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"I Have No Regrets"

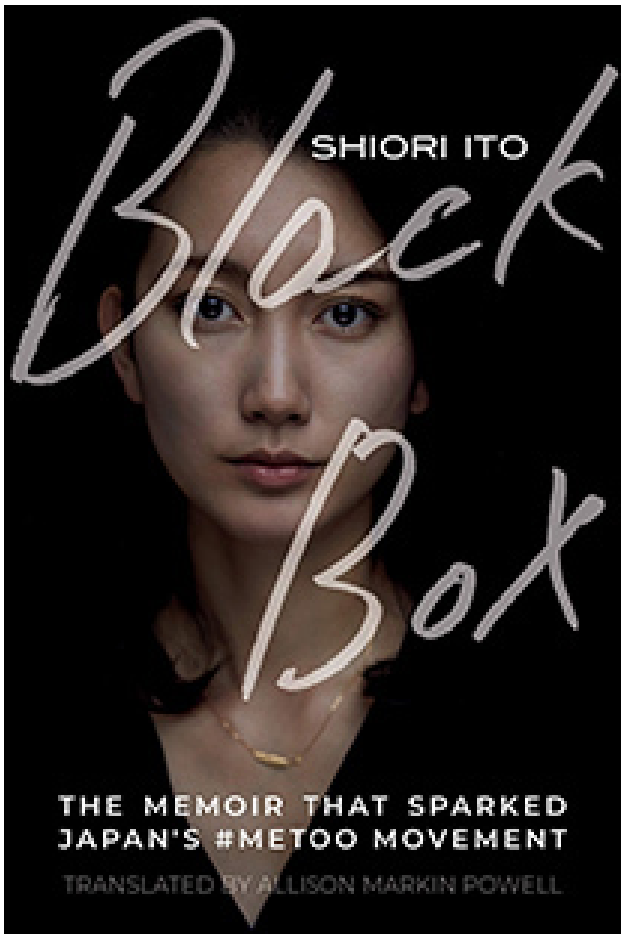
David McNeill

As the English translation of Shiori Ito's book, Black Box, is published, she says her fight for justice goes on.

It has been over four years since Ito Shiori accused one of Japan's better-known journalists of raping her in an upscale Tokyo hotel. Ito had begun nervously reaching out to the Japanese and foreign media, not to avenge herself for what happened, she said, but to challenge public attitudes regarding sexual assault. Her proposal for a press conference was initially rejected by the Foreign Correspondents' Club of Japan (full disclosure: I was on the events committee at the time), which was nervous about airing unproven claims.

It is testimony to Ito's persistence and courage that a few months later (after the publication of her book, *Black Box*), the FCCJ relented. The book was both a startling *j'accuse* (she outed her assaulter as Yamaguchi Noriyuki, a biographer of then prime minister Shinzo Abe), and a wrenching account of the psychological aftermath. Ito describes feeling like an "empty shell, ruled by fear." "I thought I had control over my own body, but someone else had been able to take over," she wrote.

Ito says she still cannot bring herself to reread the original memoir, which was a bestseller in Japan, and has been translated into Chinese, Korean, Italian, French and Swedish. In July, it was finally published in English (translated by *Allison Markin Powell*). "I only read it once since writing it," she says during a recent interview in Tokyo. "It's hard to describe because I don't want to revisit it even though I have to talk about it."



Ito reluctantly returned to Japan last year during the pandemic after fleeing to London to escape trolling that included threats on her life. She has filed lawsuits against three of her most prominent harassers, including a former professor at the University of Tokyo, and Sugita Mio, a conservative politician who suggested in a BBC documentary that Ito was to blame for her own assault (Sugita has since repeatedly 'liked' tweets defaming Ito).

Yamaguchi, meanwhile, appears to have prospered, landing work, says Ito, allegedly thanks to his powerful political supporters. He continues to insist the 2015 encounter was consensual and has filed countercharges against her. Last year, she says he filed a criminal case, with the result that she was investigated by the police. "That was shocking," she admits. "I thought I was empowered, and I thought I could say what I wanted to say. But it shook me."

The struggle continues, then, despite her landmark victory against Yamaguchi in a civil court in December 2019. "My life has been difficult in Japan," she admits. "But on the other hand, I feel that it has become easier to speak, to be myself and to explain how I have been struggling and feeling in Japanese society as a woman." She continued, "We need to keep supporting the victims of sexual crimes, and not only in the legal system. I'm shedding a light on what we needed to see and what is horrible to see."

In the book Ito writes how, in the early hours of April 4, 2015, she awoke in a hotel room to find Yamaguchi on top of her; the last thing she remembered was sharing a sushi meal with him. When the sexual assault was over, and she had returned from the bathroom, distressed and in pain; she says Yamaguchi asked if he could keep her underwear as a 'souvenir'. Ito crumpled to the floor. Staring down at her, he said: "Before, you seemed like a strong, capable woman, but now you're like a troubled child. It's adorable."

Ito recalls that exchange in her book as an example of the rapist's need to "dominate and subjugate." As she explained, "Several months before the press conference, what I had learned in my reporting on chikan (public groping) was that it went beyond a sexual predilection…For the perpetrator, it takes no more than a moment to satisfy his desire. But for the person on the other end of the experience, it will mark them for life." She cites an NHK survey on 'Things That Lead You to Think That the Other Person Consents to Sex':

> – Eating together, just the two of you 11 percent
>
> – Drinking together, just the two of you 27 percent
>
> – Getting in a car, just the two of you 25 percent
>
> – Revealing clothing 23 percent
>
> – Being drunk 35 percent

"There's not a single item in this list that indicates sexual consent," she writes.

