

Practical steps to get the right PPE for women

Women often face challenges in getting well-fitting PPE. Many employers only offer men's sizes and encourage women to just "order a smaller size". But women are not smaller men. To fit properly, PPE must be designed for their bodies.

Here are some practical steps for making sure the women in your workplace have the right PPE.

Work with your safety and health and women's committees

Getting the right PPE can be a good joint project for a local union's Safety and Health and Women of Steel committees.

Safety and health regulations

When PPE is assigned at work, it must meet certain specifications if it is to serve its purpose and protect the user. Applicable Canadian laws require PPE to "be a proper fit".

As always, PPE is a last resort in worker protection. When it's needed, however, it must fit properly to provide protection from hazards.

Identifying suppliers

An increasing number of PPE suppliers make products designed for women. Some companies focus solely on women's PPE, while others have added women's sizes to their product lines. Both the Canadian National Office and the United States USW headquarters have compiled [lists of women's PPE suppliers](#). These lists are **not** endorsements of any products or companies. Our union is not able to assess the quality of individual products and companies. Rather, the lists are a way to share resources that members have identified.

And these lists can be shared across the border! With international commerce, there is no reason that employers should be restricted to where they order.

Often employers work with one supplier for all of their PPE needs. If that supplier does not carry women's sizes, workers are often told that PPE for women is not available. This is not true. It may not be available from every supplier, but the PPE exists. Employers just have to order from a different source.

It is also worth noting that, while some women's PPE costs more than men's, that is not always the case. As with any other purchase, employers can shop around to find a range of prices.

Trying it on, trying it out

Before employers purchase new equipment, it is best, where possible, to test it out and make sure it meets the users' needs. Either ask for "samples" to test or order a small batch to ensure it is appropriate for the workforce.

When the PPE samples arrive, make sure women of a variety of sizes and shapes try them out. This will ensure that the PPE is flexible enough to fit everyone who needs it. If it is not, the employer will need to deal with several vendors to accommodate everyone relying on PPE for protection.

Work with the suppliers to get what you want: A success story

Covergalls is a Canadian company whose mission is to transform workwear for women by providing safe and inclusive clothing. Sharen Brownson, president of USW Local 9422, was excited to learn about Covergalls and got her employer to purchase some of their coveralls for the women at her worksite. Though she loved the concept, some aspects of the coveralls did not work well in the real world. [Sharen took it upon herself to contact the company](#). They were enthusiastic to work with her. Based on the feedback Sharen gathered from women throughout our union, Covergalls changed its design and launched an update of their coveralls.

Work with our union to make it

It's not acceptable for employers to say, "Women's PPE costs too much!" Forcing women to wear ill-fitting men's PPE does not provide protection from hazards on the job and that does not comply with health and safety laws and regulations. Ensuring that women have access to properly fitting PPE is not just a matter of comfort – it is a critical element of workplace safety compliance.

The USW stands with our members to ensure employers provide protection from workplace hazards. For more information on USW's program to protect women workers, visit [the web page for Raising the Bar on Women's Health and Safety](#) .