

Why “Shrink It and Pink It” No Longer Works – and How Ontario Is Leading the PPE Inclusivity Movement



For too long, female workers in industries like construction, oil and gas, firefighting, and mining have shouldered an added burden on the job: ill-fitting personal protective equipment (PPE). Historically, many manufacturers have taken a “shrink it and pink it” approach—scaling down men’s gear, coloring it pink, and marketing it as “women’s PPE.” This practice is not just uncomfortable and sexist – it can be dangerous.

A Growing Force in the Skilled Trades

Female participation in the skilled trades sector has been on the rise, particularly in Ontario. In 2023, **374,600 women** were employed in a skilled trades-related occupation in Ontario, representing **about 29%** of the 1.3 million Ontarians who were employed in such occupations. While these numbers demonstrate progress, they also highlight a significant opportunity: nearly a third of Ontario’s skilled workforce is female, yet much of the existing PPE is still designed primarily for men.

This discrepancy has direct implications for health and safety. According to recent research published by the Canadian Standards Association (CSA), **50%** of women surveyed said their PPE does **not** fit properly, **43%** said it is **uncomfortable** to

wear, and **35%** indicated the **selection of women-specific PPE is inadequate**. These are startling statistics, and they underscore the urgency of adapting PPE to meet women's needs.

An End to “Shrink It and Pink It” in Ontario

Ontario is taking bold steps to address these longstanding oversights through its ***Working for Workers Five Act, 2024***. This legislative initiative mandates that employers ensure PPE is properly designed and fitted for women in all sectors. It also cracks down on “bad actor” employers who repeatedly violate safety laws, proposing mandatory minimum fines of \$500,000 for corporations convicted of such infractions within a two-year period.

Labour Minister David Piccini has called these provisions “game-changing measures” that will attract more women into the trades, while also clamping down on employers who fail to protect vulnerable or newcomer workers. By requiring properly fitting PPE for women, the *Working for Workers Five Act* sets a new standard that could ripple across Canada, prompting other jurisdictions to follow suit.

Jennifer Khan, Vice President of Inclusive Diversity at EllisDon, highlights the significance of these changes:

“The importance of properly fitting personal protective equipment (PPE) can be easily overlooked when you can go to virtually any retailer and easily find PPE that fits your body and keeps you safe. The Working For Workers Six Act and the requirement of properly fitting PPE for women is poised to create a transformative ripple throughout the construction industry and marketplace. By prioritizing safety inclusively, we not only encourage more women to join the sector but also clearly communicate they are not merely present in construction—they are essential and embraced.”

Why Properly Fitting PPE Matters

When PPE doesn't fit, the risk of injury skyrockets. Ill-fitting PPE can:

- **Decrease mobility:** Oversized gloves or coveralls impede movement.
- **Increase injury risk:** Loose or extra material can catch in machinery or cause trip hazards.
- **Compromise protection:** Gaps in goggles, poorly sized harnesses, and boots too big or small all reduce the gear's effectiveness.

Real-life anecdotes confirm these dangers:

- One woman broke her wrist from kickback while operating a hand drill in oversized gloves.
- A welder faced repeated burns because she could never find coveralls with sleeves or pant legs that were sufficiently long.
- Another worker's glove got caught in a portable band saw—leading to a severe finger injury—because the only gloves available were men's sizes.

Research-Backed Needs

These stories align with the broader data: up to **50%** of women say their PPE doesn't fit right, almost half find it too uncomfortable, and over a third lament limited women-specific options. Given that women now make up nearly **one-third of Ontario's skilled trades workforce**, continuing to ignore these fit issues is not merely an inconvenience—it's a fundamental safety concern.

Ontario's Broad-Spectrum Approach

In addition to legislating properly fitting PPE, the ***Working for Workers Five Act, 2024*** addresses other critical workplace issues:

1. Cracking Down on Unsafe Employers:

- Mandatory minimum fines of \$500,000 for corporations convicted of repeated Occupational Health and Safety Act offences.

2. Expanding Roadside Safety:

- Motorists must slow down and move over for roadworkers with flashing amber lights, extending the protection already given to emergency vehicles.

3. Improving Washroom Facilities:

- Inspections have found numerous violations, including missing doors and no running water. New proposals would require fully enclosed, private, and adequately lit washrooms, with at least one unit dedicated to women on every job site.

4. Supporting Workers' Well-Being and Training:

- Unlocking \$400 million via the Workplace Safety and Insurance Board (WSIB) for mental health and recovery programs.
- Funding \$1.4 billion through the Skills Development Fund to train over a million workers, including expanded immigration pathways for qualified healthcare workers.

