

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

## Resource development case study



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This initiative was a funding recipient in the NSW Government Women in Construction Industry Innovation Program.



## Creating an evidence-informed resource

*Not “Just a Joke”* is a video training resource designed to make viewers more aware of:

- how workplace humour can be used in positive and negative ways
- how negative humour can cross the line and become sexual harassment, discrimination and/or bullying, and
- what individuals can do to help maintain a respectful workplace culture of positive humour.

This training resource is an output of a wider project undertaken to understand women’s experiences with humour in the New South Wales (NSW) construction industry.

The project was conducted in partnership with the Master Builders Association of NSW and 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.

This case study outlines the development of the resource which involved a four-step participatory design process: data collection, concept development, content creation and impact evaluation. A summary of this design process is depicted in Figure 1 below.

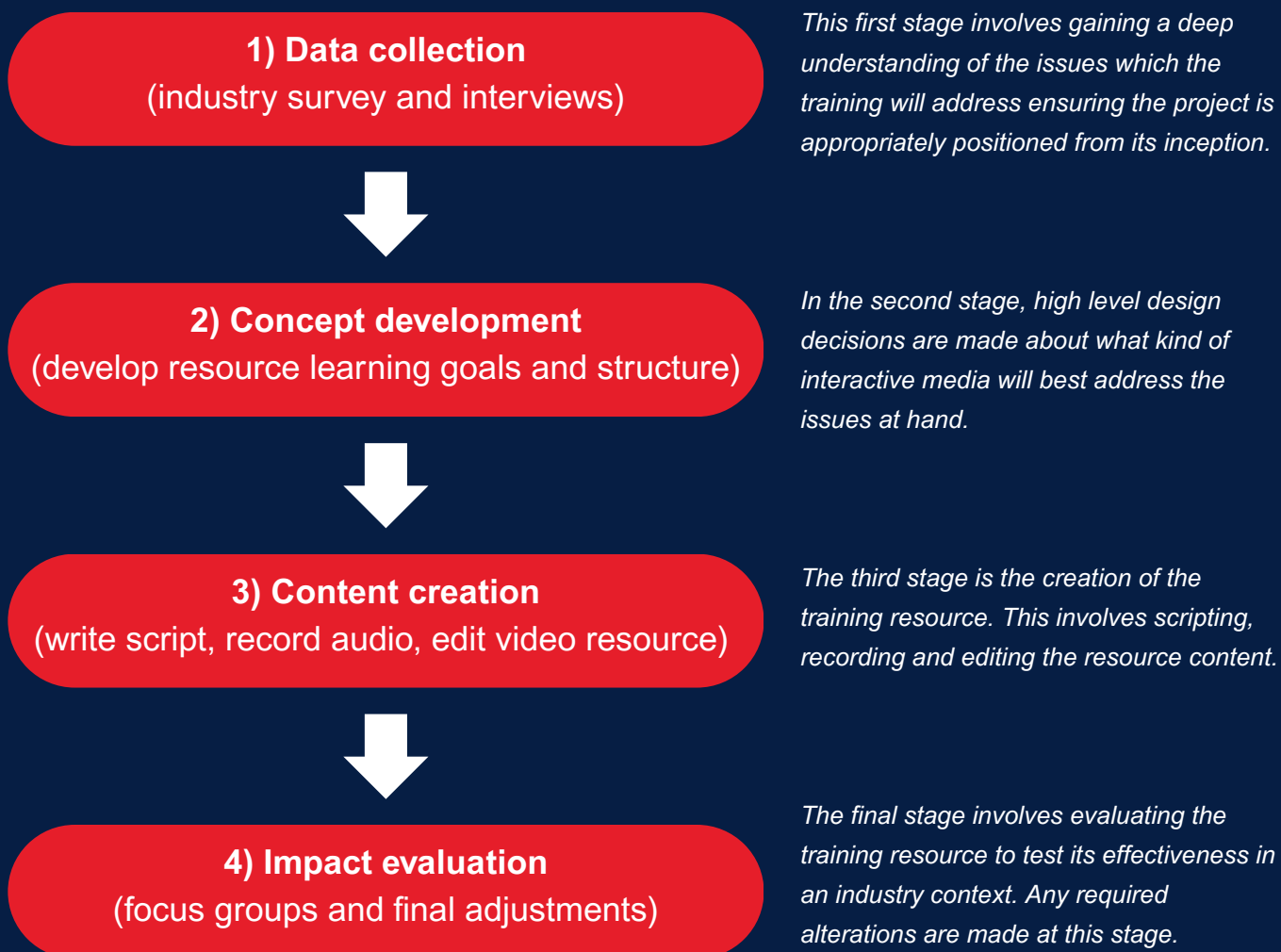


Figure 1: The participatory design process of *Not “Just a Joke”*

## 1) Data collection

The first stage of the project involved conducting a survey with 337 women working in the NSW construction industry to understand the types and effects of workplace humour they most commonly experience.

