



## What It Means to be a Female Paddler

By Emily Shanblatt (article from Girls at Play [www.watergirlsatplay.com](http://www.watergirlsatplay.com))

Everyone has challenges at the beginning. Any aspiring paddler, male or female, has to find the right people, get the gear, get over the initial intimidation of trying something new, and learn the basics. These universal challenges don't separate men from women in the canoeing world. It's after the first few steps are taken that the differences shine through. For me, the difference wasn't even apparent on my first trip to the river, or my first few roll practices. I did not feel defined as a female boater until I had gone through several scary experiences (be it swims, portages, or near-misses) and found myself surrounded by people who could not support me the way my feminine instinct was calling for.

Men have tons to teach us in the paddling world. One trait I greatly admire about many of them is the ability to brush things off, to leave a scary swim behind, and get fired up to jump back in their boat. Many men I've paddled with have exhibited this – saying a quick “whatever, I swam” and play it off like it's no big deal. Women often react differently.

The more you paddle, the more you swim, and the more you swim, the more you put yourself in an emotionally vulnerable place; a place where you're not sure if you can keep going. Where your nerves are heightened and your mindset is one of doubt and fear. I had experienced that extreme vulnerability in front of men, and felt had their expectations pressed upon me. I had felt that sense of “so what, you swam, get over it and get back in your boat”, when all I wanted was a hug and someone to tell me “You're going to be ok. You're still a good kayaker. You can do this.” Unless you're lucky enough to have paddled your entire career with women, you probably know what I'm talking about. These moments are how I begin to define myself as a female paddler. It means I've been faced with fear, self-doubt, apprehension, and even guilt for feeling emotional, and have been strong enough to get through and over it.

As women, we face ourselves in an unnatural way on the river. We're pushed towards tendencies which don't resonate with our instinct. Being scared and shaken up does not turn into audacity and bravado for me. It turns into trepidation and timidity. I had to train my mind (which is a never-ending process) to avert this natural tendency on the river. When we're put into a situation where this skill is called upon, and men are the only ones present, this task becomes infinitely more difficult. I need time, space, discussion, and reassurance. When we don't get this from our paddling buddies, we have to get it from ourselves.

So what does it mean to be a female paddler? It means I've grown up as a paddler in a man's world, and have overcome so many difficult emotional situations that I'm strong enough to hold my own and take care of myself. Being a female paddler means I've been put in those difficult situations of needing something that was not available, dealt with it, grew from the experience, and have been spit out on the other side stronger, more confident, and more capable not only as a paddler, but as a person.

Girls at Play is a Canadian company started by Anna Levesque with the aim of inspiring women and enhancing their lives through kayaking and yoga retreats, classes and trips. Girls at Play workshops, instructional tools and accessories provide an environment where kayaking feels accessible, fun, inspiring, adventurous and supportive.

[www.watergirlsatplay.com](http://www.watergirlsatplay.com)

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