

NARRATING WOMEN'S BODIES AND VIOLENCE: TESTIMONIES OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE VICTIMS IN JAPAN

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Rape myths and sexism fuel victim-blaming tendencies and the stigma around sexual violence resulting in victims' silence and shame. As demonstrated in recent years by the #MeToo movement, victims' voices play an important role in spreading awareness about the reality of sexual violence and showing how widespread the problem is. This chapter investigates how victims' stories and testimonies can contribute to challenging dominant narratives about sexual violence in contemporary Japan. What alternative narratives do they present and how can they be politically relevant to bring about change? To do so, an analysis of three case studies of women, who went public with their experience of sexual violence and became advocates and activists themselves, has been conducted. Analyzing the memoirs of the three women, this chapter shows how, by reclaiming their voices, victims not only can empower themselves, but also contribute to placing the issue on the public agenda.

Keywords: sexual violence, gender, activism, social movement, feminism, Japan

1. Introduction

Since the late 2010s, sexual violence in Japan has increasingly gotten attention becoming a topic of discussion in media, politics, and society. In 2017, the #MeToo movement spread worldwide, reaching also Japan, resulting in a series of high-profile cases, such as a journalist accusing the at the time vice minister of finance of sexual harassment. The Penal Code's articles on sex crimes were reformed twice, in 2017 and 2023. In 2022, Gonoï Rina¹ publicly denounced the

¹ The chapter presents Japanese names in Japanese naming order, family name first and given name second.

sexual harassment she had suffered when she was a member of the Self Defense Forces. In 2023, the BBC released a documentary exposing the sexual abuse of young boys perpetrated, since the 1970s, by Johnny Kitagawa, founder of one of the most famous talent agencies in Japan. While an increasing number of victims are finding the courage to speak up and denounce the violence they have suffered, it is a rather recent phenomenon. In fact, for a long time, sexual violence was considered a taboo topic, and many victims are still driven to silence and shame. Going public and denouncing sexual violence is not an easy choice as victims expose themselves to great risks. Social reactions to disclosure, such as slander, victim-blaming, or secondary victimization,² and the lack of institutional support perpetuate silence, whether it is self-silencing or being silenced (Howard Valdivia et al. 2023).

Storytelling "is a powerful tool in the fight to dismantle the culture of silence surrounding sexual and gender-based violence" (Guarini 2023, 261). This chapter focuses on sexual violence against women, and investigates how victims' stories and testimonies can contribute to challenging dominant narratives about sexual violence in contemporary Japan. A dominant narrative is defined as a culturally shared moral and ethical framework for understanding experiences that "serves to restrict definitions of rape and determines who can be a victim and who can be a perpetrator" (Howard Valdivia et al. 2023, 500). The silencing of victims contributes to making sexual violence invisible, hindering social justice and change. Victims' voices therefore have the potential to disrupt such silence. What alternative narratives do victims' stories present and how are they politically relevant? The chapter aims to address these questions by looking at the experiences of three Japanese women victims of sexual violence who decided to publicly tell their stories and take action to contribute to social change: Kobayashi Mika, Yamamoto Jun, and Itō Shiori.

This chapter applies two important concepts, rape culture and victims' voices. Rape culture is defined as "one that normalises and excuses rape, a social context in which the desires of privileged aggressors are prioritised over the comfort, safety, and dignity of marginalised populations that are seen as targets, as prey" and it is "slut-shaming, and victim-blaming, and, of course, heterosexist" (Nicholls 2021, 26–27). Rape culture is a form of structural violence which is "violence [that] is built into the structure [of a society] and shows up as unequal

² Secondary victimization can be defined as "when the victim suffers further harm not as a direct result of the criminal act but due to the manner in which institutions and other individuals deal with the victim. [It] may be caused, for instance, by repeated exposure of the victim to the perpetrator, repeated interrogation about the same facts, the use of inappropriate language or insensitive comments made by all those who come into contact with victims" (European Institute for Gender Equality 2016).

