



# DEFYING THE PUSHBACK

**AN AGENDA FOR ACTION TO MOBILISE  
FOR GENDER JUSTICE IN A TIME OF CRISIS**

# A SPRING OF DISRUPTION

The current assault on gender equality is not happening by chance – it’s an orchestrated, global crisis reshaping health and development. UN Women published that one in four countries reported backlash on women’s rights in 2024.<sup>1</sup> Amidst growing restrictions to civic space around the world and challenges to free speech, sexual and reproductive health and rights, and the hard-won gains of women’s rights movements, protecting and advancing progress towards gender equality and social justice demands an urgent, coordinated rethink of how we act and advocate.

On Holi, a day symbolising new beginnings and change, a group of 25 health, development, justice, and gender experts from around the world came together to discuss Global 50/50’s (formerly Global Health 50/50) newly released report, *Rollback and Resistance*.<sup>2</sup> The event was convened on the margins of the 69<sup>th</sup> Session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), a meeting characterised by a sense of urgency thirty years after the historic Fourth World Conference on Women<sup>3</sup> and adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action.<sup>4</sup>

---

**THIS AGENDA FOR ACTION  
BUILDS ON INSIGHTS  
SHARED DURING THE  
GLOBAL 50/50 EVENT AND  
THROUGHOUT CSW69.**





# A SNAPSHOT OF A SEISMIC SHIFT AROUND GENDER AND DIVERSITY

The *Rollback and Resistance* report is a swiftly compiled analysis quantifying the response of 72 US-headquartered organisations to Executive Orders issued by the Trump administration in January 2025. One order issued on 20 January declares the policy of the US as recognising two sexes, male and female, and requires every agency and all federal employees to use the term “sex” and not “gender”.<sup>5</sup> A further order issued on 21 January,<sup>6</sup> with an accompanying factsheet published on 22 January, terminates “DEI discrimination in the federal workforce” and directs departments and agencies “to take strong action to end private sector DEI discrimination.”<sup>7</sup>

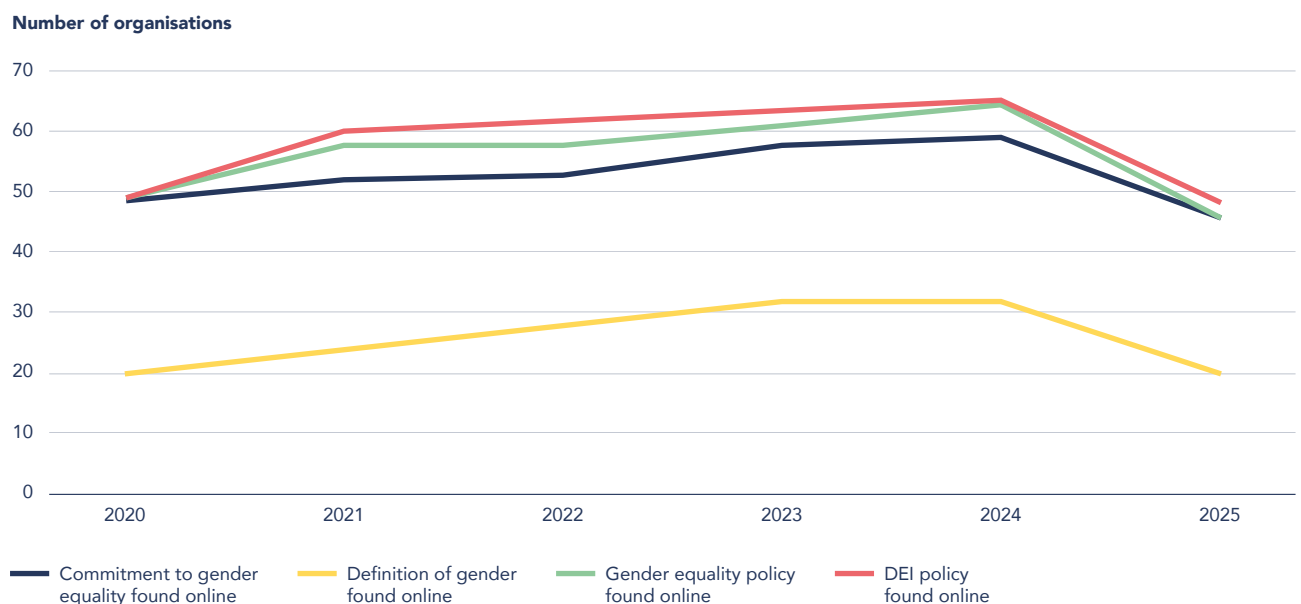
As a result, USAID issued a letter on 24 January to all contractors and partners alerting them that all Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) awards would be terminated, and that all DEI activities should cease immediately. These orders align with the Trump administration’s broader political agenda to frame values of empathy, equality and inclusion as threats and to drastically reduce US global engagement — particularly in areas related to gender, sexual and reproductive health, and multilateral cooperation.

