



NAVIGATING THE PPE EQUITY CONVERSATION

A Guide for Women
in the Workplace

A MESSAGE FROM THE FOUNDER

Amy Roosa – Founder, The Safety Rack

The Safety Rack was created in 2022 to highlight personal protective equipment (PPE) and workwear products designed for women. Over time, it became clear that awareness alone wasn't enough. That's why The Safety Rack has grown into the nonprofit it is today – dedicated to closing the PPE Equity Gap for women across all industries.

Since beginning my research and advocacy work in 2018, I've had countless conversations with women who shared the same story: PPE that doesn't fit, safety gear that creates new hazards, and workplaces that don't always take these concerns seriously. These experiences are not isolated – they reflect a systemic issue.

That's why we launched the Equity in Safety Report in 2025. Our findings from over 500 women surveyed confirmed:

- Ill-fitting PPE isn't rare – it's the norm for many women.
- Approximately 20% of women surveyed reported being injured because of PPE that didn't fit.
- Over 90% said they experienced challenges finding PPE designed for their body.
- Gaps in protection are preventable if employers, suppliers, and industry leaders work together to make PPE equity a priority.

This guide was created for you – the worker, navigating a conversation that may feel tricky or uncomfortable. PPE equity is not just about equipment. It's about safety, confidence, and the right to go home at the end of the day just as protected as your peers.

You are your best advocate. By using this guide, you'll gain tools to help you approach leadership with facts, resources, and confidence. And when you speak up, you're not only helping yourself – you're helping your employer close the equity gap at work, paving the way for generations of women to come.

This is your voice. This is your safety. And we're here to stand with you.

– Amy Roosa
Founder, The Safety Rack

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Section 1. Setting the Stage: Know Your Rights and Standards.....	4
Section 2. Preparing for the Conversation.....	5
Section 3. How to Talk to Leadership.....	8
Section 4. If You Face Pushback.....	10
Section 5. Empowerment Tools.....	12
Section 6. Closing the Loop.....	14



SECTION 1.

Setting the Stage: Know Your Rights and Standards

Introduction

Before you can have an effective conversation about PPE equity, it's important to understand your rights under workplace safety standards. Specifically, ill-fitting PPE is not about comfort and preference. It's about safety, compliance, and ensuring every worker, regardless of gender or body type, is equally protected from hazards.

OSHA regulations make it clear that PPE must fit the employee correctly. While OSHA does not specifically mention gender, the requirement that PPE must fit means employers are responsible for providing options that protect every worker, this includes women.

The 2025 updates to OSHA's Construction PPE Standard (29 CFR 1926.95) emphasize that PPE must be "sized and fitted" for the individual worker. In General Industry (29 CFR 1910.132), employers are also required to ensure PPE is not just provided, but that it fits and protects the worker.

We encourage you to review these standards by visiting www.osha.org, being able to reference OSHA's language and the ANSI/ISEA standards on visibility, sizing, and performance will prepare you to back up your request with facts, not opinions.

Remember: Knowledge is power. When you walk into a PPE conversation with the standards on your side, you're not just asking for change, you're showing that it's required.



SECTION 2.

Preparing for the Conversation

Introduction

Entering into a conversation about PPE equity can feel overwhelming, but preparation is the key to confidence. The more you understand your own needs, the company's policies, and the standards that back you up, the more effective your message will be. This section is designed to help you take inventory of your PPE experience before starting the conversation about your individual experience. By walking through each question, you'll identify where gaps exist in fit, safety, comfort, or confidence, and gather the information needed to make your case clearly and effectively.

Think of this checklist as the foundational evidence that transforms your experience into actionable data. Whether you're preparing for a discussion with your supervisor, safety team, or union rep, these notes will help you speak from both personal experience and safety compliance standards.

Speaking up about safety concerns is normal behavior, use this guide to tell your story with clarity, confidence, and credibility. The more specific your examples, the stronger your voice becomes in promoting meaningful change.