power and consequently as unequal life chances" (Galtung 1969, 171, quoted in Nicholls 2021, 16). A fundamental element that results from and at the same time sustains rape culture, are so-called rape myths. They are views of rape constructed in a male-dominated and patriarchal society that rely on stereotypical gender roles and create a climate hostile to victims shifting the blame onto them while simultaneously justifying or rationalizing the perpetrator's behaviors (Fa 2007, 5–6; Howard Valdivia et al. 2023). As such, they play a crucial part in informing people's (mis)understanding of sexual violence at all levels of society. Rape myths not only inform preconceptions of what sexual violence is, but they also construct an image of an "ideal victim" (Tsunoda 2001, 99), affecting how society perceives and circulate victims' testimonies.

These concepts will provide the analytical framework to understand the experience of sexual violence of Kobayashi, Yamamoto, and Itō, the significance of their decision to come forward with their names and faces, and the consequences of their choice to speak out. Through their stories, the chapter looks at the role of victims' voices in challenging rape culture, but also at how rape culture itself shapes the victims' experience of disclosing sexual violence.

Sexual violence has been a taboo topic for a long time, nevertheless Japanese feminists have been fighting for years to raise awareness about it and improve the societal perception of the problem. For example, in the 1980s and 1990s, women across the country established the first grassroots organizations to support victims of sexual violence, such as the Tokyo Rape Crisis Centre which opened in 1982 in the capital. They also addressed specific issues. Women in Kobe, for example, in the aftermath of the Great Hanshin Earthquake of 1995, spoke up about the increase in sexual violence in disaster-hit areas (Masai 2020) and women in Okinawa, in the context of protests against the presence of US military bases, denounced sexual violence on local women by American military personnel (Miyagi 2017). Women's organizations also engaged in various educational efforts and advocated for legal changes.

Local feminist efforts were further galvanized by international events, such as the four World Conferences on Women between 1975 and 1995, and the institution of the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Violence against Women (CEDAW) in 1981, both organized by the United Nations (UN), which helped to prioritize issues related to women's rights and gender-based violence globally. It was not until the turn of the century, however, that the first victims in Japan started to come forward publicly with their names and faces. Telling their stories, they showed the reality of sexual violence, debunked rape myths, and defied the dominant narrative that kept them in silence. Then, in 2017, the #MeToo movement starting from the US spread all over the world through social media resulting in an outpouring of victims' testimonies that shed light on the pervasiveness of

sexual harassment and abuse. In Japan, the #MeToo movement consisted mostly of anonymous posts on social media platforms, while there were few high-profile cases and no major street protests like in other countries, such as neighboring South Korea (Hasunuma and Shin 2019). In 2019, the movement was galvanized by the Flower Demo, a series of monthly demonstrations against sexual violence. The movement started in April 2019 when feminist activists called for a gathering in front of the Tokyo station to express outrage after four controversial acquittal verdicts in cases of sexual violence. In the following months, the movement started to expand all over the country and local branches were established in all 47 prefectures (Flower Demo 2020). Kitahara Minori, one of the initiators of the Flower Demo, argued that the reason why many victims had stayed silent for a long time is that society was not ready to listen to and believe them (Kitahara 2020). However, at the Flower Demo, victims spontaneously took the microphone to share with the crowd their experiences of sexual violence showing that people, indeed, are willing to raise their voices if provided with a safe environment.

While the literature on sexual violence in Japan is still limited, there has been a flourishing of studies on the topic. Many of them come from experts in the legal (Tsunoda 2001; Burns 2005; Itō 2019) or psychological (Saito and Otake 2020) field and they cover practical issues such as how to support victims or how they are treated in courts and during investigations. There is also increasing quantitative data to better understand the real situation of victims of sexual violence in Japan (Osawa 2023). In recent years, new research emphasizes the development of collective action and social mobilization on the issue of sexual violence, focusing in particular on the #MeToo movement in Japan and the Flower Demo (Hasunuma and Shin 2019; O'Mochain 2020; Flower Demo 2020; Miura 2021; Lilja 2022; Mizoroki et al. 2023). Little attention has been given, however, to what it means for victims to speak up, what their intention and the subversive potential of their voices are, how they fit in the larger discourse on sexual violence, and how they (re)shape it.

