displacement Intersection and Material Memory

3.1 Intersectional Positioning and Embodied Experience

One of the central theoretical claims of this research is that gender and displacement are not additive but intersectional categories. The experience of being a woman artist navigating displacement cannot be adequately captured by analysing gender and displacement separately and combining the results. Crenshaw's (1989, 1991) foundational concept of intersectionality, developed in the context of Black women's experiences in the US legal system, insists on the specificity and irreducibility of positionings at the intersection of multiple systems of power. In the REBLOOM context, this claim is borne out with striking clarity.

Intersectional migration scholarship further emphasises that gender, migration status, race, and citizenship interact to shape migrants' access to visibility, recognition, and resources within host societies (Yuval-Davis, 2011; Anthias, 2012). In this sense, the experience of displacement cannot be understood simply as geographic relocation but must be analysed through the layered power relations that structure everyday life in both origin and destination contexts.

Tomiris captures the compounding structure of her situation with concision:

> *"As a foreigner and as a woman, as a non-Turkish resident, it was for me twice harder to adjust and to actually make myself more visible."* — Tomiris

The phrase "twice harder" is analytically important. It is not merely that Tomiris faces both gender discrimination and xenophobia; it is that the two systems interact, each amplifying the other's effects. For Giti, the intersection takes on an embodied dimension: her entire artistic medium is the body, and the body has been the specific target of state censorship:

> *"I guess I do it through my body. First of all, in the very, very early stage, if I want to express it I use my own body… through my body and through my ideas that come with the body and movement and expression."* — Giti

Ida introduces the concept of "internalised immobility", the persistence of state and patriarchal restrictions within the body even after geographic displacement:

> *"I'm outside of that place. But the restriction is still with me. I'm carrying the restriction even outside."* — Ida

These accounts highlight how regimes of control do not disappear simply because individuals cross borders. Feminist scholarship on embodiment emphasises that power often operates through the regulation of bodies, gestures, and everyday movement (Butler, 2004; Ahmed, 2004). As Sara Ahmed suggests, social norms orient bodies toward some forms of movement and away from others, shaping what feels possible, permissible, or risky in public space. Restrictions on bodily expression can therefore become internalised over time with repetition, shaping how individuals inhabit their own bodies even after leaving the political systems that produced those constraints.

This embodied persistence manifests most acutely in performance:

> *"Inside I am moving so free, but my body is not so free because, you know, I'm so not used to be free."* — Ida

Rather than a simple narrative of liberation through migration, this account reveals the ongoing, active work required to reclaim bodily autonomy after years of state-imposed constraint. Ida frames her dance practice as a deliberate process of re-education:

> *"I can practice now on myself to be less shy and be more expressive… it's a matter of practice and it's an ongoing process."* — Ida

Participants' narratives suggest that artistic practice functions as a form of bodily re-learning. For performance artists in particular, dance becomes a method of gradually undoing internalised restrictions and experimenting with new forms of movement, presence, and expression in public space. In this sense, artistic practice operates not only as cultural production but also as a process of reclaiming bodily autonomy after prolonged regimes of surveillance and control.

Rosalie's account introduces the dimension of racial and ethnic marking within feminist and displaced-artist communities themselves. As an Asian woman in Istanbul, she occupies a position that neither "woman with migration experience" nor "Asian woman" fully captures:

> *"Here I feel less criticised as a woman because back home, like, they will criticise every single thing. My nose, for example, they will make fun of my nose."* — Rosalie

The comparative structure of this statement —Istanbul as less oppressive than home country in this particular dimension — refuses the binary of "origin country as oppressive" and "host country as liberating" that structures many mainstream migration narratives. Rosalie's experience is more complex: Istanbul offers release from certain forms of bodily scrutiny while exposing her to other forms of precarity. Her reflections illustrate how racialised and gendered forms of scrutiny travel across national contexts but are reconfigured within new cultural environments. Migration therefore reshapes existing hierarchies rather than simply removing them, producing shifting configurations of privilege, vulnerability, and visibility.

For Faryal, migration was precipitated by direct state intervention:

> *"Istanbul provided the place to dance without the mandatory hijab or the constant threat of judicial summons from a regime that had blocked her social media and attempted to silence her through the courts."* — Faryal

Importantly, Ammar introduces the dimension of male experience within the same patriarchal structures, emphasising that the festival's approach to gender was explicitly anti-patriarchal rather than simply pro-women:

> *"Men also suffer from cultural pressure regarding physical standards and masculinity that affects many men's lives."* — Ammar

This framing of shared patriarchal damage across genders was the basis for the festival's decision to include male artists in its gender discussions, a choice that generated its own tensions (see Section 5.2).

