SYCUR FUTURE EQUAL?

INSIGHTS FROM THE GENDER EQUALITY FESTIVAL 2025







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FOREWORD

We are increasingly anxious about the future, yet we rarely spend enough time imagining in any real detail what the next 10-20 years could look like. We carry a vague sense of fear, but we do not quite know what to do with this fear that affects us both individually and collectively.

This year, Luke Kemp, a researcher at the University of Cambridge who studies the risk of societal collapse, published *The Goliath Curse*. In it, he analyses 5,000 years of human history and concludes that the greatest driver of collapse is inequality: every Goliath carries within them the seeds of their own downfall, doomed precisely by the gap between themselves and the rest. The future, he argues, will be equal or it will not be at all.

When we founded A.L.E.G. in 2004 as a non-governmental organisation promoting gender equality, Romania was not yet a member of the EU, and the laws on equal opportunities (between women and men) and domestic violence had only just been adopted. Until 2003, public institutions had no formal role in preventing domestic violence, and the criminal code applied sanctions only when the victim had at least 90 days



Camelia Proca Founder, Asociation for Liberty and Equality of Gender (A.L.E.G.)

of hospitalisation, meaning they had to be close to death to be noticed. Hardly anyone had heard of NGOs, even though civil society organisations helped draft the new laws, opened the first shelters, and led early awareness campaigns.

We founded an NGO because we wanted social change: to reduce inequality and violence, both in private life, in intimate relationships, and in public spaces. From our own lived experience, we understood that gender inequalities, subtle or blatant, lie at the root of many forms of abuse.

At A.L.E.G., we see gender equality as the practice of sharing power. Instead of endlessly fighting for dominance, people recognise that to thrive - economically but also relationally - we need cooperation. And cooperation begins with respect: for oneself and for others. In couples, friendships, politics or workplaces, we are stronger together when we acknowledge that each person has value in their own way. We treat each other as equals and have fair access to resources, knowledge and decision-making.

Gender equality is also the freedom to have unlimited aspirations to grow in any direction that feels right for you, beyond what is prescribed for your sex. It is a core value of the European Union, and it is up to each of us to treat it not as a formality, but as a foundation for balance and wellbeing.

Through foresight, we aim to build together:

- HOPE that whatever comes our way will not overwhelm us;
- **CONFIDENCE** that we can influence positive change together;
- ACTION that we can begin taking today to reach the future we want.



INTRODUCTION

In 2025, ALEG celebrated 20 years since the first edition of the Gender Equality Festival.

To mark this milestone, we wanted to reflect on what we have built in Romania over the past 20 years in the field of gender equality, where we stand today, and how we can continue to progress in the next decade.

Although significant progress has been made, Romania still scored only 57.5 out of 100 in the latest <u>Gender Equality Index</u>, below the European average, with the main gaps in the health and political domains. This gap reminds us that, despite the achievements of the past 20 years, we still have a long way to go before reaching a society in which gender equality is the norm rather than the exception.

More than 60 participants joined us in this reflective exercise, bringing with them a wide range of backgrounds and life experiences. Approx. 40% of them were young people aged between 14 and 30. Over the course of two days, we imagined together what a more or less equal future might look like, and how such a future would shape our lives, regardless of gender.

We are living through a pivotal moment in history, one in which we are often overwhelmed by multiple crises: economic, social, political, and climate-related. It is only natural that these realities provoke fear. Yet, daily exposure to this sense of fear, fed by social media and the constant stream of news, can wear us down to the point where we stop imagining the future and stop acting in the present, precisely when action is most needed. We need not only energy and determination, but also bridges of

communication and collaboration between us. Only together can we shape a future in which gender equality becomes the norm rather than the exception.

This is why, at the 2025 edition of the Gender Equality Festival, we chose to use futures thinking as a method to help us step back from the assumptions that limit us today and to look at the world with fresh eyes, by anticipating multiple plausible futures.

We began with a look back, using a timeline of the past twenty years of progress in gender equality. Then, gradually, we shifted our focus to 2035. Starting from several scenarios, participants, grouped into six diverse teams, explored together the possible consequences, both positive and negative.