The Global 50/50 report tracks the organisational response to these orders with data collected on four variables before and after the orders were issued.<sup>8</sup> These were: i) public commitment to gender equality; ii) definition of gender that is consistent with international norms; iii) policy online to advance gender equality or women’s leadership; and iv) policy online to advance diversity and inclusion in the workplace.<sup>9</sup>

## ONE ORDER ISSUED ON 20 JANUARY REQUIRES EVERY AGENCY AND ALL FEDERAL EMPLOYEES TO USE THE TERM “SEX” AND NOT “GENDER”.

Of the 72 US-based organisations Global 50/50 reviewed, 20 made significant changes to language related to gender and/or diversity policies between September 2024 and February 2025. This rollback effectively reversed all progress reported by Global 50/50 since 2020 (Figure 1).

**FIGURE 1.**  
Change in organisational commitments and policies, 2020-2025



Global 50/50's research found that most organisations rolling back initiatives to promote diversity and inclusion in the workplace were doing so to comply with orders from the US administration to maintain eligibility for federal funding. Some organisations with active US contracts have chosen not to comply with these orders—at least for now—when their operations are not dependent on federal funding. In other cases, even in the absence of legal action or funding cuts, the mere existence of these directives has been enough to pressure organisations into pre-emptively scaling back equality commitments.

---

**SOME ORGANISATIONS  
HAVE CHOSEN  
NOT TO COMPLY WITH  
THESE ORDERS WHEN  
THEIR OPERATIONS  
ARE NOT DEPENDENT  
ON FEDERAL FUNDING.**

---

## **BEARING WITNESS TO A CHANGING LANDSCAPE**

The orders targeting diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility and gender “ideology”, coupled with the freezing of billions of dollars of foreign aid, including for work already completed on behalf of USAID, has plunged much of the global health and development community into chaos and uncertainty. Organisations have been forced to close diversity and gender equality programmes, lay off or furlough staff, and halt life-saving programmes around the world.

The erasure of words and concepts from policy and discourse – like gender, diversity, equality – will hold progress back. Health outcomes are not biologically determined alone. They are the product of social norms, roles, and expectations — all of which are deeply gendered. Gender is fundamentally about how power operates in families, communities, institutions, and systems. When gender is erased from the conversation, so too is our ability to understand the root causes of inequity and to respond effectively – which is much of the reason why right-wing actors and ideologues are desperate to erase it.

Recording and reporting on disappearing language becomes an essential act of resistance during such a backlash.

Additional opportunities for recording and reporting, and using data as a strategic tool to document realities and challenge restrictive narratives include:

Moving beyond only website-based research to include qualitative interviews and storytelling that capture how global health and development organisations are adapting, as well as the human toll of the US funding freeze.

---

Generating data, evidence and contextual analysis to support and inform lawsuits challenging executive orders on diversity, equity and inclusion and gender.

---

Documenting and bearing witness to the real-world consequences of policy shifts that dismantle initiatives to advance diversity in the workplace and erase language, leading to reduced protections and increased discrimination and inequalities, to provide evidence to support the case for the urgent need for systemic change.

---

Capturing and communicating on leadership role models in the face of repressive policies, and documenting and amplifying their resistance, strategies and impact.

# SPEAKING OUT TOGETHER

Naming and confronting setbacks is not a sign of defeat but a strategic necessity, particularly in the Global North where progress is often assumed to be linear. Advocacy today should draw strength from the long arc of historical resilience under authoritarian regimes around the world. Movements have always advanced through waves of pushback and progress.

During event discussions, a powerful theme emerged: how we frame our struggles matters. Participants called for a deliberate shift away from institutional jargon in favour of language that resonates, mobilises, and reflects the lived experiences of those most impacted.