To fill this gap, this chapter analyzes the stories of Kobayashi, Yamamoto, and Itō through their autobiographical books. They all belong to the genre of memoir, which is seen as a subgenre of autobiography that focuses on a specific event or period in the author's life (Couser 2012, 23). Memoirs, as well as other forms of biographical narratives, are not objective statements, but are re-elaborations of memories, emotions, feelings, and sensations, so it is always important to differentiate "between the life as lived and experienced, and the life as told" (Eichsteller and Davis 2022, 19). Although editors and publishers might influence the style, content, and format of the book, by writing a memoir, the victim-author can take control of the narrative by telling her story in her own words, minimizing the reinterpretation and distortion of their words by the media.

A memoir is part of the process of speaking out. Writing a book, compared to holding a press conference or giving an interview, allows the victim-author to go more in-depth in telling the story in a direct and honest way. Each memoir is different in style depending on when, why, and how it was written. It may take almost the form of a diary (Kobayashi 2008; Itō 2022), have a more analytical style (Kobayashi 2016; Itō 2021), or even include practical advice for other victims (Yamamoto 2017). Analyzing their memoirs, I focus on how they recall, rationalize, and interpret their experience with law enforcement, the justice system, and medical institutions. I also look at the impact the violence had on their everyday life and their relationship with loved ones, the psychological effects of trauma, how they dealt with it, what led them to choose to go public, and what have been the consequences.

As Alcoff (2018, 43) explains, “speaking can be a powerful act of reclaiming and remaking one’s life, making common cause with allies, and taking action against our perpetrator or the systemic forces that enable them.” Victims’ voices are fundamental to challenging rape culture. By connecting the personal to the political, the cumulative effect of expressing individual experiences of oppression can facilitate change and “enables to see those structures of power which legitimate and perpetuate these behaviors” (Savigny 2020, 25). Victims’ voices contribute to raising awareness of specific problems, such as police mistreatment of victims during the investigation process, negative experiences with health professionals, or problematic verdicts in court cases. This led to concrete changes in how various institutions deal with sexual violence, improving the treatment of victims, and limiting the risk of encountering forms of secondary victimization.

The expression “sexual violence” here is not limited to forcible sexual intercourse or to what is recognized in the Japanese Penal Code as “sex crimes.” Instead, I adopt a broader perspective, including all forms of sexual encounters forced upon a person’s will regardless of the use of physical violence. As Alcoff (2018, 12) explains, “to violate is to infringe upon someone, to transgress, and it can also mean to rupture or break. Violations can happen with stealth, with manipulation, with soft words and gentle touch to a child, or an employee, or anyone who is significantly vulnerable to the offices of others.” While I mostly use the term “victim” to refer to people who have experienced sexual violence, as in Japanese the term *higaisha* (被害者, “victim”) is still widely used, I acknowledge that the term “victim” is controversial and that the “association of women with victimization has exacerbated existing gender ideologies about women as weak-minded and vulnerable” (Alcoff 2018, 169). It is ultimately up to individuals to identify as “victim,” “survivor,” or however they feel more comfortable. Moreover, not all victims can or want to talk publicly about their experience and there should be no pressure on victims to speak out.

The chapter is structured in four main sections. First, I outline the situation of sexual violence in Japan, looking at available data and recent legal reforms. Subsequently, I introduce in more detail the three case studies. The third and fourth sections form the main body of this study and focus on exploring how rape culture shapes society's understanding of sexual violence and what role victims' voices play in debunking rape myths and creating positive change.

2. Sexual violence in Japan

Sexual violence against women is a widespread problem in Japan. Every three years, the Japanese government distributes to a random sample of 5,000 people between 18 and 59 years old a questionnaire to collect data on gender-based violence. According to the 2021 data, about one in every 14 women has been a victim of rape, which was defined according to the legal definition at the time as forced sexual intercourse (Gender Equality Bureau Cabinet Office 2021). The data on sexual violence shows, however, only the tip of the iceberg, as according to the same government survey around 37% of victims spoke to someone, and only 5.6% reported the violence to the police (Gender Equality Bureau Cabinet Office 2021).