Find allies that are also experiencing PPE equity concerns – do you have co-workers that may not recognize the challenges of poor fit and choice? Develop your approach together.



Self-Assessment Checklist

■ Fit & Function

- Do your garments fit in the shoulders, hips, chest, waist, and length?
- Is movement restricted (bending, climbing, lifting, reaching, breathing)?
- Does PPE shift, slip, or create tripping/snaring hazards?

■ Safety Impact of Ill-fitting PPE

- Has it caused near-misses or increased exposure to hazards? Have these occurrences been documented?
- Does your PPE reduce your visibility or interfere with other protective equipment (e.g., harness, respirators)?
- Have you noticed higher fatigue or other negative physiological outcomes related to PPE fit? Examples may include:
 - ◆ Bruising or pressure points from tight or poorly shaped PPE
 - ◆ Chafing or skin irritation from friction, seams, or improper sizing
 - ◆ Overheating or heat stress due to poor ventilation or layering incompatibility
 - ◆ Cold exposure caused by gaps in coverage (waist, wrist, neck, ankles)
 - ◆ Balance issues or altered gait from oversize footwear or unstable PPE
 - ◆ Headaches, or neck or shoulder strain from poorly fitted head, eye, or respiratory protection
 - ◆ Muscle fatigue or back strain caused by restricted movement or improper weight distribution
- Has it impacted your ability to perform tasks safely?

■ Confidence & Professional Impact

- Do you feel less confident or professional in ill-fitting PPE?
- Has it affected your productivity or perceived credibility with peers or supervisors?

■ Documentation

- Have you documented and reported any incidents, near-misses, or hazards related to improperly fitting PPE?
- Do you have photos or written notes that illustrate the issue?
- Have you reported this issue to your supervisor, safety department, human resources, and/or union?



Tip: Keep a dated journal of issues you face with PPE. Real examples are harder to dismiss than general statements.



Conversation Planner

■ Review Company Safety Policy

- Does your employer's written safety program mention aspects of PPE fit?
- Are there procurement, management approval, or safety committee processes for requesting new equipment?
- Does the company claim to follow OSHA/ANSI standards – and can you reference that compliance in your request?

■ Identify Where to Start

- Supervisors or Union Stewards may have limited authority but can raise the issue.
- Safety Managers understand and can provide insights around compliance responsibilities.
- Human Resource Representatives who focus on recruitment, hiring and retention may be interested in minimizing these gaps and knowing processes for doing so.
- Procurement/Purchasing Officers control vendor selection and orders, potentially having insights into other available options.

■ Identify Your Primary Goal

- Alternate size or option from the current vendor?
- Trial samples of PPE designed for women?
- Longer-term change in vendor or distributor?

■ Prepare Supporting Materials

- OSHA/ANSI standards and citations.
- Examples of compliant vendors and products that support your primary goal.
- Notes from your self-assessment and any incident records.
- Testimonials or survey data (like the PPE Equity Report).

■ Rehearse Your Message

- Frame your concerns around compliance and safety, not preference.
- Role-play responses to pushbacks so you're not caught off guard.



Remember: Preparation creates confidence. The more organized you are, the more likely leadership is to take your concern seriously.



Advocating as a Team

You don't have to raise PPE equity concerns alone. In many workplaces, issues related to PPE fit affect more than one person, even if not everyone recognizes it yet.

