

Progress (at last) in Woman's Rescue Gear

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[ED: we mentioned in our other publication, ARBCLIMBER, how ridiculous it seemed that we would even have a separate article on women performing the kinds of tasks they've been doing for several decades, in fact, Grace Darling would argue, centuries. But here we are in 2020 and still there is a huge disparity in the ratio of sexes in rescue and therefore in equipment manufactured specifically to suit the female rescuer. As highlighted in other work sectors, the vast majority of the world continues to treat and pay women differently to their male counterparts. In the voluntary rescue sector this is obviously not an issue although one wonders how many teams around the world would continue with disparity if everyone was paid. By 'differently' what we really mean is 'worse' and in this day and age it's frankly embarrassing. An alien life-form examining our progress from afar might have thought in the 50s and 60s that we were heading in the right direction with all manner of discriminations being legislated out of existence. How disappointed they would be to take a look 60 or 70 years later and find that not only has nothing much changed apart from reliance on technology but in some aspects of life we've been treading water for most of this century if not actually going backwards! Rescue and the outdoor recreation trade has seen better progress than most industries, as Andrea's article highlights, but it seems mighty slow which forces us to have articles highlighting the continuing disparities. Raven Rescue is a training and supply company in Canada and we don't often have overtly commercial contributors but the brands and models highlighted (which we can thoroughly recommend as well) are being stocked by Raven specifically because they have made the effort to better suit/fit women so we're happy to make an exception here. There are, of course, many other companies producing female-oriented equipment but it needs to be a little more than simply the same kit in pink; the UK's RNLI uses Helly Hanson suits that are a specific female cut (see RNLI pic on page 17) and trousers with a female 'comfort' zip so these are meaningful design considerations. Female-specific helmets have been produced by, for instance, Petzl and Black Diamond for many years, we just need to extend this specialisation to ALL other relevant items and that doesn't just mean smaller sizing; not all females are petite and many need equipment to fit a figure with curves that are the opposite to a middle-aged man's waistline expansion! Taking a lead from the outdoor clothing and footwear companies which have ALWAYS produced gender-specific products, there are now an exponentially increasing number of rescue companies bridging this weird gap in the market so hopefully, this article will soon be out of date!]

Five years ago, in the Raven Rescue (Canada) Women in Rescue newsletter, we featured an article about Rescue Gear For Women. From staying dehydrated in order to avoid a PPE doffing restroom break, to chest-crushing PFDs, the landscape has remained much the same since 2014. However, there are some brand-name manufacturers making waves with their commitment to high-quality rescue gear for women. With each piece of equipment they design, the message to the rescue industry gets stronger – professional female rescuers shouldn't have to choose between women's-specific and rescue-specific gear.



STORIES OF COMMITMENT

As a rescue equipment distributor for first responders across Canada, we've come face-to-face with a handful of tenacious manufacturers that are dedicated to equipping female rescuers with top-quality gear. While each organization has its own reasons for equipping female customers, they're united by the common value of keeping rescuers safe.

The origin story of Georgia-based manufacturer, Pigeon Mountain Industries, compels them to maintain their commitment to high quality rescue equipment that fits all individuals:

PMI is a company founded and run by men and women who love ropes and rigging and who come from a field perspective. Many of our employees (men and women) are rescuers, rope access technicians, cavers and climbers who are passionate about work and play in the vertical realm.

Loui McCurley, present CEO of PMI, has been a member of Alpine Rescue Team in Colorado since 1985, and has also served as a firefighter and a rope access technician. In the early days especially, finding equipment to fit women was challenging at best for a slender woman. She recalls that most of the equipment she used back then was ill-fitting small menswear, equipment designed for children, and/or equipment designed for other purposes. As a result of this experience, Loui was motivated to find new and better rescue equipment solutions for herself and other women. Meanwhile, the late, great, PMI founder and avid caver/rescuer Steve Hudson, at 6'4" and not a slight build, experienced similar issues at the opposite end of the spectrum. Together they formed an agreement that any future PMI harness, helmet, or glove would be bounded by their respective size extremes. PMI is also sensitive to hand size when selecting hardware suppliers with whom to partner for

carabiners, descenders, and other equipment. Loui still serves as a Technical Specialist with Alpine Rescue Team, and is also a certified Rope Access Technician. She remains highly sensitive to the specialized needs of women who work at height and makes special effort to collaborate with and listen to the needs of women in the industry.