When civic space is being actively curtailed and rights are under attack, clarity is powerful. Advocates must speak plainly about the systemic barriers communities face – and the collective strength required to overcome them. Some US-based organisations are adapting their policy language to align with the hostile political climate while maintaining their core values and commitments to gender equality and diversity, including by:

---

Using more generic terminology (e.g., “all people affected” instead of gender-specific references).

---

Ensuring that public-facing language remains inclusive but strategically framed to mitigate risks (e.g., exploring alternative terminology to gender, such as “social determinants” or “social dimensions”).

---

Replacing ‘diversity’ with other terms that signal an organisation’s workplace values, such as ‘belonging’.

---

Acknowledging the distinction between what an organisation publicly states and its real values and beliefs, operational commitments and practices.

Speaking out in solidarity with feminist, LGBTQI+, and class and racial equality movements, reinforcing the idea that these issues cannot be addressed in isolation.

---

Demonstrating the economic benefits of diversity initiatives. This includes challenging misconceptions that diversity, equity and inclusion efforts are costly and detrimental to the economy, instead highlighting evidence that inclusive policies drive innovation, productivity, and long-term financial stability.





# TAKING COLLECTIVE ACTION

Organisations are facing funding and staff cuts and the inability to deliver for their partners and communities, necessitating new approaches to resource mobilisation, advocacy, partnership, and programming to protect and advance gender equality. One participant remarked, “Hope is a political decision we have to make every day”, as participants sought ways to counter despondency and inaction by channelling outrage into opportunities and solutions.

Collective action should include:

Resisting “going against allies” and allowing competition for increasingly scarce resources to undermine strategic alliances and splinter movements for gender equality and diversity.

Rather, investing in and building alliances and collaborating on proposals and programmes to strengthen collective advocacy and resource mobilisation in the face of increasing restrictions on civic space and available funding.

Drawing from lessons from feminist and other social justice movements from around the world and understanding how communities mobilise in underfunded and restricted spaces.

Embracing the power of popular culture, with participants stressing the need to “flood” traditional and social media and the arts with positive stories of gender equality and inclusion and invest in artists to communicate data and messages with greater resonance for impact.

Engaging global allies, sharing best practices, and leveraging international pressure to sustain gender equality and diversity efforts.

Tracking funders and funding flows to identify opportunities to pursue new donors/funders to fill the gap left by the US funding freeze.



# CHARTING A WAY FORWARD

Around the world, forces are working to divide, distract, and dismantle decades of progress. In response, we offer not only resistance — but a renewed, strategic commitment to advancing justice.<sup>10</sup> We put forward six key areas for action:

**Building a principles-based order.** In a time of chaos, uncertainty, and the collapse of the recent global system, we must champion a values-driven world order — one rooted in justice, solidarity, and dignity. This requires forging bold coalitions that connect gender justice with peace, with economic and ecological justice, with inclusion and self-determination, with human rights and the rule of law, with freedom of expression and bodily autonomy, with multilateral cooperation, and with solidarity — local and global. Above all, it must be anchored in empathy, reciprocity, and our shared humanity.

**Highlighting and drawing from alternative models to advance equality** that are rooted in local leadership, solidarity, and structural transformation — from participatory grantmaking and regionally governed funds to Global South-led feminist policy frameworks — while decentring dominant narratives and actors, particularly the outsized influence of the US.

**Understanding power dynamics and the politics of exclusion.** Efforts to silence conversations on gender equality and diversity are not neutral — they are calculated moves to preserve existing hierarchies. A collective agenda must centre power analysis: who

benefits from exclusion, who is harmed, who is being deliberately erased from decision-making spaces, and importantly, how power can be mobilised to redress the balance.

**Fighting the battle of political ideas.** This is not just a policy fight — it's a battle over narratives. We must actively challenge the weaponisation of "anti-woke" rhetoric, the distortion of equity efforts, and the framing of inclusion as ideology rather than necessity. Our messages must reclaim the moral clarity and political urgency of gender justice and speak to people in ways that mobilise, not mystify.

**Committing to sustained engagement and resistance.** Resistance must be long-term, resourced, and rooted in community. It requires showing up — in boardrooms, courtrooms, and the streets — and continuing to fight even when the political winds shift. Powerful, decentralised protest movements against the US Administration are broad and growing.<sup>11</sup> Resistance is fed by applauding and celebrating efforts that promote greater justice, empathy and solidarity.

