

Empowering Women Through Sports: The Legacy of Mary Kom in the autobiography, Unbreakable

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Legendary five-time female world boxing Champion, MangteChungneijang Mary Kom, was born on 1st March, 1983 in Kangthei, Manipur to MangteTonpa Kom and MangteAkham Kom, both of whom were landless agricultural labourers in the village of Manipur. She grew up amidst a marginalized tribal community in the conflict torn state of Manipur. As the eldest of four siblings in the family, Mary Kom's childhood years was in a humble background helping her parents with farm related activities. Hailing from an impoverished background, she could neither afford proper shoes nor dream of having sports gear to pursue her passion. She had to toil hard in the fields, cut wood and help her family earn a livelihood. These hardships and the various instances of marginalization faced on account of her tribal community and geographical location since her childhood days laid the foundation of her strength as acknowledged by her:

"I am tough because of my background. They made me who I am today. They gave me the strength to keep fighting. Indeed, they made me want to fight in the first place." (Unbreakable 03).

This paper attempts to unravel the journey of a village girl to the boxing ring who had to surpass many obstacles to achieve her goals. The autobiography explores how Mary Kom conquered personal and professional Challenges to pursue careers in sports despite the many barriers. Emerging from the often-overlooked rural regions of Northeastern India, the autobiography, *Unbreakable*, serves as a compelling revelation of the current trends in writings centered on marginalized communities. It sheds light on the gender-based marginalization prevalent in sports, as also reflected in films and media. The autobiography can be viewed as an expression, providing a platform to amplify the voices of the underrepresented. Additionally, it is important to highlight that, despite women's significant

contributions to the field of sports, their achievements have been largely sidelined and undervalued by the sports media industry.

Gender disparity had been prevalent since long in different sections of the community. One such case is of the Kom society where boys were given preference when it came to education. Mary Kom's father was strong in his beliefs and ideologies as he wanted his first born to be the first to clear the Class X grade. Mary Kom, being the eldest in the family gained mental Strength and motivation at this crucial stage of his childhood life: "I am proud that he dared to think differently, and grateful for the farsightedness that has brought me so far (Unbreakable 12).

The role of socio-economic background in shaping Mary Kom's Career was apparent from the autobiography. It had various instances which reflected her hardships in wet rice fields, ploughing the fields, driving the animals etc. She also acknowledged the it wasn't that all children in the village worked as hard as she did. Many of her friends used to spend their time playing, eating and sleeping. The role of the family in nurturing her values like mental toughness, hard work, resilience, grit is undeniably represented in the autobiography.

But Father had trained us to work from a young age. There were many jobs I could do that even boys struggled with. All three of us siblings were given our chores, and as the eldest, I took my responsibilities very seriously. I helped in the fields- a task that required immense strength. (Unbreakable 13)

In a confessional tone, Mary Kom says that the most significant lesson she had learned from her father, Apa, was of the dignity of hard labour and honesty. She had these lessons with her like a lighthouse to guide her in the path to success while heading to Imphal in 1999. She wanted to get a seat at Sports Authority of India (SAI). Under the guidance of the trainer, Coach Gosana, Mary tried

to explore the avenues at SAI though she felt she was not the right fit for gymnastics. Women's Boxing was a new sport for everyone and it was only after a chance meeting with Rebika Chiru, that she realized that Women's boxing had entered the SAI Academy of Manipur. Mary also became conscious of her inclination towards Boxing and thus thought of meeting the then chief coach, L. Ibomcha Singh. She went on to meet Sir Ibomcha and expressed her desire to be trained by him. To her utter disbelief, she not only received a cold shoulder but was also taunted: "Why do you want to join boxing? You are a small frail girl. With your gold earring, you don't even look like a boxer. Boxing is for young boys." (Unbreakable 31).

Finally, Sir Ibomcha accepted her despite being little apprehensive about her skills in the sport of Boxing. He had strict routine for Mary to follow as he was hard taskmaster, and she had to maintain the schedule and timings of the training. At the same time, Mary realized her natural, inborn style of boxing. She also felt that her childhood had prepared her for the endurance training that was so essential to boxing. This study thus delineates her upbringing in Manipur and how her rural background shaped her personality and career.