The survey results showed that although positive forms of humour were common, negative humour is still a widespread issue in construction workplaces. 65% of respondents indicated that they had experienced some form of sexual harassment at the workplace. Unwelcome sexual jokes were one of the most common forms of sexual harassment experienced by respondents, especially for site-based workers.

The survey also found that unacceptable humour impacted women's health and careers, and that many women were not comfortable reporting unacceptable humour due to fears around damaging their work relationships or not being taken seriously. A comprehensive summary of the survey results is detailed in the full research report, (The experience of workplace humour among women in the NSW construction industry: Final report).

The survey was followed by in-depth interviews with women in the construction industry to more fully understand their experiences in different job roles, industry sectors, and organisational environments. Subject matter experts in workplace gender issues were also interviewed. Key interview findings are summarised in this section with illustrative quotes.

### ***Unacceptable uses of humour***

Although most participants recognised that humour has a positive bonding and stress-relieving effect at work when used correctly, they also described jokes and behaviours that they had experienced which crossed the line of acceptability. These included:

- jokes of a sexual nature (e.g. sexually charged content, sexualising workers)
- sexist jokes (e.g. gendered stereotypes, treating women as inferior workers)
- other discriminatory jokes (e.g. race, sexual orientation, religion), and
- humour being used to mask hostility (e.g. using "it's just a joke" as a defence).

Some participants felt that behaviours such as these should not be considered as jokes and should instead be understood and treated as cases of sexual harassment, discrimination or bullying.

***"I'm not going to call it a joke... I think when something is directed at somebody personally, it doesn't matter who you are, what you are, how old you are, it's not acceptable."***



Figure 2: A still image of the Not "Just a Joke" training resource

## 1) Data collection (cont.)

### *Impacts and responses to unacceptable humour*

Interview participants corroborated the survey results, noting that unacceptable humour can have a negative impact on women's physical health, mental health and careers. Participants described how they, and many other women, would typically avoid or disengage from work occasions or events to protect themselves.

*"I never reacted... I would just sit there and do my work and just brush it off and just let it go... my protection strategy when I was working on these projects is I always just pretended I was in a bubble... if anything was happening around me, just to let it bounce off."*

Participants also described how some women working in construction would try to fit in with the workplace humour culture, emulating the humour they see men using, even if it was not reflective of their true personality.

*"In some ways, you're thinking, 'Do they have to normalise to be part of the boys' group, the mateship? Does it mean you have to compromise everything? Then they become quite crude, rude and revolting as well.'"*

### *Changing the humour culture*

As well as 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.

In addition to leadership training, industry initiatives and a more diverse workforce, participants also suggested things that individuals can enact themselves. One simple suggestion was that people at work should think carefully before making a joke, taking a moment to imagine if anyone present could potentially be hurt or offended.

*"Part of being a good organisational citizen in a workplace is being aware of the different backgrounds from which people come and using just a little imagination as to what people are likely to find offensive... we require you to put on your work persona, and part of that persona is to be respectful and to anticipate how people might be offended by things that you might say."*

Participants also suggested that changing the prevailing humour culture in the construction industry requires that people become active (rather than passive) bystanders. When witnessing a situation that concerns them, active bystanders take action to prevent harm or improve the situation, rather than remaining doing nothing. The interview participants described numerous occasions in which unacceptable jokes had been made in their presence while other coworkers either ignored these jokes or laughed along with them.

*"Had any one of those men standing with him defended me and said 'hey, that's not funny' or 'that's disgusting, don't talk to her like that' or defended me in some way I would probably not have left... But no one did, they just laughed."*

**These interview findings, in addition to the industry survey data, informed the development of the Not "Just a Joke" resource learning goals and content.**



## 2) Concept development

In the second stage of design, high level decisions were made about the direction the video resource should take and what content should be covered. Informed by the survey and interview findings, the research team conceived nine learning objectives which formed the basis of the resource's development. The resource was designed to help viewers:

- 1) Understand the difference between positive and negative humour in the workplace
- 2) Develop an awareness that humour can be harmful if used in ways that undermine, demean, exclude, discriminate against or harass people in the workplace
- 3) Understand the difference between what is and what is not humour in a work context
- 4) Be 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
- 5) Understand the potential consequences of unacceptable workplace humour on women's health, safety and wellbeing

6) Understand the potential consequences of unacceptable workplace humour on women's ability to flourish in a construction career

7) Understand that, just because women don't 'call out' unacceptable humour in the workplace, it does not mean that they are not affected by it

8) Understand 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

9) Understand that the support of active bystanders reduces the adverse impacts on women exposed to unacceptable workplace humour.