Across the country in California, Kokatat Director of Sales, Jeff Turner, says that their long-standing commitment to keeping female rescuers well equipped is a company-wide tradition. *"This goes back a long time for us. Our former design manager had worked for Kokatat for many years, and she was in a position to influence the design and development of all our gear. It was important to her to develop products that are designed to fit women."*

And head over the pond to the Czech Republic, home of harness manufacturer Singing Rock, and you'll find out why they produce a rescue harness with the smallest waist on the market: *"The main reasons for including small size were basically two – women, and smaller-sized people in Asian and South American markets,"* reports Sales Manager Jindrich Truhlár. *"We receive various positive comments on small harnesses, mainly from female rescuers."*

Even more 'niche' is UK manufacturer Arbortec catering primarily to arborists and forestry but with obvious crossovers into SAR. They produce and actively market an entire range of chainsaw protective trousers and jackets which you would think would be very much a male dominated market in 2020 though the ratio gap will continue to close. This is perhaps the best indicator of change, when we see specialist equipment made for the few rather than the many.

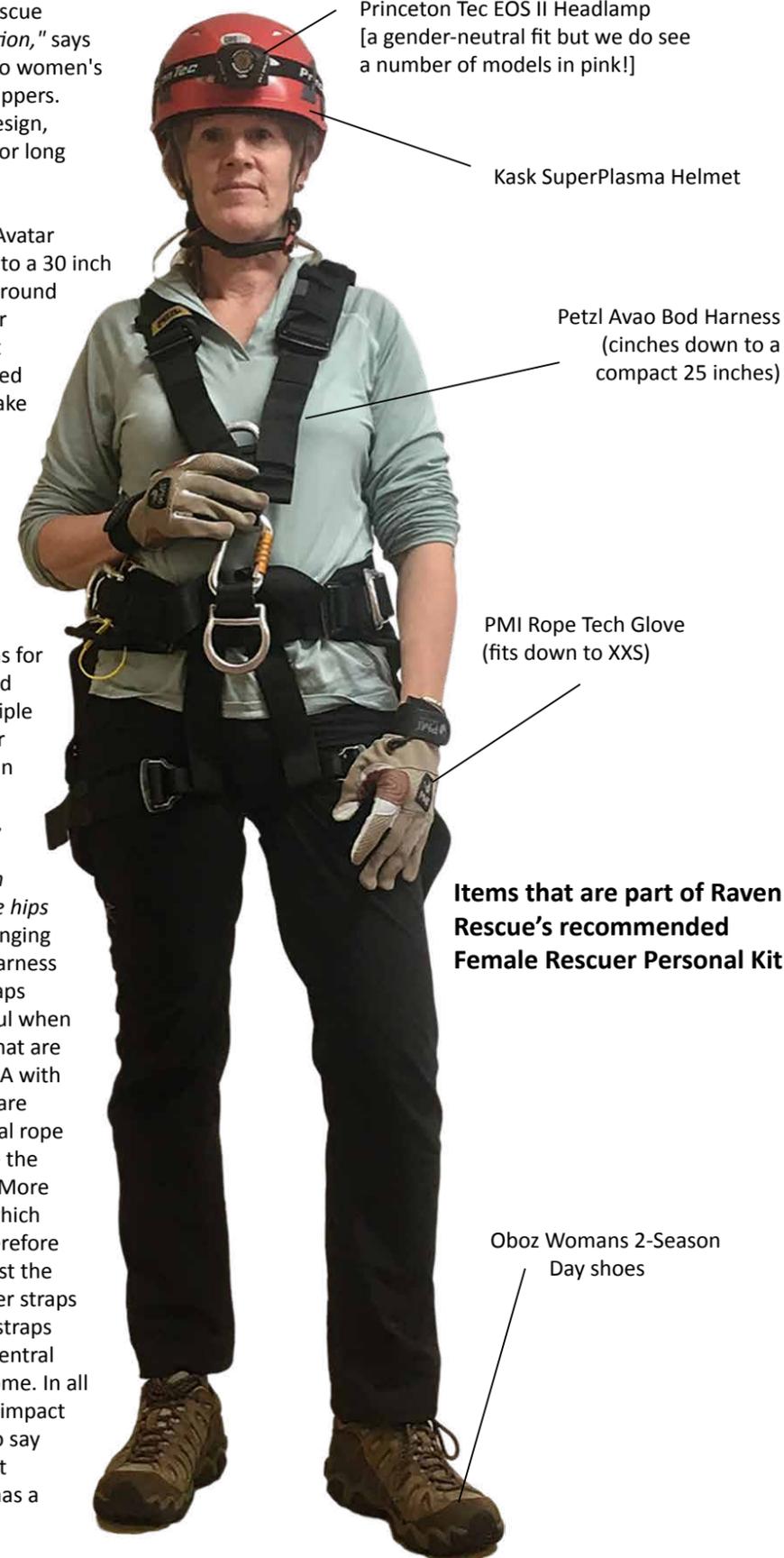
WHAT CAN MAKE THE GEAR BETTER?