The first time she stepped out of Manipur was for the Seventh East India Open Boxing Championship in Bengal. She was surprised when representatives of the Kom-Rem Student Union came to see her off at the bus station and gave her 500 rupees note and a traditional Manipuri pahnek to encourage her and wish her the best for the tournament. This affiliation and support from her community was like a rock-solid support at that time when she had no idea what the world outside was like. All these gestures empowered her to face the new world.

Having won so many state and national championships be it in Bengal, or Chennai or Hisar, during 2001, she took a step further to not only participate in international sport but also win the silver medal in the first edition of a world championship. Her community was proud that she was now an international level boxer. She was so connected to her roots that her victories or medals could not diminish her desire to assert her identity as a 'Kom' tribe.

To be honest, one of the greatest motivating forces for me has been my desire to assert the identity of my tribe 'Kom' within my own country and the world over. We are just a few thousand people. I hoped that by coming up in sports and getting known worldwide, I'd be able to popularize the culture and ethos of my tiny tribe.

(Unbreakable, 83)

In recent times, boxing has taken on the role of a powerful medium for reclaiming lost dignity and asserting one's identity. This mirrors the function of the autobiography in framing Mary Kom's individuality and her achievements as a woman. Beyond the common global issues of marginalization tied to gender, class, and the politics of sports, Kom also faced personal tragedy due to the insurgency in Manipur, which claimed the life of her father-in-law—a story that remained overlooked until Kom highlighted it in her writings. This tragic event marked a pivotal moment in her life, leaving unanswered questions about the senseless violence. While the shadow of insurgency continues to loom over the region, its resolution remains elusive, even as the silence surrounding such atrocities in Manipur begins to lift. This marginalization of the conflict-ridden state underscores its neglect and exclusion as part of a minority whose needs remain unmet. Through her achievements in boxing, Mary Kom elevated her community and state above the divisive constraints of politics.

Mary Kom's life took a new turn when she met Onler Kom. It was truly a momentous time for her as it the meeting in 2000 that changed her life completely. Since Onler was the president of the Kom-Rem Students Union in Delhi, he left no stone unturned to help Mary with his sage advice and cautionary words during the tours. Mary was also in dilemma when she was fraught with the questions of marriage and relationships. Perhaps the persona of Onler as a straightforward person who believed in his actions stood like a pillar of support for Mary. He confided as : "I will never come between you and your career" (61).

With all the grit and determination, Mary was awarded the Arjuna in 2005 followed by Padma Shri. It was a battle which she had to fight for every bit of recognition though she sought the recognition not only for herself but for her sport and even more specifically, for women's boxing. Though she had to face criticism due to her oriental looks, she asserted her identity by her medals: "Whether or not I look Indian, I am an Indian and I represent India, with pride and all my heart" (91).

Kom's autobiography aims at motivating youngsters by conveying the message that unflinching determination is the key to making one achieve even the impossible dreams. Successful People like Mary Kom who achieved a lot in their lives never had it easy as the only thing that they had in abundance was their will power to live their

dreams. Mary Kom's bronze medal at the 2012 London Olympics marked a historic milestone, not just for Indian sports but for women's empowerment globally. She motivated herself at every stage by recounting as before every bout, she repeated her magic mantra: I must win this bout, I must win, I must win (118). Her achievement transcended the boundaries of a mere sporting victory, representing a triumph over systemic gender biases, societal expectations, and the marginalization of women in sports. Through her autobiography, *Unbreakable*, Mary Kom recounts her journey from a small village in Manipur to the global stage, providing a raw and inspirational narrative of perseverance, resilience, and self-belief. The Olympic medal was not just a personal victory but a symbolic moment for countless women aspiring to break free from societal constraints. It showcased how sports could be a transformative tool for empowerment, enabling women to reclaim agency over their lives. Despite facing challenges like financial struggles, lack of resources, and even political instability in her home state, Mary Kom's indomitable spirit paved the way for change. Her story underscores how representation matters—Mary Kom's success gave visibility to women in male-dominated sports and highlighted the potential of women from marginalized communities.

Through her legacy, she continues to inspire future generations to dream big, proving that barriers can be broken when determination meets opportunity. Mary Kom wanted to be the champion of hope for the women of her country and for all the youngsters: "I dared to dream big in spite of my humble beginning. I hope that my life is proof to youngsters across India that it is possible to do more if they dare, if they have the will" (124). Mary Kom concludes her autobiography on the note that: "A country like India has a lot of potential. I end with the hope that we will build on that. My life is my message: nothing is impossible" (137).

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