

Defending Gender Justice: **Resolve not Retreat**

Roundtable co-hosted by Global 50/50 and The Lancet
Geneva on the margins of the World Health Assembly

19 May 2026

Follow-up to the Lancet Commission on Achieving Gender Justice for
Global Health Equity (2025)

Purpose and context

This closed-door roundtable, held under Chatham House Rule on the margins of the 2026 World Health Assembly, brought together senior leaders from multilateral institutions, civil society, academia, the legal sector, and independent experts.

The meeting was hosted by The Lancet and Global 50/50 and was the fourth in a linked series of convenings in 2025–2026. Previous events were held at the Commission on the Status of Women, Women Deliver, and the Brocher Foundation.

In today's adverse political environment for social justice and progressive movements, both organisers and participants agreed that it is more important than ever to uphold systems of accountability – based on independent monitoring, transparency, and remedial action – to promote gender justice. The purpose of the meeting was to take stock of progress on the recommendations made by the Lancet Commission on Achieving Gender Justice for Global Health Equity, published in April 2025, and to identify where collective or more aligned action over the next twelve months could deliver concrete movement.

The Commission had examined six areas: gender justice for all people; why definitions matter; the weaponisation of gender; gender and the global health workforce; investments and financing; and systems of accountability – and produced extensive recommendations. Four were selected for discussion at this roundtable, based on relevance and potential for action.

A changed atmosphere

Several participants noted that the mood in the room was strikingly different from a year ago. At previous meetings, including one on the Lancet Gender Commission held at the 2025 World Health Assembly, and particularly at the 2025 Commission on the Status of Women shortly after the change in US administration, participants described a pervasive sense of shock. This year, the

atmosphere was resolute, determined, and positioned towards building momentum. The movements for gender justice are now focused on ways forward rather than cataloguing losses.

Nonetheless, the context remained bleak. The Global 50/50 2025 report documented a one-third reduction in diversity, equity, and inclusion policies among health organisations exposed to US federal funding. Participants described the policing of language and the risks of self-censorship – including the ceding of ground even before external pressures are applied. Participants argued that the US executive orders have been interpreted in a highly conservative manner, especially since the orders are not in themselves legally enforceable.

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reduction in diversity, equity, and inclusion policies among health organisations exposed to US federal funding

Source · Global 50/50 2025 report

“The weaponisation of gender didn’t begin with this US administration – we said in the Commission, submitted days before the 2025 inauguration, that the train was already coming down the line. What has changed is that it has reached inside our own institutions. These are the most adverse conditions for anyone concerned with social justice in any of our lifetimes. And yet, a year on, what strikes me is how much practical energy there now is to move forward – together, and with more joined-up strategies than we’ve attempted before.”

Sarah Hawkes
Co-CEO, Global 50/50

What the pre-convening survey found

An anonymous survey sent to approximately 160 senior people working in the gender justice space, with 42 responses, provided context for the roundtable. Three main issues were identified from the survey:

First, funding pressures have cascading consequences. Respondents described a domino effect in which funding cuts ripple outward, steadily narrowing the institutional spaces and interlocutors available for engagement.

// “The funding is having a domino effect – the disbanding of gender teams, the reframing of what appears to be acceptable, the work is vilified and defunded, the people we could engage with in governments and multilaterals are not as present as they used to be. Almost like the self-stigma experienced in the mental health or HIV fields.”

Second, respondents converged on what is working: organising and mobilising; new financing strategies; using evidence in new ways; and legal action. No single strategy was considered to be sufficient; instead respondents emphasised the need for joined-up action on multiple fronts and a stronger communications infrastructure.

Third, when asked what the field should do more of, just over half of respondents identified cross-movement alliances – spanning health, climate, labour, and legal movements. The next two priorities were safer spaces for convening and better data and evidence.

Themes from the roundtable

Five breakout groups reported back on proposals linked to the four selected Commission recommendations. The following summary draws together the proposals, the plenary discussion that followed, and closing reflections.

01

A standing accountability mechanism: the Lancet Countdown on Gender Justice

The proposal for a Lancet Countdown on Gender Justice received strong backing. This would be an annual mechanism holding health and gender

policy and practice to account, tracking what has been implemented and actioned, and where commitments remain on paper. The proposal built directly on the Commission's recommendation for an international accountability framework that bridges the gap between gender accountability mechanisms (such as the Commission on the Status of Women) and health accountability mechanisms (such as SDG 3 reporting), which tend to address gender only in relation to women's reproductive health.

