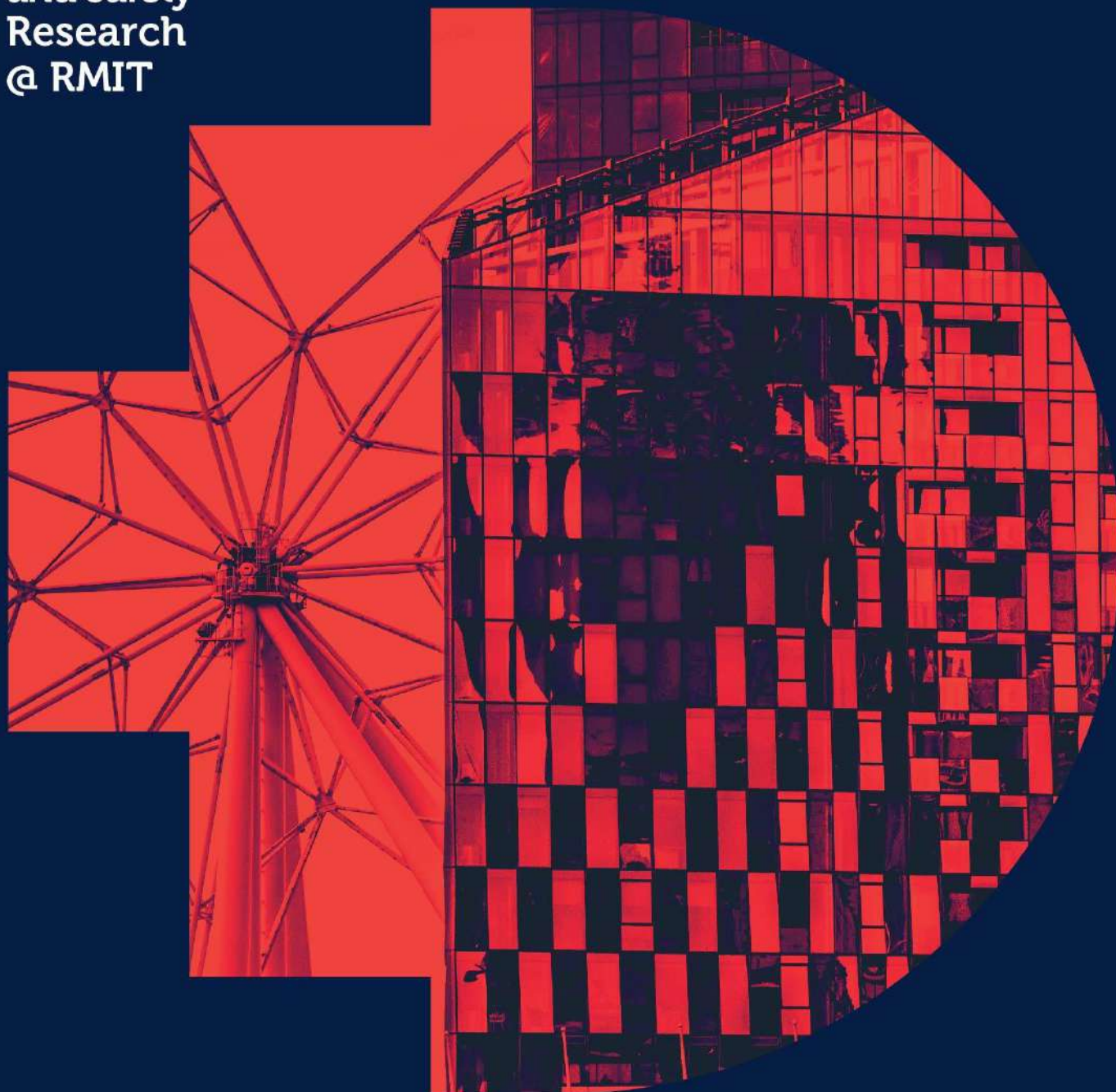


Construction  
Work Health  
and Safety  
Research  
@ RMIT



The experience of workplace humour among  
women in the NSW construction industry:  
Summary report

June 2025

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Any findings, conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the view of the Master Builders Association of New South Wales or the New South Wales Government. Opinions expressed by research participants are their own.



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Construction Work Health and Safety Research @ RMIT provides leading-edge, applied research to the construction and property industries. Our members are able to work with organisations to analyse health and safety (H&S) performance and identify opportunities for improvement. We can develop and evaluate innovative solutions, provide specialised H&S programs or undertake other research-based consulting activities. Our work addresses real-world H&S challenges, and our strong international linkages provide a global perspective to our research.

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# 1. Introduction

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Humour is a prevalent feature of many workplaces. Depending on its nature, workplace humour can have different impacts. Some workplace humour helps to build social cohesion, relieve stress and improve the experience of work. However, when humour is used in a negative way — for example, when it is targeted, belittling and/or aggressive in nature — it can have damaging impacts. Research shows that some workplace behaviour performed under the guise of humour, should be identified as sexual harassment.

The social context of the workplace is important for workers' health, wellbeing, retention, and performance. Many construction workplaces are characterised by banter, which can sometimes be inappropriate, offensive, undermining, or exclusionary. Women are particularly impacted by workplace banter that includes sexual comments or innuendo, which is linked to reduced mental health and wellbeing. Despite evidence showing the harmful effects of aggressive/sexist workplace humour, this aspect of workplace culture has not been addressed by previous research or culture-change interventions in the Australian construction industry.

