

PPE FIT FOR WOMEN

Q&A With Kathi Dobson & Abby Ferri, ASSP/ISEA Z590.6 Technical Report Committee Leaders

Proper PPE fit is critical to providing the appropriate level of protection. The ASSP TR-Z590.6-2023 technical report aims to address issues surrounding PPE fit by offering guidance on the design, manufacture and proper fit of PPE for women. PSJ spoke with Kathi Dobson and Abby Ferri, chair and vice chair, respectively, of the committee that compiled the report.

PSJ: What are some of the challenges women face with PPE?

Kathi: The number of issues that people have with PPE is overwhelming—not getting the right sizes, only finding large and extra-large sizes on jobsites, being told to make do with what’s available, or talking to manufacturers who didn’t see the necessity to branch out into smaller sizes and women’s sizes.

Currently, there are more manufacturers who are identifying the need and actually investing in that manufacturing process to put PPE on the shelves for women. One issue is that there’s not enough. Some women have felt that their gloves were so big and bulky that they would be caught up in equipment or pull their arms right in if the equipment had rotating parts. Gloves shouldn’t be worn working with rotating equipment, but some companies don’t understand that. They just say, “Oh, you have to wear gloves.”

Abby: We realize that to get their PPE to fit some workers may have been adjusting their PPE, which can reduce the protection it offers.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a lot of media around women working in healthcare and their ill-fitting respiratory and facial protection. And these workers were on the front lines of a global pandemic with gear that was ill-fitting. Many articles included pictures of women showing that their mask bruised their face because they were wearing oversized masks. They were trying to make it work because that’s what was available.

Another issue is cost. Some manufacturers or distributors charge more because employers order in smaller quantities. Another issue I’ve noticed is that many women are buying direct, even for things that an employer is responsible for providing. If the employer-provided item is not meeting her needs, then a woman may go out and buy proper fitting gear herself. In that case, she is subject to higher prices because she is buying as a consumer from a work wear brand.

Some good options exist, but they tend to be high end and expensive because many of these products are made by small businesses that are keeping their operations in the U.S. or minding their supply chain. This direct-to-consumer purchasing can be costly.

PSJ: What are some challenges OSH professionals or employers may face when trying to purchase women’s PPE from manufacturers?

Abby: OSH professionals may receive great samples of women’s PPE and recommend them to workers. Often, when these workers or those who order for

the workplace try to buy the items through their usual safety supplier, they can’t get the quantities they need. I know someone who was trying to buy 12 to 20 high-visibility shirts in women’s sizes from a brand that definitely has the sizes but does not have the quantities.

Kathi: The quantity breakdown is huge. If you only need a dozen and you have to buy a gross, what are you going to do with the rest? Most manufacturers don’t offer breakdowns in sizing, so you have to buy a gross of each small, medium and large rather than the 10 or 12 items that you might actually need.

Another issue is that many times when people are looking for PPE or work wear, and they’re in a remote location, they may only have one or two suppliers that they can go to. There can also be a lag time of several weeks, and by the time they receive the equipment, the women on the jobsite may have moved to another project. Then the employer is stuck with that stock, and nobody wants that cost or the equipment collecting dust on the shelf.

Abby: In addition, you can’t just go to your local work wear store and find women’s sizing, let alone try it on in your actual size. This gear has to be ordered, so some planning is required. While shipping time may be less of an issue, it’s more about the demand somehow not being communicated to those who can actually do something about it. Some companies may say they have gear in women’s sizes but they don’t actually stock it so people can buy these items.

PSJ: What are some personal experiences you have had when ordering women’s PPE?

Kathi: When you look for women’s apparel from different vendors at conferences, they may have a very small supply or nothing available. Several years ago, I was at a trade show and only one vendor had gloves in lavender that were meant for women. All other vendors had items such as boots, shirts and vests that were geared toward men or labeled as “unisex” size. Even if these items for women were available in a catalog, it would help to be able to see what it looks like and allow women to try it on for fit.

Abby: Another part of finding properly fitting PPE is that often the women’s category on a supplier’s website or catalog has items that are categorized for women that are purple, pink, turquoise, leopard print, but that may not have any actual fit or function for women besides colors the manufacturer thought women might like.