On the second day, participants immersed themselves deeper into 2035, building their own scenarios based on today's realities. Drawing on these, we concluded the two-day process with a set of concrete actions that we can begin right now, bringing us closer to the equal future we want, and to avoid the directions we do not wish to take.

Everything that follows in this booklet stems from the work, reflections and imagination of the participants. We invite you to explore these scenarios and actions as a space for inspiration and as a starting point for the concrete steps we can take, whether as engaged citizens or from positions of decision-making, in building a more equal and equitable future in Romania together.



2004-2009

A.L.E.G. is founded

Alec

- First edition of the Gender Equality Festival in Sibiu
- "Silent Witnesses" exhibition as part of the global "16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence" campaign
- · A.L.E.G. is accredited as a provider of social services by the Directorate for Labour, Family and Social Solidarity
- · Launch of the Psychological Counselling Programme
- · A.L.E.G. wins several awards at the Volunteer Gala



- The National Agency for Equal Opportunities (ANES) is established
- Romania's first Pride parade, GayFest, takes place in Bucharest
- · Launch of the Gender Resource Centre
- Romania becomes an EU member.
- · Amendment to Law 202/2002 through Government Ordinance 84/2004 on equal opportunities for women and men
- Government Ordinance 61/2008 prohibits gender discrimination in access to services/goods
- Government Ordinance 67/2007 eliminates gender-based discrimination in the social security system
- Order of the Ministry of Education introducing diversity education into the curriculum

2016-2021

- A.L.E.G. is licensed as a social service: the Counselling Centre for the Prevention and Combating of Domestic Violence
- Launch of the "Şi Eu Reuşesc" / "I Can Too" programme and the Survivors' Network
- The first #ICanToo community is created in Sibiu
- First Survivors' Forum in Romania
- Workplace anti-harassment policies developed through the "Employers for Respect" project
- A.L.E.G. wins the With and For Girls Award, London
- "Sibiu for Equal Rights" appeal addressed to local election candidates
- · "Cu Alte Cuvinte" Association is established
- Campaigns against gender-based violence: #MeToo, #NoMeansNo, #ThanksForTheFlowers
- Code for Romania's "Civic Labs: Violence at Home" report
- ANES implements a pilot service for victims of sexual violence
- Covid-19 pandemic
- "Together for Women's Safety" march annual public demonstrations



- Romania ratifies the Istanbul Convention
- Street harassment is now punishable by law
- Child pornography, human trafficking, torture and pimping have become offences that can no longer be subject to a statute of

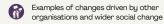
2026-2035



- Activists will succeed in changing laws and influencing the creation
- Draft law: sanctioning forced marriages
- · Emotional education so that people can empathise with and understand one another
- · Respect and opportunities for everyone
- · More people will be educated about gender equality
- Free therapy for children and young people who cannot afford it or who come from disadvantaged backgrounds
- Less hatred and discrimination compared with 2025
- · Activism and community engagement will become part of everyday life for everyone
- Reduced internalised sexism
- Gender equality will be a clearly stated and visibly practised goal

WHAT HAVE WE **ACHIEVED IN 20 YEARS** OF GENDER EQUALITY?





Examples of legislative changes

Expectations for the next 10 years

2010-2015

- Becomes a member of the AWID, ASTRA Network, European WAVE Network focal point, WAVE Coordination Committee
- A.L.E.R.g for A.L.E.G. at the Sibiu Half Marathon
- Launch of the Online Counselling Platform
- Receives permanent accreditation as a social service provider
- Projects focused on preventing domestic violence
- Partnership projects with AVON and TransAgape
- Projects: LOG-IN, SEE, "Gender Equality Coalition"
- First "SlutWalk" in Bucharest
- First Pride parade in Clui
- Gender Equality Coalition is founded
- Sibiu City Hall and Sibiu County Council are led by women
- · Adoption of the Istanbul Convention
- ANES placed under the Ministry of Labour
- Amendments to Law 217/2003 on preventing and combating domestic violence: improved protection for victims, the introduction of the provisional protection order (following the Perla case), electronic monitoring bracelets
- Law on domestic violence