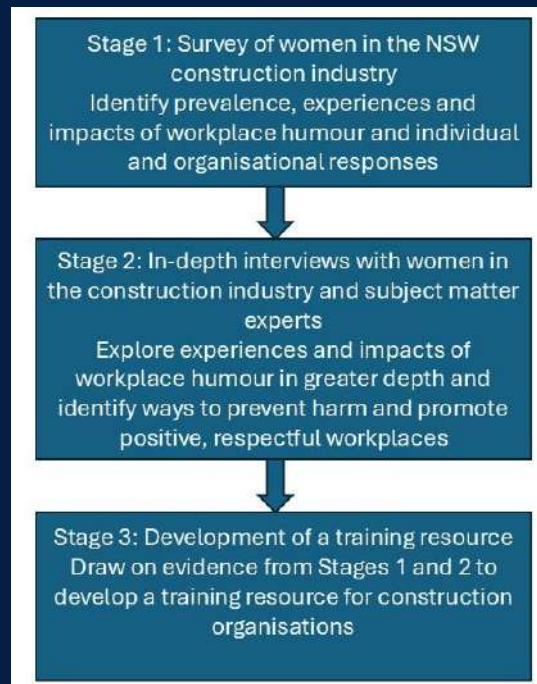
This report summarises the findings from the project *Understanding Women's Experience of Banter and Humour in the New South Wales (NSW) Construction Industry*, undertaken by RMIT University in partnership with the Master Builders Association of New South Wales. The project aimed to understand the experiences, impacts, and management of humour among women in the NSW construction industry. The insights were further used to develop an evidence-based training resource to help construction organisations create and maintain a culture of positive humour in workplaces.

The project was funded by the NSW Government Women in Construction Industry Innovation Program (IIP), which supports initiatives to make construction a more diverse, inclusive and safe industry for women.

## 2. Study design

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The project was undertaken between July 2024 and June 2025 and involved three main stages, as illustrated in Figure 1:



**Figure 1: Research and development stages**

**Stage 1:** An industry-based survey involving 337 participants was conducted first to understand the types and effects of workplace humour experienced by women in the NSW construction industry. The survey collected data about respondents’:

- attitudes towards workplace banter,
- experience of workplace humour
- experience of sexual harassment behaviour
- opinions about what constitutes unacceptable workplace humour
- reporting of unacceptable workplace humour,

- perceptions of impact of unacceptable jokes, and
- knowledge of workplace banter policy.

**Stage 2:** The survey was followed by in-depth interviews to more fully understand women's experiences in different job roles, industry sectors, and organisational environments. Subject matter experts in workplace gender issues were also interviewed. In addition to their personal experiences of workplace humour, interview participants were asked about their views on strategies and measures to prevent negative workplace humour and create a more respectful and inclusive work environment in the NSW construction industry.

**Stage 3:** A training resource was developed to help construction organisations foster a culture of positive humour in workplaces. The resource includes interactive educational videos and a facilitator guide. Feedback on the early version of the videos was gathered through three focus groups to refine the resource for industry-wide dissemination. The focus groups involved a diverse sample of participants, including both women and men from various professional backgrounds across different stakeholder groups and industry sectors.

### 3. Key findings

#### Attitude towards workplace humour

Overall, survey respondents had positive attitudes towards workplace humour indicating that they believe banter in the workplace can be an effective way to build relationships and create an enjoyable work environment. However, they also agreed that banter is only acceptable if it is not offensive or disrespectful and remains light-hearted and playful.

Interview participants also observed humour as a fundamental component of construction site environments, and they acknowledged that jokes and banter can serve to relieve stress in construction workplaces.

#### Experience of humour types

Survey respondents indicated that they experience positive and stress-relieving humour in their immediate workgroups to a greater extent than they experience negative or self-defeating humour. However, some significant differences were observed. For example, respondents in site-based roles reported significantly higher mean scores for negative and self-defeating humour than their office-based counterparts. Figure 2 presents the mean humour type scores reported by office-based and site-based respondents.

