

#MeToo in Japan

Wednesday 4 March 2020, by [MATSUMOTO Chie](#) (Date first published: 1 March 2020).

JAPAN'S #ME-TOO MOVEMENT was sparked by a television reporter who said she was sexually harassed by the country's highest-ranking finance ministry official.

"Can I touch your breast?" "Can I tie you up?" The voice of the man's relentless sexual advances was heard on a tape that ran in the weekly tabloid magazine Shukan Shincho. His target was the reporter herself.

When the full story appeared in 2018, there was sympathy among female journalists but little surprise. Most had experienced similar harassment. The recording of the encounter went viral on the Internet.

It was not an isolated case. More than 70% of women who work in the media say they have been sexually harassed on the job, according to a survey conducted by a confederation of media unions, the Japan Congress of Mass Media Information and Cultural Workers (MIC) in 2018. [\[1\]](#)

In the most famous recent case, freelance journalist Shiori Ito accused a senior journalist with television network TBS (and a biographer of Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe), Noriyuki Yamaguchi, of drugging and raping her in 2015 when she was a college intern seeking a job. Prosecutors dropped criminal charges against Yamaguchi in 2016.

Amidst mounting criticism and vicious online trolling, Ito published a bestselling book, Black Box, to tell her own story. She has since become a leading figure in women's battle against sexual violence. She took Yamaguchi to court and won a landmark civil case against him in December 2019.

As Ito's case highlighted, the majority of harassers are male bosses and coworkers, but the list also includes police officers, politicians and local and central government officials, [\[2\]](#) such as the finance ministry official, Junichi Fukuda.

The handful of women who muster up the courage to speak out often face vicious harassment and trolling, as Ito did (she says she was forced to flee the country after receiving threats on her and her family). The case involving the finance ministry official showed the price paid for confronting powerful men.

Finance Minister Taro Aso, Fukuda's boss, hinted that Fukuda had been entrapped by the female reporter and expressed concerns about his human rights rather than the victim's. Some questioned the reporter's journalistic ethics because she handed a tape of the secretly recorded conversation to another media organization. Concern was mounting that her company would issue her a reprimand.

Many female journalists across the country decided enough was enough. They stood up to support their colleague with the hashtag: "#WithYou." More than 100 women gathered within a few weeks and formed Women in Media Network Japan (WiMN) in May 2019 — the first-ever all-female group of journalists (print, broadcast, publishing and freelance) in Japan.

Breaking the Silence

At a press conference to announce the group's establishment, and to protest against the finance ministry, 19 women reporters anonymously revealed they had been exposed to sexual abuse throughout their careers. In statements, some revealed a pattern of forced kissing, groping and fondling by male colleagues and interviewees so common that they grew numb to it.

They also spoke of their sense of responsibility and regret that by staying silent about this sexual abuse they may have contributed to the industry's tolerance to it. Many had stayed silent because they had been told that predatory abuse is part of the job, and to just bear it. They were told that such abuse is the path to becoming professional journalists.

To maintain journalistic objectivity, they had kept themselves out of stories of harassment. The case against the television reporter made them realize they were among the voiceless victims they had been reporting all along.

The Japan Federation of Newspaper Workers' Unions (Shimbunroren) immediately responded to the case and demanded that the industry body, the Japan Newspaper Publishers and Editors Association, adopt a strict no-tolerance policy against any sexual harassment and protect the victims under the understanding that harassment is a violation of human rights.

A similar set of demands was filed by the commercial broadcast unions.

Before the negotiation with the industry organization, a report by a university graduate was circulated to Shimbunroren. The graduate said she was asked during a job interview for a major newspaper if she had ever been sexually harassed. This question, by itself, is harassment: would a man be asked such a thing?

The suggestion is that media companies expect new recruits to put up with unwanted sexual advances, so common as they are. Veteran journalists and members of Shimbunroren reported that they had been asked the same question more than 20 years ago. Nothing changed.

A Press Freedom Issue

Soon after the negotiation, the newspaper association passed a resolution stating that news sources abusing their status and harassing reporters not only infringes reporters' human rights, it violates citizens' right to know. It said henceforth it would refuse to turn a blind eye to words or deeds that keep women from doing journalistic work.

As both print and broadcast industry bodies clearly stated, demanding sexual favors or making unwanted sexual advances on journalists in exchange for information or access to interviews is a press freedom issue.

Japan's pacifist constitution famously denounces war. It also guarantees two essential rights of democracy: press freedom and the right to know. As harassment of journalists concerns some of the most important elements of democracy, interest surged from the media industry.

Meanwhile, the International Labor Organization (ILO) opened a forum on workplace violence and was scheduled to vote on a resolution to eliminate it in June 2019. The only two member countries that resisted were the United States and Japan. Japan was also categorized in a group of countries without any regulations on workplace violence and harassment.

Unions across Japan increased pressure on the government to demand a comprehensive law defining and banning sexual harassment, as well as stronger penalties against perpetrators.

