

Indian women: Still seeking independence

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LSE alumna Olina Banerji argues that despite 65 years of independence, India's women are still fighting for true freedom.

[Magnificent Mary Kom](#) bowed out of the London Olympics graciously. She returns to India having won a bronze medal for boxing and a million hearts. Twitter is agog with celebratory Mary Kom jokes; the one that catches my eye points out that Kom's school-going children will never be bullied. Through humour, she becomes India's ultimate 'supermom'.

This is strange, however, since the costume for boxing – the headgear and the tunics – makes it impossible to distinguish between male and female athletes. Kom is a champion of an androgynous sport.



But no one, least of all the Indian media, wants her, or us, to accept that. Kom is not new to this game of labels—over the years she has sported them all. Wife. Mother. Home-maker. Female Fighter. The Indian press has described her as “[India's diminutive female boxer](#)” who snagged a medal “[despite raising twins](#)”; the *Times of India* [concedes](#) that “many in this traditional country can't fathom the idea of a woman landing lethal left hooks.”

Owing to such coverage, labels that should have become springboards remain shackles for India's women. They've made the disadvantage of being a woman in this country more apparent than ever—*despite* has become a loaded notion. Kom got there *despite* being a woman – and a mother – from one of the most marginalised areas in the country. It would seem that there is no merit in being a woman. Or hailing from Manipur.

One hopes that fame and an Olympic medal will enable Kom to transcend the gendered public space. She should now be able to play by her own rules—from mother to boxer, she should revel in doing it all.

But what about those Indian women who don't make it into the spotlight, or do so for all the wrong reasons? Barely weeks before Kom's Olympic win, [a teenage girl in Guwahati was assaulted by 14 men](#) for 30 minutes at a busy street corner a stone's throw from a police station; to add insult to injury, her assault was filmed by a journalist who didn't think to intervene on her behalf. What about women like her and others who think they're equal participants in India's public space? Women who smoke, drink and dress as they please, but end up [paying for these perceived](#)

[sins through attacks](#) or demands that they behave in culturally appropriate ways. The women of independent India must be doing something wrong for them to be punished like this. What else explains the fact that their independence is an invitation for derision, or worse? A woman who drinks is fair game; a woman who has pre-marital sex is an easy target; and a woman who opines freely (think: Arundhati Roy) is widely hated.

“I’d like it very much if we lived in a genderless city where we could go about our business without having men constantly stare at our chests,” says a 23-year-old content developer and entrepreneur. As it is, in an acutely gender sensitive India, she drives around Delhi in a vehicle akin to an armoured tank, but hesitates to stay out past 10 p.m. Meanwhile, a fellow journalist drinks occasionally, but refuses to do so in front of her relatives. For my part, I’m told off by my brother each time I light a cigarette. The fact remains, women in India are not yet independent of what men (and other women) think of them.

Ironically, it was a man who made the point that it’s women themselves who must make the choice to be independent. Over a lunch where he was outnumbered two working women to one unemployed man, he asked, “If not you, then who?” My friend and I hummed and hawed about social conditioning, middle-class pressure and ovarian maladies. But he remained obstinate. “You have no excuse,” he told us, “you’re in a position to get your own way.” In his opinion, if there has ever been a time when a cross-section of urban Indian women can become people – hard-working, successful citizens – it is now.

But this seems unlikely given that even an outlier like Kom cannot completely escape gender expectations and the oppression they perpetuate. It also doesn’t help that most gender-related statistics are discouraging: Indian women currently endure more discrimination and violence than in [any other G20 country](#); [India ranks 129 out of 146 countries](#) on UNDP’s Gender Inequality Index; female political participation remains appallingly low, with [women constituting only 11 per cent of India’s fifteenth Lok Sabha](#) (lower house of parliament) and 10.26 per cent of the Rajya Sabha (upper house).

Even the country’s middle-class working women, [go-to symbols of Indian progress](#), have to struggle against the fact that [“societal expectations have not changed](#) or even modified to factor in the double burden on [working] women.” In this context, it’s not surprising that [Indian women are the most stressed out in the world](#), with 87 per cent saying they felt anxious most of the time.

Do I feel the oppression? Maybe not everyday, maybe not from every man. But it slowly wears us down into submitting to the rules of smoking behind closed doors, not sharing your bed. Some people think cigarettes and mini-skirts are upper-middle-class, pseudo-symbols of freedom that have nothing to do with the ground reality of the nation that lives beyond the cities. That may be partly true, but symbols are important; they can induce a trickle-down effect. I don’t advocate that every Indian woman drink, smoke or show off her cleavage to announce her independence. But to know that the choice exists, without consequences, is what true freedom is about.

Happy Independence Day.

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