Alec

2022-2025

- A.L.E.G. organises self-defence courses for women
- Organises social theatre camps on youth and equal rights Organises workshops for employers and employees
- Launches the "Safety Kit" guide for refugees
- StoP Domestic Violence project, strengthening community involvement.
- Wins an award at the Public Participation Gala for the "Employers for Respect" campaign
- Launches the "Sibiu for Equal Rights 2024" manifesto
- Code for Romania launches the "Be an Ally" platform for the LGBTQ+ community
- Protests against domestic violence and for the recognition of femicide
- · Survivors share their experiences publicly, highlighting domestic violence, harassment in universities, and workplace harassment
- · Law 174/2018 reintroduces the provisional protection order and expands the definition of domestic violence to include cuber
- Law 183/2020 allows electronic monitoring of perpetrators through electronic bracelets
- The Ministry of Labour, together with A.L.E.G., supported legislation combating workplace violence and harassment
- Romania ratifies ILO Convention 190
- Ordinance 79/2023 introduces the national support programme for in vitro fertilisation



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CURRENT CHALLENGES



Mental health deterioration and rising polarisation, particularly in online spaces

Many young people today are living with anxiety, isolation, and various forms of online violence, in a digital environment that can feel overwhelming and difficult to navigate. Across Europe, anxiety among teenagers has doubled over the past two decades: girls are affected far more frequently, while boys remain at higher risk of suicide. In this context, disinformation and content created or amplified through AI reinforce gender stereotypes and ideas about the "appropriate roles" of women and men. As polarisation increases and young people become trapped in information bubbles, trust declines, and prejudices become more deeply rooted. In Romania, where many young people still lack the support needed to recognise these risks, conspiracy theories circulate easily and are sometimes taken as truth. All these emotional and social pressures erode empathy and the willingness to get involved or to listen to different perspectives. Without empathy, initiatives for gender equality may seem unnecessary, exaggerated, or even threatening, which risks reducing public support for them.



Growing political instability and setbacks in gender equality policies

The 2024 elections brought to the surface a **deep mistrust in democratic institutions**, a phenomenon also visible in <u>other European states</u>. The most recent <u>trust barometer</u> shows that the Government and Parliament are among the least trusted institutions, while the army and the church remain among the most highly regarded. This points to an increasing gap between institutions and the concerns of citizens, particularly of young people. In such a context, social dissatisfaction and a lack of trust can create fertile ground for populist messages and the rise of extremist movements, which often place pressure on women's rights and on gender equality policies. In Romania, we have already seen **attempts to restrict hard-won rights**, such as the <u>legislative proposal</u> that would have further limited access to abortion, already restricted in practice, signalling just how vulnerable these policies become in times of instability.



Rapid technological development and deepening gender inequalities

Cyber violence has become an increasingly common reality for girls and women as the digital environment continues to evolve. For example, the rise of the "manosphere" is spreading and going viral across online platforms, promoting misogynistic narratives and identity models built on antagonism towards women. These communities attract particularly boys and young men, contributing to the normalisation of digital violence, the spread of stereotypes, and the rejection of gender equality, deepening divisions between groups. Across Europe, 1 in 10 women has experienced some form of online violence since the age of 15, and emerging technologies (AI, virtual reality, augmented reality) are amplifying these risks, from harassment and stalking to doxing, deepfakes, cyberbullying, or grooming. In Romania, a recent case highlights the severity of the issue: a website with over 60,000 users published intimate images obtained without consent, some of which were altered using AI to sexualise the victims. In parallel, the bias embedded in algorithms and AI can reproduce or even amplify gender discrimination in areas such as recruitment, access to financial services, crime prevention and security, education, media, healthcare, and public services.



CURRENT CHALLENGES



Rising tensions within social movements, including the gender equality movement

Organisations defending the rights of women and other marginalised groups are now facing an increasingly challenging environment, largely due to **the rise of anti-gender movements and growing external pressures.** Across Europe, <u>funding for organisations opposing gender equality</u> has increased, from \$81.3 million between 2009 and 2018 to \$1.18 billion between 2019 and 2025, with Romania among the top 10 destinations for these funds. At the same time, many organisations supporting women's rights are **experiencing significant cuts to their funding**: UN Women reports that <u>1 in 3 organisations</u> working to combat violence against women have had to cease their activities due to funding reductions. This situation is further exacerbated by <u>online harassment</u>, <u>threats, and personal or organisational attacks</u>, creating a climate of fear and vulnerability. All these dynamics place additional pressure on gender equality movements, making solidarity and continuity in activism more difficult to sustain.



