



The Takeaway

Policy Briefs from the Mosbacher Institute for
Trade, Economics, and Public Policy

Empowering Women and Combating Harassment

The Women Powerline Initiative in Uttar Pradesh, India

ANUPAM AGRAWAL

Mays Business School, Texas A&M University

In this policy brief, I discuss how, amidst the persistent societal and cultural hurdles faced by women in India, a pioneering social program known as Women Powerline 1090 (WPL) has emerged in the state of Uttar Pradesh (UP) to create a safer environment and combat atrocities against women, using technology as a tool.

The WPL initiative, implemented by the police in the UP state of India, aims to combat the prevalent issue of harassment against women. The program operates through a call center based approach and offers resources to victims while also focusing on educating and reforming the offenders. It addresses harassment against women in different settings such as the home, workforce, academia, and other public instances of day-to-day life. The program's accessibility is aided by the fact that any woman can reach the power line by dialing the four-digit number "1090" on any phone (cell or landline). The program has received over a million complaints

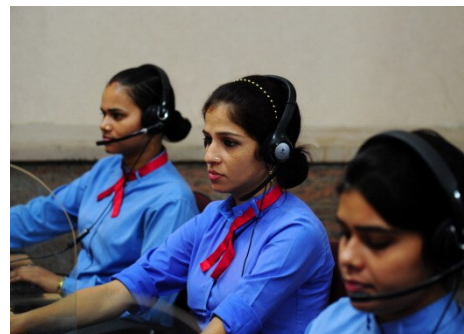


Photo by Sanjay Kanojia/AFP via Getty Images

WHAT'S THE TAKEAWAY?

The Women Power Line is a unique initiative in India that addresses harassment and abuse against women through a technology-driven social change approach.

The program ensures that victims of harassment receive the support and assistance needed while holding harassers accountable for their actions.

The potential for replication across the entire country is promising with the right governmental support and resources.

since its inception in 2012 and currently sees an average of 700 complaints a day.¹

There are, however, numerous socio-cultural hurdles that create resistance toward reporting incidents of harassment. Victim-blaming is one such hurdle, where the victim is made to feel responsible for the harassment they experience. Many women believe they are partially responsible for the harassment they experience, and this flawed logic shifts the blame from the attacker to the victim, resulting in many women being hesitant to report their complaints. Another common attitude is the fear that reporting incidents of harassment will have negative consequences on the family, employers, and society. Women are made to feel guilty about the harassment and questioned about the impact of their reports on co-workers, which further discourages them from speaking out. Fear for their careers is another valid concern for many women, as they worry that reporting incidents to the police may result in being viewed as not hireable in the future. These attitudes collectively discourage women from reporting incidents of harassment, despite being subjected to various forms of harassment daily. Therefore, the WPL strives to address these issues and empower more women, seeking to curb these social and cultural obstacles and provide a safer environment for women.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

The WPL reporting system follows seven guiding principles that ensure accessibility, confidentiality, and follow-through. They are as follows:

1) **One state, one number:** The WPL can be accessed by anyone seeking to file a complaint through the number 1090. This centralized reporting agency remains at the core of the

program, even as it expands to other reporting tools.

- 2) **Any victim or her relative can file a complaint:** The program is accessible to all women in Uttar Pradesh, ensuring that every woman has the option to stand up against harassment and abuse.
- 3) **Anonymous reporting is acceptable:** Women seeking to file a complaint can remain anonymous, ensuring complete confidentiality of their identity.
- 4) **No need to go to a police station:** Lower-income women can file a report from the comfort of their home.
- 5) **Complaints are processed by a female police officer:** Any complaint received is processed by a female police officer who can understand the victim more easily and ensure their comfort.
- 6) **Confidentiality is ensured:** Women can divulge personal information to help investigations, knowing that it remains confidential.
- 7) **Complaints are monitored until resolved:** The call center continuously monitors reports until they are resolved, ensuring that every woman who files a complaint receives the attention and help that she requires.

These seven principles help ensure that any woman reporting a complaint to the WPL will have her information kept confidential, be able to make a claim regardless of resources or social status, and have her report monitored until it is resolved.

REPORTING AND RESOLUTION PROCESS

The Reporting and Resolution process at WPL is a five-stage process that ensures that victims of

harassment receive the support and assistance they need while holding harassers accountable for their actions. The workflow at WPL is divided into two cells, with the first cell staffed entirely by female officers and the other by (mostly) male officers.²

The first stage of the process is reporting, where victims file a report and provide the necessary information to contact the harasser. When a victim contacts WPL, a female police officer in the first cell attends to the call, documents all the details of the incident, and offers care and assistance to the victim. In the second stage, a male police officer in the second cell contacts the harasser, conveys the instances of harassment while keeping the victim's identity confidential, and issues a warning. If the harassment is severe, counselling is provided; otherwise, this stage ends with a warning. The officers in the second cell refer the result of their interaction to the first cell, who then calls back the victim to check if the complaint has been resolved.

