

Durable Designs for Women Who Wrangle and Weld



Sharon Moore, founder of Rosies Workwear. As more women enter careers once dominated by men, entrepreneurs are seeing an opportunity to create rugged, quality clothing suitable for manual labor and designed for women. Jessica Chou for The New York Times

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Physically demanding jobs may not be restricted to men anymore, but the women entering such careers are still finding it challenging to break into one aspect: work clothes.

As more women are choosing careers once dominated by men, many are realizing that they do not have much choice for rugged, quality clothing suitable for manual labor.

To meet those needs, new entrepreneurs such as Taylor Johnston have set out to fill that niche. Ms. Johnston, greenhouse and garden manager at Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston, said she

needed proper clothes that would let her be authoritative but comfortable at work. Men's wear did not fit properly, and she felt it made her look unprofessional.

"It was really about finding something that felt like I could be taken seriously in," Ms. Johnston said.

To address the need, she founded [Gamine Company](#) in 2014, based in Cohasset, Mass. Its goal: making workwear for women, including pants, overalls and coveralls.

Ms. Johnston is one of several entrepreneurs who have started companies to make work clothes designed for women's bodies. These businesswomen were driven to start companies because of a personal need, a lack of options in the market and a desire to support women's changing work roles.

Women still have a long way to go before becoming a critical mass in traditionally male-dominated fields, but there is a growing market in some sectors as women [break into nontraditional jobs](#).

Start-ups see an opportunity as more women enter fields such as farming, ranching, welding and other labor-intensive careers.

In the past, women in such industries have resorted to purchasing clothing designed for men or boys. Not only were they uncomfortable, but they also posed a safety hazard if a loose flap or a long sleeve got caught in machinery.

Sarah Calhoun had worked years in physically demanding jobs, including five years in the field for the outdoor education nonprofit organization Outward Bound. She once resorted to duct-taping the crotch of her men's work pants when the seams came apart.

"If they're not designed to fit a woman's body, they don't function properly," she said.

She approached several companies that made men's workwear to see if they would create a women's line, but the response was lukewarm.

In 2004, she shared a table at a local coffee shop with Richard Siberell, a veteran outdoor gear designer. He encouraged her with advice and contacts. Later, he became her mentor and a board member. "He said, 'Sarah, you're on to something big here, you need to move on this now,'" Ms. Calhoun recalled.

After spending six months at a company in Bozeman, Mont., sewing backpacks to learn about production, she began making a single pants style she designed herself. She and her roommate at the time were the models. Then she started her women's workwear company, Red Ants Pants, in 2006, in White Sulphur Springs, Mont.

Now, [Red Ants Pants](#) has 10 employees and offers a range of work clothing. Its standard pants cost \$139. The company's revenue is around \$500,000 a year, and year-to-date sales are up 65 percent.

Like Ms. Calhoun, Ms. Johnston had no experience with apparel when she decided to start a clothing company. She spent two years learning the art of pattern-making before creating Gamine's signature product: a pair of dungarees.

A dozen prototypes led to the first fit. The pants were tested by unofficial fit models while they were working. “We take the approach that everything should be tested outside, indoors, hot weather, wet weather,” Ms. Johnston said.

Then she stopped selling the pants to make improvements based on feedback from the first buyers. The pants now come in 14 sizes, three fits and four inseams, and cost \$150.

Sharon Moore, founder of [Rosies Workwear](#), based in San Luis Obispo, Calif., said that 70 percent of America’s small farms under 50 acres are headed by women. She sees that as an opportunity for her company.

Ms. Moore started the company in 2003 after she needed a coverall for a welding class and could not find any made for women.

Her sales have doubled in the last two years, and the company is projecting a 20 percent increase in 2016. The company, which has four employees, recently moved into a new, larger building.

The best seller is the eggplant-colored overall. Unlike many of its competitors, Rosies offers colors and florals, including in the gender-stereotypical pink.

“Some women tell us, ‘I really want the pink or the green because I’m so tired of always looking like the guys,’” Ms. Moore said. “They want to say, ‘Hey, I’m a woman and I’m doing this.’ For some women, that’s a really important statement they’re making.”

American workwear for women is not as well documented as men’s brands, said Emma McClendon, assistant curator of costume at the Museum at Fashion Institute of Technology. “A lot of it is handmade or obscure ready-made.”

A few prominent workwear companies have begun to offer some products for women.

“Only recently in the last decade we at Dickies and other workwear companies have made women’s specific workwear,” said Erica Tew, senior designer at Dickies. The company recently partnered with Gamine as part of its Dickies 1922 archive-inspired collection to release the [Sweetwater Trouser](#) — named after the Texas town where [Women’s Airforce Service Pilots](#) trained during World War II.

Gamine and Red Ants Pants make their clothing domestically, but finding a factory is not without its challenges. Handyma’am Goods, a company started by Bella Weinstein, a hairdresser by trade, began making coveralls in 2015. Its first run of 50 sold out quickly.

But the original factory in Texas did not want to continue producing the coverall because it was so difficult to make. The finished product also did not meet Ms. Weinstein’s standards. It took a year and a half before the company resumed production after finding a new garment factory — [Dynotex](#), in Greenpoint, Brooklyn.

The company’s first and signature piece is challenging to manufacture because of its tailoring and heavy fabric. The complexity and the small production runs pushed up the price tag.

Ms. Weinstein said she was aware that the prices were more commonly associated with designer wear, but the retail price, \$325, is close to her production cost. Although the company is not making a profit, Ms. Weinstein knew the coverall would make a strong first impression.

“It’s been really, really difficult to find a factory willing to do it and that does it well,” she said.

The company recently released an original product: [the “drapron,”](#) a combination apron-dress made with a water-repellent coating. It costs about \$165 and is available in two colors.

In the past, laborers were accustomed to spending a lot of money on work clothes on the assumption that they would be able to mend them and increase their life span, Ms. Johnston said. To help alleviate concerns about the cost, Gamine offers a guarantee to fix its products free, and it covers shipping costs for repairs.

Rosies Workwear, however, moved production to China from the United States to help bring down prices. The company realized its price point was too expensive for its target market.

“That’s when I started going offshore and getting them made so I could get a really good product but keep the price acceptable,” Ms. Moore said.

These companies say that many women are delivering other potential customers via word-of-mouth marketing. Fans of Rosies coveralls, Ms. Moore said, talk about the garment in their work networks and on social media.

“Once they see it, they go, ‘This is great. I don’t have to have horse slobber on my good clothes all the time,’” she said.



Rosies Workwear designs and swatches in the shipping warehouse office. The company’s sales have doubled in the last two years. Jessica Chou for The New York Times