

Exploring PPE Equality

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



About the Author

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About the Article

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