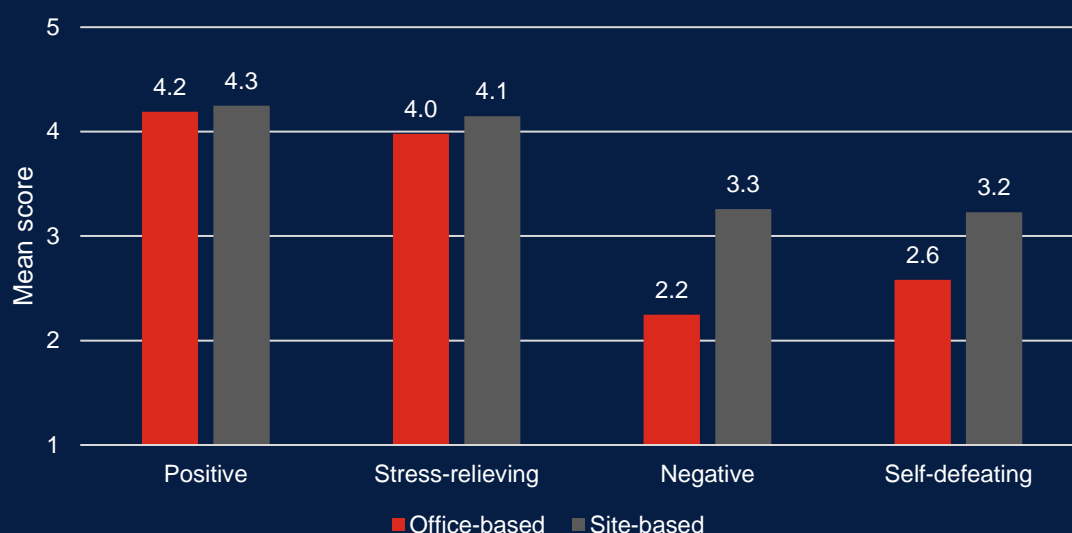


Figure 2: Mean humour type scores reported by office-based and site-based workers

## Experience of sexual harassment behaviour

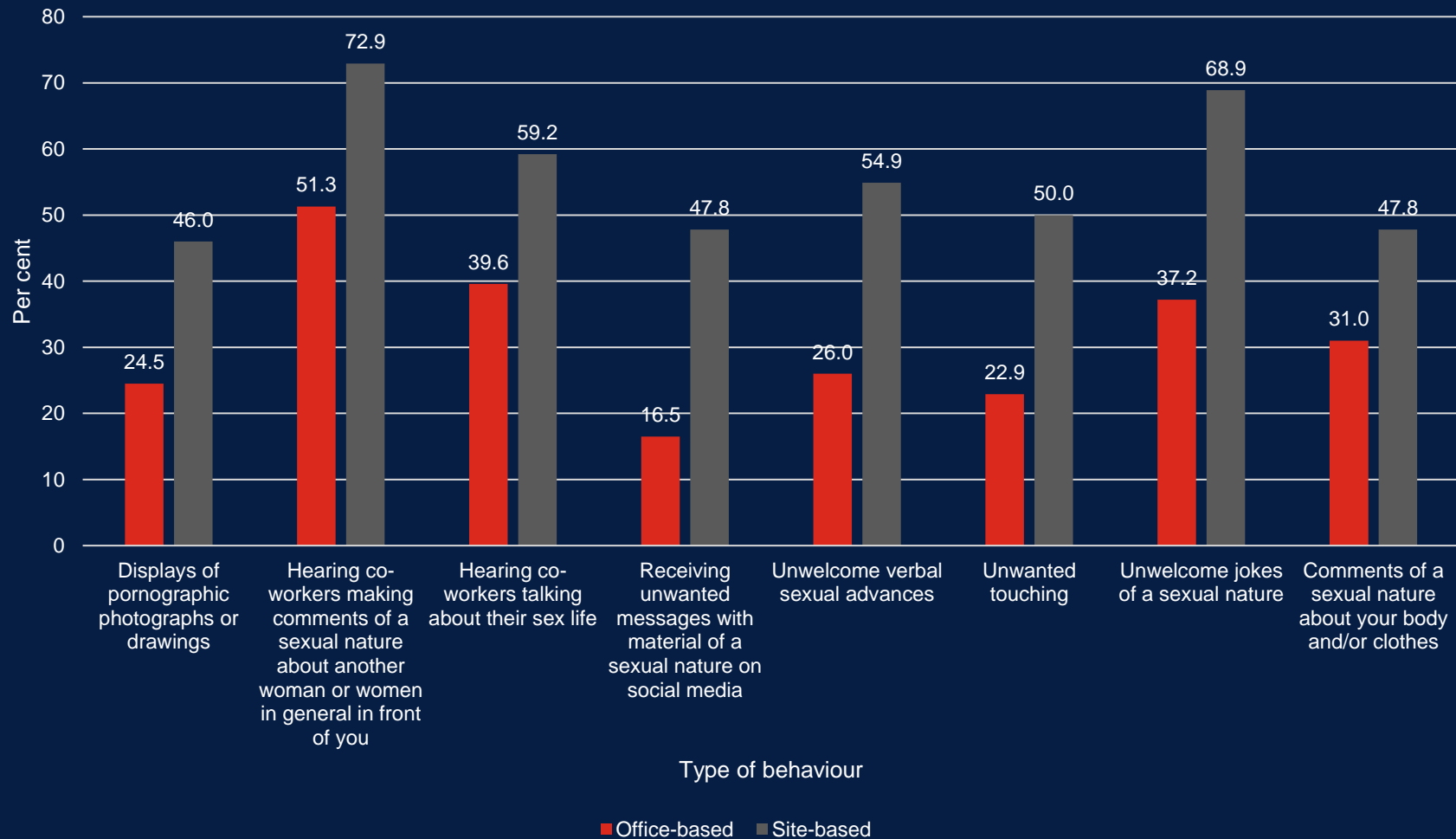
218 (64.7%) of the 337 survey respondents indicated that they had experienced some form of sexual harassment at work. Figure 3 shows the percentages of different types of sexual harassment behaviours experienced by office-based and site-based respondents.

Respondents in site-based roles reported significantly more experience of coworkers making unwelcome jokes of a sexual nature (68.9%) than their office-based counterparts (37.2%). Site-based respondents also reported significantly greater experience of other forms of sexual harassment behaviour compared to those in office-based roles.

