



5 Ways Construction Employers Can Create Safer Workplaces for Women

Filed in [Employment and Training, Labor Rights, Safety and Health](#) •

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More than 390,000 women work in [construction and extraction occupations](#), an 11% increase since 2017. More women are attracted to the high-paying, high-quality careers offered by the construction trades, which is much needed at a time when the construction industry faces large workforce demands in order to undertake ambitious and historic federally-funded infrastructure projects. But despite this growth, gender and racial discrimination remain widespread and many women still face challenges navigating these male-dominated occupations – including threats to their safety. Not only do all workers deserve respectful workplaces free of discrimination, they deserve to go to work in a safe and healthy environment.

Here are five ways employers can create safer and better workplaces for all workers, including women:



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- **Provide Properly Fitting Personal Protective Equipment**

Women's safety on the job is undermined when safety measures, such as providing personal protective equipment (PPE) for diverse bodies, are not implemented in favor of a one-size-fits-all approach. A [recent survey](#) of tradeswomen and non-binary tradespeople found that nearly three in ten report never or rarely being provided gloves or safety equipment in sizes that fit them. According to [another survey](#), 89% of tradeswomen said they had difficulty accessing PPE that fits and 77% reported they were exposed to unnecessary hazards because of ill-fitting PPE. In response, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) [issued a notice of proposed rulemaking](#) to ensure that all employees have PPE that fits properly.

- **Guarantee Safe and Sanitary Bathrooms**

[OSHA's sanitation standards](#) require employers to provide accessible sanitary facilities for ALL personnel and to ensure that these facilities are maintained appropriately. Despite this, many tradeswomen we've talked to say they still lack access to clean toilets on sites, and too many encounter hostility and harassment from male colleagues when bathrooms are designated for women only. Inadequate and unsafe [facilities](#) lead to many women reporting that they avoid using toilets or drink less water. The result can be a higher incidence of bladder and kidney infections and an increased risk of heat stress and other health problems.

- **Ensure Protections for Pregnant and Postpartum Workers**

Pregnant and postpartum workers often have unique health and safety needs. The new [Pregnant Workers Fairness Act](#) requires covered employers to provide “reasonable accommodations” to workers’ known limitations related to pregnancy, childbirth or related medical conditions unless the accommodation will cause the employer an undue hardship. Under the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA), as recently extended by the Providing Urgent Maternal Protections for Nursing Mothers Act (PUMP Act), covered employers are required to provide nursing employees with reasonable break time and a private space, other than a bathroom, to express breast milk at work for up to one year after the child’s birth. The Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) entitles eligible employees of covered employers to unpaid, job protected leave for the birth of and bonding with a child, for prenatal care and incapacity related to pregnancy, for the worker’s own serious health condition including following the birth of a child, and to care for a child with a serious health condition. Employers should ensure they are adhering to these laws and any other relevant state laws, and may choose to go beyond them by, for example, providing job-protected paid family and medical leave, paid sick leave and child care for workers with children. Supporting employees throughout all phases of their lives, including pregnancy and parenting, ensures that employers can attract and retain a pool of diverse, skilled workers.

• **Prevent Gender-Based Violence and Harassment**

Lack of respect, discrimination and gender-based violence and harassment (GBVH) undermine worker health and safety and drive women out of male-dominated jobs. In fact, lack of respect or discrimination is [the most commonly cited reason](#) tradeswomen consider leaving the construction industry. Employers should assess their worksites and [institute policies and programs](#) to change workplace culture and prevent and address GBVH, such as those detailed in the Women’s Bureau’s [Tools for Building an Equitable Infrastructure Workforce](#). Addressing GBVH is not just necessary for inclusivity; it plays a role in creating safe workplaces.

• **Promote Mental Health**

Stress from GBVH, lack of inclusion and demanding worksites can be harmful to worker health and increase mental health challenges, which can include mental illness and substance use disorders as well as emotions like grief, sadness and anxiety. Research shows that workers who have not been integrated into a workplace culture are [more likely to have accidents](#) on the job due to the increased psychological and emotional stress of being excluded. These challenges can also lead to low job satisfaction for women, which results in their exit from construction occupations. [OSHA’s webpage on Workplace Stress](#) includes [resources to both help understand the issue](#) and provide [guidance for employers to help address the issue](#).

Rather than expect women to conform to workplaces that were designed for men only, employers should work with women to create safe and supportive workplaces.

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