

Exploring PPE Equality

Written by: Alex Headley, Associate Editor, Construction Business Owner Magazine

SAFETY EXPERTS ON WHY THE RIGHT FIT REFLECTS A SHIFT IN WORKFORCE REPRESENTATION

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) has stated that female construction workers face specific health and safety issues on the jobsite that may require different personal protective equipment (PPE), gear and apparel than men in the industry require. Because of this, OSHA best practices recommend that, in addition to compliance with the OSHA regulations, whenever employers are required to purchase PPE, they should purchase these items in size ranges that are also suitable for women. Employers should maintain a directory of PPE manufacturers and suppliers on-hand, identify a wide selection of size ranges, keep appropriate size ranges in stock, and ensure direct accessibility, as required. But safety is about more than compliance; it's a necessity to meet the needs to the many varied body types that are at work throughout the industry.

According to a January 2021 study from BigRentz, 10.3% of the industry, or 1,106,900 employees, are women. This number represents a significant increase of women in the construction trades, and, according to Autodesk, is the highest rate in 20 years.

The same study indicates that women's numbers in construction could be even higher, if not for several factors, including gender bias, a lack of adequate training, higher risk of workplace injury, and negative perceptions of women in construction. Despite these challenges, the number of women



in the workforce is growing, with 12% of construction firms now owned by women, and companies across the United States taking steps to increase diversity in the workplace.

With more women being hired on the jobsite, as much attention must be paid to their safety as is paid to their male counterparts. As manufacturers continue to respond to an increasingly female workforce in the skilled trades and cater to this market, the shortage of skilled labor continues to impact the built world, and contractors and other construction businesses need to make sure they are prepared to keep an increasingly diverse workforce safe in the field.

Companies such as Truewerk, Safety Girl, and Dovetail Workwear are tackling this market head on with work clothes specifically designed for women in construction and other skilled trades that demand physical work and specific

safety needs. Additionally, other more established brands and traditional manufacturers such as Carhartt and Dickies have also begun to grow their product lines to cater to these needs. The industry's "one size fits all" days are over, and a new dawn of safety gear, PPE and apparel is rising. But, what do construction business owners need to know to keep their female employees safe and comfortable on the job?

More Than Aesthetics

"Changing a color doesn't necessarily make it appealing to other genders," said Erica Cole, product manager, mechanical goods at Pure Safety Group. "Initially, most manufacturers provided safety gear in pink as a much too on-the-nose nod to the fact that the apparel or safety product was designed for women." Cole's observation isn't restricted to just the construction industry, with an onslaught of products in recent years – spanning from razors to ballpoint pens – that were introduced with the claim of being designed especially for women, without more than a color change on the packaging. "Looking forward, I see the future moving past color delegations for women's products and simply offering a wider range of sizes. I also expect that, as the number of women using safety gear continues to rise, more studies will be completed about the effects of falls and energy absorber deployment on women," said Cole.

The development of PPE and other safety apparel for women in the industry is still not standard practice for many manufacturers. According to Cole, apparel is critical to safety, from visibility in poor lighting or at a distance to fabric selection for the job it all impacts whether or not the worker returns home safely. A standard size small or extra small may still be too large for some women, and excessively loose clothing poses a risk to become caught in equipment.

"For those who wear PPE and use safety products, concerns lie around proper fit of the equipment and ensuring the weight ranges of the equipment are applicable and maintain safety for women. Many compliance standards across the globe specify a minimum weight range of the worker, which, for some women, could be a concern. Ensuring testing standards and instructions for mechanical safety products, including charts for the specific worker height into fall clearance calculations, is critical for substantially shorter or taller workers, as traditional

calculations would sometimes assume an average height of 6 feet," said Cole.

Of particular note for Cole is ill-fitting safety equipment for women of varying body types. "I do think we can make more strides to advance the sizing and fit for both plus size and petite women. The chest and pelvic regions of body harnesses are areas most manufacturers could improve on. The sizing options for women do not accommodate women's bodies who have variable sizing in chest region and hip region. The sub-pelvic strap on some harnesses also improperly fits too high or too low."


Addressing a Need

Brian Ciciora, founder and CEO at Truwerk shared findings in line with Cole's. "In the midst of a skilled labor shortage, women represent a huge untapped opportunity," said Ciciora, "but without the right resources, we subtly reinforce that this isn't a space for women."

Business owners and general contractors alike have taken notice and continue to work toward making the jobsite a safer, more welcome place for women in the workforce with new technologies and policies that provided a more even playing field.

"For the ultimate safety, apparel has to provide flexibility without compromising durability, including features that make your necessities easy to access and secure, while fitting just right," said Ciciora.

As continued efforts by diversity-forward organizations, such as Nontraditional Employment for Women (NEW), National Association of Women in Construction (NAWIC) and Professional Women in Construction (PWC), seek to increase representation of women in traditionally male-dominated careers, the issue of equitable safety will only become more prevalent.

"Having women on the jobsite isn't just good for women, it's good for anyone who wants results. We're doing what we can to make that message loud and clear. Anyone with the aptitude for this work should feel empowered to step up into the skilled trades, work with their hands and leverage their intelligence and creativity into a rewarding career," said Ciciora. 



About the Author

Alex Headley is associate editor at Construction Business Owner magazine.

About the Article

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