Reduced access to sexual and reproductive health services

Although legislation permits abortion on request up to 14 weeks, in practice, access is severely restricted. More than 80% of public medical units do not provide abortion on request or cannot be contacted, while conscientious objection has become the rule for refusal rather than the exception. To these barriers are added the actions of anti-abortion organisations, such as so-called "crisis pregnancy centres", which use tactics like scheduling appointments after the legal limit, providing misleading information about the procedure, or applying emotional pressure designed to dissuade women from exercising their rights. Without real access to the public system, many are pushed towards costly private services, which are not covered by the public health insurance system. Problems arise even at the level of prevention: contraceptives have not been funded by the Ministry of Health since 2013, and comprehensive sexuality education remains limited or absent in most places. All these barriers disproportionately affect women with low incomes, teenage girls, and women in rural areas, turning a legal right into a privilege and deepening gender inequalities.



Growing collective fatigue and declining civic engagement

In recent years, organisations defending human rights and gender equality have been operating in an increasingly challenging environment. In many European countries, civic space has narrowed amid the rise of the far right and attempts to discredit NGOs through disinformation campaigns, harassment, or even restrictive legislation. This external pressure is also felt in Romania, where small NGO teams must meet the growing needs of their communities, often with limited resources and in a context where cooperation with public institutions can be difficult. Recent data show that nearly half of employees in Romanian civil society organisations experience high or very high levels of burnout, while just under a third of members and volunteers report the same. For organisations working on gender equality, frequently exposed to anti-gender attacks and to restricted access to financial and human resources, this fatigue accumulates even more quickly. And collective exhaustion affects not only the continuity of activism but also the democratic health of society. When civic actors are overwhelmed, the space for dialogue, public accountability, and the protection of fundamental rights shrinks, while the risk of backsliding on gender equality increases.



WHAT DOES 2035 LOOK LIKE? 6 FUTURE SCENARIOS*

LEGENDĂ



2035 scenario



Today's signal pointing us to the 2035 scenario



The revolt of the invisible shifts the balance of power

By 2035, the frustration accumulated among women as a result of persistent inequalities and social pressures has given rise to radical movements of self-assertion. Increasing numbers of women refuse to accept the dynamics of subordination and assert themselves publicly with greater confidence, overcoming the fears and inhibitions that had previously held them back. Under pressure from these groups, new policies are introduced that give women a stronger voice in decisions that directly affect them, altering the balance of power between genders. At the same time, currents such as the "femosphere" and #roughgirl, amplified by online communities, promote a tougher, and at times hostile, stance towards men, leading to aggressive behaviours and heightened tensions in some communities.



The rise of unassisted births

The Free Birth Society trend promotes giving birth at home without medical support, exposing mothers and babies to serious and potentially life-threatening risks. Against a backdrop of disinformation, trust in conspiracy theories, and the obstetric violence many women experience in Romania, this trend risks taking hold here as well.



When economic autonomy rewrites the rules

By 2035, political interest in gender equality has grown alongside the emergence of a generation of women who are more educated and financially independent. Educational reform, with a strong focus on financial literacy and career guidance, has made it easier for them to enter the labour market and has reduced the feminisation of poverty. National programmes supporting economic independence have contributed to more balanced relationships and a decline in domestic violence. Against the backdrop of these transformations, public pressure has pushed politicians to prioritise education and healthcare as the foundation of a prosperous economy.



Businesses owned by women are more profitable

A recent ING Bank study shows that companies in Romania owned entirely by women are more profitable, with a profit margin of 12.3%, above the average recorded by male-led or mixed companies. In 2024, one in four Romanian businesses was fully owned by women. This study highlights the significant potential that women's entrepreneurship holds for the economy and the labour market.