3.2 Gender Analysis: Patriarchal Structures, Bodily Sovereignty, and Political Claims

Participants' experiences illustrate how gendered migration operates simultaneously across several interconnected levels: the institutional level of state bureaucracies, the embodied level of lived experience, and the creative level of artistic response. Feminist scholarship on

migration has long emphasised that states institutionalise gender hierarchies through administrative systems that regulate movement, citizenship, and legal personhood (Yuval-Davis, 2011; Anthias, 2012). Ida identifies a specific legal document that symbolises this bureaucratic control:

> *"A piece of paper from government office, which is for a woman to take to be able to get a passport... to be able to leave the country."* — Ida

This document represents a legal structure in which a woman's ability to travel is contingent upon male approval. Ida elaborates on the broader legal logic underpinning this system:

> *"if you are a woman, you always need a man's permission…You're like an object belonging to a man, and a man should decide the legal stuff for you."* — Ida

These accounts demonstrate how patriarchal authority becomes codified within state bureaucracies. Rather than operating solely through social expectations, gender inequality is institutionalised through legal and administrative procedures that determine who can obtain documents, travel internationally, or exercise legal autonomy.

Rosalie further describes how administrative systems in host contexts can produce new forms of precarity. She highlights the precarity created by shifting residency regulations in Turkey:

> *"And then with what's happening in the political sense lately... they're targeting foreigners. And there's a recent trend lately, like, people's residence permits are being rejected."* — Rosalie

Such regulatory changes illustrate how migrant artists often navigate precarious legal structures in which the ability to remain, work, or create art is contingent upon fluctuating bureaucratic frameworks. Migration therefore produces an ongoing negotiation with administrative systems rather than a stable transition from restriction to freedom. Feminist migration scholarship has long cautioned against framing migration through a simple binary of oppression and liberation; instead, women's mobility frequently produces simultaneous experiences of autonomy and constraint shaped by legal status, labour markets, and gender norms (Morokvašić, 1984; 2004).

The relationship between gender and state power becomes particularly visible in cases where governments directly restrict mobility as a response to political expression. Faryal describes how a former festival participant lost her ability to travel after the state confiscated her passport:

> *"She was here last year. But this year she went back to Iran and they confiscated her passport because she had posted something on Instagram about the government."* — Faryal

This example illustrates how states extend their authority beyond territorial borders by controlling the mobility of citizens. Yet mobility restrictions represent only one dimension of gendered governance. Participants also emphasise that patriarchal control operates directly

through the regulation of women's bodies and artistic expression. Faryal explains how female performers in Iran are criminalised for engaging in dance and music:

> *"In Iran, it is forbidden for women to dance. Even on social media. The Iranian government had our Instagram page shut down. For dancers and singers, especially women dancers and singers, they summoned them to court and banned them." —* Faryal

These restrictions illustrate how state governance extends into the regulation of gendered embodiment, policing how women's bodies may move, appear, and express themselves within public and digital spaces. Feminist scholarship on embodiment highlights that such systems of control often extend beyond legal prohibition to shape how individuals inhabit and experience their own bodies (Butler, 2004; Ahmed, 2004).

Giti reflects on how these forms of control become internalised over time:

> *"I wanted to discover my body as a female, which was always a shame or like, I don't know, like something uncomfortable about being a woman, like touching your own body or like being sensual or whatever. Like it's always being suppressed somehow." — Giti*

Her reflection illustrates how patriarchal governance becomes internalised at the level of embodiment, shaping women's relationships to their own bodies through feelings of shame, discomfort, and self-surveillance. Even after migration removes the immediate legal constraints, these embodied forms of discipline may persist as hesitation, self-censorship, or uncertainty about bodily autonomy. In response to these experiences, participants frequently describe artistic practice as a form of resistance and transformation. Giti recounts performing through intense emotional pain:

> *"I noticed that the first time that it happened was two years ago for me that I was in such a pain and I had to perform in such an environment that was not that artistic to me. ... I cried behind the scene, I cleaned, I made my makeup, and I said, like, I will dance as an act of resistance." —* Giti

Here performance becomes not simply aesthetic expression but an act of political refusal. Through movement and performance, artists transform personal grief and political constraint into forms of embodied agency.

At the same time, festival discussions highlighted that patriarchal systems do not only structure women's experiences but also shape how inequality is perceived and interpreted by men. Feminist scholarship has long emphasised that patriarchal power is sustained not only through formal institutions but also through everyday processes of socialisation that normalise gender hierarchies and render them difficult to recognise. This dynamic reflects the epistemic gap produced by gendered socialisation, in which men may experience patriarchal norms as ordinary while remaining unaware of the structural constraints imposed on women. Such dynamics contribute to the structural reproduction of patriarchy through everyday practices, as gendered assumptions and behaviours are continually reinforced within social and cultural

environments (Bourdieu, 2001; Connell, 2005). Ammar reflects on this dynamic, describing how many men remain unable to recognise the scale of gender inequality surrounding them:

> *"what's happening that this man can reach such a horrible situation. ... And like it was so interesting that those men are really. They live in such a bubble in their head. They don't know what is. I mean we are facing such a crazy culture problem."* — Ammar

Rosalie similarly illustrates how these gendered assumptions become reproduced within artistic spaces, describing the double standards that shape artistic expression in the comedy scene:

> *"most of the male comics, they will talk about sex and their penis and everything, but it's fine because they're male. But when you're a woman, you're doing it like either they really love it and enjoy it, but they will abuse you after, or they will just really hate it from the very beginning."* — Rosalie

These reflections reveal how patriarchal norms are reproduced within artistic spaces, generating unequal expectations regarding bodily expression, sexuality, and public visibility. Rather than operating only through formal institutions, such norms structure the everyday dynamics of artistic communities, influencing which voices are legitimised, which performances are acceptable, and how artists are judged within their professional environments. In this context, displacement does not automatically dissolve the effects of patriarchal governance. Instead, artists continue to navigate gendered expectations within new cultural and artistic settings, where recognition, credibility, and creative freedom remain unevenly distributed. In this sense, artistic practice emerges not only as cultural production but also as a political claim to bodily sovereignty, through which displaced artists contest the gendered structures that seek to regulate mobility, expression, and public visibility.

3.3 Material Objects as Sites of Memory and Political Testimony

One of the most methodologically distinctive dimensions of REBLOOM II was the "Object–Memory–Materiality" process through which participants were invited to bring personal objects holding significance in relation to their experiences of displacement. This approach draws on a rich tradition in feminist and oral history methodology of using material culture as an entry point into narratives that resist capture in conventional interview formats (Appadurai, 1986; Hoskins, 1998; Miller, 2008).

Material culture scholars have noted that personal objects frequently operate as repositories of emotional memory, enabling individuals to articulate experiences that may be difficult to express through direct narration alone (Cvetkovich, 2003). Within migration contexts, such objects often function as anchors connecting personal biography to broader political histories of displacement. They also mediate between the intimate and the political, translating embodied experiences of migration, loss, and adaptation into material forms that can be shared with others.

Giti brought a feather:

> *"I brought a feather as my object… because I'm working with the body, I always want to bring people's attention first to the very, very natural state of being a human."* — Giti

The feather functions as a condensed symbol of the embodied approach that characterises her practice: lightness, naturalness, the possibility of movement and flight. It connects directly to her account of dance as a reclamation of bodily freedom, and to the particular significance of that freedom for someone who trained under a regime that restricted women's access to performance spaces.

Rosalie brought her journal — a material archive of grief, isolation, and eventual reconnection:

> *"I bought it a few months after the guy died... I didn't know anyone. I didn't have friends. I was literally new to this country. All the elements in my journal will be like a guidebook for at least my story of how I went here."* — Rosalie

The journal operates simultaneously as a tool of emotional survival and as a political document, a first-person archive of arrival, loss, and reconstruction that resists both the romanticisation and the erasure of displacement experience. Rosalie describes using it to transform the daily grind:

> *"Every day when you're traveling with Marmaray or dealing with shitty workmates, it becomes like, your life becomes really dull... I start seeing elements... I put the elements together, and I realise, actually, life is not that bad. Life is beautiful."* — Rosalie

Lila brought a painting on recycled paper — a practice she explicitly identifies as therapeutic:

> *"I need to find things, like, to make me feel good, feel relaxed and good. That's something. It helps me. Like sports and painting... it's make me express my feelings as well."* — Lila

The choice of recycled paper is itself significant: it enacts a resourcefulness and transformation that mirrors the broader practice of making art, and making a life, out of available materials under conditions of scarcity.

Ida's object is the most overtly political: a government form required in her home country for a woman to apply for a passport, a document that requires a male guardian's signature:

> *"If you are a woman, you always need a man's permission... as a woman, you're like an object belonging to a man, and a man should decide the legal stuff for you. Because of your gender, you don't have rights, individual rights, for yourself."* — Ida

One of the researchers reflects on how object-based testimony works differently from direct speech:

> *"You see the object and the object looks very simple to you. But then when you read the narration, the story, everything just connects... telling this other stories without even like, you know, pushing people or forcing them to listen."* — Researcher

This observation captures something important about the political aesthetics of the method: it creates conditions for audiences to arrive at understanding through their own interpretive work, generating emotional impact through the audience's own act of connection-making rather than through the imposition of a pre-formed narrative.

The political strength of this method lies precisely in its ability to transform personal artefacts into forms of collective testimony. Rather than presenting audiences with abstract political arguments, object-based storytelling invites audience to interpret connections between individual experience and broader systems of power. Through this process, seemingly ordinary

objects become carriers of migration histories, gendered restrictions, and political struggle, transforming personal memory into a form of collective political testimony.

