

How to Get Firms to Invest in Safe Workplaces: Evidence from Urban India

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A legal-compliance pitch got firms to say yes to harassment

training, but a gender-equality pitch got them to finish it.

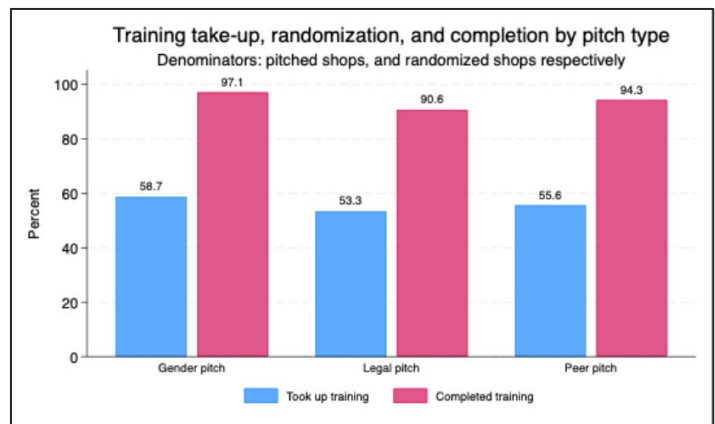
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Topic at a Glance

This project studies how to encourage firms in Delhi's retail sector to act on workplace safety for women, a setting where formal safeguards are limited and women's employment is low. We ask the following question: can different messages motivate employers to not just express an interest in sexual harassment prevention training but to actually complete it?

We offered the same sexual harassment prevention training to retail shops but randomly varied the message used to recruit them, emphasising either gender equality, legal compliance, or peer recommendation. We then tracked firms from initial interest through to actual completion.

We find that early interest is a weak guide to who follows through. Compared with the gender-equality pitch, firms that received the legal-compliance pitch expressed the same level of initial interest but were significantly less likely to actually complete training. These findings address an important implementation challenge: effective programmes must do more than provide useful services; they must also persuade firms to follow through.



Caption: Share of firms by recruitment message. Legal-compliance framing lowered completion despite similar initial interest.

New Insights

This project addresses an important gap in evidence on how to improve workplace safety for women in small and informal firms. While sexual harassment prevention training is increasingly seen as an important tool for improving workplace culture and women's labour market outcomes, less is known about how to get firms to participate in such programmes in the first place. This gap is especially important in low-capacity settings, where governments have limited ability to mandate, monitor, and enforce workplace training among small and medium enterprises.

To study this, we offered the same sexual harassment prevention training to retail shops across Delhi, but randomly varied how the training opportunity was pitched to shop-owners. Each shop received one of three messages: a gender-equality framing (appealing to fairness, women's safety, and equal opportunity at work), a legal-compliance framing (emphasising employers'

obligations under workplace sexual harassment law and the consequences of non-compliance), or a peer-recommendation framing (highlighting that other shop owners had completed the training and found it useful). Across all three pitches, the training itself was presented as practical, credible, and useful for workplace safety and productivity. We then tracked firms from their initial intention to take up training through to whether they actually completed it. In all, training was ultimately delivered to 988 managers and 2,623 employees at shops across Delhi's retail markets.

Two findings stand out:

- Framing matters for follow-through, not early interest.** The legal-compliance framing did not significantly reduce firms' initial interest in receiving training, relative to the gender-equality pitch. However, it did reduce actual completion: managers offered the legal pitch were about 6–7 percentage points less likely to complete training, and firms were similarly less likely to have either an employer or employee trained. These differences held up even after accounting for the many outcomes tested.
- The fall in interest was concentrated in specific firms.** The negative effect of legal framing was strongest among clothing shops, male-managed firms, male-dominated firms, and firms where managers had already discussed sexual harassment with employees. Among managers of male dominated firms who had previously spoken to employees about sexual harassment, the legal framing reduced manager completion by about 18 percentage points.

These findings suggest that messages emphasizing legal obligations may secure initial agreement without producing sustained engagement. Programmes should be evaluated not only by whether firms express interest, but also by whether they follow through. A gender-focused narrative may be more effective than legal-compliance messaging in encouraging firms to complete sexual harassment prevention training. Firms in the peer pitch also had lower follow-through than Gender, though the decline was smaller than for Legal and not statistically significant. Overall, the gender-equality pitch maximized training participation.

Policy Recommendations

1. Lead with a gender-equality message when recruiting firms for sexual harassment prevention training.

Programmes should frame training around creating safer, more respectful, and more inclusive workplaces for women, rather than relying primarily on legal-compliance messaging. In this study, legal framing reduced manager training completion relative to a gender-focused narrative, even though firms were similarly likely to initially express interest. Legal obligations still matter and belong in the training itself, but they work better as guidance delivered once a firm is engaged than as the opening pitch.

2. Judge uptake by completion, not expressed interest.

Our results show that firms may agree to participate but fail to complete training. Implementers should track multiple stages of the participation funnel: initial interest, scheduling, attendance, completion, and engagement with follow-up materials. Outreach strategies should be judged by completion and sustained participation, not simply enrolment.

3. Pilot and experimentally test communication strategies before scaling.

Small changes in programme framing can influence whether firms actually participate. Organisations scaling workplace safety training should test alternative narratives, monitor completion rates by firm type, and adapt outreach based on evidence rather than assuming that legal messaging will motivate action.

Limitations

While the legal-compliance framing reduced training completion relative to the gender-focused framing, the analysis does not establish the mechanism behind this result. Legal messaging may have been perceived as threatening, accusatory, redundant, or less personally relevant, but these explanations would require further qualitative research or experimental testing.

The heterogeneity findings—such as larger negative legal-framing effects among clothing shops, male-managed firms, male-dominated firms, and managers who had previously discussed sexual harassment—should be treated as suggestive. The analysis examines multiple subgroups, and these patterns should ideally be confirmed through future studies explicitly designed to test tailored outreach strategies.

Finally, this brief reports on take-up and completion only: whether and how firms can be encouraged to participate, not yet to what that participation achieves. Whether the training itself improves awareness, workplace practices, reporting, or women's employment is a separate question, which we are currently studying through follow-up surveys of participating firms.

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