Kathi: Also, a lot of manufacturers have simply taken the men’s pattern and made it smaller rather

Kathleen Dobson, CSP, CHST, CIH, SMS, STSC, has more than 24 years’ experience in the construction industry. As safety director for Alberici Constructors, she has responsibility for and supports the firm’s automotive, mining, and industrial processes divisions and projects in Mexico. Dobson is a member of ASSP’s Greater Detroit and St. Louis chapters; Construction, Ergonomics and Oil, Gas, Mining and Mineral Resources practice specialties; and Women in Safety Excellence (WISE) Common Interest Group.

Abby Ferri, CSP, ARM, is chief safety officer of Insurate, managing director of the United States Industrial Safety Association and an adjunct instructor with Central Washington University’s Safety and Health Management program. Ferri is a past president of ASSP’s Northwest Chapter, past administrator of the WISE Common Interest Group, and a member of the Society’s Risk Management Practice Specialty. She received the 2022 ASSP Safety Professional of the Year award.



“We have to show that we care what people think and that we care that their gear fits. If you want something different, you have to do something different.”

than shaped it so that it properly fits a woman. Some people like to have different color options, which is great. But when they put it on and it still fits like a tent, it’s not applicable or appropriate.

PSJ: Please describe the scope of the ASSP TR-2590.6 technical report.

Abby: The technical report is meant to be a one-stop source to explain why we need to care about having PPE for women and why this PPE is different from men’s. The report discusses the benefits of good PPE fit, what happens when PPE does not fit, and also some areas that people may not have thought about specifically related to women, such as pregnancy or other medical issues.

There’s also a section about areas where women differ from men scientifically in fit at scale and proportion. It’s not that women’s gear should just be a smaller version of the men’s gear or just large sacks to account for curves. There are elements that should be fitted differently and accounted for with women. One example is shoulder width, which comes into play with safety vests, coveralls and any other body equipment. On average, women have slightly smaller shoulder width than men of the same size. You can tell when a woman is wearing a safety vest designed for men because the shoulders stick out several inches beyond their natural shoulder, putting the seam further down the elbow, which can cause real safety concerns.

Another interesting example from the report is about the head forms used for testing head protection that would meet the needs of more of the working population, including smaller men as well as women. If manufacturers used a smaller head form, such as one sized for children, to test head protection, this would address a larger percentage of women’s fit and create a better overall head protection sizing system.

Another example of where women differ from men is facial measurements, such as from the ear to eye socket. Many people see this with the fit of their safety glasses. When you smile, your glasses go way up, and they are not protecting your eyes. That’s because the tests for safety glasses to meet certain sizing and other requirements do not take into account measurements of women’s facial structures.

Overall, the theme is options and understanding why people need different sizes, why you can’t just

assign someone one set of gear at the beginning of their tenure and expect that to fit them forever, and that different sizes or options may be needed throughout different seasons or times in their lives.

Cori Wong, an expert in women’s studies and gender research, refers to the margins of the margins. For context, ASSP’s *Women and Safety in the Modern Workplace* report explains that the safety industry must pay the most attention to those who have been the most disadvantaged and the issues these groups face. By doing so, the industry will help more individuals. In other words, when you can meet the needs of those on the margins of the margins of your worksite, you can cover everyone in between. We realize that in many industrial and trade settings, women are the margin of the margin on those sites. So, if companies and safety professionals can use this report to help the women on their sites, they may be closer to helping everyone else, too.

Kathi: The technical report covers everything, such as head size, facial structure, body, feet, everything. It also addresses many different issues such as pregnancy, menopause, having a hysterectomy or mastectomy—things that employers or project leadership don’t normally consider unless they have been through it themselves. This is one of the biggest issues that the technical report addresses. It gets across the message that these are real safety concerns and applicable to not only women, but others on the jobsite. While smaller or larger men may have different issues than women, they are still on the same tangent as our issues.

PSJ: What other factors besides physical elements can affect PPE fit for women?

Abby: There are different life cycle changes and events that happen for most women. There’s menopause and being overheated during these changes. And now couple that with ill-fitting gear and being overheated and needing some options for different times when someone might need that comfort level.

The report also has a section on psychosocial impact, which hasn’t really been discussed. It’s been alluded to ever since OSHA’s *Women in the Construction Workplace* report from the 1990s and women still have many of the same concerns as they did then. People don’t realize that women may simply leave these workplaces or opt out of these great career paths because of PPE. It communicates so

RESOURCES

much about care for employees when they are given gear that fits. If women on a worksite receive gear that does not fit or they are not taken seriously by their colleagues, male or female, that can go a long way on psychosocial impact. The woman may leave the profession or trade. So it's very important, but it's something that has been a gray area, so I'm happy that it was discussed in the report.

