Let’s face it, unless you’ve been living under a rock for the last 20 years, the roles women now play in our world and workplace have advanced well beyond traditional and into all aspects of leadership in politics, business, academics, medicine and science, just to name a few. Construction is no different with an almost 16% increase in women in the construction industry since 1970. Even with a steady population incline in the construction industry, women still face some unique challenges in the workplace, especially in construction.

**Women in Safety**

- Approximately 18% of ASSE membership is women
- About 14.9% hold Certified Safety Professionals Certifications

**Women In Safety Engineering (WISE)**

WISE was established to foster the advancement of women in the SH&E profession. The group provides professional development opportunities, evaluates the ongoing state of women in SH&E, mentors women in the profession, provides opportunities for women to obtain professional certifications and promotes the development and peer review of written material related to issues specific to women in the SH&E workplace. For more information go to WISE.org

**National Association of Women in Construction (NAWIC)**

NAWIC, founded in 1953 in Fort Worth, TX, Core Purpose:  
- To enhance the success of women in the construction industry  
- Core Values: Believe. Persevere. Dare.  
For more information go to www.NAWIC.org

**Women in Construction Statistics**

- 9% across all job types are held women (1970<1%, 1995 2.3%)  
- 13% management or professional position are held by women
Mentoring Benefits for both parties

Primarily they are given the chance to have a more mature, experienced, successful and knowledgeable person come alongside them and offer to communicate and share knowledge, points of view and ideas, etc. The wisdom of the mentor is a priceless resource for the mentee who is brought into a position where they can learn from the mentor. The mentor also benefits from the mentoring program. For many mentors the chance to help another, to shape the values and outlook of those who they mentor is reward enough. Even if the mentee ultimately disagrees with the mentor and takes another path, the mentor has had a rewarding time helping, influencing and caring about another person.¹

Where to find a mentor:

- WISE
- NAWIC
- Board of Certified Safety Professionals mentoring program
- Local chapter of professional group
- Start your own!

Mentor Suggestions:

- Seek out both men and women
- Seek different age, race or work specialty

Specific Hazards and Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)

Hazards

Women face a multitude of specific hazards in construction. There has been a sharp decline of women leaving the construction industry from 2007-2010. Only 9% of construction workers are women. Working as a minority and the accompanied feelings of fear and isolation presents a hazard in itself, also including:

- Culture Hazards: Harassment/Threats/Rape/Homicide, Gender Bias, Isolation, Work Vandalism/Sabotage
- Ergonomic Hazards: Women are at a much higher risk for back and soft tissue strains due to specific lifting techniques. Intimidated to ask for help. Training!
- Reproductive Hazards: Women construction workers pregnant or planning to become pregnant have exposures to lead, solvents, and pesticides. Recommend specific training on Safety Data Sheets (SDS)!
- Hygiene Hazards: Urinary tract/kidney infections and bacterial exposure stemming from poor availability and/or access to sanitary facilities
- Other Hazards: Depression, stress and anxiety in a higher degree than men due to juggling responsibilities between work, home and children.

Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)

Let’s examine this scenario- A man is working on a construction site with an all-female workforce. They do not treat him well, and refuse to interact and assist him in any way. He is given PPE that is much too small for his size, such as gloves that he can’t fit over his hands, and a fall protection harness that he can’t buckle. He knows he’s a minority, and is painfully aware of the culture in his company and on his worksite. How brave and motivated do you think he would be to complain about the PPE he was given and ask for proper replacement for fear of harassment, job transfer or discharge? Even worse, he might decide to not say anything and just take his chances with what he has, knowing it could lead to a serious injury or even death. Pretty alarming, wouldn’t you say? Well, this scenario plays out every day for women working in construction. The issue of personal protective equipment requirements for women must be addressed within your company:

- PPE should never create a bigger or additional hazard than the hazard you’re trying to protect from
- The International Safety Equipment Association (ISEA) reports that many employers now provide a full range of sizes for PPE. ISEA lists manufacturers who offer safety equipment in various sizes that is appropriate for women in construction.
- Male and female anatomy differences demands proper PPE! One size does not fit all! Work with Logistics and Procurement Management to seek out vendors.
- Gloves, aprons, goggles, boots, and harnesses are all examples of PPE that should be selected and sized for women. Anthropometry and ergonomics!

Final Tips:
- Mentors are important. So are mentees! Encourage and educate women in this industry, and don’t forget men’s education on this topic as well!
- There are many great organizations out there for help and assistance. Reach out and get involved!
- Training women on awareness and recognition of these hazards to begin with is critical!
- All hazards pose a potential threat to human health, safety and life, but men and women have different exposure degrees and levels of exposure that demand education, awareness and training
- PPE is not one size fits all. Ensure consideration for your female workforce when it comes to PPE procurement, selection, fit and training.
References:

1. OSHA’s Safety & Health Topics Page: Women in Construction charts are available at https://www.osha.gov/doc/topics/women/index.html


3. NIOSH (National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health) Women’s Safety and Health Issues at Work report at http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/women/