The interview results similarly revealed that many women - irrespective of their job role - have experienced teasing, put-down humour, sexual or discriminatory humour in their work environments.

**“I was on a construction site once through Winter, and I always wore long pants and obviously my work boots and my PPE, and then I remember as the seasons transitioned into Summer, the site foreman one day walked up to me and he said, ‘I didn’t know you had legs.’ ... That wasn’t actually humorous.”**

**“I used to have one guy on one of the projects, and this example isn’t directed at me personally, but it’s being in this environment where it was banter... he would come in on a Monday morning, and he would hang up on the superintendent’s partition of his office the pair of undies from the woman who he’d slept with on the weekend... and every weekend.”**



**Figure 3: Experience of sexual harassment behaviour by office- and site-based respondents by type of behaviour**

## What constitutes unacceptable workplace humour

Survey participants were asked to describe what unacceptable workplace humour looks like to them. Common responses included humour of a sexual nature and well as sexist humour or jokes about someone's race, religion, sexual orientation, appearance or personal circumstance. These results were consistently echoed by interview participants in the later stage of the study, who noted that humour is often used to mask underlying hostility under the guise of being 'just a joke'.

Figure 4 presents the 50 of the most common words in the responses to this open-ended survey question.



**Figure 4: Common words used in survey respondents' definitions of unacceptable humour**

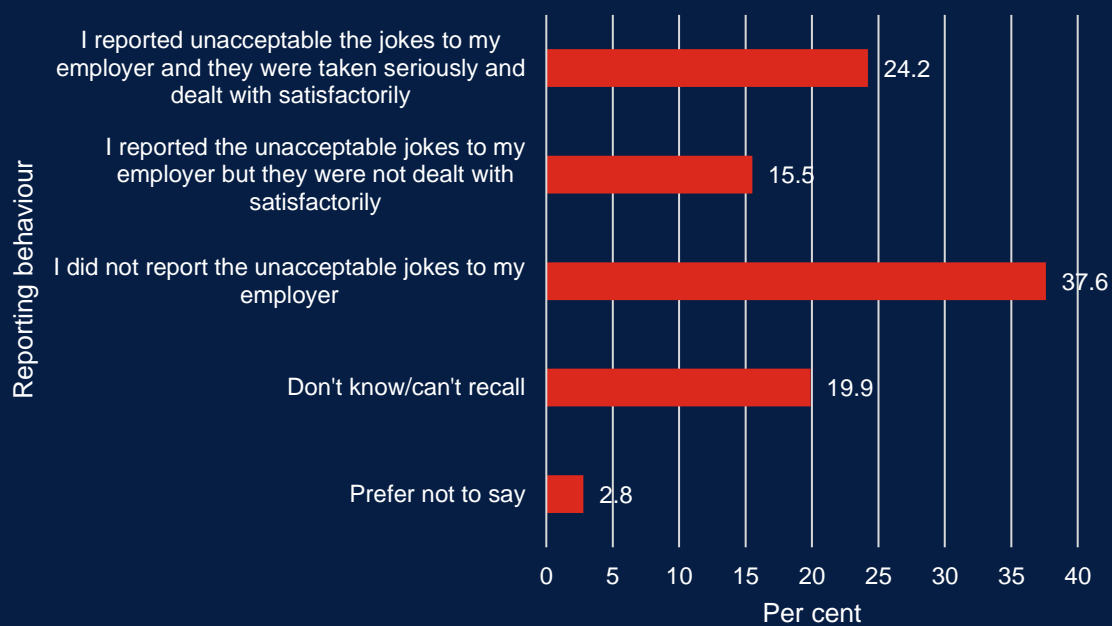
**“I think as a woman in the sector, one instance that stands out for me is my boss, who I really respected. I remember walking into his office or something like that, or being near him, and he said, ‘Now, there’s an arse I’ll never forget.’ So anything that sexualises you, or puts you in a context that’s sexualised by where you’re seen by that person in a different light that’s derogatory, that’s gross.”**

**“We often forget about sex-based harassment, so that’s where someone says, ‘Well, you’re a woman, what would you know?’ ... That’s not sexually harassing someone, but it is absolutely disrespectful. So, I take a broad lens on what constitutes both respect and also a safe workplace, so that it might think broadly of gender-based violence against women.”**

**“There’s certain lines you can’t cross and there’s certain things you can’t joke about, and it might be based on their sexuality, or it might be based on their cultural background or their religious background. There are no go conversations and no go jokes.”**

