

Client: BBC National Press
Source: The Daily Telegraph (Main)
Date: 28 June 2018
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Reach: 458487
Size: 939cm2
Value: 30179.46



The woman standing up to Japan's sexual shame

In a country where sex is kept firmly in the shadows, Shiori Ito has been a lone voice saying #MeToo. *Charlotte Lytton* reports

I want to talk this through calmly, so I'm sending you this email," Shiori Ito wrote to Noriyuki Yamaguchi, then Washington bureau chief of one of Japan's biggest national TV networks. "You had sex with me while I was unconscious."

In Japan, speaking about sex, let alone rape, is verboten; so to level accusations at a media magnate and close friend of Shinzo Abe, the prime minister, was almost unthinkable.

Yet three years ago, when a 25-year-old Ito met Yamaguchi, then 48, in Tokyo to discuss a prospective internship, the interaction with a man whose career she had idolised quickly turned sour. She alleges that, after a few small glasses of sake, she began feeling dizzy and excused herself to regain composure in the restaurant's bathroom. The next

thing she says she remembers, is waking up in a hotel bed in intense pain as Yamaguchi raped her.

What followed was a battle of wills: Ito's allegations and Yamaguchi's denials. With no corroborative or forensic evidence – Ito decided to go to the police five days after the alleged rape – it was one person's word against another's. Yamaguchi has consistently and firmly denied Ito's allegations throughout.

"Part of me thought maybe I should forget about it. I thought maybe this is the way you have to be as a woman," explains Ito, since dubbed "the woman who brought #MeToo to Japan". In the country, where only four per cent of sex crimes are reported to police, most victims, it would seem, take a similar approach.

But the thought of allowing what she says she had gone through to pass undocumented "really disgusted me", she says. "I want to talk about the truth and ask for justice." The justice

she has been searching for, however, has not been forthcoming: Yamaguchi denied all charges and her case against him collapsed for lack of evidence; one senior police officer told Japanese media how he had personally called off the warrant for the broadcaster's arrest.

Since going public with her story last May, the threats levelled against both Ito and her family forced them to cut off contact. Ito moved to London a few months later in desperation. "I can be no one here," she says quietly. "In Japan, I was always the girl who says she was raped."

She had emailed Yamaguchi in an attempt to begin a paper trail of what she believed had happened. When that didn't happen, and she went public with her story, she was met with vitriol, with one TV commentator describing the alleged attack as Ito simply "failing to sleep her way to the top".

Rape allegations are made 50 times more frequently in the UK than in the now 29-year-old's home country. But



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that is not, she says, an accurate portrayal of the scale of Japan's sexual

violence problem. The common refrain is that the culture is under-sexualised, that rates of intercourse are at their lowest ever, with a third of young people entering their 30s without any sexual experience, and that a "demographic time bomb" awaits as this national abstinence propels the population into decline. But Ito paints a very different picture.

"Being sexually assaulted or groped was just a daily thing," Ito recalls of life in Japan, adding that incidents were at their worst when she was a teenager. Groped and even masturbated on while travelling to school, she and her fellow pupils "were used to it, so it wasn't something to talk about", she says.

Bystanders would do nothing because they "didn't want to get in trouble, or be late for work... We just had to live with it."

It is no coincidence, she continues, that so much undocumented sexual assault exists in a country where the very act is never to be discussed.

"There's a history of not considering violence against women as a very

serious social problem," explains Hiroko Goto, a law professor at Chiba University, because "while 'no means no' is commonly accepted in the UK and US, in Japan it's 'no means yes'" Until last year, the crime of rape in Japan had a lower minimum sentence than theft. The legal age of consent in the country is just 13.

A study by national Japanese broadcaster NHK last year found that 11 per cent of men believed a woman going to dinner with them was proof of her sexual consent – a number that swelled to more than a third if she was drunk. Those who commit "quasi-rape" – a term in Japanese law to denote intercourse with a woman orchestrated by "taking advantage of

loss of consciousness or inability to resist" – can result in punishment of just six months. That is, of course, if the case ever makes it to court.

"Even if a woman has a sexual desire, they've been taught from a young age that it's not a good thing to express that," Goto says. That is because, adds Ito, "if you're a woman, you should

have the attitude of shame". The Japanese tradition of *onna was sanpo sagatte* requires wives to walk three steps behind their husbands in a show of servitude.

The account that Ito presents – true or false – is an illustration of the country's retrograde attitudes towards women and sex; though the rape Ito says she was subjected to "was shocking, I was more shocked at what I had to go through *after* I was raped". Following her ordeal, she spent two hours recounting what she alleged had happened to the only available female officer at the local police station, only to be told that the woman worked in the traffic violations department and could not help her. She was then forced to re-enact the alleged crimes in front of a male investigator.

Ito persisted in the hope that, by coming forward, she would change the future for others, like the schoolgirls suffering as she had while simply travelling to school. However, she has been disheartened by the #MeToo movement's failure to launch in her own country.

"After I spoke out, I was expecting for someone to step forward with me, but no one did," she says. Indeed, there is a telling moment in *Japan's Secret Shame*, the BBC documentary of Ito's story, in which three older women discuss her case. "What do you call that hashtag?" one asks another. "Too-Me?"

Ito's decision to go public with her allegations has cast a long shadow both professionally and personally. "I've struggled to have physical contact [with men]," she says, as well as trouble sleeping and panic attacks. Her family have also become unwitting collateral. Having urged her not to speak out because they were "afraid to be targets", their fears were realised when their names and family photos were posted online.

Last year, the publication of her memoir, *Black Box*, so named to reflect the covert nature investigators give to such crimes, brought glimmers of respite; Ito believes her family now better understand why she came forward, and the case has caught the attention of lawmakers,



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with a £1million fund being set up to support Japan's victims of sexual crimes.

She continues to pursue a civil case against Yamaguchi, who responded to her emails back in April 2015 with the advice to "go ahead with legal proceedings" as "there is no way you will win". As far as a criminal prosecution goes, he may be right. But as she chips away at Japan's culture of sexual shame, perhaps a greater battle is slowly being won.

Japan's Secret Shame is on BBC Two tonight, 9pm

'While "no means no" is commonly accepted, in Japan it's "no means yes"'



Accused: Noriyuki Yamaguchi is one of Japan's best-known television journalists



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Accuser: Shiori Ito moved to London to escape the threats she received