The majority of the resource content was conceived as plain-speak, educational narration with accompanying visuals. However, it was also decided at this stage in design that some personal anecdotes about unacceptable humour should be included in the resource, to make the content more relatable, impactful and grounded. As such, the research team developed five women's stories, drawing directly from the interviews, which illustrated the varied lived experiences of dealing with unacceptable humour in a construction context.



Figure 3: Still images of the five women's stories depicted in the training resource

### 3) Content creation

After the direction and content of the resource had been identified, the team proceeded to create the resource itself. The first step in this stage involved drafting a script and refining the wording over several research team meetings. Once the script was finalised, the audio was recorded over several sessions – a man's voice was recorded for the narrator and five women's voices were recorded for the women's stories. The audio takes were then edited, processed and mixed in preparation for use in the video resource.

With the audio recorded, the research team then began accompanying the audio content with engaging visuals. The bulk of the visual content was carefully selected from two stock videos libraries, with close attention being paid to ensuring that the video content was as relevant to an Australian construction audience as possible. This involved selecting videos of Australian construction sites, roads and cities, as well as ensuring that the depicted workers represented a range of diverse demographics and were placed in plausible industry settings.

Careful selection of the videos was especially important in bringing the women's stories to life – for example, as one woman speaker describes leaving a work function due to an offensive joke, the video cuts between a group of men laughing at a pub and a frustrated woman driving a car.

Additional visuals included figures and statistics from the survey data and final edits included matching the audiovisual content to appropriate background music and adding transitions, titles and subtitles.

### 4) Impact evaluation

#### *Feedback from focus groups*

In the final stage of design, the training resource was evaluated to test its effectiveness in an industry context. This involved three focus groups which involved men and women in a variety of roles in the construction industry. The focus group participants had experience in both office-based and site-based roles and worked in the residential and non-residential sectors of the industry. The groups also included representatives from industry associations, training providers, and companies that support construction businesses.

Across the three focus groups, participants expressed broad agreement with the key messages of the training resource and described them as clear, strong, and effective.

***“The content was certainly relatable, certainly impactful.”***

Participants described the training resource as being relevant to construction and potentially also applicable to other industries in which men are over-represented. Participants also commented that the resource would be effective in both individual and facilitated group sessions.

***“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.”***

***“(Viewing the resource) as a group, I think they're great because it can open up really open discussions about each of the sections and give people the time to actually have those conversations rather than just watch it all the way through... But I also like individualised as well, because you can actually sit down and reflect.”***

## 4) Impact evaluation (cont.)

The inclusion of the stories was considered to be impactful by all participants, who described them as humanising and relatable. In particular, participants expressed that the tone of the video materials was appropriate and not preachy.

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

A women’s story which encouraged construction workers to be active bystanders particularly resonated with several focus group participants, deeming it to be one of the most vital messages of the resource.

***“One of the favourite things about the video was the silent bystander... That was a really clever and intentional thing to do, calling out the bystanders that stand by and laugh along ... which enables that whole toxic culture and that whole bullying in itself.”***

Participants discussed the best ways to utilise the video, highlighting its broad applicability to workers and individuals considering entry into the industry. They suggested the training materials could usefully be incorporated into induction training activities, work health and safety training and/or toolbox talks.

Some participants recommended embedding the training materials within construction-related training programs within TAFE. They also suggested integrating the video into ‘white card’ training, a mandatory requirement for entry into site-based roles in the construction industry. Participants also indicated that the content should be made available to men and women in the industry.

### ***Implementing focus group feedback***

The original version of the training resource consisted of one 12-minute, interactive video. In this version, the video would routinely pause automatically to give the viewer time to reflect, before presenting a “click to continue” button for when the viewer wished to proceed. The majority of participants felt that this delivery disrupted the “flow” of the training experience and expressed a preference to have the content broken down into smaller videos. Some participants also expressed a wish to see the content outline to discern how far through the resource they were, and what topics would be covered.

The focus group feedback was incorporated into the final iteration of the resource, which now exists as a 10-part video playlist hosted on YouTube. Each of the 10 video sections ranges from 37 seconds to one minute 40 seconds in length. Viewers are now able to view and navigate the content by selecting videos from the playlist and can choose to watch them as one whole package or break up the content over several sessions.

In addition to the video resource itself, a facilitator’s guide was created to aid in the facilitation of group training sessions. The guide suggests group discussion questions relevant to the content of each of the 10 sections of the resource designed to encourage open conversation about humour and harassment in construction workplaces.

**To view the video resource and facilitator’s guide, please scan the QR code below or [click here to access the RMIT Play It Safe hub](#).**