Public discussion and awareness on sexual violence (性暴力 *seibōryoku*) and related issues, such as molestation (痴漢 *chikan*), especially on public transportation, and sexual harassment (セクシュアルハラスメント *sekushuaru harasumento* or セクハラ *sekuhara*) in the workplace, have also risen in the last decades thanks to feminists' efforts. Nevertheless, victim blaming, shaming, stigma, and fear of secondary victimization are strong factors contributing to silencing victims and reinforcing the taboo on the topic. Moreover, of the cases reported to the police, only a fraction goes to court and often legal proceedings to get justice are physically, mentally, and sometimes financially burdensome for victims (Sawaragi 2021). Courts' verdicts are frequently informed by the same dominant narratives of gender and the sexuality underpinning rape myth, such as the common misconception that rape is a sudden, violent attack by a stranger. Many cases reported to the police, as well as official figures of court cases won by victims, belong to this category of a stereotypical attack on a woman in a public space by a stranger (Burns 2005, 56). This contributes to reinforcing a cognitive bias among judges and prosecutors that this is the most common scenario of sexual violence. Government data, however, contradicts these assumptions, showing that only 12% of sexual violence victims claimed that the assailant was a total stranger. In most cases, the perpetrator is someone that the victim knows, such as a family member, lover, ex-lover, friend, acquaintance, colleague, or superior at school or work (Gender Equality Bureau Cabinet Office 2021).

In Japanese, rape is often referred to as “the murder of the soul” (魂の殺人 *tamashī no satsujin*) to express the devastating impact that it has on the victim’s life. The real consequences of sexual violence are often, however, not sufficiently understood. It can lead to developing post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), low self-esteem, and even suicidal tendencies, it can also compromise one’s relationship with sex, result in economic problems, and lead to social isolation (Osawa 2023). It is therefore fundamental for victims to be able to access adequate support. Since 2011, One Stop Support Centers (性犯罪・性暴力被害者のためのワンストップ支援センター *Seihanzai Seibōryoku Higaisha no Tame no Wan Sutoppu Shien Sentā*) providing victims with legal, medical, and psychological support, have been established in every prefecture in Japan (National Police Agency 2021). There are still many problems that need to be addressed, however, such as funding, the lack of centers catering to mid- and long-term support, accessibility of services, and staffing.

The law plays an important role in sanctioning what behaviors are considered acceptable in society. Not all forms of sexual violence are considered sex crimes according to Japanese criminal law, although the legal definition has been expanded greatly through two reforms of the Penal Code, in 2017 and 2023. The Japanese penal code was originally written in 1907, during the Meiji period (1868–1912), and for over a century, the provisions on sex crimes remained mostly untouched. The old version of the law defined *gōkan* (強姦, “rape”) as using force or intimidation to have sexual intercourse with a female of not less than 13 years of age, and the minimum sentence was two years (Maesawa 2017, 3). Hence, rape was limited to penile-vaginal penetration and only recognized women as victims and men as assailants, while all other acts, including oral and anal penetration, were included in the lesser crime of *kyōsei waisetsu* (強制わいせつ, “indecent assault”). One of the main reasons why the law was considered outdated by activists was the excessive focus on physical violence, which did not acknowledge the real experiences of the victims, the power dynamics often involved in cases of sexual violence, and the variety of victims’ reactions. For example, “freezing” is now recognized as a common psychological unconscious response to threat and in certain cases deciding not to struggle or scream is a conscious choice dictated by the fear of causing a violent reaction from the assailant (Hopper and Lisak 2014).

