



Run Like a Girl



Founded in 2003 by choreographer and teaching artist Wendy Jehlen, ANIKAYA creates performance and community engagement programs that challenge social hierarchies and expand possibilities for connection across cultures, identities, and ways of knowing. Through embodied artistic practice and kinesthetic empathy, ANIKAYA develops cultural interventions that shift how communities understand difference, power, and belonging.

ANIKAYA has conducted artistic and educational initiatives across Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the United States, working with leading cultural practitioners in their regions. Our international initiatives have been supported by cultural diplomacy programs and U.S. embassies worldwide.

Project Leads

Wendy Jehlen

Founder & Artistic Director

ANIKAYA

Fulbright Scholar • Fulbright Specialist • Arts Envoy

Marcel Gbeffa

Founder & Artistic Director

Centre Chorégraphique Multicorps, Cotonou, Benin

Fulbright Scholar in Residence





Vision

Run Like a Girl is a participatory arts initiative designed to address cultural drivers of gender inequality and gender-based violence by transforming the narratives through which societies understand masculinity, femininity, and power.

Across cultures, patriarchal systems rely on emotional conditioning that restricts boys' and men's access to empathy, vulnerability, and emotional self-regulation. Language plays a critical role in enforcing this conditioning. Everyday phrases —“run like a girl,” “don't cry like a girl,” “man up” —teach children from an early age that qualities associated with femininity are weak and shameful.

The result is a social environment in which emotional literacy is suppressed and aggression becomes one of the few culturally permitted forms of emotional expression for men. At the same time, relational capacities historically cultivated among girls—care, cooperation, emotional awareness, and interdependence—are systematically devalued, despite being essential for healthy families, communities, and societies.

Run Like a Girl challenges these narratives by centering girls' lived experiences and reclaiming the social value of relational intelligence.

Approach

Run Like a Girl uses embodied artistic practice as a tool for narrative change.

Participants engage in movement-based exercises that explore cooperation, trust, collective awareness, and shared responsibility—qualities often dismissed as “feminine” but fundamental to nonviolent and resilient communities.

Facilitated dialogue examines the language and cultural assumptions that shape participants’ understanding of gender. Rather than encouraging girls to prove that they can succeed within systems defined by traditionally masculine values such as competition and dominance, the project questions the hierarchy itself.

Participants collectively create a performance based on stories and insights that emerge from the workshops. This process allows participants to publicly reclaim narratives about gender while opening dialogue within their broader communities.

Why

Embodied Practice?

Gender norms are not learned only through ideas—they are learned through the body: how we move, take up space, express emotion, and relate to others. Because these patterns are deeply embodied, they are difficult to shift through discussion or information alone. Artistic practice allows participants to experience alternative ways of being before they have language for them. By physically practicing cooperation, mutual support, emotional expression, and collective awareness, participants can feel new possibilities for gender and power in real time. This embodied experience often makes social assumptions visible in ways that intellectual debate cannot, creating space for deeper reflection and lasting change.