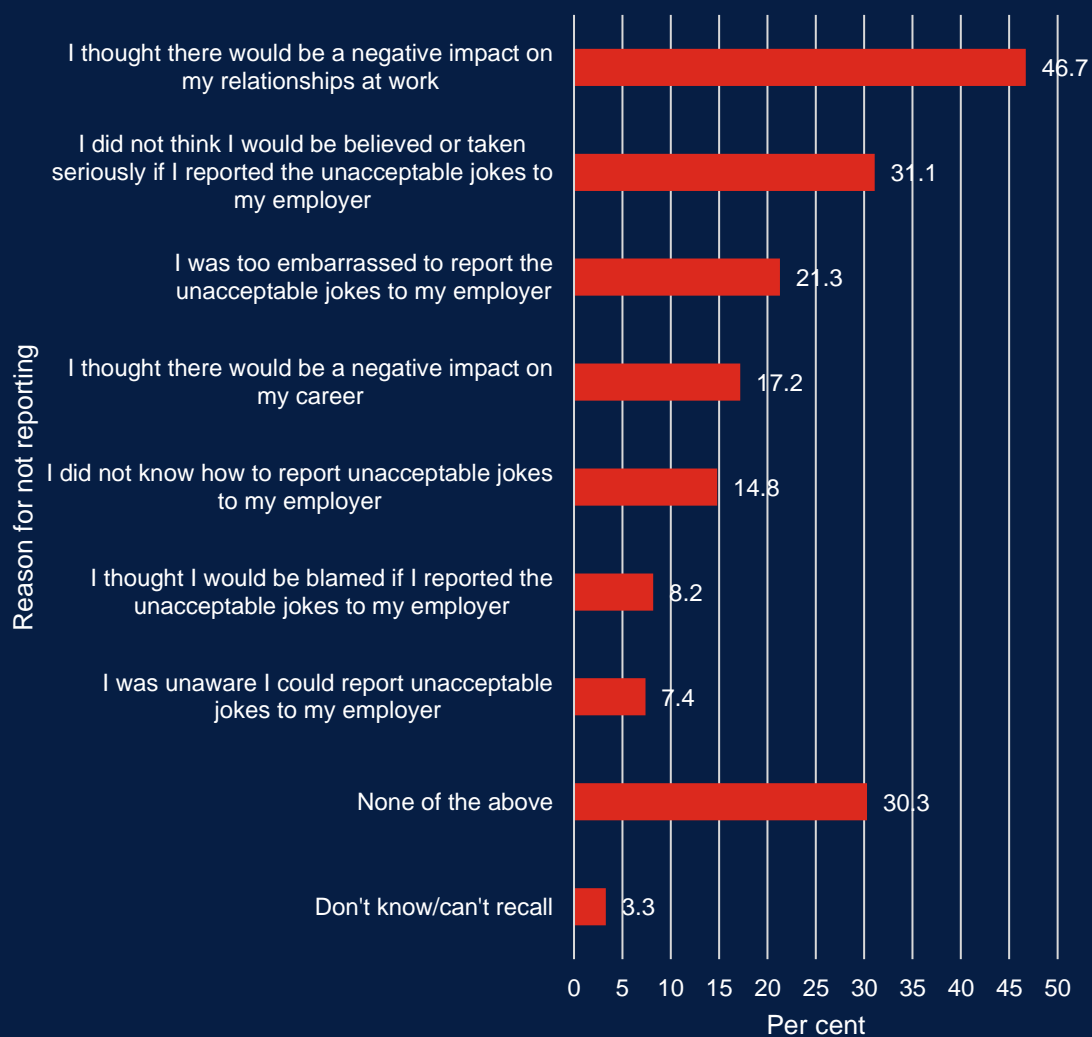
### **Reporting of unacceptable humour**

Unacceptable workplace humour was most frequently identified as being perpetrated by male coworkers (reported by 39.5% of 337 survey respondents). If participants had experienced unacceptable workplace humour, respondents were asked to indicate whether they reported this behaviour to their employer. 39.7% of survey respondents indicated they reported their experience to their employer. However, another 37.6% indicated they did not report experiences of unacceptable workplace humour to their employer. Figure 5 presents the respondents’ reporting behaviour in relation to unacceptable humour.



**Figure 5: Reporting behaviour in relation to unacceptable workplace humour (n=322)**

Nearly half of the 122 survey respondents who indicated they did not report their experience of unacceptable workplace humour to their employer (46.7%) indicated the fear that reporting unacceptable workplace humour would negatively impact their working relationships. A further 31.1% indicated that they did not think they would be believed or taken seriously, and 21.3% indicated they were too embarrassed to report their experience of unacceptable workplace humour. Figure 6 shows the reasons for not reporting unacceptable jokes to their employer, identified by respondents.



**Figure 6: Identified reasons for respondents not reporting unacceptable jokes to their employer**

The interviews further uncovered other barriers to reporting, including the fear of being labelled overly sensitive and/or difficult to work with, concerns about being perceived as unsuitable for the construction industry, negative career consequences, and workplace power dynamics.

**“You don’t want the definition of, ‘You’re not supposed to be here. She’s too emotional, she’s not supposed to be here.’ You don’t want people to judge you based on how you’re feeling.”**

“Well, no, because if there's a power imbalance, then no, because say it's your boss that's making those kinds of jokes and that they're being inappropriate. You can't just go 'shut up' to your boss, you know, can you? You've got like, you know, I think that would you feel like it would cause an argument, and you could end up not having secured work, you know.”

“Look, there have been a few times when you walked in on something or went to a room where they're discussing something inappropriate, and they just apologise to me. But other times there are good examples where they expect you to have a super, super, super thick skin and they make out that it's nothing to do with you and it shouldn't impact you and, if it does, then you're a bit weird or super sensitive.”

Interview participants shared that when they did report unacceptable workplace humour, the reporting outcomes were varying. While some participants received supportive responses from their organisations, others reported that their reporting was not taken seriously or dismissed. In some cases, organisations only acted when participants indicated an intention to resign, and some participants even experienced punitive actions as a result of making formal complaints about unacceptable humour in the workplace.