The era in which AI is held accountable for its mistakes

By 2035, after years in which frequent AI errors disrupted everyday life, society has undergone a major shift in direction. Public complaints and social pressure have led to stricter new rules: AI systems are monitored, evaluated, and automatically restricted whenever they generate inaccurate information. If they exceed a set error threshold, applications are temporarily suspended and cannot operate until they are revalidated. Within this new framework, AI is used solely as a tool for information and synthesis, and people have returned to critical thinking and careful verification of data. AI is no longer treated as a source of truth, but as a tool that must be checked.



Citizens write an Al's "Constitution"

In 2024, Anthropic and the Collective Intelligence Project carried out a deliberative process in which more than 1,000 citizens contributed to a "constitution" used to train an AI model. Subsequent evaluations showed that the resulting model displayed fewer biases, including gender bias, compared with the standard model, while maintaining the same level of technical competence. It is one of the first examples in which public participation has reduced discrimination in AI.







WHAT DOES 2035 LOOK LIKE? 6 FUTURE SCENARIOS



Solidarity returns to centre stage

By 2035, civic education, ethics and media literacy are integrated into schools for all ages, while anti-hate speech programmes help to reduce tensions in public life. Local authorities actively support communities through participatory projects that strengthen collaboration and teamwork. NGOs adopt transparent practices, openly publishing their results, and a National NGO Register makes it easier for people to access initiatives and volunteer opportunities. Through these changes, more citizens choose to engage in long-term actions that make a difference in their communities.



Timișoara pilots participatory budgeting in high schools

The Timişoara City Hall has recently launched Romania's first participatory budgeting programme for high schools, in which 300 students proposed 29 educational and community projects. The initiative gathered over 6,500 votes and achieved a 76% participation rate. Such programmes help strengthen collaboration, civic responsibility and trust between youth and institutions.



Sexuality becomes a protected right

By 2035, sexuality is treated as a fundamental right and safeguarding it becomes a public priority. Sexual abuse legislation is strengthened, and institutions respond swiftly to any form of violence. NGOs access dedicated funding to develop sex education programmes for both girls and boys, helping young people better understand their own bodies, contraception methods and the principle of shared responsibility in relationships. At the same time, programmes aimed at engaging men more actively, through wider access to male contraceptives and education on preventing unwanted pregnancies, help reduce current pressures and inequalities, and reinforce a culture of consent, safety, and shared responsibility.



Romania's first sexual education festival

A 16-year-old organised the "Empower Youth" festival, the first student-initiated event dedicated to sexual education, bringing together national NGOs and offering workshops and resources on reproductive health. Initiatives like this show how young people are taking on roles that institutions often avoid, paving the way towards a culture of responsibility and informed decision-making.



A generation that puts the brakes on the noise

By 2035, the mental health crisis will have prompted more and more well-prepared young people to enter politics and promote policies that reduce digital overstimulation. Cities are redesigned to include accessible community spaces, the Children's Palace is expanded and modernised to support the discovery of personal passions, and institutions implement clear child-protection policies that limit screen exposure. Volunteering becomes an integral part of the educational pathway, strengthening civic engagement and community relationships. Together, these measures offer real alternatives to an overwhelming digital environment and reduce anxiety and social comparison.



A screen-free camp for teenagers

The organisation Zi de Bine has run Romania's first "digital detox" camp: a week without screens, during which teenagers took part in offline activities designed to reduce anxiety and foster real connection.

Gen Z is rewriting the digital rules ctrl+alt+reclaim, Europe's first youthled digital rights movement, including youth from Romania, is calling for meaningful youth involvement in EU digital policymaking, "safety-by-design" standards, and reduced Big Tech influence, to create a healthier and safer online environment.