To understand why rape was originally defined that way, we must consider the socio-cultural context in which the 1907 penal code was written. The old law was rooted in Meiji Japan’s understanding of gender roles and family system, called *ie* (家, “household”), which enshrined patriarchal authority. The head of the family, a man, had almost complete control over the other family members, while women were seen as properties of men and had barely any civil rights (Tsunoda 2013; Itō 2019). Consequently, rape was understood as a crime against a man’s property and

not against the woman as an individual with dignity and rights of her own (Yano 2007, 200). Moreover, the lack of female politicians, lawyers, and police officers resulted in the complete absence of women's perspective and input in the redaction of the law. Although, eventually, the 1947 Constitution established equality between the sexes and women's rights were guaranteed, it was only in the 1970s that, in the context of the women's liberation movement, women began to actively argue that the protected legal interest in case of sexual violence should be sexual freedom and the right to sexual self-determination (Tsunoda 2013).

Thanks to the work of feminist activists as well as pressure from international bodies, such as the UN (Itō 2019, 33), the first extensive reform of the penal code occurred in 2017. The main changes were the modification of the name from the "crime of rape" to "the crime of forced sexual intercourse" (強制性交等罪 *kyōsei seikōtōzai*), and the lengthening of the minimum sentence to five years. Moreover, the definition of sexual intercourse was broadened to include oral and anal sex which made it possible to also recognize men as victims of rape. Finally, sexual relationships between minors and their guardians were criminalized regardless of the use of violence (Ministry of Justice 2017).

Many of the changes that activists pushed for were, however, not included in the 2017 reform, most notably the elimination of "force requirement," wherein victims had to show that the level of force used by the perpetrator significantly hindered their ability to resist. After years of lobbying campaigns, activism, and discussions, on June 16, 2023, the Diet passed a new reform. The name was once again changed, this time to "the crime of non-consensual sexual intercourse" (不同意性交等罪 *fudōi seikōtōzai*). Furthermore, the definition of sexual intercourse was extended to also include the insertion of body parts other than the penis into the vagina or anus. The legal age of consent was raised from 13 to 16 years old³ (Ministry of Justice 2023). An important change is that to determine the lack of consent new concrete examples other than physical coercion and threat have been listed, such as abuse of social or economic power and the use of alcohol or drugs (Penal Code 2023). The same new conditions apply to the crime of indecent assault. The statute of limitation has been further expanded and new crimes, such as grooming and non-consensual photography, have been created (Kaneko 2023). This reform is considered a great victory by activists as it contributes to moving away from a very restrictive legal definition of rape, based on physical violence, toward a new definition that is more centered around consent.

³ However, this does not apply when an individual aged 13 to 15 has consensual intercourse with a person less than five years older than them.

This section served to outline the current situation of sexual violence in Japan and the evolution of the legal definition of sex crimes. The next section will provide further details about the three case studies.

3. Introduction of the case studies

The women in these three case studies, Kobayashi Mika, Yamamoto Jun, and Itō Shiori, are not the only victims who have published a memoir about their experience of sexual violence. There are two main reasons why their stories have been selected. First, they represent examples of three different forms of sexual violence: stranger rape (Kobayashi), child sexual abuse (Yamamoto), and acquaintance rape (Itō). Second, they have become activists and advocates who support other victims, spread awareness, and work to change the situation. Their stories offer a good perspective on how different experiences of sexual violence can be and how the trauma caused by such violence can impact people's lives. No victim's experience is more or less valid than others, and all three women make it clear that they do not aim to speak or represent all victims, but through their voices, they want to contribute to spreading awareness on sexual violence. I will consequently briefly introduce their life stories and their books.