“When she reported, they (were) more like, ‘This is actually not something serious. You're not supposed to report it.’... She wanted to quit... they had to get the person to apologise to her.”

Interview participants also described other coping approaches to unacceptable workplace humour. Some avoided work occasions or disengaged from conversations at work to protect themselves from unacceptable jokes, while others tried to fit in with the working joking culture. A few women also chose to directly speak with the perpetrators to unacceptable work. However, they also acknowledged that the outcomes of direct confrontation often depended on their relationships with the perpetrators and the level of support of other coworkers.

**“I never reacted, because I would just sit there and do my work and just brush it off and just let it go. I would never say anything at the time. Because my protection strategy when I was working on these projects is I always just pretended I was actually in a bit of a bubble. And just that if anything was happening around me, just to let it bounce off. And that was honestly my coping strategy, with the environments I worked in.”**

**“Just get it [the job] done. Don’t fight, don’t cause trouble, just move on.”**

**“I attended a Christmas party and someone in front of a group of men made a joke which was inappropriate, but I was the person he made it to, and it made me feel super-uncomfortable and I left the Christmas party.”**

## Impacts of unacceptable workplace humour

Figure 7 shows the impacts of unacceptable humour experienced by respondents in the workplace. Survey respondents (n=309) most frequently identified the following impacts:

- feeling embarrassed (42.1%)
- causing them to avoid certain work situations (e.g. courses, meetings, shifts, locations) to avoid the perpetrator (34.6%)
- negative impacts on mental health (30.4%), and
- feeling less confident at work (27.2%).

Similarly, the major impacts of unacceptable workplace humour revealed by interview participants included negative emotional impacts, e.g. discomfort, stress, anger and embarrassment, and career impacts, i.e. negative effects on professional and career development of women.

**“It [the inappropriate joke] made me feel super-uncomfortable and I left... I was just embarrassed. Though I felt that there were people that also thought it was inappropriate everybody laughed. So that was hurtful.”**

**“You know, when banter is let to run rife then it’s really toxic, and what do people do? They vote with their feet. They leave.”**

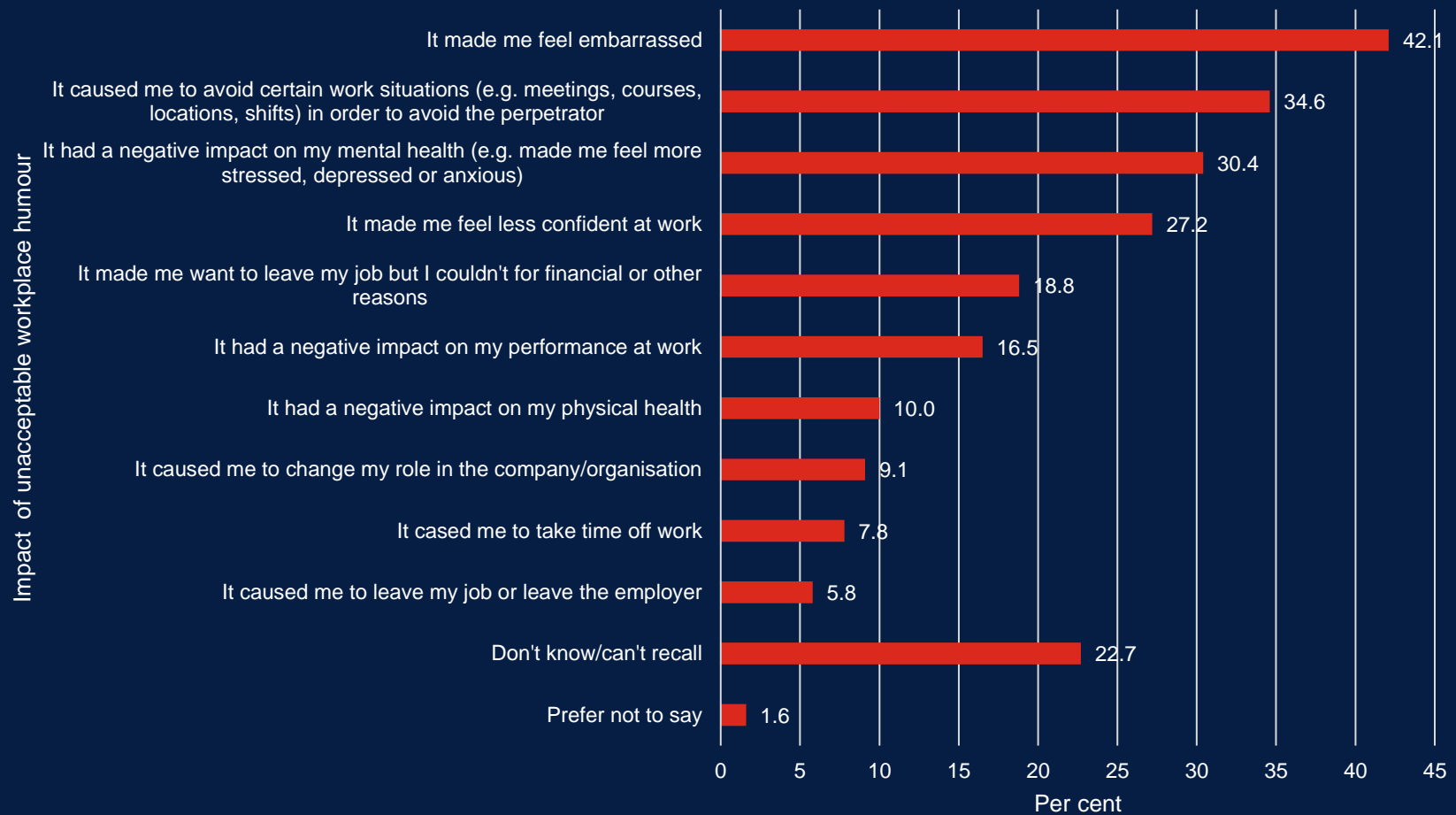
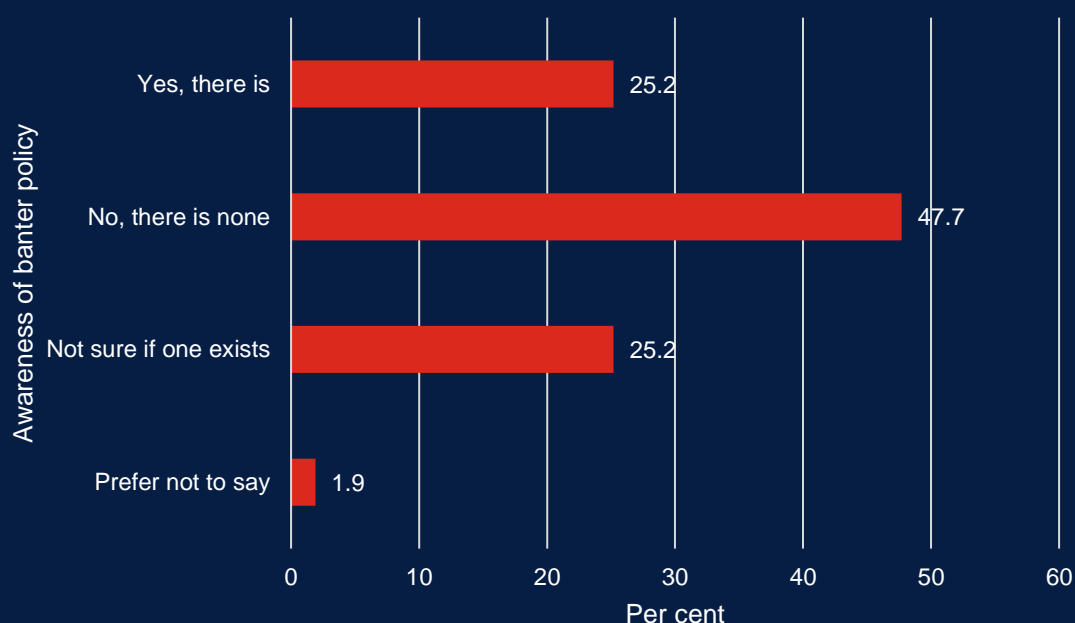