4. Visibility and Invisibility

4.1 The Dual Logic of Urban Anonymity

The politics of visibility and invisibility run through every aspect of the artists' experience in Istanbul. What is striking in the findings is that these categories do not function as simple opposites, with visible being good, invisible being bad, but as complex, ambivalent, and strategically negotiated conditions. Being seen can be enabling or dangerous; being unseen can be liberating or marginalising.

The act of being seen as a migrant artist in Istanbul therefore becomes a complex performance of selective visibility, where the desire for professional recognition is constantly weighed against the necessity of personal safety. Artists repeatedly describe the need to manage how and when they appear in public space, balancing the risks of exposure with the practical need to build audiences, collaborations, and livelihoods.

Paige articulates the positive dimension of urban anonymity:

> *"I actually really enjoy the feeling of invisibility, like anonymity. That's one of the things I love most about Istanbul… there are so many people, you can kind of fade into the background."* — Paige

This is the urban anonymity theorised by Simmel (1903) in his account of the metropolis: the freedom from the social surveillance of smaller communities, the capacity to reinvent oneself without the weight of prior reputation. For artists who have fled contexts of intense social control — state censorship, homophobic community norms, family patriarchy — the Istanbul crowd offers protective cover.

Yet the same urban scale that provides anonymity also produces invisibility in a more negative sense. Tomiris's account of her first months before she could speak Turkish describes radical social non-existence:

> *"I felt invisible when I didn't speak a word in Turkish. Like, not any person in my normal life, a taxi driver at the shop, it was very difficult. So I had to learn the language to be visible."* — Tomiris

Invisibility in this context is not simply anonymity but a form of social erasure. For migrant artists, becoming visible often requires navigating language barriers, institutional structures, and informal social networks that determine who is recognised as a legitimate participant in the artistic ecosystem.

Giti articulates a third, relational conception of visibility that moves beyond both of these:

> *"When I feel I've been understood and respected, I feel visible."* — Giti

This formulation is significant. The relevant axis is not merely public/private (being seen vs. not being seen) but the quality of recognition, whether being seen also means being heard, understood, and respected in one's complexity. This connects to Honneth's (1995) theory of

recognition as a fundamental condition of human dignity, and to the feminist critique that insists on the difference between recognition and recuperation (Fraser, 2000).

4.2 Selective Visibility and Gendered Performance Norms

Multiple participants describe a pattern of gendered double standards in the public reception of their artistic work. Tomiris observes this in the comedy context:

> *"People expect from female comedians softer humor, and when females do speak in dark humor… they are not accepted the same way as a man comedian person would deliver them."* — Tomiris

Rosalie provides a more viscerally detailed account:

> *"Most of the male comics, they will talk about sex and their penis and everything, but it's fine because they're male. But when you're a woman, you're doing it like either they really love it and enjoy it, but they will abuse you after, or they will just really hate it from the very beginning."* — Rosalie

This double bind — the female comedian who performs "masculine" content risks either sexualisation or rejection — is a specific instance of what Butler (1990) theorises as the regulatory norms of gender performance. Certain forms of public visibility are coded as appropriate for women; transgressing these codes, even in a space that presents itself as progressive, activates punitive social responses.

Ida adds a further dimension — the specifically visual double bind of female artistic visibility:

> *"If you show yourself or your face, you're being threatened that you're not good enough as an artist. At the same time, women are degraded to "just like beautiful face… and not see your talents," or face sexual harassment from male gatekeepers who abuse their power."* — Ida

In response to these pressures, many artists describe developing forms of selective visibility as a feminist survival strategy. This selective visibility often takes the form of identity curation. Artists may separate their public or commercial personas from their deeper, more radical artistic truths in order to avoid unwanted scrutiny while still maintaining professional visibility.

Female artists describe the need for meticulous self-curation as a form of daily labour. Giti describes the experience of performing at a fashion show during the "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement:

> *"I was in a fancy fashion show for an audience that felt like they were coming from other planets. I was appearing polished and professional while privately crying behind the scenes and dedicating my movements as a silent act of resistance for the people of Iran."* — Giti

Her account illustrates how migrant artists often maintain a dual existence: a visible surface that satisfies institutional or market expectations, and an invisible emotional core that carries the weight of political struggle. Artistic visibility therefore becomes not only a matter of recognition but also a carefully managed negotiation between authenticity, safety, and survival.

This dynamic can be understood as a form of *selective visibility*, a feminist survival strategy through which individuals carefully manage how and when they appear in public space. Rather than seeking maximum exposure, artists strategically calibrate their visibility in order to

navigate unequal power relations, institutional expectations, and potential risks of harassment or surveillance. Feminist scholarship on gender performance has long emphasised that visibility is not neutral but structured by social norms that determine whose bodies can appear safely in public and under what conditions (Butler, 1990). For migrant women and queer artists in particular, selective visibility becomes a practical tactic for maintaining both artistic agency and personal safety within precarious political environments.

