

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON GENDER AND POLITICS

## Flowers for Sexual Assault Victims: Collective Empowerment through Empathy in Japan's #MeToo Movement

Mari Miura

Sophia University

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The #MeToo movement in Japan is usually considered to have started slowly, and it remains far smaller and quieter compared with those found in the United States or South Korea. Few celebrities or high-profile figures have come forward to support the movement, and even fewer powerful men have been brought down as a result of allegations of sexual assault. The strategy of naming and shaming has rarely been used, but there is collective empowerment through empathy resulting from a nationwide grassroots movement known as “Flower Demo.” This movement has provided victims with a safe space to share their experiences. Those breaking their silence have appeared in various sectors of society, and this has raised the social consciousness of deep-rooted sexism inherent in Japanese society.

### #MeToo, #WeToo

Shiori Ito, who later became the symbol of Japan's #MeToo movement, held a press conference in May 2017 accusing Noriyuki Yamaguchi, former Washington bureau chief of the Tokyo Broadcasting System and a biographer of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, of raping her in 2015. Her case was strangely dropped as a criminal investigation, which forced her to go public with her face and name and publish *Black Box* (2017), a book about her experience and the deficiency of the Japanese judicial system in dealing with victims of sexual assault. Not long after she came forward, the #MeToo movement began in October 2017 in Hollywood, which, along with Ito's courageous act, led to several online or public accusations of sexual misconduct in the advertising industry,

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entertainment business, journalism, educational institutions, academia, and other places.

However, the strategy of naming and shaming has rarely been pursued in Japan, and it is even rarer for perpetrators to be held accountable. Instead, victim blaming and secondary victimization occurs, constituting the social control of silencing victims. Weak investigative journalism and the male-dominated Japanese media industry prevented the #MeToo movement from growing rapidly. Most major newspapers and the broadcast news did not even report Ito's story, and the media perpetuated the narrative that she was somehow responsible (Hasunuma and Shin 2019). Because of death threats and vulgar slurs, Ito moved to London and proposed launching a #WeToo campaign. An individual act of coming forward would be too frightening in Japan, and she would not dare ask other victims to speak up about their experiences.

In March 2018, a popular weekly magazine took Japan's #MeToo movement to new heights when it reported that Junichiro Fukuda, administrative vice minister of finance, Japan's highest-ranking civil servant, had sexually harassed a female Asahi television reporter during interviews that were sometimes carried out at bars. He eventually stepped down without officially admitting his offense. His boss, Minister of Finance Taro Aso, defended Fukuda, stating that there is "no such thing [crime] as a sexual harassment charge," and "there would not be any sexual harassment incident if only male reporters cover the Finance Ministry" (*Kyodo News* 2018; *Straits Times* 2018). The Fukuda incident and Aso's comments were shocking for female journalists, as many had experienced sexual harassment themselves during personal contact with informants, especially police officers and local assembly members. Numerous meetings were spontaneously held by female journalists, allowing them to share their unpleasant experiences and sharpen awareness of sexual harassment. A network connecting women working in the media industry, called WiMN (Women in Media Network), was created and paved the way for increasing the number of articles on sexual violence and other gender topics (WiMN 2020).

### **FLOWER DEMO, #WithYou**

The next phase of Japan's #MeToo movement emerged out of the outrage over acquittals in four sexual assault cases in March 2019, which triggered a nationwide grassroots movement, Flower Demo. Minori Kitahara, a feminist writer, and Akiko Matsuo, the founder of a feminist publishing

company (etc.books), called for a street protest to seek justice, with participants holding flowers in their hands to show solidarity for victims of sexual violence. More than 500 people gathered in Tokyo and Osaka on April 11, 2019, which, in turn, spurred monthly rallies in cities across Japan. By the final gathering, scheduled for March 2020, Flower Demo had been organized in all 47 prefectures in Japan. Tokyo rallies often lasted over two hours, with a line of speakers who talked about their traumatic experiences. Some spoke about their sexual abuse as children for the first time in their lives, and some others reported their ongoing court trials. Some remained anonymous. Male and transgender victims were also among the speakers.