The #MeToo and #WithYou movement helped uncover sexual and other forms of harassment not only in media but in many other jobs and industries, even at job interviews. The MIC was moved to conduct a second online survey, this time across all jobs and industries. [3]

The results were illuminating. According to the survey, about 20% of respondents who experienced sexual harassment said they never reported the case. Almost 70% complained that their cases were handled improperly, by being dismissed, transferred or dropped without investigation. Some were told it was best to keep quiet for their own sake.

Those findings suggest a pattern. When women address cases of sexual harassment or gender discrimination, the issues are often minimized. One reason is that the media industry, like others, is male-dominated. About 20% of the media workforce is female. Just 6.6% of the management of newspapers and wire services are women (the figure is 14.7% in commercial broadcasters). [4] There are almost no women on the boards of media companies. [5]

Gender Gap Persists

Japan ranks 121st out of 153 countries in the Global Gender Gap Report 2020, falling from 110th in the previous year.

More women in management would not only help create a more gender-neutral workplace, it might encourage victims of sexual harassment to report not just their own cases, but those of others. Female journalists often express frustration that such stories are hard to get past male-dominated newsrooms.

The recent outburst of solidarity among women journalists has boosted coverage of gender issues, analysts say. When it was revealed in mid-2018, for example, that Tokyo Medical University had for more than ten years manipulated scores on entrance examinations to favor male applicants by deducting points from female students, female (and male) journalists extensively reported the story and filed a protest statement.

The effort eventually exposed similar practices at other universities. Tokyo Medical University said that the medical industry needed more male doctors and practitioners because women take maternity leaves during pregnancy or tend to resign when they marry and have children.

The string of injustices against women continued. On March 12, 2019, a man was found not guilty of having sex with a woman who was drunk and incapacitated in the southern Japanese city of Fukuoka. (The case was overturned later in the high court. The man was sentenced to four years in prison.)

On March 19, the Shizuoka District Court in central Japan found another man innocent on charges of forcing a woman to have sex. The courts ruled that in both cases the women had “failed to resist enough” for the men to notice there was a lack of consent.

Another case in Nagoya District Court found a father not guilty of sexually abusing his teenage daughter repeatedly for two years. Although the court accepted that the man had sexually abused his daughter, it ruled that there was still doubt that she lost complete ability to resist. In other words, she showed no physical signs of abuse that would indicate her resistance.

#MeToo Fighting Back

Many women interpreted this string of unjust verdicts as a backlash against the #MeToo movement in Japan. On April 11, 2019 they took to the streets of Tokyo holding flowers and began what has

developed into a nationwide campaign against the silencing of women.

The Flower Demo, which is now organized on the 11th of every month in 36 out of Japan's 47 prefectures, has offered a place for women (and men) to reveal abuse and sexual violence, or simply to receive or express support.

The campaign was fueled by solidarity among WiMN members who relentlessly pushed their editors to cover the Flower Demos, stories on gender-based violence and the #MeToo accounts.

These actions empowered one survivor of a 2007 rape case to file a lawsuit against Nagasaki City. The alleged rapist, the head of the city's Atomic Bomb Survivors Relief Department, hanged himself a few months after the reporter filed a claim and the city was set to launch an investigation. The city has not officially apologized or even confirmed that she was raped.

That reporter's case was the first taken up by Shimbunroren since it appealed to women working in newspapers and wire services to report sexual violence. The newspaper union's federation in July last year recruited eight women to the all-male executive committee. Labor must first spearhead changes to corporate society, said the federation.

Shimbunroren organized the first Flower Demo in Nagasaki City in November, along with local advocacy groups for women that were the first to respond to the reporter's claims 12 years ago. They demanded an apology and said the shame brought on a city so emblematic of the global peace movement demanded justice for the rape survivor. The lawsuit has triggered several more claims of sexual violence against journalists in Nagasaki, surely the tip of the iceberg.

As a commitment to eradicating sexual violence especially in media industry, WiMN put together a compilation of confessions, essays and opinions from its members. The book, *The State of Sexual Harassment in Media*, [6] edited by WiMN, is guaranteed to ignite more reports of gender-based abuse and discrimination. The fight to end violence against women and build stronger solidarity is only getting started. The key is to keep sharing our stories.

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P.S.

Solidarity

<https://solidarity-us.org/atc/205/metoo-in-japan/>

Footnotes

[1] MIC is a network of unions in Mass Media, Information and Culture industries. The online survey was conducted between July 18 and August 17, 2018. Some 428 (233 women, 194 men and one other) responded.

[2] MIC survey.

[3] MIC conducted another survey across more than 24 jobs and industries, including university job seekers, from mid-April to mid-May, 2019. Some 1,061 responded to the online survey.

[4] 2019 Cabinet Office report:

http://www.gender.go.jp/about_danjo/whitepaper/h29/zentai/pdf/h2

[5] Japan Federation of Commercial Broadcast Workers' Unions survey (2019. 10)

<http://www.minpororen.jp/>.

[6] Masukomi • Sekuhara Hakusho (The State of Sexual Harassment in Media) scheduled for publication on February 13, 2020.