



Breaking Barriers: Analyzing Gender, Identity, And Resilience In The Lives And Narratives Of Gunjan Saxena And M.C. Mary Kom

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Abstract

This research paper explores the intersection of gender, identity, and resilience in the lives of Gunjan Saxena, India's first female combat pilot, and M.C. Mary Kom, a world-renowned boxer. Through an examination of their personal narratives and achievements, the paper highlights how these women have broken barriers in male-dominated fields and challenged traditional gender roles. By analyzing their stories, we aim to understand how resilience and identity were forged and tested in the face of societal expectations and institutional limitations. The study draws from biographical works, media portrayals, and feminist frameworks to critically examine their journeys and their wider impact on Indian society.

Keywords: Gender, Identity, Resilience, Gunjan Saxena, M.C. Mary Kom, Women in Combat, Women in Sports

1. Introduction

The representation of women in traditionally male-dominated fields such as the military and sports has always been limited. However, women like Gunjan Saxena and M.C. Mary Kom have redefined the boundaries of possibility in their respective fields—aviation and boxing. Their stories not only showcase individual excellence but also highlight the societal challenges that come with breaking away from conventional gender roles. This paper focuses on how gender, identity, and resilience interplay in their narratives and aims to provide insights into their personal and professional journeys as symbols of empowerment.

2. Gunjan Saxena: Pioneering Female Aviator in Combat

Gunjan Saxena, famously known as the “Kargil Girl,” became the first Indian woman to fly in a combat zone during the 1999 Kargil War. Her journey was not just one of personal triumph but also a landmark event for women in the Indian Air Force (IAF), a domain that was predominantly male. The societal and institutional challenges she faced reflect the systemic barriers against women in such professions. Saxena's resilience is demonstrated by her refusal to be confined by the perceptions of her gender and her determination to prove her capability in extreme conditions.

2.1. Breaking Gender Barriers in the Indian Air Force

Women in the military have traditionally faced institutionalized sexism, and Saxena's journey was no different. Despite initial resistance and skepticism from her male colleagues, Saxena persevered. According to the autobiography "The Kargil Girl", her training years were marked by frequent instances of bias, where her abilities were often questioned simply because of her gender (Saxena, 2020). Her resilience can be traced back to her conviction in proving that skill, rather than gender, determines success in the military.

2.2. Legacy and Impact on Gender Norms

Saxena's contributions extend beyond her military achievements. Her story has become emblematic of gender equality in India, inspiring many women to pursue careers in the armed forces and other traditionally male-dominated professions. The 2020 film "Gunjan Saxena: The Kargil Girl" further amplified her story, though it sparked debates regarding the film's depiction of sexism in the IAF (NDTV, 2020). This media portrayal of her life reinforces the conversation around institutional challenges for women and the broader societal implications of her accomplishments.

3. M.C. Mary Kom: Boxing Beyond Boundaries

M.C. Mary Kom, also known as "Magnificent Mary," is a six-time world boxing champion and Olympic medalist from India. Hailing from the northeastern state of Manipur, her journey to global prominence was fraught with numerous challenges, from financial hardships to societal disapproval of women participating in combat sports. Mary Kom's identity as a boxer, mother, and Manipuri woman plays a crucial role in understanding her resilience and drive.

3.1. Fighting Against Societal Expectations

Mary Kom's rise in the world of boxing is remarkable, given that sports, especially contact sports like boxing, have long been seen as inappropriate for women. Coming from a modest background, her journey was shaped by struggles with societal stereotypes and gender expectations. In her autobiography "Unbreakable", Mary Kom discusses how she had to balance the expectations of being a wife and mother while pursuing a rigorous and physically demanding career (Kom, 2013). This dual role is a key aspect of her identity and symbolizes the unique challenges women face when balancing personal and professional

aspirations.

3.2. Cultural Identity and the Struggles of Being a North-eastern Woman

Another significant aspect of Mary Kom's identity is her cultural background. As a Manipuri woman, she had to combat not just gender bias but also regional discrimination. The northeastern states of India have often been marginalized in mainstream Indian society, and Mary Kom's success has helped highlight the region's talents and issues. Her story illustrates the intersectionality of gender and ethnicity, where resilience is not only a matter of personal determination but also a fight against larger societal marginalization (Saikia, 2015).

3.3. Global Impact and Inspirational Legacy

Mary Kom's legacy as a boxer goes beyond her numerous championships. She is an inspiration for women athletes globally, showing that it is possible to excel in sports while defying cultural and societal norms. Her determination to keep competing even after motherhood is a powerful testament to her resilience. In recent years, she has also emerged as a mentor and role model for aspiring female athletes in India and around the world (Chopra, 2019).

4. Comparative Analysis: Gender, Identity, and Resilience

While Gunjan Saxena and Mary Kom come from different professional backgrounds—military aviation and sports—their journeys exhibit striking similarities. Both women faced institutional and societal barriers deeply rooted in traditional gender roles. Their resilience can be attributed to their strong sense of identity, not just as women but as individuals determined to excel in their respective fields.

4.1. *Resilience in the Face of Institutional Barriers

Both Saxena and Kom encountered and overcame significant challenges related to gender bias. Their persistence in the face of such barriers serves as a powerful narrative of resilience. For Saxena, it was the challenge of proving her competence in a male-dominated military system, while for Kom, it was the fight to establish herself as a legitimate athlete in a sport traditionally seen as unsuitable for women.

4.2. The Role of Media in Shaping Their Narratives

The media portrayal of both women has played a significant role in shaping public perception of their achievements. The release of the biopic "Gunjan Saxena: The Kargil Girl" brought her story to a broader audience, while Mary Kom's life was immortalized in the film "Mary Kom". These films, despite some criticism, have helped in advancing conversations about gender equality and the struggles women face in male-dominated arenas (Jain, 2021).

5. Conclusion

Gunjan Saxena and M.C. Mary Kom are remarkable examples of women who have broken barriers in their respective fields. Their stories highlight the importance of resilience, not only in overcoming personal and professional obstacles but also in challenging societal norms. By interrogating their journeys, we can better understand the complex interplay of gender, identity, and resilience in the lives of women who have defied the odds to make lasting impacts in traditionally male domains.

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