Charmaine Williams, Associate Minister of Women's Social and Economic Opportunity, emphasized that improving job-site conditions—from better-fitting PPE to cleaner washrooms—will attract and retain more women. “They sometimes can't find the right coveralls, or boots that are the right fit because maybe there's only men's sizes available,” she noted. When basic necessities like safety gear and sanitary facilities are provided, women not only enter the field but are more likely to stick around.

British Columbia's Parallel Efforts

Ontario isn't alone in tackling PPE inclusivity. In March 2023, **WorkSafeBC** released updated guidelines (*OHS Guideline Part 8*) clarifying that PPE must be designed, selected, and

used appropriately for all workers, regardless of gender.

“We recognize that the differences in body shape and size between men and women can make it challenging to find PPE that fits properly,” said Suzana Prpic, Senior Manager of Prevention Field Services at WorkSafeBC. “We want to make sure that all workers are protected and comfortable while on the job, and that means ensuring that PPE is designed and fitted to accommodate a wide range of body types.”

These guidelines also remind employers that modifying or repurposing ill-fitting PPE—like cutting sleeves or stitching pant legs—can invalidate the gear’s certification, potentially compromising its protective qualities.

Not Just About Safety—But Inclusion

A large segment of female professionals across multiple industries have felt marginalized by having to wear gear that doesn’t fit, and by using unsanitary or insecure washroom facilities. According to Monte McNaughton, Ontario’s Minister of Labour, Training, and Skills Development, simple measures—like ensuring that uniforms, boots, and safety harnesses fit properly—send a powerful message: **Women are not only allowed on job sites; they are valued there.**

“When I show up on site, I don’t feel like an afterthought,” explained one female tradesperson who switched to women-specific coveralls and gloves. “I’m protected and I’m comfortable. That’s how it should be for everyone.”

Industry Leaders and Worker Voices

Forward-thinking companies, such as Covergalls and IFR Workwear, are reengineering the way they design and size PPE. Their products result from actual data on women’s body shapes—acknowledging that you can’t simply scale down men’s proportions. Female workers across sectors attest that these options finally allow them to walk, climb, lift, and operate

machinery with both comfort and confidence.

A Path Forward: Practical Steps

1. Assess Current Inventory:

Review all protective gear. Does it genuinely fit the variety of body shapes among your workers?

2. Demand Supplier Accountability:

Look for data-driven designs, especially when it comes to boots, gloves, and harnesses. Do not assume scaled-down men's sizes are enough.

3. Engage Workers in Feedback:

Encourage employees to report incidents or near misses associated with ill-fitting PPE. Open communication accelerates problem solving.

4. Review and Update Policies:

Align internal procedures with the latest government requirements, such as Ontario's *Working for Workers Five Act* and WorkSafeBC guidelines.

5. Foster a Culture of Inclusion:

From posting signage that affirms women's contributions, to ensuring washrooms are truly female-friendly, these measures demonstrate genuine commitment.

Benefits for Employers and the Industry

- **Enhanced Safety and Compliance:** Fewer injuries and legal liabilities.
- **Workforce Attraction and Retention:** As more than one-quarter of Ontario's skilled trades workforce is female—and growing—companies that invest in properly fitting PPE and sanitary facilities can position themselves as employers of choice.
- **Improved Productivity:** A comfortable worker is a more efficient worker, free to focus on tasks rather than worry about gear malfunctions or discomfort.

Looking Ahead

From Ontario's legislative reforms to British Columbia's updated guidelines, Canada is witnessing a broader national conversation about how best to protect **all** workers. As more provinces align with data-backed practices—requiring employers to provide PPE that accounts for female anthropometry—we're likely to see lower incident rates, reduced compensation claims, and greater job satisfaction among women in the trades.

At the end of the day, “shrink it and pink it” was never a real solution. Whether you're a welder, a carpenter, an electrician, or a safety coordinator, having PPE that truly fits should be non-negotiable. By mandating properly fitting equipment and cleaner, female-friendly facilities, Ontario and other provinces pave the way for a safer, more inclusive future in industries that have traditionally overlooked women's needs. With continued advocacy, and the growing participation of women in skilled trades, we can finally say goodbye to an era of ill-fitting PPE—and embrace one where every worker can safely and confidently perform their job.

Resources

[Canadian Women's Experiences with Personal Protective Equipment in the Workplace](#)