"Accountability means monitoring, bringing people together to examine what that monitoring reveals, and then taking action. That's the cycle that creates change. We've done it on climate, on Reproductive, Maternal, Newborn, and Child Health – now it's time to do it on gender justice. And I look forward to doing it in partnership with Global 50/50."

Richard Horton
Editor-in-Chief, The Lancet

The question of funding was raised early and pointedly.

// "Everybody loves to talk the talk of accountability, but nobody wants to fund it."

The discussion raised examples of other Lancet accountability mechanisms. The Lancet Countdown on Climate and Health established an evidence base, demonstrating to funders that a credible group had provided rigorous work, and sought funding to turn recommendations into action. After several years, further substantial funding has been provided, enabling not just a global countdown but regional countdowns across Latin America, Europe, Asia and Africa. A similar path was traced for the Lancet Countdown 2030 addressing reproductive, maternal, neonatal, child and adolescent health and working with a range of partners including WHO and UNICEF. A variant model was also discussed: the newly launched Lancet Countdown on Health and Plastics is organised around stakeholders rather than countries, which avoids the political sensitivities of country rankings while maintaining accountability pressure on specific actors, including corporations.

In short, the Lancet Commission on Achieving Gender Justice for Global Health Equity has already provided the foundational evidence; a Countdown on Gender Justice is now recommended.

02 Language, framing and the politics of gender

Within the health sector, the understanding of the anti-rights movement was noted to be outdated, and the analytical skills required to counter it are mismatched to the challenge. Unless the analysis of the problem is accurate and better politically informed, the response will be poorly calibrated.

Some expressed the opinion that at the heart of this challenge is the word 'gender' itself. Despite decades of scholarship and widely adopted global commitments, there is still profound confusion about the distinction between sex, gender identity, and gender as a social, structural, and political construct. As participants at the earlier Brocher Foundation meeting had also noted, sex and gender continue to be conflated, and gender itself is widely misunderstood, frequently portrayed as an issue of individual identity rather than recognised as a structural and political construction bound up with the distribution of power across all aspects of society. The anti-rights movement has deliberately exploited this confusion, while allies within the gender justice movement sometimes misstate the distinction themselves.

A strategic response was proposed: rather than fighting over definitions, the movement should rally behind the principle of inclusion – by sex, by gender, for women, for men, for non-binary and trans people – and deploy evidence both strategically and politically. As one participant stated, the opposition already knows the evidence, and anti-rights movements are not unified in their definitions but coalesce around shared principles and a common agenda. The task for the gender justice movement is to move away from internal definitional disputes and more effectively address the politics.

// “The anti-rights group are not all unified in their definitions either, but they get together behind the principles. We spend a lot of time generating evidence to convince people. These people know the evidence. It’s time to add the politics.”

An observation was offered on cross-movement strategy: in settings where the door on gender or sexuality is closed, disability rights or another adjacent framing can serve as an entry point. One participant described doing this for many years in China, where human rights language was prohibited but disability rights language was permitted, and channelling everything through that frame. The lesson is that when direct engagement on gender is blocked, adjacent framings can open space – a low-hanging fruit that the movement underuses.

One proposed reframing was to shift the entry point from 'gender justice' to 'justice', linking explicitly to democracy and broader political movements. It was immediately noted that 'justice', as well as other terms and values, is also being weaponised – underscoring that the problem is political, not just lexical.

A final proposed framing was to position addressing gender as good science. Gender analysis and action produce more targeted health interventions, more efficient use of resources, and better health outcomes. This framing does not shy away from the politics but can reach audiences and institutions where a more justice-oriented framing faces resistance.

03

Gender justice as part of the democracy struggle

The attack on gender justice is not happening in isolation but is part of a wider assault on democratic institutions, and the separation of powers – legislative, executive, judicial – is breaking down. Gender rights are collapsing alongside democratic norms, not independently of them.

The discussion highlighted specifics. In Kenya, a recent High Court ruling criminalised both a 17-year-old and her healthcare provider, even though there are constitutional protections for abortion services for adolescents and rape survivors. The case illustrates the gap between legal frameworks and judicial practice, and the consequences when democratic norms, justice, rights and public health are disconnected.