Female rescuers face equipment issues across all rescue disciplines. *"It basically comes down to fit and function,"* says Jeff Turner. In the world of drysuits, this translates to women's specific patterning, drop seats, and lowered relief zippers. Kokatat knows that these elements are critical to design, particularly for the rescue professional who works for long stretches in their garments.

As for harnesses, adjustability is critical. Take PMI's Avatar harnesses, for example. The PMI Avatar goes down to a 30 inch waist, has the ability to adjust the rear risers to fit around a curvier body shape, and offers the choice of either a V-type or H-type chest harness. The Avatar wasn't specifically designed FOR women, but it was designed BY women, so it includes some features that will make it adjustable to a range of body sizes. And if a small waist is the most important item on your harness tick list, keep in mind that the Singing Rock Expert III cinches down to a compact 22 inches.



..... but small doesn't necessarily mean great. Shauneen Nichols (left) has been involved in her local Search and Rescue teams for over a decade, and has served as a search manager on multiple occasions. We spoke with her five years ago in our women in rescue feature, and when we touched base this time around, she pointed out that "most full body rope rescue harnesses, even in the smaller sizes, still tend to dig into the hips no matter how much you adjust them." This year, Singing Rock introduced the padded waist of the new 3D Harness in a size small, which goes down to 25 inches. Perhaps some women will find the additional padding helpful when they have to spend hours in their harness. Others that are helping to bridge the gender divide include DBI-SALA with the Nex harnesses and Tractel with Ladytrac which are admittedly not new and are aimed more at industrial rope access but they are light, start from XSmall and, like the Singing Rock 3D have enhanced, strategic padding. More familiar to rescuers might be the Petzl AVAO BOD which is again more of a work positioning harness and therefore generally too large for mountain rescuers but at least the thinking is going the right way, their leg and shoulder straps distribute weight evenly across the body while the straps in front gather together and are connected with a central carabiner which may provide greater comfort for some. In all cases, what is needed is strapping that reduces the impact force on the breasts in the event of a fall. It's safe to say that while the rock climbing and industrial fall arrest ranges offer specific harnesses for women, rescue has a way yet to go.



Princeton Tec EOS II Headlamp [a gender-neutral fit but we do see a number of models in pink!]

Kask SuperPlasma Helmet

Petzl Avao Bod Harness (cinches down to a compact 25 inches)

PMI Rope Tech Glove (fits down to XXS)

Items that are part of Raven Rescue's recommended Female Rescuer Personal Kit

Oboz Womens 2-Season Day shoes



Pic by Brian Teyck for The Responder

When it comes to PFDs, Shauneen says that some of the women she knows opt for Astral PFDs, because "the way they're cut gives our bust a bit more room. Once you get any full-bodied PFD tightened down adequately, it just crushes your chest and you can't breathe properly. Unfortunately, making room for our chests takes away some of the buoyancy of the PFD, which is crucial to keeping larger males up out of the water during a rescue." It is this kind of feedback on fit that prompted Raven Rescue to add the Type-V NRS Zen Rescue PFD to its Standard Swiftwater PPE Kit for Women.

Creating gear that fits professional female rescuers also means considering their perception in the workplace. "Our female customers have made it clear to us that they do not particularly want to be singled out with pink helmets or fru fru [ED: had to Google that one! it means 'very decorated or girly in nature'] features in gear," McCurley comments. Women in rescue want to perform their jobs with excellence, alongside their male counterparts. PMI doesn't necessarily label gear as a product designed just for women, but the smaller size range and unique designs mean that the equipment is safe and comfortable for women (and petite men) to use.

WOMEN'S GEAR AND THE BOTTOM LINE
 "Although in the past years, it has been something of a challenge to sell enough of these specially sized items to justify the inventory, sometimes you just have to 'do the right thing' even when the economics don't quite jive," says PMI CEO, Loui McCurley. "Equipment that fits well and performs well provides a greater level of safety, and better supports an inclusive environment and the advent of more women in rescue and in other forms of work at height. For this reason alone we believe that the investment is worthwhile."
 "This is a long tradition for us, and frankly, it just makes sense," explains Jeff Turner at Kokatat. "Women, or men, we want all of our customers to be happy, comfortable and safe." But challenges remain, particularly in swiftwater equipment. While there are a number of recreational PFDs and drysuits that work well for women, they don't include the robust features that you can find in rescue-specific products like the Mustang Sentinel Series Drysuit, or the Mustang MRV150 Swiftwater Rescue Vest. Mustang's rescue products lead the industry year after year, so naturally we were curious why they haven't invested in optimizing their PFDs and drysuits for a women's fit. "This is due to the business case that must be considered when