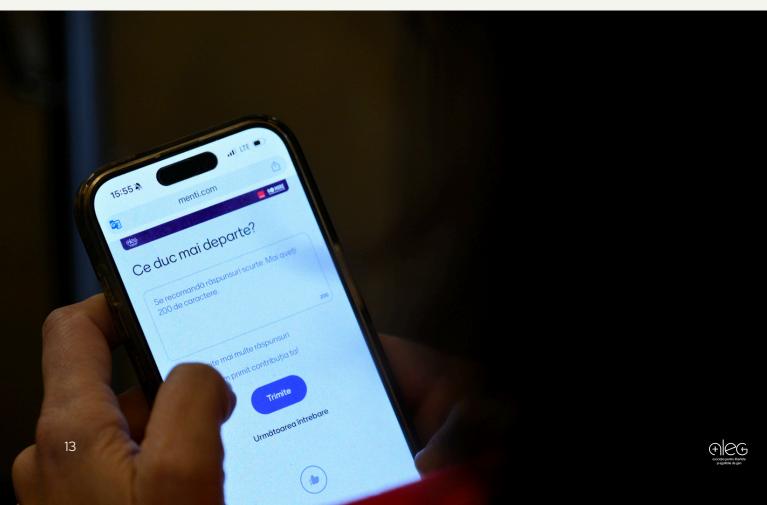


WHAT CAN WE DO TODAY FOR A MORE EQUAL AND EQUITABLE FUTURE?



What can I do as a policymaker?

- Integrate financial education, sexual and reproductive education, mental health, and media literacy into the national curriculum.
- Modernise Youth Centres and expand non-formal programmes for young people's career development.
- Limit mobile phone use in schools through clear and enforceable policies.
- Collect and publish official data on unpaid work and the economic value of women's participation in the labour market, to gain an accurate understanding of the economy.
- Assess the cost of gender-based violence for communities and workplaces by initiating research in collaboration with universities, in order to strengthen the case for investing in prevention.
- Implement policies that combat the feminisation of poverty by increasing access to education, employment and economic independence programmes.
- Ensure sustained funding and access to sexual and reproductive health services, including free contraception in both urban and rural areas.
- Strengthen legislation against paedophilia, digital violence and online abuse.
- Carry out national information and awareness campaigns on disinformation, digital manipulation and the risks of emerging technologies (e.g. deepfakes).
- Support the adoption and implemention of European digital safety regulations (e.g. the Al Act and the Digital Services Act), ensuring their clear transposition into national law, strong protection measures for citizens, especially young people, and accountability from technology companies.



WHAT CAN WE DO TODAY FOR A MORE EQUAL AND EQUITABLE FUTURE?



What can I do as a young person?

- **Be an active bystander** when you witness bullying, harassment, or violence, whether at school, at work, in public spaces, or online (here are 5 steps to becoming an active bystander).
- **Start a club at your school** (debate, gender equality, media literacy, financial education, sexual education, or mental health).
- **Create a safe discussion group** (together with an NGO) where your peers can speak freely about sensitive topics: relationships, stereotypes, anxiety, social pressure.
- **Get involved in volunteering** or community projects that address issues such as gender equality, mental health, education, or support for vulnerable groups.
- **Start a petition in your school.** For example, to include financial education or media literacy in the "Săptămâna Altfel (Different Week)" programme, or to provide free menstrual products in school (see the <u>lele Sânziene</u> Association's campaign).
- Take part in campaigns, peaceful protests, and civic actions that promote democratic values, gender equality, and the fight against violence.
- **Use your voice online.** Promote causes you believe in, challenge stereotypes, and share verified information.



What can the community do (schools, universities, NGOs, businesses)?

- **Introduce clubs and activities** dedicated to financial education, sexual and reproductive education, mental health, and media literacy.
- Organise debates and workshops on gender equality, healthy relationships, and violence prevention.
- Create support groups for young people and for survivors of violence.
- Provide training for teachers on gender equality, non-violent communication, and mental health.
- **Expand non-formal programmes:** camps, entrepreneurship labs, and community spaces for offline activities.
- **Run local campaigns** on women's unpaid work, and on the impact of menopause, pregnancy, and motherhood.
- Build alliances between NGOs, and also with the academic and business sectors, to enable joint action and greater impact.
- Ensure transparency in NGO communication (clear activity reports, impact, resources).
- Use community storytelling, real stories, not just statistics, to build empathy and engagement.
- Promote local role models of civic engagement ("community champions" as inspiration).
- Organise campaigns on Al and digital safety, critical thinking, and deepfake awareness.
- Establish ethical rules for the use of the internet and technology in schools and community spaces.