If the harassment persists, the third stage is initiated, and the harasser receives more counselling with another warning from the police. The officers in the second cell continue to handle this stage of the process. The fourth stage is initiated seven days after the second instance of counselling, where the WPL team reaches out to the victim to inquire about the harassment. If the harassment has continued, the harasser is sent for counselling again and issued a final warning. The officers in the first cell handle this stage of the process by contacting the victim to check on the progress of the complaint. Thirty days after the fourth stage report, the WPL team reaches out to the victim once again to inquire about the harassment. If the harassment still continues, the case is reported to the appropriate

legal channels, and legal action is taken against the harasser (fifth stage). This entire process ensures that the victim's identity remains confidential, and they receive the necessary care and support to confront harassment and abuse.

NATURE OF COMPLAINTS

Our work revealed that the WPL dealt with four types of complaints, organized by the severity of the incidents. The first type pertained to basic harassment through phone calls, which comprised over 90% of the complaints. The second type of complaint involved harassment through social media, while the third type dealt with public or face-to-face harassment.³ The fourth type of complaint dealt with the most serious atrocities, such as abuse, assault, or other physical crimes against women, which required immediate legal action.

The counselling process focused on getting harassers to change their bad behavior, focusing on societal pressure before legal action. The approaches included intimidation, guilt, education, and legal action. Intimidation was carried out by male officers (second cell) who were not afraid to get rough with harassers to convince them to change their ways. Guilt was used by reaching out to the families of harassers (specifically mothers and sisters) to shame harassers into reevaluating their behavior. Education was employed to help young harassers understand that their actions were wrong. Occasionally, legal action was taken against men who refused to yield.

RESULTS

My research found that the counselling procedures were effective. Currently, about 1.5% of the complaints are unresolved, and this number has remained constant over time. Within

the resolved cases, about 97% of the resolutions were within the second stage category (i.e., a single call-back to the harasser), 2.1% of the cases had multiple stage resolutions, while in about 0.9% of the cases, the harassers had to be jailed. Over the last five years, female harassment crimes have decreased by around 11.6%.

An important aspect uncovered by my research was the nuanced social change over time. First, the way women report harassment has changed over time. When the initiative was first launched, complaints concerning harassment of women were reported quite late—sometimes after six months of continuous problems faced by the victim. Currently, complaints are being registered much faster—incidents occurring in the morning are reported to WPL by the afternoon. This change is indicative of an increased belief in the efficacy of the WPL program and increased confidence in the process to solve problems. Also, today there are many more callers from rural areas, compared to earlier when the callers were mainly girls from urban areas. Calls to WPL from rural areas have risen to 39% today from almost zero call traffic in 2012. Overall, these trends show that girls are now hesitating less before reporting incidents of harassment, even in rural areas.

Helplines are prevalent in many places worldwide, but the approach taken by the

Women Power Line (WPL) in driving social change in the state of UP in India is unique. The success of WPL in addressing issues related to harassment and abuse against women demonstrates the potential of such initiatives to make a real difference in the lives of citizens. However, despite the success of this strong initiative, my research interactions suggest that replicating it throughout the entire country may face challenges due to lack of governmental support. With the right support and resources, similar initiatives could be implemented in other regions and countries to drive meaningful social change.

Anupam Agrawal is an Associate Professor at Texas A&M University's Mays Business School in the Department of Information and Operations Management and a Mosbacher Research Fellow.

Notes:

¹ Agrawal A. (2022). In the direction of ensuring safety for women— Women Powerline 1090. Case Study, Texas A&M University. https://oaktrust.library.tamu.edu/bitstream/handle/1969.1/197719/WPL_1090_working_paper_v4.pdf

² Poonam, S. (2017, Feb 12). 1090 Helpline: When Stalkers Call Women in UP, It's the Cops Who Call Them Back. Hindustan Times. <http://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/creep-callers-in-up-are-up-against-ire-of-parents-god-and-cops/story-oEAFdOCyhRKGg4t55aloBM.html>

³ Chaudhary, V. (2019, Jun 2). Law lacks bite to tackle cyberbullying. The Tribune India. <https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/sunday-special/people/law-lacks-bite-to-tackle-cyberbullying/781864.html>

Published by:
Mosbacher Institute for Trade, Economics, and Public Policy
The Bush School of Government and Public Service
4220 TAMU, Texas A&M University
College Station, Texas 77843-4220

Email: bushschoolmosbacher@tamu.edu
Website: <https://bush.tamu.edu/mosbacher>

The views expressed here are those of the author(s) and not necessarily those of the Mosbacher Institute, a center for independent, nonpartisan academic and policy research, nor of the Bush School of Government and Public Service.



To share your thoughts on *The Takeaway*, please visit <http://bit.ly/1ABajdH>