

Women’s Program – Systemic Change Tip Sheet

What Is Systemic Change?

Within the context of the Women’s Program at Women and Gender Equality Canada (WAGE), systemic change refers to changing one or more elements within a system in a way that allows women and girls to fully take part in the economic, social, democratic, and political life of Canada.

Elements within a system include policies and practices; resource distribution; networks and collaboration; authority, voices, and decision-making; and gender norms and attitudes (see Figure 1).

What Is a Systemic Change Project?

Systemic change projects:

- **Aim** to address or remove the root barriers to gender equality in a system (for example, by working with institutions to change their policies and practices that are biased against women).
- **Do not aim** to change women to fit or adapt to discriminatory systems (for example, by training women to take part in an institution’s policies and practices that are biased against them).

To help explain the difference more clearly, consider the following example:

A training program is developed to help 30 women find a job in an industry where most employees and managers are men, such as construction. The women start work, but there are barriers such as sexism, harassment, or a lack of flexible work arrangements. Will they be able to keep working or get promotions without changes to these working conditions? Will there still be barriers for the next 30 women who want to enter the construction industry?

Instead of funding this type of training program, WAGE funds multi-year projects that aim to address systemic barriers. These projects **aim to advance equality for women in a sustainable and long-term way**. This could include a project working with construction companies to help them understand barriers for women, find solutions, and make changes. Solutions could address different elements of a system, such as:

Policies and practices	Resource distribution	Networks and collaboration	Authority, voices, and decision-making	Gender norms and attitudes
Developing strong human resources policies that prevent and address sexual harassment on work sites. <i>Systemic change has occurred when the construction company adopts the HR policies.</i>	Sharing best practices on alternative childcare arrangements for parents who cannot work the 9 to 5 "norm," and working with the construction industry to test the arrangements. <i>Systemic change has occurred when best practices are implemented.</i>	Partnering with schools to promote and support the hiring and retention of women in the construction industry. <i>Systemic change has occurred when the partnership is sustained beyond the end of the project.</i>	Testing a mentorship program to promote underrepresented women in leadership positions in the construction industry. <i>Systemic change has occurred when the mentorship program is adopted after being tested.</i>	Implementing training for staff in the industry to address harmful gender stereotypes and support an inclusive work environment. <i>Systemic change has occurred when the training results in reducing the presence of harmful gender stereotypes.</i>

Figure 1: Examples of activities to address the elements of a system

Projects should work on elements that will lead to meaningful change. They do not need to address every element listed above.

Key Components of a Systemic Change Project

While there is no one-size-fits-all approach to systemic change, there are some key components that can help guide your project:

1) UNDERSTAND THE ISSUE

As a first step, **gather facts** on the issue you are aiming to address to understand its **root causes**, the broader context, **who is affected by the issue**, and how experiences and outcomes differ between and within groups of people and why. Consider the elements of a system: which ones are perpetuating the issue and why? Where are the challenges and opportunities for change?

- Keep in mind that people with diverse lived experiences and identity factors might perceive or define the issue differently. This could impact the design of your project. WAGE's [Gender-Based Analysis Plus](#) can help you ask the right questions.

2) TAKE STRATEGIC ACTION

Now that you have mapped out the issue, and the people most impacted, identify **what you hope to achieve** and develop an approach to get you there. Ensure the proposed action is workable in scope, addresses one or more elements of a system, and has the potential for a **positive and lasting impact on those affected by the issue**.

- Consider trying something new based on your research and consultations, or consider replicating/adapting/expanding on existing approaches that have worked well in the past. Check out WAGE's [Stories of Impact](#) for project examples.

3) ENGAGE

Engage and collaborate with others both on the design and implementation of your project, including **those who are directly affected by the issue** (e.g., women with lived experience), **those who can influence change**, **those who may be resistant to change**, and **those whose perspectives are not frequently heard**.

- One organization alone cannot solve complex gender equality issues. Diverse partners can bring new knowledge, resources, and networks to advance your project and amplify its impact.

4) LEARN AND ADAPT

Apply a continuous learning approach to your project where possible. Consider what is and what is not working, or how things may be changing. **Respond to changes as they occur and build on your learnings** by adapting or adjusting your approach if needed.

- Specific actions may not always lead to the specific impact you intended. Yet unexpected impacts can provide valuable learning opportunities to help improve your current project or inform future projects. Creating and maintaining a plan to monitor change, and measure project results can help with this component.

***Extra tip:** Systemic change starts from within your organization. Consider bringing on a project lead who reflects the population you are aiming to support through the project, or who has experience working with that population.