In 2000, Kobayashi was raped by a stranger who approached her on the street. Immediately after, accompanied by her ex-boyfriend, she went to the police station to denounce the violence; however, her rapist was never found. The day after the violence, she went to work and tried to live her life normally, however, the experience had a great impact on her mental health, resulting in frequent flashbacks, panic attacks, and depression compromising her quality of life. She had also problems engaging in sexual acts, which negatively impacted her romantic relationships. After the rape, she wished for more "understanding" (理解 *rikai*) from the people around her and not finding it exacerbated her feelings of shame, guilt, and anger. In particular, her parents' negative reaction upon her disclosure of the incident worsened her mental health and strained their relationship. Meeting other victims in online forums and finding people who could understand her was a key element to her journey of recovery and eventually, seven years after the rape, it led to her choice to tell her story publicly. She published her first book in 2008 (with a paperback edition released in 2011) with the title *Seihanzai higai ni au to iu koto* (性犯罪被害にあうということ, *Encountering Sexual Violence*, 2011). It is a collection of thoughts she wrote on her phone two years after the violence. She chose not to edit them for publication because they reflect her emotional state and thoughts at the time (Kobayashi 2011, 225). The book was one of the very first autobiographical works published in Japan by a victim of sexual violence under her real name and received great media attention. Soon after publication, she began to receive

messages from many other victims and she included their testimonies in her second book, *Seihanzai higai to tatakau to iu koto* (性犯罪被害とたたかうということ, *Fighting Sexual Violence*, 2016). The book includes the data she gathered through her interactions with almost 3000 victims of sexual violence, shedding light on how diverse victims' experiences are and spreading a better understanding of the reality of sexual violence and the impact it has on victims' lives.

Yamamoto is a survivor⁴ of child sexual abuse at the hands of her father. The abuse she suffered led to various psychological issues, such as fear of men, a problematic relationship with sex, and even alcoholism. After becoming a nurse, she received specific training for supporting victims of sexual violence, even taking part in workshops abroad; she met other victims and got increasingly involved in various advocacy organizations. Thanks to this support network in 2010, 23 years after the start of the abuse, during a lecture on medical care for victims of sexual violence, she publicly spoke for the first time about her experience. She eventually became one of the leading figures in the advocacy and lobbying campaigns for legal reforms and created an association called Spring whose mission is "to create a society in which sexual abuse survivors can live more comfortably" (Spring, n.d). She was also a member of the Ministry of Justice's Criminal Law Study Committee on Sexual Offences in preparation of the Penal Code reform of 2023. She published her book *13 sai "watashi" o nakushita watashi* (13歳、「私」をなくした私, *At 13 Years I Lost Myself*) in 2017. In it, she covers over three decades, giving important insight into changes in society, law, and the media's approach to the sexual violence and treatment of victims that she witnessed and contributed to bringing about. There is a section after each chapter including practical information that she said, "helped me going forward" (Yamamoto 2021, 8). Yamamoto's testimony sheds light on child sexual abuse, the difficulty for children and young people to even understand what is happening to them, and how long-lasting the consequences of trauma can be.

Itō, a journalist and documentary filmmaker, was raped in 2015 by a senior journalist, Yamaguchi Noriyuki. The two had met for dinner to discuss a job opportunity for Itō, however, during the evening she blacked out and woke up in a hotel room with Yamaguchi having intercourse with her. She reported the case to the police who at first ordered the arrest of Yamaguchi, but then suspended the operation at the last minute for unclear reasons. The prosecution eventually dropped her case, arguing that there was not enough evidence. In 2017, Itō called for a press conference and went public with her experience. She faced enormous backlash, especially online, that led her to leave Japan and live in the UK for a period

⁴ Here "survivor" is used instead of "victim" as Yamamoto refers to herself as a "survivor" (サバイバー *sabaibā*) in her memoir.