4.3 Protection versus Exposure: Legal and Social Precarity

In Istanbul, visibility can also carry legal risks. Rosalie describes the English-language comedy community's experience:

> *"In the comedy scene, we are always paranoid there could be an undercover cop."*
> — Rosalie

This is not merely anxiety. Ammar explains the strategic reasoning behind keeping REBLOOM's branding "general" and "international":

> *"A "Syrian Art Festival" or a "Kurdish Art Festival" would attract targeted state surveillance and "dangerous" scrutiny that a broader "migrant" label avoids. This self-censorship is not a lack of courage but a survival mechanism in a city where residency permits are precarious."* — Ammar

Giti describes the experience of writing her political statement for the festival, which explicitly called for regime change:

> *"It felt like risking something and "making it nude in front of everyone." Even in "safe" spaces, the threat of exposure remains a palpable weight."* — Giti

This phrase — "making it nude in front of everyone" — captures something precise about the specific risk faced by artists whose work is politically explicit: they are simultaneously exposing their art and exposing their bodies to state and social retribution. The performance of political dissent is, for displaced artists, always also a performance of vulnerability.

This tension was humorously but poignantly illustrated during a stand-up performance at the festival, where a comedian pointed to an audience member perceived as foreign and joked, "Are you civil police?". While the remark was met with laughter, it revealed the underlying anxiety shared by both performers and audiences in authoritarian contexts—the constant suspicion that one is being watched.

4.4 Collective Visibility as Solidarity Practice

Against the multiple individualising forces that structure these artists' experience of visibility, participants describe a range of collective practices through which vulnerability is managed. Rosalie describes the comedy community's system of mutual warning:

> *"We have just recently started warning everyone before we go on stage, like, no recording and stuff. We just stick out for each other."* — Rosalie

Beyond informal solidarity, the community has engaged in collective political action. Rosalie describes a petition, demanding safer performance spaces:

> *"We signed, like, a petition… We want a safer stage for everyone… whenever we experience harassment in a space, an audience member or another comic, they're very protective. When you raise your voice, they will protect you."* — Rosalie

Rosalie emphasises that male colleagues also signed the petition — making this an instance of precisely the cross-gender solidarity around anti-patriarchal politics that REBLOOM sought to model:

> *"Many male colleagues also added their names to the petition. The perpetrator is banned from the space with no question. You truly feel the solidarity."* — Rosalie

Ammar frames the festival's collective approach through the metaphor of holding hands:

> *"We can hold each other's hand across gender lines to dismantle the patriarchal structures that damage everyone."* — Ammar

Louise, as organiser, describes the festival space as an environment where collective agreements about recording, harassment and, whose voices are centred, replace the atomised vulnerability of individual artists navigating an unwelcoming public sphere:

> *"The idea was also to have maybe like, mostly women or at least a lot of women, especially because we said this show also talks more about, you know, patriarchy and gender."* — Louise

Through these practices, the festival creates a form of collective visibility in which the risks of exposure are no longer borne by individuals alone. Artists who might otherwise navigate the city as isolated and vulnerable figures instead appear together within a shared framework of solidarity and mutual protection. As several participants described it, the festival allows them to "be strangers together", transforming urban anonymity from an individual condition into a collective form of safety.

5. REBLOOM as an Institutional Actor: Reflexivity, Care, and Tensions

5.1 Care and Safety as Organisational Practice

What distinguishes REBLOOM from many comparable arts festivals is its explicit, theorised commitment to care as an organisational principle. Louise articulates this with clarity:

> *"Care for me is really connected to time and space because we need to be together somewhere, like, physically."* — Louise
>
> *"Some of the performances, for example, didn't happen exactly the way it was supposed to because… the artists were not feeling good enough… I think them feeling good is the priority… to create this space where actually artists feel free to say: "I don't feel good now… let's find a solution together.""* — Louise

This capacity to adapt programming in real time to the emotional and physical needs of artists represents a significant organisational achievement — one that requires genuine commitment to care values and a degree of institutional flexibility that many arts organisations lack.

Participants repeatedly described this environment as one in which organisers actively "held the space" for artists experiencing grief, exhaustion, or emotional distress. Giti emphasised how important it was that the organisers were willing to pause, listen, and accommodate moments when artists were not able to perform according to rigid schedules. In this sense, the

festival recognised that for many migrant artists the "work" of artistic creation cannot be separated from the ongoing work of surviving displacement, precarity, and political trauma.