■ Why team advocacy matters

- Multiple voices help demonstrate that PPE fit issues are systemic, not individual
- Group advocacy reduces the fear of retaliation or being labeled as “difficult”
- It strengthens the case for PPE trials, policy updates, or vendor changes
- Leadership is more likely to act when concerns reflect workforce-wide risk

■ How to advocate together

- Start informal conversations with coworkers about PPE fit and safety challenges
- Share examples of hazards caused by poor fit (snagging, restricted movement, fatigue, exposure)
- Compare experiences across roles, body types, and job tasks
- Identify common issues that impact safety, performance, or compliance

■ Designate a spokesperson or group approach

- Decide whether one person will raise their concern on behalf of the group
- Or request a joint meeting with a supervisor, safety committee, or union representative
- Bring shared documentation, examples, and proposed solutions

■ Leverage formal structures

- Safety committees, toolbox talks, and union meetings are effective forums
- Written submissions or agenda items create a record and encourage follow-up



Team advocacy isn't about confrontation, it's about collaboration. When workers come together with shared evidence and solutions, PPE equity becomes a safety improvement initiative, not a personal complaint.



SECTION 3.

How to Talk to Leadership



Introduction

Speaking up about PPE can feel intimidating. You may worry about being seen as “rocking the boat” or causing trouble. Remember, your employer is legally required to provide properly fitting PPE, and you have every right to raise concerns. By approaching leaders professionally with the facts, you not only protect yourself but also create change for others who will follow you.

The following conversation starters and responses are designed to help you think through the discussion before it happens. Use them as examples, not scripts to guide how you approach your supervisor, safety team, procurement, etc. Prepare a few key points or responses ahead of time to support a smoother conversation and assist with staying calm, confident, and focused on facts. The goal is to turn a potentially uncomfortable discussion into a productive dialogue that leads to solutions. After the discussion, follow up with an email that includes items that were discussed or need review and agreed upon actions.

Conversation Starters & Responses

■ Supervisor

- Starter: I'm concerned about my safety while wearing this PPE. It doesn't allow me to [insert task and name the risk] safely. Can we look at alternatives?"
- Pushback: "We've always ordered this brand."
- Response One: "I understand that, and I'm not questioning the brand. My concern is whether this specific fit allows me to perform my job safely. If I can't move properly or maintain coverage during (insert task/risk), that increases risk. I'd really like to explore alternatives that allow me to do the job safely and effectively."

■ Safety Team / Department

- Starter: "I want to raise a safety concern. My PPE does not fit and is impacting my ability to perform certain tasks safely. Here are specific examples, and here are possible vendors that offer properly fitting options for women."
- Pushback: "No one else has reported this issue."
- Response: "Underreporting is common. I'm bringing this forward because I want to prevent incidents and help improve safety for everyone."



Safety Team Tip:

Frame the issue as both a safety and compliance concern. Connecting it to hazard reduction, injury prevention, and overall workforce safety strengthens your case.



■ Procurement/Purchasing

- Starter: “Our current vendor doesn’t carry compliant options in women’s sizing. Would you consider trialing these brands that meet ANSI standards?”
- Pushback: “We don’t have the budget for that.”
- Response: “OSHA requires properly fitting PPE, and compliance can’t be put aside due to cost. To start, what if we obtain trial/sample PPE from compliant vendors or run a small pilot program? This would allow us to evaluate fit, safety, and performance before making any permanent purchasing decisions.”



Tips

- Stay fact-based, not apologetic, relate back to your story and personal experiences.
- Emphasize compliance and safety, not preference.
- Use “we” statements to emphasize shared goals and workforce-wide benefits such as fewer injuries, better efficiency, and higher morale. Be calm, confident, and consistent.



Remember: Asking for properly fitting PPE is not “complaining.” It’s about advocating for a safer workplace.



SECTION 4.

If You Face Pushback

Introduction

Even the best-prepared conversations sometimes meet resistance. Budget concerns or dismissive attitudes are possible roadblocks. Pushback does not mean you're wrong — it means you need a strategy.

If the first conversation doesn't work, that's okay. Advocacy isn't about winning once, it's about persistence. Sometimes you need to pause, regroup, or bring in allies. If your supervisor dismisses you, Union Reps, Procurement, or the Safety Committee may be a better avenue. Allies, mentors, or trusted peers can also step in to support your voice.