The spontaneous growth of Flower Demo suggests that such space was needed in Japan. Kitahara recalled that “[s]urvivors felt that they had been bottling up their experiences too long, that others had shut down their voices, and now they do not want to stay silent any longer” (*Japan Times* 2020). Flower Demo was not a protest rally, but rather a safe space for anyone to share their pain, anger, anxiety, or grievances. Speaking in public became a healing process for victims, and the presence of an attentive and compassionate audience triggered many to break their silence. Flowers in the hands of participants symbolized empathy and the collective will to believe survivors. The participants in Flower Demo experienced collective empowerment through empathy. The development of Flower Demo was thus close to what the original MeToo movement’s advocate, Tarana Burke, had envisioned. Her vision of MeToo was not “taking down powerful white men and tearing down their name” (Carter 2018), but “individual healing and community healing” (Tsai 2018) and “the exchange of empathy, from survivor to survivor” (Murray 2017).

## A NEW WAVE OF FEMINIST ACTIVISM

Japan’s #MeToo movement is not confined to combating sexual assault but has spread to broader struggles against sexism. Yumi Ishikawa, an actress and freelance writer, started a campaign to outlaw corporate practices that force women to wear high heels as sexual discrimination or harassment. It was called #KuToo, a play on the Japanese words *kutsu*, meaning “shoes,” and *kutsuu*, meaning “pain.” In June 2019, she submitted a petition signed by more than 15,000 people to the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (MHLW). Several members of Parliament brought up the issue in the Diet, and eventually Prime

Minister Abe stated in March 2020, “I want to say clearly that women should never be forced to suffer from dress [codes] despite doing the same job as their male counterparts.” It was a clear victory for the #KuToo movement. Many Japanese companies, including Japan Airlines, All Nippon Airlines, and some mobile carriers, altered their dress codes to allow women to wear flat shoes.

The rise of student activism in the fight against sexual misconduct and assault on campus was another example. Although there have been serious sexual assault cases at elite universities, Japanese universities do not offer sexual violence prevention programs.<sup>1</sup> No regulatory framework exists to require higher education to provide mandatory training, and the concept of “sexual consent” remains foreign to many Japanese students. New student organizations on several campuses disseminate the concept of sexual consent, and they have distributed student created handbooks and hosted workshops for sexual education. A campaign organization, Chabujo, provides training programs to prevent sexual assault, including bystander intervention, and has supported student activism.

One prominent feminist activism group is Voice Up Japan, founded by Kazuna Yamamoto. In 2018, she launched an online campaign when she was still a university student, demanding that the publisher of the weekly magazine *Shukan Spa!* retract an article that ranked female university students by their sexual availability. More than 50,000 people signed the petition within 10 days. She and her friends held a discussion with the magazine’s editor-in-chief, who then apologized and admitted that the article objectified women. Voice Up Japan actively committed to several campaigns, including stopping sexual harassment and assault when job hunting and preventing discrimination against women by medical schools that manipulated their entrance exams to favor men.

The rise and spread of feminist activism suggest the beginning of cultural change, especially among the younger generation. They are more likely to “express their anger without compunction.”<sup>2</sup> One of the battlefields is Twitter. Ishikawa Yumi (2019) replied to criticism against her #KuToo campaign and published a book compiling such sexist remarks. Many of the student activist groups have names that convey *speaking*, such as Voice Up Japan, Speak Up Sophia, Shaberu (meaning chatting and eradicating the roots of sexism), and SAY (Safe Campus Youth Network).

1. Japanese universities usually have harassment prevention policies, but their definition of harassment does not include sexual assault or sexual crimes.

2. The quote is from Karin Amamiya, a writer and activist on issues of poverty (*Japan Times* 2019).

The hashtags #SilenceWontProtectYou or #IWontBeSilenced are also often used in online campaigns. The act of breaking their silence is now considered to empower women, or at least a new generation of feminists takes it that way.

