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## Lifting A Weight Off My Shoulders

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# Lifting A Weight Off My Shoulders

## **Abstract**

It's a familiar scene for anyone who's entered the Jaeger Center. You walk past the entrance desk, past the rock wall, the blue mats with some students stretching; there, the cardio machines, some soccer players cycling on the bikes, some girls on the elliptical machines and scattered on the treadmills, a guy on the stairmaster, a teacher jogging. Finally, you reach the end, the huge space filled with free weights, barbells, a leg press machine, and some pull up bars. You pay attention less to the selection of weights than who occupies this space: men, lots of them. At any time of day or night, you can find several male students working out here. What's much less common, one might even say rare, is to see women in this space. Certainly, there are some of us, particularly in groups or entering with a sports team. But the ratio is uneven, to say the least.

[*excerpt*]

## **Keywords**

Cardio, Exercise, fitness, Gender, Gettysburg College, gym, health, running, Social Justice, weight, Weightlifting, Surge, Surge Gettysburg, Center for Public Service

## **Disciplines**

Civic and Community Engagement | Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies

## **Comments**

Surge is a student blog at [Gettysburg College](https://www.gettysburg.edu) where systemic issues of justice matter. Posts are originally published at [surgegettysburg.wordpress.com](https://surgegettysburg.wordpress.com) Through stories and reflection, these blog entries relate personal experiences to larger issues of equity, demonstrating that –isms are structural problems, not actions defined by individual prejudice. We intend to popularize justice, helping each other to recognize our biases and unlearn the untruths.

# SURGE

**[ VERB ] : to move suddenly or powerfully forward or upward**

## LIFTING A WEIGHT OFF MY SHOULDERS

October 26, 2016



It's a familiar scene for anyone who's entered the Jaeger Center. You walk past the entrance desk, past the rock wall, the blue mats with some students stretching; there, the cardio machines, some soccer players cycling on the bikes, some girls on the elliptical machines and scattered on the treadmills, a guy on the stairmaster, a teacher jogging. Finally, you reach the end, the huge space filled with free weights, barbells, a leg press machine, and some pull up bars. You pay attention less to the selection of weights than who occupies this space: men, lots of them. At any time of day or night, you can find several male

students working out here. What's much less common, one might even say rare, is to see women in this space. Certainly, there are some of us, particularly in groups or entering with a sports team. But the ratio is uneven, to say the least.

I started lifting weights the summer after my freshman year here at Gettysburg. I wanted a change after sticking to cardio my entire life. In the past, I had always chosen to run because it seemed natural to me. The idea of lifting never occurred to me. In my mind, that was always something men did, while running meant shedding calories, trimming my figure, and being "small," like women are supposed to be. I assumed if you lifted weights as a woman you were trying to get big and strong, like the guys.

In middle school, just when I was hitting puberty and had gained some weight (as many twelve year old girls do at that age), my coach on the track team recommended I join the throwing team. "You're tall," he said, even though I was about an average height. It was clear to me what he meant: running was for thin people and throwing was for the people, mainly boys, who looked like they could be big or strong. I didn't want to be one of "those" girls, though. My parents felt the same way — why would a girl join the throwing team? Did she want to be "ripped?" Gross! Everyone agreed, and I quit the track team. I wasn't lean enough to be a runner, but I was also too much of a girl to be on a throwing and lifting team.

Some people might say that the gender divide in the gym is simply there because women and men like different forms of exercise. Or, even worse, that it's because women are naturally weaker; they can't lift weights the way men can. I've noticed, though, that this gender divide mainly goes one way. Men comfortably occupy the cardio section, at least from what I've seen, but women rarely enter the weights section without a friend close by. The

reality is that overwhelmingly male spaces always feel a bit threatening and judgmental to women, even if men do not mean it to be that way.

When I began lifting weights, I started to feel liberated through exercise in a way I never had before. Finally, exercise wasn't about being small, burning calories, and tracking more miles. Now, I lift weights to increase my strength, to raise the number of pounds I can squat or shoulder press. My goal is not to be smaller, to trim my body down until it disappears, but to be stronger. Lifting has taught me how powerful my body, as a woman, can be. Men are always pictured as the tough, muscular ones. Women are supposed to be dainty and delicate. But I don't feel dainty and I love it—my womanly body can lift heavy weights, can sweat, grunt, and train through any lift I desire. To lift is to channel a desire to be more, rather than a never ending struggle to be less.

This is not to say, however, that every woman's motivation when choosing to do cardio is to become smaller. Rather, women and men are socialized into different forms of exercise based on gendered norms—what women should be (small) and what men should be (strong). Why else, at my gym at home, do I see fourteen and fifteen year old boys heading straight to the barbells and girls the same age and younger crowded around elliptical machines? These choices do not appear in a vacuum, and they are choices that are made at a young age and often last a lifetime.

My love of lifting is not something that is always easy to own. It's sometimes awkward and uncomfortable to be one of only two or three women—sometimes the *only* one—in a space that has been masculinized to the point that girls feel unwelcome joining in. But, I am a woman and I am proud of that, and I am proud to lift weights and to enter a traditionally male space and use it however I like.

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