Photo : Marcel Gbeffa

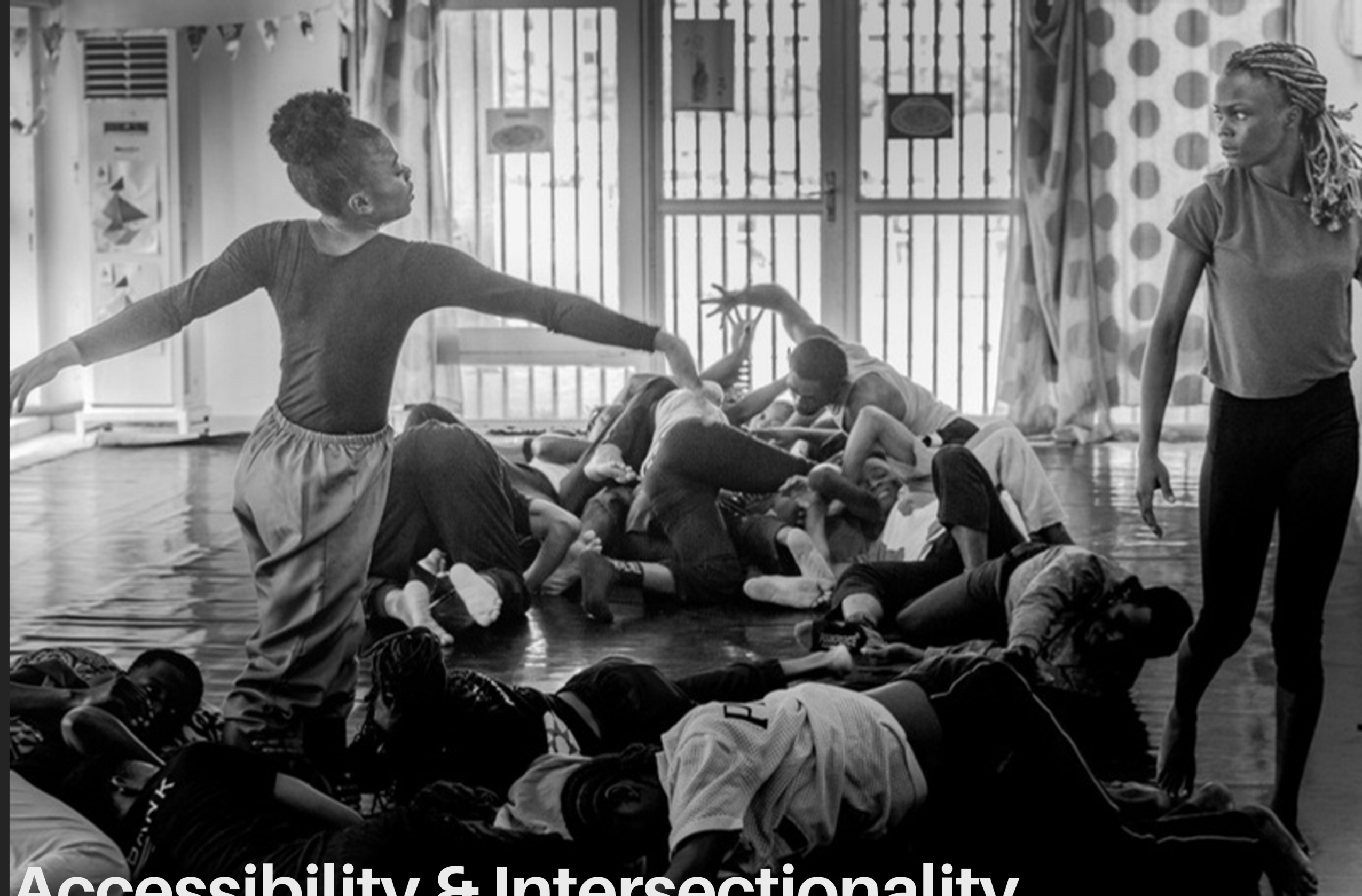
Gender Justice

Run Like a Girl contributes to feminist efforts to address the root causes of gender-based violence by shifting cultural norms around emotion, power, and gender.

The project:

- Challenges patriarchal narratives that equate femininity with weakness
- Centers girls' knowledge and lived experiences as sources of leadership
- Encourages emotional literacy and relational skills among participants of all genders
- Repositions empathy, care, and cooperation as forms of social strength
- Creates community dialogue that questions cultural norms sustaining violence
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By working at the level of language, embodiment, and narrative, Run Like a Girl complements policy and advocacy approaches by addressing the cultural foundations that allow gender inequality and violence to persist.



Accessibility & Intersectionality

Run Like a Girl intentionally brings together participants across gender identities, language modalities, and lived experiences. Lead artist Wendy Jehlen is a nationally-certified American Sign Language-English interpreter and has worked with Deaf artists and communities around the world for more than three decades. Workshops can be conducted directly in sign language, ensuring Deaf participants can fully engage in both the creative and dialogue processes.

Global Impact

Run Like a Girl has been implemented to date in diverse cultural contexts with support from cultural diplomacy initiatives in:

Benin • Brazil • Burkina Faso • Botswana • Haiti • Japan • Mexico • Democratic Republic of Congo

Across these contexts, the project has demonstrated the ability of embodied arts practice to open conversations about gender norms that are often difficult to reach through traditional educational or advocacy frameworks.

Long-Term Cultural Change

Ending gender-based violence requires more than policy change—it requires transforming the cultural narratives and emotional conditioning that normalize inequality in the first place. Run Like a Girl operates at this cultural level. By shifting how participants understand strength, emotion, and gendered behavior, the project helps expand the range of identities and relational practices available to future generations. Participants carry these shifts into their families, artistic communities, and social networks, contributing to a broader ecosystem of feminist cultural change.



Links: www.anikaya.org/run-like-a-girl
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