Figure 7: Impacts on recipients of unacceptable workplace humour

## Awareness of workplace banter policy

One quarter (25.2%) of 321 survey respondents indicated that their employing organisation has a policy dealing with workplace banter, while nearly half of survey respondents (47.7%) indicated their employing organisation has no such policy. Figure 8 shows respondents' awareness of organisational banter policy in their employing organisations.

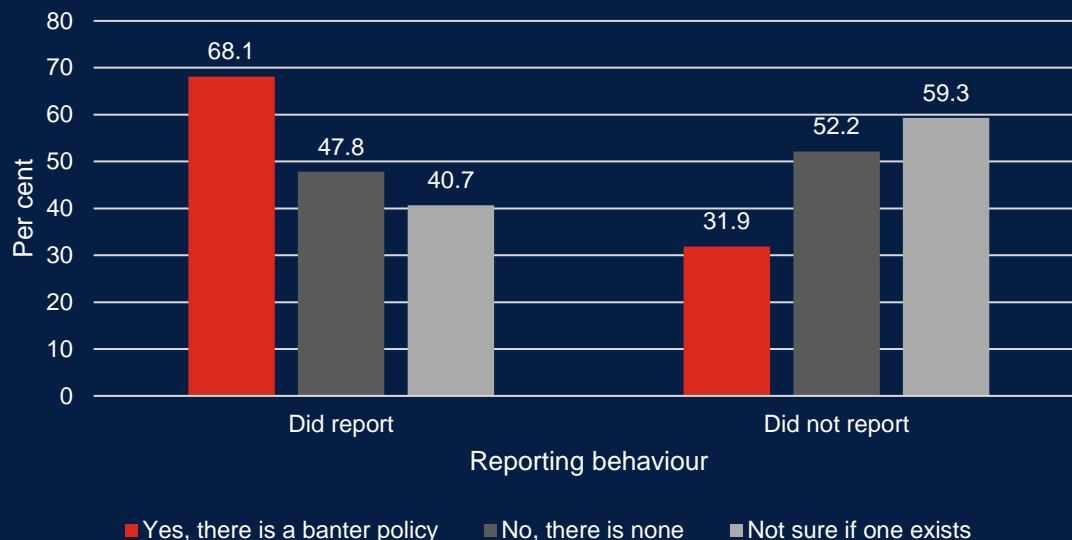


**Figure 8: Respondents' awareness of organisational banter policy in their employing organisations**

The results further suggest the presence of an organisational policy dealing with workplace banter positively impacts reporting behaviour and treatment following the reporting of unacceptable workplace humour.