Participants drew parallels with strategies employed to counter these anti-democratic waves: targeted funding, strategic mobilisation of young people

(as happened in Hungary), and a framing centred on restoring the rule of law and democratic institutions. These strategies can and have been learned and adapted across borders. The gender justice movement in health, by contrast, risks remaining within its own professional and academic circles. A strong call was made to develop a narrative that brings together gender justice, public health, and democratic agendas. It was also noted that the movement needs to move beyond global-level engagement and work more with regional strategies such as the African Union's Agenda 2063 and ASEAN processes. To counter the anti-gender, anti-rights movement, the field needs to build the kind of strategic communications infrastructure that can operate at the pace and scale of political contestation.

“How do we respond, not react? We have amazing diagnosis, but we need to get out of our circles – out of this wonderful academic professional circle. There are other things we can do beyond the painful but somehow comfortable space we’re in.”

04 Sex-disaggregated data: from compliance to system design

The discussion on data reiterated that the field does not need more calls for sex disaggregation. It needs to embed sex-disaggregation into routine monitoring and evaluation systems as standard practice, not as a compliance add-on.

“UN Member States have been calling for sex-disaggregated data since 1975 – and here we are.”

The SAGER guidelines (Sex and Gender Equity in Research), adopted by WHO in 2023, were cited as a specific mechanism for embedding gender analysis into research practices. Addressing the intersections of vulnerability – age, disability, race, ethnicity, indigeneity – alongside sex allows greater targeting of resources to make significant differences on health inequities. Participants proposed combining quantitative evidence with testimonials and lived experience, moving from describing inequities to building the case for policy change.

A concrete opportunity was identified in the current disruption to the Demographic and Health Surveys programme. Funding cuts have prompted countries to invest in civil registration and vital statistics systems. As national data systems are redesigned, the movement can join that coalition and ensure gender is incorporated from the outset.

05 The health workforce, curricula, and institutional embedding

The conversation on the health workforce focused on frontline workers. These health workers are predominantly women, and they are the first and primary point of contact for many women and communities. Gender is largely absent from training, however, and this gap needs to be addressed. Some countries are already leading the way on embedding gender into health worker curricula. India's programme on gender and medical education and the work of Zambia's National Health Research Authority were both cited as evidence that progress is being made, particularly in the global south.

06 Leadership transitions: feminist leadership, not just female leadership

Several major leadership appointments are due within the next 18 months, including the WHO Director-General, the UN Secretary-General, the Global Fund Executive Director, and the UN Women Executive Director. Participants highlighted that these represent significant windows of opportunity – but the discussion pushed back on the simplistic framing of 'put a woman at the top'.

Three concerns were raised. First, the risk of the glass cliff: placing a woman in charge of an institution that is being dismantled risks setting her up to fail. Second, participants reflected candidly that having women at the helm of major institutions – including at UNFPA, UNICEF and the IMF – has not, on its own, translated into delivery of a gender agenda – a gap they attributed less to individual leaders than to a field that has not demanded accountability for gender outcomes. Third, evidence that impact comes from feminist principles and practice, not just the gender identity of the

leader. Specific examples were cited: two former WHO Directors-General transformed the organisation and created genuine institutional space for women to progress and for gender equity and rights to be addressed within its work. Both were women whose feminist leadership practice made a tangible difference.

// “We’ve had women in leadership for years. They make promising statements when they come in, but the gender agenda just gets dropped, and we’re failing to hold them to account. We are part of the same system, and the system is fundamentally wrong.”

What matters, participants concluded, is not a woman at the top but a feminist at the top – and the movement needs the analytical tools to distinguish between the two before lending its support. Global 50/50 has a track record here: in the last WHO DG election, it assessed the top five candidates against the SDG framework, and three campaigns subsequently sought its advice. The upcoming 2026 UN Secretary-General selection and the 2027 WHO Director-General election are similar windows of opportunity to secure concrete commitments on gender equality. To that end, Global 50/50 is now developing a five-point agenda on gender justice for the future Secretary-General to commit to – with the possibility of a similar campaign for the WHO Director-General election raised at the meeting.