Kathi: It brings out the point that if you have PPE that fits people, whether they are going through pregnancy or mastectomies, menopause, whatever their stage of life is, it is a sign of respect to the workforce and the worker. The organization shows respect to the employee by offering a variety of sizes and styles and allowing them to make that selection.

It's hard for an organization to say that it is respectful of its workforce when a shorter woman who may be a little bit on the heavy side is given size 4XL coveralls with sleeves that cover her fingertips and that she has to roll up or cuff 16 times so she doesn't trip over them. And we know safety professionals who are in that situation. We know other women and men who find that they must make adjustments to their PPE just to get around the jobsite, against the advice of the manufacturer.

PSJ: What are some ways that safety professionals and employers can use the technical report to better protect women in the workplace?

Abby: Organizations need to look at their purchasing and planning to make sure they have the gear for people, especially if it is outside of the typical large to 3XL sizes. Understanding the scope of what the women at a workplace may need can help employers make better purchasing decisions.

As the committee drafted this technical report, we thought the end users of the report would be a range of individuals from the end users of PPE—the workforce, the tradespeople—all the way through safety professionals, procurement, operations professionals and beyond into our supply chain with the manufacturers, distributor, and suppliers of PPE and sales professionals. Safety sales professionals may be able to incorporate this into their training because it can help them serve their audiences and increase awareness of what's needed. The technical report is not just for safety professionals and employers, but also for our partners that are developing equipment as well as regulators and trades groups.

PSJ: What should employers keep in mind when choosing PPE for women?

Abby: Employers should be proactive. It also helps for workers to try on gear because some brands have different sizing conventions. When we think about fit and options, people like to see the products and be a part of the process. It goes a long way by just having different options on hand that people can see, touch and try on, maybe even providing a private space for someone to try something on so that they can see if it fits. No one wants to just be handed things and told, "Hey, see you tomorrow when you

ASSP TR-Z590.6-2023, Guidance of Personal Protective Equipment for Women, is an ANSI registered technical report that provides guidance on PPE fit, selection and implementation for women. It provides background on the state of available PPE in women's sizing, anthropometric data and the impacts of PPE fit. Access the report at <https://bit.ly/3u5HjxY>.

Following are several additional resources that readers can explore to learn more about this topic.

•**ASSP Women and Safety in the Modern Workplace report:** <https://bit.ly/48GVKNe>

•**CPWR—The Center for Construction Research and Training "Personal Protective Equipment for Women Construction Workers" information:** <https://bit.ly/3vDEdXp>

•**OSHA "Women in Construction: PPE" web page:** www.osha.gov/women-in-construction/ppe

•**Women in Global Health *Fit for Women? Safe and Decent PPE for Women Health and Care Workers* report:** <https://womeningh.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/WGH-Fit-for-Women-report-2021.pdf>

have all this gear on." That gear might not fit, and the person might not understand how it works.

The practice of "shrinking and pinking" must stop. Women are not small men. Women's gear shouldn't cost more. Employers that have experienced this must push back on their supply partners.

Kathi: In addition, an individual who is ordering supplies needs to do their research. They need to evaluate what's out there and what's available. They need to involve the workforce and bring in a variety of people—women and men, those with a lot or little experience—and ask what works best for them. When you're involving the tradespeople who will be using the equipment, you're getting the equipment that's right for them.

Abby: A fellow ASSP member, Sharon Lipinski, says, "The answers are in the room." People love when they can involve workers in designing; sometimes companies work with manufacturers to design completely different PPE to meet the needs of the hazards, or at least getting them to give feedback. People love to try things out and explain exactly what they liked and didn't like, and then see that come to action, such as a new or improved product, or a different option available to them.

If we want to be workplaces of choice for young people because the trades are dying out and people are retiring, we have to do different things. We have to show that we care what people think and that we care that their gear fits. If you want something different, you have to do something different. We hope that this report helps people understand why, and helps people take some action, too. **PSJ**

Cite this article

ASSP. (2024, Feb.). PPE fit for women: Q&A with Kathi Dobson and Abby Ferri, ASSP/ISEA Z590.6 Technical Report Committee leaders. *Professional Safety*, 69(2), 27-29.