

GYMTIMIDATION | STAMPING OUT THE STIGMA

‘We have all been there before girls. You are feeling motivated and driven, determined to go to the gym tomorrow morning and give 110%. You’re ready to take your training to the next level, finally convincing yourself to try the free weights section. You prepare your clothes the night before, laying out your new Gym Shark set that you finally got your hands on, because failure to prepare is preparing to fail. Right? Well not quite. As soon as you set eyes on the barbell racks, your self-confidence vanishes, replaced by that overwhelming and all too familiar feeling of dread. Hello gym anxiety.

This scenario is all too common for a multitude of women, impacting female students tremendously. Although open to both sexes, the gym still maintains its status as male orientated, providing irrefutable evidence of gender divisions. It is undisputed that resistance training is one of the most effective exercise practices, proven to help you overcome your fitness plateaus, increase lean muscle mass percentage and decrease body fat composition. Even though research shows women’s participation in resistance training improves their overall physical strength and physiological health, the majority are avoiding it due to fear of judgement and intimidation. Focusing on weightlifting and women’s use of the free weight’s section, BU Today reported in 2013 just 17.5 percent of American women—and 20 percent of college-age American women—meet the strength training recommendations of the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention.¹ So what’s stopping women, and female students at NTU, dropping cardio for deadlifts?

‘I often end up focusing on exercises around the treadmills and mat area’ says second year, Education student Sinead Mills. No stranger to incorporating a healthy and active lifestyle into her daily routine, Miss Mills admitted to finding the experience of the gym taxing, avoiding certain areas due to fear of intimidation. ‘I fear judgement at the gym, often second guessing my knowledge of the gym equipment and machines available. To reduce my anxiety I try to avoid the free weight’s section, so I don’t seem as if I am getting in the way of the men.’

GYMTIMIDATION | STAMPING OUT THE STIGMA

Pinpointing the layout of most gym's to be daunting, Miss Mills explains how this places unnecessary restrictions on women, offering solutions as to how gyms can play an active role in preventing women feeling overwhelmed. 'Maybe something simple like changing gym layouts could be effective, so moving the free weights section to the front of the gym rather than the back. This would definitely encourage myself, other female students I know, as it would emphasise the gym being a welcoming, inclusive environment.'

Just like the age gap, the gender gap in the gym robs women of success, leaving us feeling unwanted in an area promoted as an escape of life's realities. Although you are not going eradicate your gym anxiety overnight, you should not allow stigma to stop you. Instead of submitting to 'gymtimidation', grab those weights, do your squats, and keep your head held high ladies- because you deserve to do what you love.

Literature that will help you overcome 'Gymtimidation':

- *Get Your Sh*t Together*, Sarah Knight.²
- *Not A Diet Book*, James Smith.³
- *The Psychological Effects of Aerobic Fitness Training*, David G McDonald and James A Hodgson.⁴
- *Jog On- How Running Saved my Life*, Bella Mackie.⁵



Sarah Knight, *Get Your Shi*t Together* (London: Quercus Publishing, 2016).
James Smith, *Not A Diet Book* (New York: HarperCollins, 2020)
David G McDonald, James A Hodgson, *The Psychological Effects of Aerobic Fitness Training* (New York: Springer, 1991)
Bella Mackie, *Jog On- How Running Saved my Life* (Glasgow: William Collins, 1993)
(Rich Barlow, 'Women and Weight Lifting: It's Good for You', *BU Today*, 6 March 2013, p.1.)