

TOOLBOX TALK #32

THE NEED FOR UNIQUE WOMEN'S PPE

The number of women working in the construction trades continues to grow. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, women make up 9.1% of the U.S. construction workforce. As the percentages increase, the demand for unique PPE for women continues to grow as well. Of course, the primary purpose of PPE is to prevent an injury. However, comfort and fit are also important because these features can dramatically influence whether workers actually wear their PPE. The single biggest demand from women who are required to wear PPE in the workplace is an appropriate fit. This sounds reasonable but, in reality, too few options are available.

Besides being uncomfortable and sometimes even clownish-looking, ill-fitting PPE is a safety hazard. The oversized safety shirts and jackets issued to women can be cumbersome, especially with excess fabric at the sleeves that can get caught in machinery. The fit is often too blocky and clumsy, and can interfere with the use of tools and operation of equipment. For women who need PPE shirts and jackets, the mantra has too often been “just buy a man’s garment but one size smaller.” The problem is that men’s garments are simply designed differently than those made for women. Jackets designed for men are longer and larger than those made for women. The waist cut design is higher for women, and there’s more space in the chest area. The shoulders on men’s jackets are much broader compared with women’s jackets. Women’s jackets are curve-friendly and flare near the waist. Even the position of buttons is different – women’s jackets traditionally have the buttons on the left side, while jackets designed for men have them on the right.

One manufacturer and wholesaler of PPE that offers men’s and women’s designs provided basic measurements for a welding jacket for each. Comparing a men’s size small with a women’s size medium, the difference may seem minor, but they’re important. The chest of a women’s medium jacket is 2 inches bigger than a man’s small jacket. However, the shoulder width of the woman’s jacket is almost 2 inches narrower and the sleeves are about an inch shorter. Additionally, the collar on the women’s jacket is 1.5 inches shorter. The woman’s style also includes waist adjustments. Although women don’t fit into one body mold, of course, merely sizing down could result in a jacket that is too tight in the chest area, but with sleeves up to 3 inches too long (a significant safety hazard) and a collar space too wide to effectively keep out the debris, sparks and spatter associated with welding.

The “one size smaller” rule is problematic for women’s hand protection, too. Women need the same level of protection and dexterity as men, without sacrificing fit and comfort. While acknowledging the hands come in all shapes and sizes, in a very general sense, women’s hands are smaller than men’s hands. Women’s fingers tend to be narrower than men’s fingers. There are even differences regarding individual fingers – the ring and index fingers on a woman’s hand are roughly the same length; a man’s ring finger is likely longer than his index finger. Using measurements provided by the same PPE manufacturer, a men’s size small welding glove is slightly longer and a bit wider than a similar style of women’s size medium welding glove. The thumb also is longer on the men’s glove. Downsizing a men’s welding glove, rather than using a glove designed specifically for a woman’s hand, will likely result in a glove that’s too wide, with fingers (and especially the thumb) that are too long. Not only will there be a loss of dexterity and comfort, but the excess glove material can cause hand fatigue (particularly for thicker materials such as leather). PPE has advanced in terms of protection levels, comfort and design enhancements. The next advancement needs to be more safety garments and gloves designed specifically for the fit, comfort and protection of women.