



Women in Steel:

Progress & Perspectives



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Where did your education and career start?

I actually want to start with where I was born, as that really shaped the rest of my life and decisions that led to where I am today.

It is a relatively large Central Asian country called Kazakhstan, which has a strong patriarchal culture. In this predominantly Muslim society, women are very much treated as second-class citizens, subservient to their husbands. This was the “norm” that I experienced in my formative years.

Then, when I was ten, my family immigrated to Germany and I immediately noticed the stark differences in the women of the Western world. They weren’t simply relegated to house-making and child rearing but were instead empowered, in visible leadership roles.

The freedom they channeled allowed me to consider life choices that I hadn’t known were possible, which is how my love for engineering was born. I decided on this career path for two main reasons: I wanted to make a positive impact on the world and I wanted a job that would allow me to be financially independent.

At University (Reutlingen), I enrolled in a program called International Project Engineering and it was perfect for me. I was able to get a broad knowledge about various engineering subjects like electrical engineering, materials science and manufacturing engineering while maintaining a significant focus on project management and languages.

This unique program required all students to go abroad for an internship semester. I envisioned myself in an exotic country in Asia or South America but the most interesting offer came from a steel cutting tool facility in a tiny town called Waukesha, in Wisconsin. Waukesha was by no means glamorous or exotic but it was there that I fell in love with the American way of life and entrepreneurial spirit.

During my internship, I worked in the quality assurance and EHS departments and the projects were all over the board. One day I would be creating a safety gloves plan for our operators and another day I would have to research how to use various steel hardness measuring tools. The best part of it all was that they wanted me to come back to write a thesis on heat treatment of steel. I know it sounds nerdy but it was so much fun to learn more about carburizing, nitriding and especially induction hardening for varied applications. This is where my love for all things STEM really blossomed.

Talk about the support you’ve received to start your own company.

No one can do it alone and I’m no exception. I’d love to say that my family was supportive of my ambition but alas, like many loving families out



there, they were fearful and apprehensive about me taking such a risk.

My number one supporter in all of this was my husband, who from day one encouraged me to take this “crazy” idea of fashionable women’s safety shoes seriously. It was also the people in the startup community, specifically in Milwaukee, that really gave me the confidence to push forward with my vision. Early on we participated in a pre-revenue accelerator program called gBeta, run by gener8tor. The people who facilitated the program and the many business leaders I met during pre-arranged “pitch events” were by far the most influential mentors during my journey.

What led you to create Xena Workwear?

I started Xena out of my own frustration. Working in industrial manufacturing, I was often one of the only women in the room and when it came time to go down to the manufacturing floor (where personal protection equipment was required), I was the only person that had to hold up the group while I ran back to my desk to change shoes.

The problem was that I had to dress business professional or business casual and that outfit looked ridiculous with any of the safety shoes available on the market. There was no way I could wear them without feeling like a clown, not to mention the lack of safety due to the poor fit and heavy weight of the boots. Safety shoes? Talk about an oxymoron!

I later came to learn that most manufacturers employ the “Shrink It and Pink It Method,” which involved taking a men’s boot, making it smaller and adding stereotypical “female” colors to it. This was all in an effort to save money as they didn’t see the women’s market big enough to invest real R&D into. This was probably a savvy business decision but this left women with very few options.

After finding nothing and feeling incredibly frustrated, I decided to do something about it. Knowing absolutely nothing about footwear manufacturing or safety shoe regulations, I took the plunge and started Xena.

What are you most proud of in your career?

I am most proud of the fact that I am constantly finding myself in the minority and thriving despite the odds. First I was one of only two women in my engineering program. Then I was one of only five businesses to be accepted into an accelerator program. Of those, I was the only one who received pre-revenue funding. With women only getting 3–4% of venture capital funding in the U.S., I felt extremely fortunate. Most startups fold within a year and those that don’t mostly stay tiny. I was able to make it into the 1% that generate revenue over US\$1,000,000. I suppose to summarize, I’m proud of my journey as a woman through a gauntlet where statistically I should have failed at every turn yet persevered. As women we are conditioned to downplay our accomplishments, so I’m not totally comfortable with how self-aggrandizing the answer to this question sounds, but it is the truth.

Why do you feel diversity and inclusivity are important in the workplace, and the steel industry as a whole?

The beauty of humanity is that we come from all different cultural, religious and ethnic backgrounds. Our experiences shape us and then we bring those experiences with us into the workplace. The greater the diversity of viewpoints and ideas, the greater the possibility that the best solution will present itself. With that said, there is a caveat because diversity can be a double-edged sword. Without a cohesive workplace culture, diversity can lead to discord and lack of productivity. Leadership needs to commit to a meritocratic process and outline a common vision/mission. With those in place they can, in full honesty, talk about diversity of thought and inclusivity as a strength.

What advice do you have for young women who are interested in pursuing a career in a field that is typically male-dominated?

Never think that you don’t belong. Yes, I realize that’s a double negative but it’s meant to sound harsh. The world has become more accommodating over time, but men still interact differently than women. They will poke fun at each other and bond over coarse humor or sports. We will be a minority in these spaces and the conversations around us can feel a bit foreign. That doesn’t mean that we can’t perform the work or that we’re cognitively any different than our male counterparts. It’s crucial to maintain your female identity in the process. I’ve met women in my career who dress down and effectively blend to be “one of the guys” and I’ve always been depressed by it. I wonder, what was she like 25 years ago? Did she bend under the pressure and conform to the collective over time? At least when it comes to boots, she’ll never have to again! ♦