Black Box is billed as the memoir that sparked Japan's #MeToo movement, though in truth that moment flared briefly but quickly morphed into #WithYou—an acknowledgment that many victims might not want to admit it has happened to them, even now. Most have remained anonymous even as Ito has trudged her lonely public path. She was crushed by her first press conference in June 2017 when she aired her story to a room full of mostly indifferent male reporters.

A flood of hate mail followed, accusing her of being a prostitute and setting a honey trap for Yamaguchi. These days, she says, an assistant opens her inbox first, shielding her from the worst of its contents. "I'm trying to find a way to cope with it. I was worried that I would burn out, but I think it's important to talk about this – not just rape but the harassment that follows anyone who speaks out."

Ito famously pushed the police to investigate her assault, enduring a humiliating ritual at the police station: reenacting the rape using a life-sized dummy as a group of male officers looked on, taking photographs. Yet, there is still little difference in how police handle such cases, she

says. “The number of female officers hasn’t changed dramatically – they work closely with prosecutors. They think rape is difficult to work with.”

Still, her career as a journalist prevented her from staying silent, she says. If she could not face the truth of what had happened to her, how could she go on? Whatever her attacker did to her, she says, it could never be worse than the psychological damage of running from herself. Her decision to speak out was correct, she insists. “It has been difficult but rape is visible now. We see more cases in the media, we’ve had demonstrations in Tokyo and in many other cities. I have no regrets.”

Black Box by Shiori Ito, translated by Allison Markin Powell, has been published by Tilted Axis. The following extract is courtesy of the publisher. It can also be found at LitHub.

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When people hear the word “rape,” many probably imagine a situation in which a woman is suddenly attacked by a stranger in a dark alley.

But in a survey conducted in 2014 by the Cabinet Office of the Japanese government, the percentage of cases in which a woman was forced to have sexual intercourse against her will with a total stranger was only 11.1 percent. The vast majority of cases involve victims who are acquainted with their assailant. Just 4.3 percent of all assault victims go to the police, and of that percentage, half were raped by a stranger, which makes it seem much more prevalent.

In circumstances where the victim is acquainted with their assailant, it proves difficult to report the incident to the police. And under Japan’s current legislative system, if the victim was unconscious when the crime occurred, there are tremendous hurdles to prosecuting.

This was true in my case.

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If you are taking the time to read this, I wonder what you may already know about me. Do you think of me as the woman who was raped, the woman who had the courage to hold a press conference, or the woman who appeared on TV with her shirt not buttoned all the way up when she was discussing rape?

After the press conference, whenever I saw the “Shiori Ito” portrayed in the media, it felt as though I was watching someone I didn’t know.

There were all kinds of things on the internet about this other, unfamiliar “Shiori” who looked just like me: she was a North Korean spy, a graduate of Osaka University, a dominatrix, politically motivated—these and all manner of unrelated and unheard-of details appeared alongside my picture. It was appalling the extent to which my family and friends—whom I had wanted to protect—were scrutinized. A month after the press conference, I heard from my friends that people were wondering where I was or saying that I had vanished.

But I was leading my life, the same way as before. I hadn’t gone anywhere, and I hadn’t disappeared.

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Many things can happen in your lifetime: events you never imagined, stories like the ones you see on television, things you thought only happened to other people much different from yourself.

I aspired to become a journalist. I studied journalism and photography at an American university, and after returning to Japan in 2015, I began an internship at Reuters. And just then, something happened that changed my life forever. I had traveled to over sixty

different countries; I had interviewed Colombian guerrillas and reported on stories from the cocaine jungles of Peru. When people heard this, they always said, "You must really have been putting yourself at risk!"

But while I was covering stories in such remote areas of these countries, I never felt at risk. The place where I encountered real danger was in Asia, in my own famously "safe" country—Japan. And the events that transpired afterward were even more devastating. The hospital, the hotlines, the police—none of these institutions were there to save me.

I was astounded to realize this about the society I had been living in so blissfully unaware.

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Sexual violence causes unwanted fear and pain for all its victims. Our trauma continues for a long time afterward.

Why was I raped? There is no definitive answer to this question. I have blamed myself, over and over. It's simply something that happened to me. And unfortunately, no one can change what happened.

I want to believe this experience isn't in vain. When it happened to me, I had never been in so much pain. At first, I had absolutely no idea how to deal with such an unimaginable event.

Now I know what needs to be done. And in order to accomplish this, we must make changes—simultaneously—to the societal and legal systems that handle sexual violence. Above all, I hope to enable a society in which we can discuss trauma more openly. For the sake of myself, for my sister and the friends I love, for the children of the future, including my own, and for the many people whose names and faces I don't know.

Keeping my shame and anger to myself wouldn't have changed anything. That is why I decided to write this book—to speak my mind and to expose the problems that need to be addressed.

At the risk of repeating myself, I did not write this book because I wanted to tell the story about "what happened."

I want to raise questions such as "How can we prevent assault from happening?" and "When assault does happen to someone, how can they get the help they need?" The only reason I even bother to bring up the past is so that we can strive to have these discussions in the future.

A further extract can be found at Granta.

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