## TOWARD LEGAL REFORMS?

It remains to be seen, however, whether the Japanese #MeToo movement will lead to structural change. Gender-based violence takes place on the basis of heterosexual masculinity. As long as the patriarchy is perpetuated, sexual assault motivated by power and domination over victims will never be eradicated. One small but extremely important step to remedy the power balance would be to amend sexual assault laws and outlaw sexual harassment. The law to ban discrimination based on gender must also be strengthened.

The demands of the participants in Flower Demo crystallized with changes to the sexual crime law, which was amended in 2017 for the first time since 1907, tightening penalties against offenses and broadening the definition of rape to include oral and anal penetration. Sexual abuse by guardians against children under the age of 18 was criminalized. The government considered a further revision in 2020, and survivors demanded the adoption of the Swedish model of “yes means yes.” Jun Yamamoto, a survivor of sexual abuse and the founder of Spring, a group advocating for the amendment of the penal code, demanded that victims be included in the advisory panel deliberating the next round of penal code amendments. The Ministry of Justice set up an examination panel in March 2020, and Yamamoto was included as one of 17 members, 12 of whom are women.

The courts also began to be more attentive to the voices of victims. Among the four acquittals that triggered Flower Demo, high courts have overturned three district court verdicts; in one case, the prosecution gave up its appeal. In December 2019, Shiori Ito won her lawsuit against Yamaguchi, and the district court ordered him to pay 3.3 million yen (US\$31,500) in damages. The judge said in the ruling that Ito had been forced to have sex while in a state of unconsciousness and severe inebriation. The court also dismissed Yamaguchi’s 130 million yen countersuit. Ito’s victory adds a new page in the history of seeking justice for the survivors of sexual violence. It suggests that victims’ typical responses to sexual assault, such as being incapable of resistance or

behaving normally after the incident, are taken into consideration in the judicial community.

In May 2019, the MHLW amended the Equal Employment Opportunity Law and related labor laws to prevent various forms of workplace harassment. In addition to sexual harassment and maternity harassment against women, the legislation prohibits “power harassment,” which is defined as words and behavior by an offender who takes advantage of their superior position to make the workplace a hostile environment. Its effectiveness remains to be seen, however, as penalties against violators are not instituted despite the vigorous demands of labor unions and opposition parties. The law only requires employers to take measures to prevent harassment. The ministry issued new guidelines in December to enforce the law, which raised further concerns that power harassment is narrowly defined. The current level of law enforcement makes it difficult for Japan to ratify the International Labour Organization convention to eliminate workplace violence and harassment.

The political processes regarding legal reforms in the penal code and labor laws differ greatly depending on who is invited to official deliberations. Responding to the social pressure created by Flower Demo, the examination panel under the Ministry of Justice included a sexual assault victim. In contrast, activists and victims of workplace harassment did not directly participate in the deliberation process under the MHLW. Japan’s #MeToo movement succeeded in giving a voice to sexual assault victims in the legal reform process. Yet, victims of sexual harassment have not mobilized such a spontaneous grassroots movement. The success of #KuToo, started by one woman and mainly online, should therefore be noted as a remarkable achievement.

## CONCLUSION

As Japan’s #MeToo is part of the global #MeToo movement, women in Japan realize that they are not alone. The problem is global, and so must be the movement. Yet, local movements inevitably take different forms to fit local needs and contexts. In Japan, collective empowerment through empathy was a form of activism that was demanded by society. Flower Demo continues to exist online because of the persistent need for women to share their stories. Geographical and cultural closeness between Japan and South Korea also allowed Korean #MeToo activists to provide Japanese activists with inspiration and new language to

combat the disbelief and trivialization of victims that Catherine A. MacKinnon (2020) calls the two biggest cultural barriers. Transnational exchanges of the #MeToo movement add potency to the local movement, which in the next stage could create new forms of activism.

*Mari Miura is Professor of Political Science, Faculty of Law, at Sophia University: [mari\\_miura@icloud.com](mailto:mari_miura@icloud.com)*

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