Common Roadblocks & How to Respond

Even with preparation, you may still encounter resistance. Below are common barriers you might hear along with strategies to reframe or redirect the conversation to keep progress moving forward.

■ Budget Concerns

When cost is mentioned, refocus the discussion on compliance and risk reduction. Emphasize that OSHA requires properly fitting PPE and that investing in correctly fitted gear prevents costly injuries, claims, and downtime.

■ Established Vendors

If your team defaults to “we’ve always used this brand,” acknowledge consistency but highlight how workforce diversity and standards have evolved. Offer vendor examples that meet current compliance and fit requirements.

■ Lack of Reported Complaints

If leadership suggests “no one else has complained,” point out that underreporting is common — especially for PPE fit issues. Sharing data, survey findings, or documented incidents reinforces that this is a widespread and preventable problem.

■ Incorrect Sizing Solutions

When the quick fix is to “just size up,” explain that oversized PPE can create new hazards such as tripping, snagging, or reduced protection. Reinforce that proper fit is a safety and compliance requirement, not a preference.

■ Time Constraints

If there’s resistance to trialing new products, suggest a small pilot program. Testing a few compliant options can identify solutions that improve comfort, performance, and long-term safety outcomes.



Pro-Tip: The Safety Rack Directory is a great resource to research the different brands making women’s workwear and PPE.



Escalation & Reframing

- Document everything:
 - Keep records & notes of your concerns, conversations, and responses.
 - Create an incident log – PPE items, hazards, outcomes, action items
 - Take & share photos
- Know when to pause: If dismissed, consider revisiting with HR, Safety, or Procurement.
- Bring in allies: Supportive peers or committee members can amplify your message.
- Reframe: Position PPE equity as a shared win – safer workers, better compliance, fewer injuries.

Real-World Example

Maria, a welder, told her supervisor twice that her flame-resistant jacket was too long and her sleeves were snagged on equipment. She was told to “just roll them up.” Instead of giving up, Maria documented two near misses, took photos, and went to the Safety Committee. With evidence and compliance framing, the committee piloted women’s FR welding jackets. Within weeks, Maria and other women had better gear, and snagging incidents dropped.



Pro-Tip: Pushback isn't the end; it's a signal to try another approach. Persistence and allies can turn the tide.



SECTION 5.

Empowerment Tools

Introduction

You don't have to navigate this conversation from memory. The tools below are designed to help you organize your experience, document risks, and communicate clearly with leadership. Think of them as PPE for your advocacy – protection, preparation, and proof.

These tools can be informal notes, printed worksheets, or digital documents. What matters most is consistency and documentation.



Tools You Can Use

1. Incident & Fit Issue Log

Create and maintain your own log to document PPE-related hazards, near-misses, or injuries tied to fit, function, or access.

What to capture

- Date and task being performed
- PPE item involved
- Fit or performance issue
- Hazard created or exposure increased
- Outcome (near-miss, fatigue, task interference, injury)
- Action taken or reported to whom

Why it matters: Patterns documented over time are harder to dismiss and help shift the conversation from anecdotal to evidence based.

2. Conversation Preparation Worksheet

Before meeting with a supervisor, safety team, or procurement, outline:

- The specific PPE issue and task impact
- Relevant OSHA or ANSI standards
- Safety risks created by current PPE
- Requested solution (trial, sample, pilot, alternative sizing)
- Acceptable interim steps or compromises

Why it matters: Preparation keeps the conversation focused on safety, compliance, and solutions—not personal preference.

3. Vendor & Market Awareness

The Safety Rack’s PPE & Workwear Directory highlights manufacturers and distributors offering women’s PPE and workwear options across industries.

Important note:

Inclusion in the directory does not replace employer responsibility. Employers must still verify that any PPE meets applicable OSHA, ANSI, NFPA, or industry-specific standards.

Why it matters: Knowing compliant options exist removes “availability” as a barrier to action.