The proposed merger between UNFPA and UN Women was also discussed. Participants recognised that something needs to change in the architecture of UN gender institutions but argued that the diagnosis is political and geopolitical while the proposed response is technocratic – which is why it is meeting resistance.

07 Cross-movement alliances

Cross-movement alliance-building was identified as a top priority in the pre-convening survey and reinforced throughout the discussion. Health, climate, labour, disability, and legal movements face overlapping threats

and share potential allies, but the gender justice movement has not systematically built the bridges required. Women-with-disabilities-led organisations, for example, have historically felt excluded by the mainstream feminist movement; recent years have seen progress, but turning the power and diversity of different groups towards shared objectives remains an underused strategy.

The lack of core, sustained funding is compounding the challenge. The anti-gender, anti-rights movements are well-funded – recent research estimates over \$1.2 billion over the past few years – and active in the institutional spaces where policy is made. The gender justice movement, by contrast, is frequently absent from those same spaces. Closing this gap requires intelligence, presence, and the resources to sustain both.

“52% of the people we surveyed told us the same thing – what they need most is cross-movement alliances, across health, climate, labour, and legal movements. But the opposition is already in our spaces. Are we in theirs? Do we even know when they’re getting together? What’s missing is the connective infrastructure – shared resources, intelligence, and platforms – to move at the speed they already move. That’s the gap we’re inviting people to close with us.”

Kent Buse
Co-CEO, Global 50/50

Closing reflections

The closing remarks drew together two key points. The first was a refusal to self-censor. The example was cited of a Lancet Commission on Women, Power and Cancer, which deliberately placed feminist analysis at the heart of a strategy for addressing cancer among women. Initial anxiety about even using the word ‘feminism’ in a technical commission proved misplaced: a feminist lens unlocked progress on an issue that had been

stuck. The lesson was that intentionality about feminist principles produces better work, not more controversial work.

// “Let’s be intentional about feminist principles and not self-censor because of the political environment. We can make progress. We will win. We just have to stick with what we’re doing.”

The second point was on the practicalities of accountability, if the field is to move ahead with a Lancet Countdown on Gender Justice. Advances in AI-assisted analysis have made the kind of monitoring work required for a standing accountability mechanism considerably more feasible than even 18 months ago. There is now much greater capacity to track institutional commitments, policy implementation, and reporting practices across a large number of organisations and countries. This will require an institutional home and resources. Yet tracking alone will not automatically translate into political wins on the issues raised throughout the meeting: it will require alliances, communications infrastructure, and strategic presence in the spaces where decisions are made.

Agreed next steps

1 Lancet Countdown on Gender Justice: Global 50/50 and The Lancet will take this proposal forward. Those interested in collaborating are invited to reach out.

2 Open letters on gender equality: Produce public sign-on letters calling on the next United Nations Secretary-General and the next WHO Director-General to make commitments to advancing gender equality during their tenures.

3 Consolidated convening report: Global 50/50 will produce a single report drawing together findings from the 2025–2026 convening series (CSW, Women Deliver, Brocher, WHA) and share it with participants.

4 Next year’s Global 50/50 and Lancet convening on the margins of the WHA: a larger event with broader participation and fewer access barriers.

5 The Lancet’s pages remain open to all participants to advance the gender justice agenda.

Windows of opportunity identified by participants

Through a live polling exercise, participants identified the following clusters of political opportunity over the next twelve months.

Leadership transitions

WHO Director-General and UN Secretary-General elections; new appointments at the Global Fund, UN Women, and Unitaid.

Global health convenings

AIDS 2026; Global Fund Round 8; World Health Summit; WISH; ITU Assembly.

UN political processes

UNGA and UN80; High-Level Political Forum; Human Rights Council; High-Level Meetings on HIV/AIDS, on Pandemics and UHC; IPU Parliamentary Assembly; Commission on the Status of Women.

Climate and national politics

COP31; national elections in countries where gender justice is directly at stake in electoral competition.

About this meeting

This session was held under the Chatham House Rule. The meeting was convened by Sarah Hawkes and Kent Buse (Global 50/50) and Richard Horton (The Lancet). Quotations are attributed only where the speaker has agreed to attribution; all other contributions remain unattributed, and participants may refer to the content of the discussion but may not attribute remarks to any individual.

To engage on the proposals above, or to participate in future convenings, please contact Global 50/50:

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