

Young Mothers [12A]

2025 France/Belgium 105 mins

UK released **15 August 2025**

Director **Luc Dardenne ; Jean-Pierre Dardenne**

Screenplay **Luc Dardenne ; Jean-Pierre Dardenne**

Cinematography **Benoît Dervaux**

Cast **Babette Verbeek** (Jessica); **Elsa Houben** (Julia);
Janaína Halloy Fokan (Ariane); **Lucie Laruelle**
(Perla); **Samia Hilmi** (Naima)

Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne, the Belgian brothers who have twice won the Palme d'Or, emerged in the early 1980s, when they chronicled the hunger strikes from Derry and working-class life on the Continent. In common with Ken Loach, whose films they have helped to produce, they are guided by a compassionate focus on the marginalised. That can make for the devastating, dramatic descents of Rosette or Tori and Lokita.

Conversely, *Young Mothers* is a quietly hopeful ensemble drama. The film, which won two awards at Cannes, including for best screenplay, was inspired by the Dardennes' visit to a maternal support home near Liège, for research into maternal alienation.

Their 13th feature, accordingly set in a Liège shelter for underage mothers, weaves together the lives of five young women, each variously grappling with early motherhood, abandonment, familial discord and too little preparation.

The empathetic story unfolds through patient film-making that exemplifies the principles of direct cinema: the nuts and bolts are intimate moments such as feeding routines, nappy changing and the making of plaintive phone calls.

Pregnant teen Jessica (Babette Verbeek) is desperate to meet and bond with the biological mother who gave her up for adoption. Perla (Lucie

Laruelle) makes frantic calls to an indifferent partner after his release from a young offenders' facility.

Even with the assistance of a caring partner and social supports, former drug addict Julie (Elsa Houben) struggles with sobriety. Fifteen-year-old Ariane (Janaina Halloy Fokan) wants to give up her child for adoption, much to the chagrin of her mother, Nathalie (Christelle Cornil), who imagines her grandchild as a "do-over" baby.

Reteaming with the cinematographer Benoît Dervaux and their long-time editor, Marie-Hélène Dozo, the Dardennes deftly balance these overlapping narratives.

The strain of absent fathers, generational addiction and the cycle of poverty are carefully countered by resilience, love and the flicker of youthful possibility.

Tara Brady, *The Irish Times*, 27 August 2025

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