Proportionally more survey respondents whose organisation has a formal banter policy indicated they reported the experience of unacceptable workplace humour (68.1%) than those whose organisation has no policy (47.8%).

Proportionally more survey respondents whose employing organisation has a formal banter policy also indicated they were treated better after they reported an incident of unacceptable workplace humour (52.2%) compared to those whose organisations do not have a formal banter policy (17.9%). Figure 9 compares respondents' reporting behaviour according to whether there is an organisational policy concerning workplace banter.



**Figure 9: Respondents' reporting behaviour according to whether there is an organisational policy concerning workplace banter**

### **Suggested strategies to improve workplace humour culture**

Interview participants suggested a range of strategies and measures on how the construction industry can change its humour culture to be more inclusive, supportive and safe, including:

- encouraging individuals in the industry to be active (rather than passive) bystanders in response to unacceptable humour
- ensuring leaders at all organisational levels demonstrate a clear commitment to driving workplace cultural change and making sure unacceptable humour is not seen as normal and permissible
- raising awareness of potential harm caused by unacceptable workplace humour and providing education on respect at work across organisational levels
- promoting industry-wide collaboration and initiatives to support cultural change in the construction industry, and
- building a more diverse and inclusive workforce to bring about fundamental shifts in construction industry culture.

“[There should be] more presentations around that awareness of behaviour and that bystander effect of not saying something and just sort of getting around, try to just let people know that they’ve got all that power and privilege at their fingertips that they can use to actually speak up for people when these things happen.”

“They [organisations] can behave differently. The top leaders in these organisations need to have a reckoning, because they are actually, what’s going on in terms of the humour and the gendered nature of construction, is a reflection of how they behave, and the type of engagement they have with one another, the conditions of the contract for example...what you are seeing in the humour and the behaviour is a reflection of how our leaders and our companies engage with each other.”

### Development and evaluation of a training resource

The last stage of the project involved developing a training resource to ensure that humour in the construction workplace is appropriate and positive in its nature and consequences. The training resource was guided by key learning objectives derived from the survey and interview findings. They included:

- understanding the difference between positive and negative humour in the workplace
- developing an awareness that humour can be harmful if used in ways that undermine, demean, exclude, discriminate against or harass people in the workplace
- understanding the difference between what is and what is not humour in a work context
- being able to identify behaviour, i.e. sexual harassment, bullying or discriminatory behaviour, that should not be described as humour and therefore excused in a workplace
- understanding the potential consequences of unacceptable workplace humour on women’s health, safety and wellbeing

- understanding the potential consequences of unacceptable workplace humour on women's ability to flourish in a construction career.
- understanding that, just because women don't 'call out' unacceptable humour in the workplace, it does not mean that they are not affected by it
- understanding that women sometimes laugh along with or choose to ignore humour that they find hurtful because they believe that 'speaking up' will lead to negative consequences, and
- understanding that the support of active bystanders reduces the adverse impacts on women exposed to unacceptable workplace humour.

A training resource comprised of a series of videos titled *Not "Just a Joke"* was developed to address the above learning goals. The final version of the resource was structured into 10 short videos (ranging from 37 seconds to 1 minute 40 seconds in length) and sequenced as a playlist to make the content as user-friendly and digestible as possible.

Three focus group sessions were conducted to evaluate a draft version of the resource between 4th and 6th of June 2025. The sessions ranged in duration from 34 to 47 minutes.

In general, focus group participants agreed with the content of the resource and found its key messages clear and strong. They recognised its relevance to the Australian construction industry and its wide applicability beyond, to other male-dominated industries. It is expected that the resource will help construction organisations create workplace cultures that are inclusive, respectful and supportive of women in all roles.

**"The content was certainly relatable, certainly impactful."**

**"I would show my team here and get them to see it and just understand some of the challenges that that people face on site... I think it has relevance in every company... in every male dominated place."**

**"I really liked the stories because I think they humanised it and put it into a bit more context for people rather than just being overly preachy."**

## 4. Useful links

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*Not “Just a Joke”* is a video resource developed through this project to address the role of humour in construction workplaces.

The resource is comprised of 10 short sections. Each section can be viewed independently or screened to a group of people in a facilitated session. Without pausing for group discussions, the resource runs for approximately 12 minutes.



**Scan this QR code to access the video resource, or use the link below:**

[youtube.com/playlist?list=PL8uYOKwoXWA9xxgnRqZQUTHiGVUiuigIL&si=MPphzdh7m38uqUmu](https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PL8uYOKwoXWA9xxgnRqZQUTHiGVUiuigIL&si=MPphzdh7m38uqUmu)

**Visit this link to learn more about the video and download the facilitator guide:**

[www.rmit.edu.au/about/schools-colleges/property-construction-and-project-management/research/research-centres-and-groups/construction-work-health-safety-research/play-it-safe/not-just-a-joke](http://www.rmit.edu.au/about/schools-colleges/property-construction-and-project-management/research/research-centres-and-groups/construction-work-health-safety-research/play-it-safe/not-just-a-joke)