**Recognising and demonstrating the strategic role data can play** in shaping norms and policy responses, and in the realisation of people's rights. In the face of disinformation and erasure, data is power. We must invest in data that is disaggregated across gender, race, class and disability, and is owned by the communities it is about. Evidence must not only inform policy — it must expose inequality and support demands for accountability.

## HOW CAN GLOBAL 50/50 CONTRIBUTE TO ADVANCING THE EMERGING AGENDA?

Global 50/50 was proposed as a unifying force, providing independent and rigorous evidence and facilitating dialogue across and beyond issue-specific silos. Calls were made for Global 50/50 to:

Continue and expand the vital work of data collection, monitoring, and accountability, ensuring that gender and inclusion data and narratives remain visible and grounded in robust research; support qualitative storytelling and lived-experience documentation to provide insights and case studies on how organisations and movements survive, resist, and thrive during authoritarian crackdowns on gender equality and diversity.

Convene conversations with like-minded organisations to foster collective action and share insights on navigating restrictive and regressive policies, bringing actors together across issues to build stronger alliances for gender justice and diversity initiatives.

# ENDNOTES

- 1 UN Women (United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women). 2025. Women's Rights in Review 30 Years After Beijing. New York: UN-Women.
- 2 Global 50/50 (2025) Rollback and Resistance: How US-based global health organisations are responding to the DEI crackdown. Cambridge: UK. <https://doi.org/10.56649/GYHK2587>
- 3 UN Women (n/d) World Conferences on Women. <https://www.unwomen.org/en/how-we-work/intergovernmental-support/world-conferences-on-women>. Retrieved 17 March 2025.
- 4 UN Women (2015) Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, Beijing +5 Political Declaration and Outcome. <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2015/01/beijing-declaration>. Retrieved 17 March 2025.
- 5 United States, Executive Office of the President [Donald Trump]. Executive Order. (2025c, January 20). Defending women from gender ideology extremism and restoring biological truth to the Federal Government. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/defending-women-from-gender-ideology-extremism-and-restoring-biological-truth-to-the-federal-government/>. Retrieved 17 March 2025.
- 6 United States, Executive Office of the President [Donald Trump]. Executive Order. (2025a, January 21). Ending illegal discrimination and restoring merit-based opportunity. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/ending-illegal-discrimination-and-restoring-merit-based-opportunity/>. Retrieved 17 March 2025.
- 7 Fact Sheet. (2025, January 22). President Donald J. Trump Protects Civil Rights and Merit-Based Opportunity by Ending Illegal DEI. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/fact-sheets/2025/01/fact-sheet-president-donald-j-trump-protects-civil-rights-and-merit-based-opportunity-by-ending-illegal-dei/>. Retrieved 24 March 2025.
- 8 GH5050 collected data from September 2024 to January 2025, and then again between February 7 and 14 2025.
- 9 Since 2017, GH5050 has tracked gender equality and since 2020 wider aspects of DEI for 200 organisations.
- 10 Hawkes, S, et al. Gender and global health: going, going, but not gone. Lancet. 6 April 2025. [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(25\)00617-8/abstract?rss=yes](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(25)00617-8/abstract?rss=yes)
- 11 "A trickle to a tidal wave": behind the Trump protest movement that launched on Reddit." The Guardian. 27 April 2025. [www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/apr/27/trump-protest-movement-50501?CMP=Share\\_iOSApp\\_Other](http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/apr/27/trump-protest-movement-50501?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other)

---

## INSIGHTS FROM A GLOBAL 50/50 CONVENING ON THE GLOBAL CRACKDOWN ON GENDER EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY ON THE MARGINS OF THE 69TH SESSION OF THE COMMISSION ON THE STATUS OF WOMEN (CSW69)

New York, March 14, 2025

Suggested citation: Global 50/50, Defying the pushback: An agenda for action to mobilise for gender justice in a time of crisis, Cambridge, UK, 2025. doi: <https://doi.org/10.56649/UTXN1485>

This Report is published under a Creative Commons Attribution NonCommercial 4.0 International Licence.

For follow-ups and further engagement, please contact: [info@globalhealth5050.org](mailto:info@globalhealth5050.org)

#GH5050 @GlobalHlth5050 [www.globalhealth5050.org](http://www.globalhealth5050.org)

Cover image: Battleground, Amy Dury.