4. Ally & Amplification Support

Advocacy is stronger when supported by others.

Ways allies can help:

- Validate and echo safety concerns in meetings
- Support pilot programs or trials
- Help document issues and outcomes
- Raise PPE fit concerns during safety meetings or toolbox talks
- Reinforce that PPE equity is a workforce safety issue, not an individual complaint

Why it matters: Multiple voices reduce individual risk and reinforce that PPE fit issues affect overall safety culture.

Remember: You don’t need perfect tools to begin. Clear notes, consistent documentation, and follow-up are often more effective than formal systems that are never used.

SECTION 6.

Closing the Loop

Introduction

Advocacy doesn't stop after the first ask. Change takes persistence, documentation, and follow-up. By reinforcing progress and showing benefits, you keep PPE equity on your employer's radar.



What to capture

- Follow Up Regularly: Ask when decisions will be made, set a specific timeline, then circle back. Do not let the issue fade away.
- Track Progress: Document vendor outreach, trials, or policy changes.
- Show Benefits: Highlight improved safety, reduced incidents, and efficiency gains.
- Offer to Help: Volunteer for trials, evaluation of vendors, or feedback opportunities.
- Celebrate Small Wins: Every small step matters! Recognize progress and keep moving forward.
- Encourage Policy Updates: Suggest revising the company's written safety program to explicitly require properly fitting PPE for all employees. Advocate for formal procurement policy and processes.

Remember: Consistency builds credibility. By staying engaged, you help build a safer workplace for everyone.

Define What Progress Looks Like

Success doesn't always mean an immediate, permanent PPE change. Progress can show up in measurable steps that reduce risk and improve access over time.

Examples of meaningful progress metrics

- Trial or pilot programs launched for women's PPE or alternative sizing
- Sample PPE evaluated and documented for fit, safety, and task performance
- New vendors added to the approved or trial vendor list
- PPE fit considerations added to procurement or safety review processes
- Increased reporting or documentation of PPE fit issues (indicating trust and awareness)
- Reduced near-misses, discomfort-related distractions, or task interference
- Follow-up meetings scheduled with clear timelines and accountability

What counts as a “win”

- Temporary access to compliant PPE while long-term solutions are evaluated
- Agreement to pilot options rather than immediate full adoption
- Formal acknowledgment that current PPE presents a safety risk
- Commitment to revisit PPE options at a set review cycle
- Written action items or policy language updates

Recognizing compromise without losing momentum

A compromise should still improve safety and move toward compliance. If a solution reduces risk, documents next steps, and includes a timeline for review, it can be a valid interim win — not the end goal.



Tip: Progress is measurable when there is documentation, accountability, and a plan to revisit the issue. If nothing is written down, it's not progress.

A FINAL WORD

Advocating for properly fitting PPE isn't about asking for special treatment — it's about safety, compliance, and dignity at work. When you speak up, document concerns, and stay engaged in the process, you help create safer systems not just for yourself, but for everyone who comes after you.

Progress may come in steps. A pilot program, a policy update, or a single conversation can be the beginning of real change. Stay consistent, keep records, and know that your voice matters.

You deserve PPE that protects you fully. And you deserve to go home safe at the end of every shift.

To learn more and stay up to date on issues surrounding women's PPE and workwear equity, follow us at www.thesafetyrack.org.

Important Disclaimer

This guide is intended for educational purposes only and to provide resources to help women prepare for conversations about PPE equity in the workplace. The Safety Rack makes no guarantees that use of this guide will result in employer action, policy changes, or improved PPE access. This guide does not constitute legal advice. For legal questions, consult OSHA directly or seek legal counsel. References to vendors or products are for informational purposes only and do not constitute endorsement by The Safety Rack. Employers are responsible for verifying product compliance and ensuring PPE provided meets applicable safety standards. Every workplace is different. We encourage you to use your judgment, seek support from allies, and consult with appropriate safety or HR representatives within your organization.