Ammar describes the festival's psychological function for artists who have been living under conditions of "heaviness":

> *"The festival gave artists "true and clear hope" and the necessary motivation to finalise paintings or movies they had abandoned due to the exhaustion of survival. For many, the act of finalising a work reminded them: "Yeah, that's true, I am an artist" — a realisation that had been buried under the heaviness of life in Istanbul."*
> — Ammar

Giti affirms the importance of this care orientation from a participant's perspective:

> *"More spaces like Rebloom, like about caring and like feeling that being cared for or like being free."* — Giti

The connection between care and freedom in this formulation is significant: for artists who have experienced environments of censorship, coercion, and surveillance, the experience of being cared for is not separable from the experience of being free. Safety is a precondition of creative risk-taking, and this is not a soft organisational aspiration but a political claim about the conditions under which genuine artistic expression becomes possible.

In this sense, REBLOOM functions not only as a venue for artistic display but also as a temporary safety infrastructure for artists navigating the emotional and political burdens in displacement. Participants repeatedly emphasised that the festival's most valuable contribution was the creation of a space where empathy, active listening, and mutual support were treated as essential elements of artistic production. By prioritising care and relationality over rigid schedules and output-oriented programming, the organisers deliberately resisted the extractive dynamics that often characterise cultural institutions.

The research team's approach mirrors this care ethic in its methodological commitments. The aspiration to "do feminist action research, which would require creating a safe space where any kind of homophobia or xenophobia would not be welcome," is not simply procedural but reflects a substantive political commitment: a refusal to treat the feminist and anti-racist character of the research as merely symbolic. Instead, these principles shaped how interviews were conducted, how participants interacted within the festival environment, and how knowledge was collectively produced.

This alignment between institutional practice and research methodology is particularly significant within participatory action research frameworks, which emphasise that knowledge production should not be detached from the social relations through which it emerges. In the REBLOOM context, care therefore functions simultaneously as an organisational ethic, a research practice, and a political intervention within the cultural field.

5.2 Institutional Reflexivity: Acknowledging Blind Spots

One of the most significant features of REBLOOM as an institutional actor is its demonstrated capacity for reflexivity — the ability to critically examine its own practices, acknowledge failures, and publicly commit to improvement. Louise engages in candid self-criticism about

the gendered balance of representation, including the relative absence of openly non-heteronormative artists:

> *"Do you think the representation of women with diverse gender identities and sexual orientations is enough in the fest? No, we don't see it… I think there is margin for progress, this is for sure."* — Louise

This acknowledgement reflects a gap between the festival's stated values and its actual inclusivity. The organisers acknowledged that the representation of women artists with diverse gender identities and sexual orientations was less than intended. Ammar articulated both the aspiration and its current limitation:

> *"I want to reach these communities but I lacked the channels or bridges to do so."* — Ammar

Language accessibility is identified as a further concrete failure. Louise recounts a community dinner where two participants who could not speak English were effectively excluded:

> *"These two girls sitting next to me, they could not speak English, almost nothing… maybe we could have thought about it before. So we place them differently in the space."* — Louise

This incident illuminates a structural tension: REBLOOM is committed to inclusion and accessibility, but its operating language is predominantly English which effectively excludes many artists whose first languages are Arabic, Farsi, Turkish, Kurdish, or other languages. The festival's documents note that Arabic, Farsi, and Greek were absent from the closing dialogue circle, a failure that the team acknowledged as a "missed opportunity for a truly holistic cultural exchange." Disability access is identified as a further blind spot.

Hara offers perhaps the most pointed structural critique, addressing the relationship between the festival's gender politics and its actual gender composition at the level of power:

> *"In the bigger something is, the more likely it is that men are there talking about gender issues rather than women."* — Hara

Participants also reflected critically on moments in which attempts at inclusive representation produced more ambivalent outcomes. In some instances, male performers sought to highlight women's artistic contributions by performing or curating works created by women. While these gestures were often framed as acts of solidarity, several participants questioned whether such practices truly constituted representation. As one participant noted, such situations risk reproducing a familiar pattern in which men remain the public narrators of women's experiences. This dynamic reflects a broader tension within feminist cultural spaces: efforts to include male allies can unintentionally recentre male visibility unless institutional practices deliberately prioritise women's voices and authority.

6. The Role of Festivals and Strategic Recommendations

6.1 Temporal Limits and Long-Term Community Building

A recurring theme in the findings is the tension between the temporally limited nature of festival events and the longer-term social and political changes they aspire to support. Louise articulates this with honesty:

> *"I don't think, you know, that the festival will change, like migration policies… The point is for people to get together, to meet each other, to create new relationship networks…"* — Louise
>
> *"They are also very much short lived, you know, you just forget about it… So our main objective is to somehow through our research archive what happened in the festival, make it somehow more everlasting."* — Research team

Both participants and organisers consistently emphasised that the festival format should not be understood as a solution to the structural inequalities that migrant artists face. A three-day cultural event cannot dismantle restrictive residency regimes, labour precarity, or rising xenophobic sentiment in the broader political environment. Rather, its value lies in functioning as a temporary catalyst that allows new relationships, collaborations, and creative trajectories to emerge. In this sense, the festival operates less as an endpoint than as a "seed" for longer-term community formation and project-building.