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ABOVE: The UK's RNLI ran billboard-style promotions in 2019 to promote the service and included an equal number of active woman crew-members. So it's just as well that they also adopted female-specific drysuits from Helly Hansen. The Gecko helmet isn't a female-specific shell but it has a self-air-blown customisable interior to fit any shape or sized head.

developing PFDs, and the regulatory costs involved," says Mustang Representative, Tony McCormick. "The potential volume of business is a key issue, and costs to design, produce and get through the regulatory hurdles dictates the viability of the products."
 This financial pinch point has frustrating implications for professional female rescuers looking for off-the-shelf options. While the Kokatat Odyssey Drysuit does feature women's specific patterning and many robust features (including suspenders, reflective accents, and Gore-Tex reinforcement), it remains a different suit than the Mustang Sentinel Series, which provides for professional rescuers with foam padding, reinforced nylon seat, reinforced wrists and reinforced zippered ankle overcuffs. Professional female rescuers will find more rescue-specific options in the Type V Kokatat Guide PFD, which has equipped females for over twenty years with a quick release belt, reflective tape, pockets, and female-friendly sizing, and Mantis green colouring (available in 2020). With options like the Kokatat Guide PFD on the shelf, the grip held by Mustang's MRV150 is beginning to loosen. But comparing rescue-specific gear to women's-specific gear remains a challenging undertaking – many of the products available are still as different as apples and oranges. The reality that Mustang identified faces every gear manufacturer: female recreationalists far exceed the

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number of female rescuers in the rope and swiftwater industries. Off-the-shelf equipment options reflect this reality. Take the world of swiftwater, for example. The recreational market is packed with excellent options for female paddlers. NRS' Pivot and Crux drysuits are great examples, along with Kokatat's Front Entry and Odyssey suit. And when it comes to PFDs, NRS has a collection designed specifically for recreational paddlers, which are well-worth considering along with Kokatat's Guide PFD, and their soon-to-be-released 2020 Hustler (which features an expanded size range to fit a variety of body shapes). And let's be clear – these drysuits and PFDs are excellent, and they can certainly be worn by female professional rescuers on the job. In fact, male rescuers opt to wear recreational suits and PFDs all the time... there's no requirement that rescuers have to wear rescue-specific gear! But the fact remains that female rescuers don't have the choice that male rescuers do. Female professional rescuers have to choose between a recreational item designed for the female body type, or a rescue item designed for men.



Buddy check..... photo courtesy of PMI

**WOMEN-SPECIFIC... OR RESCUE SPECIFIC?
A FUTURE WHERE WE WON'T HAVE TO
CHOOSE ONE OR THE OTHER**

The time is right for rescue gear designed for women to become a staple in the industry: safety standards continue to motivate employers to equip first responders to the best of their abilities; more women are taking on rescue roles around the globe; and manufacturers with a strong commitment to equipping female professionals are well-positioned to meet an increased demand. Organizations like PMI, Kokatat, Arbortec, NRS, Petzl and Singing Rock have already made their dedication clear. Professional female rescuers can motivate future developments at these forward-thinking companies by providing regular feedback about their needs. Kokatat's custom-suit builder program is a prime example – it enables professional female rescuers to order a suit with women's specific patterning, along with almost all the bells and whistles of the most robust rescue suit. Kokatat's customization options already allow the best of both worlds, and who knows... the more orders that are placed, the greater the chance that female rescuers may one day see off-the-shelf availability.

Here at Raven RSM and in the pages of WILDERNESS SAR, TECHNICAL RESCUE and ARBCLIMBER, we will continue to promote manufacturers that are dedicated to equipping rescuers of all shapes and sizes. We exist to support and educate First Responders, whether they are professionals and volunteers, or occasional workplace rescuers. Getting rescuers into the right tools for their rescue jobs is part of our task and we're starting by offering Women's-specific Swiftwater and Rope PPE Kits alongside our original line of PPE Kits. The items we've selected for our kits weren't necessarily designed specifically for women – like the Aqualung Evo 4 Boot, for example – but they're available in smaller sizes than other options on the market. We will continue to upgrade these kits with different products introduced to the market, as the days of having to choose between women's-specific or rescue-specific come to an end... and women's rescue gear becomes a standard we can all expect.

"Zipline/highline spanning water

Photo courtesy of PMI