Hara adds the dimension of the "unseen" social infrastructure that festivals generate:

> *"The most profound impacts of the festival often occur in the unseen spaces — the dinners and shared backstage moments. Artists who met at the previous year's festival eventually became roommates, demonstrating how these events provide the social capital necessary for survival in a precarious city."* — Hara

These informal interactions illustrate how the social impact of festivals often unfolds beyond the visible performances themselves. Shared meals, backstage conversations, and spontaneous collaborations create networks of trust that extend far beyond the temporal boundaries of the event. For migrant artists navigating precarious urban environments, such networks function as critical forms of social capital, enabling participants to share housing, exchange information about work opportunities, and build collaborative artistic projects.

Ammar situates the festival's role in terms of psychological sustenance and creative reactivation. According to him, the festival gives artists "true and clear hope" by creating a deadline and a stage, the festival motivates participants to finalise their work, effectively reminding them of their identity as creators rather than just people navigating precarity. This formulation reminding artists of their identity as creators points to a dimension of the festival's work that is invisible in conventional impact metrics but is consistently identified by participants as among the most significant effects of participation.

In contexts of displacement and economic instability, artistic practice is often pushed to the margins of everyday survival. By providing both a stage and a deadline, the festival temporarily reactivates artistic identities that may have been overshadowed by the practical demands of migration. Participants repeatedly described the experience of completing a performance, exhibition, or artwork as a powerful reminder that they remain artists.

6.2 Strategic Recommendations

1. Fund Continuous Infrastructure

The most fundamental recommendation emerging from this research is for REBLOOM and its peer organisations to prioritise the development of year-round community infrastructure rather than concentrating resources on the annual event. The evidence consistently points to the inadequacy of the current model: the festival generates community, collaboration, and solidarity, and then disappears, leaving artists without the institutional support structures necessary to sustain what has been created.

Ammar proposes two specific models: an "Audio Magazine" — a community-based podcast where artists can record essays, comedy sets, and musical sessions, using sound effects to develop and share their creative work — and a "Community Kitchen" model of bi-weekly gatherings combining food preparation with discussion circles facilitated by psychologists to address the mental health needs of the community. The "Komşu Cafe" model of donation-based sustainability is invoked as a precedent for avoiding the capitalistic devaluation of care labour.

These proposals illustrate a broader shift from event-based programming toward forms of everyday cultural infrastructure that sustain artistic communities beyond the temporal limits of the festival itself. By creating regular spaces for exchange, collaboration, and collective care, such initiatives would allow the relationships and creative momentum generated during the festival to continue developing throughout the year.

2. Implement Funded Open Calls with Local PR

The post-festival retrospective identifies a structural limitation in REBLOOM's current recruitment: the festival operates largely within "closed social bubbles," reaching those already connected to the organising team's networks. The post-festival feedback makes this clear: future iterations must prioritise funded open calls supported by Turkish-language PR professionals to ensure the artist and audience pool are genuinely heterogeneous, reaching beyond existing activist and academic circles.

Expanding outreach is particularly important in a city as socially stratified and linguistically diverse as Istanbul. Without deliberate efforts to reach new communities, festivals risk reproducing the same social networks that already dominate cultural production. Funded open calls, multilingual publicity campaigns, and partnerships with local organisations would help ensure that the festival reaches artists who are not already embedded within existing cultural circuits.

3. Expand to "Movement Experience": Including Internal Displacement

The post-festival reflections suggest reconceptualising participation criteria: moving from a focus on "harsh reasons for leaving" — a frame that risks reducing displacement experience to its most traumatic dimensions — to a broader "movement experience" that would include artists with backgrounds in internal displacement within Turkey. As Ammar noted, Turkish artists who have moved from cities such as Diyarbakır, Manisa or other cities to Istanbul share many of the key experiences that REBLOOM addresses: the disorientation of urban arrival, cultural difference, the challenge of building artistic careers in an unfamiliar environment, and the specific intersection of gender and displacement. Including these artists would not dilute the festival's political focus but enrich it, creating the conditions for solidarity across the citizen/displaced-person divide.

Conceptually, this shift reframes mobility not primarily through legal migration categories but through shared processes of displacement, emplacement and creative survival. By foregrounding movement as a lived experience rather than a legal status, the festival opens space for encounters between migrant artists and those whose trajectories involve internal displacement within Turkey. In this sense, REBLOOM becomes a platform where different forms of mobility intersect through common experiences of urban transition and artistic re-positioning.

4. Shift to Collective Authorship: The Dialogue Circle and the Living Report

The closing dialogue circle of REBLOOM II represents the clearest instantiation of the research's commitment to collective authorship as a political practice. By finalising our research findings through this collective exchange, we ensured the community's voice shaped the final narrative. Ammar articulates the significance of this collective framing and naming process:

> *"Determining the word means you understand exactly what it is."* — Ammar

The recommendation is that this very report be treated as a "living document" that evolves across successive festival iterations, capturing the continuous dialogue of the community. Rather than producing top-down policy briefs, we emphasise the value of a collectively authored document that emerges directly from the community itself. This research report is imagined as a visible and evolving articulation of shared values—gender justice, anti-racism, and solidarity across migration experiences. Translating and sharing these findings reflects the linguistic diversity of the festival participants and ensures that the political commitments and knowledge produced by the community remain accessible to everyone involved.

7. Conclusion

7.1 Final Synthesis

This report has traced the multiple dimensions of what it means to make art at the intersection of gender and displacement in contemporary Istanbul, and to attempt to do so within an institutional framework that takes seriously the political demands of non-extractive feminist knowledge production. The REBLOOM II festival emerges from this analysis as a genuinely significant experiment in cultural politics — imperfect, self-aware, and productively honest about its limitations.

Several findings stand out. First, the intersectional character of participants' experiences confirms that gender and displacement are not additive but mutually constitutive categories of oppression and agency. Tomiris's "twice harder," Ida's "carrying the restriction even outside," and Rosalie's navigation of racial and gender marking simultaneously — these are not illustrations of a theory but its living demonstration. The implications for how arts festivals are conceptualised and funded are direct: programmes that address displacement without foregrounding gender, or that address gender without attending to legal precarity and displacement status, will miss crucial dimensions of the experience they claim to engage.

Second, the findings reveal the centrality of care as an organisational practice, a political orientation, and a form of artistic survival to the lives and work of the artists in this research. Art, for many participants, is not primarily an instrument of political resistance (though it can be that); it is a practice of self-care in conditions that might otherwise produce isolation and despair. Lila's painting on recycled paper, Rosalie's daily journal practice, Ida's "ongoing

process" of teaching her body to be free — these are acts of care-centred creation that conventional impact metrics systematically fail to capture or value.

Third, the analysis of visibility and invisibility reveals these as politically contested categories that artists navigate with sophistication and creativity. The capacity to "fade into the background" of a vast metropolis can be simultaneously a form of freedom and a form of erasure; the experience of being truly seen — as Giti articulates, being "understood and respected" — can be simultaneously a source of dignity and a source of danger. The festival, at its best, creates conditions in which artists can choose the terms of their own visibility, conditions that are systematically denied by the broader social environment.

Fourth, the research confirms the festival form's specific and irreplaceable contribution to long-term social change. Festivals cannot change residency policies directly; they cannot provide legal protection or economic security; they cannot dismantle patriarchal structures through aesthetic experience alone. What they can do is generate the raw material of community — the shared experiences, mutual recognition, and nascent solidarities that social movements require. Rosalie's comedy community's collective petition against harassment illustrates this dynamic precisely: it was the community forged through shared performance — its trust, its collective identity, its sense of shared stake — that made collective political action possible.

Finally, the report's documentation of REBLOOM's internal tensions is not offered as a critique but as an honest accounting. The festival's capacity to name these failures publicly is itself a form of feminist practice. An institution that claims to stand for gender justice while reproducing gendered hierarchies within its own structure undermines the very values it seeks to promote. Addressing these structural contradictions is not a distraction from the festival's political mission but its most necessary expression.

The findings also suggest that the intersection of gender and displacement should not be understood merely as a thematic focus within artistic programming, but as an active site of struggle, negotiation, and reclamation. Within the REBLOOM context, artistic practice frequently becomes a space where artists reclaim forms of expression that were previously restricted or suppressed. For participants such as Giti and Faryal, the act of performing in public — metaphorically "making themselves nude" before an audience — operates less as spectacle than as a ritual of vulnerability and resistance. The festival therefore succeeds most meaningfully when it functions as a space where such risks can be taken collectively within an environment grounded in care, trust, and shared political awareness.

Supporting participatory, displacement-experienced, artist-led arts models is not an aesthetic investment — or not merely that. It is a fundamental political commitment: to the decolonisation of institutional knowledge production, to the realisation of gender justice in cultural life, and to the development of the genuinely empathetic social capacities that democratic societies require. Prejudice toward displaced people is often sustained through ignorance and one-dimensional stereotypes that reduce complex lives to singular labels. The festival's work — anchoring stories in objects, making visible the multi-dimensional human behind the "displaced person" label, insisting on the complexity and political intelligence of those who are most easily reduced — is, in the deepest sense, work for all of us.

8. References

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