of time. Itō's case was politically charged because Yamaguchi was an influential man with connections to powerful politicians, such as former Prime Minister Abe Shinzō (Itō 2018). This contributed to the slander targeting Itō. Her press conference in 2017 occurred a few months prior to the start of the #MeToo movement in the US and she became the face of the movement in Japan. Despite the online slander, Itō decided to file a civil lawsuit against Yamaguchi, which she eventually won in 2019, when the court recognized that "the sex was not consensual" (Aizawa 2019). In 2022, she won another important lawsuit against Sugita Mio, a Liberal Democratic Party politician, for "liking" defamatory tweets posted against Itō on a social media platform (Tanaka 2022). Itō published her first book, *Black Box* (ブラックボックス *Buraku bokkusu*) in 2017. The memoir has a clear journalistic style and explains the details of her relationship with Yamaguchi, the dynamics of the violence and its aftermath with a specific focus on her (mostly) negative experience with the police, the judiciary system, and victim support services in order to shed light on the inadequacy of the system. The book has been translated into multiple languages, with an English edition coming out in 2021. The BBC made a documentary on Itō's story, and she was even listed among the 100 most influential people of 2020 by *Time*. In 2022, Itō published her second book, *Hadaka de oyogu* (裸で泳ぐ, *Swimming Naked*), which is a collection of short essays on Itō's personal and professional life seven years after the rape. It can be seen as a diary of her recovery journey after sexual violence (Itō 2022, 133–134). Among other things, Itō reflects on the impact that the backlash she suffered after going public, opening up about her mental health struggles, as well as her complicated relationship with her family and with dating. The second book feels rawer compared to *Black Box* because, as Itō herself explains, in *Black Box* she tried to be as objective as possible without letting her feelings show (Itō 2022, 268).

The experiences of these three women are different, both in terms of the violence they suffered, but also in the aftermath, the impact it had on their lives and how they decided to go public. Despite these differences, they were all affected by living in a society dominated by rape culture that sought to silence them, and through their voices, they challenged victim-blaming narratives and rape myths.

4. Rape culture and the silencing of victims

Rape culture is part of a patriarchal and sexist system of domination and subordination which is sustained and reinforced by rape myths that contribute to silencing survivors and fuel victim blaming tendencies. They inform people's prejudices and preconceptions about how a victim should behave, speak, or look (Onozawa 2020, 5), and victims' testimonies are often discredited or minimized if they do not fit such preconceptions (Alcoff 2018, 11). Examples of rape myths

include assumptions that rape is a sudden attack at night by a stranger and the idea that women “ask for it” by behaving and dressing a certain way (Howard Valdivia et al. 2023, 500–501). Rape culture is also facilitated by the so-called “sexual double standard” that depicts men as sexual subjects with natural and uncontrollable sexual urges (Ueno 2018, 285) and the female body as passive, vulnerable, and culpable (Gavey 2005; Tsunoda 2013). When denouncing sexual violence, judicial systems often investigate and interrogate women’s behavior, clothing, and verbal expression to see if she “tempted” the man, interpreting “tempting” or “provoking” behavior as a “will for sexual activity” (Ehara 2009, 123). From these ideas come, for example, the rape myth that secretly women desire to be raped and that when they say no, they do not mean it (Burns 2005, 107–108). Thus, tackling the problem of sexual violence means challenging “conventional ideas and norms of heterosexuality and gender identity that excuse or romanticize rape as a form of strong desire or normative masculinity or an inevitable feature of a certain kind of interactions or living situations” (Alcoff 2018, 19).

The silencing of victims can happen at various levels, and it can be cultural or interpersonal. Howard Valdivia et al. (2023) identify different forms of silencing. It can take the form of “testimonial quieting” when the audience fails to recognize the speaker as credible and has a negative reaction to their disclosure. In this vein, the reaction of family members and other close people can have a great impact on the recovery journey of the victim. The reaction of Kobayashi’s mother—anger at the public discussion of her victimization and warning her not to tell anyone else—had a deep impact (Kobayashi 2011, 85). Kobayashi (2011, 8) explains:

Those words have remained in my head for a long time. It reminded me of society’s common sense and harshness. My body, my way of thinking and seeing things, my relationships with family, lovers and friends, it all changed. I have done nothing shameful or wrong. I have nothing to hide. And yet... I felt as if everything in my life up until then, even my own existence, had been denied.⁵

Such negative reactions not only made her wary of telling other people (Kobayashi 2011, 96) but also increased her sense of shame and made her feel “dirty” (汚れてしまった *yogorete shimatta*) (Kobayashi 2016, 12). In Kobayashi’s eyes, her mother’s words represented society’s overall view of sexual violence as something shameful that should not be talked about. This sort of mechanism alongside victim blaming, silences victims and strengthens the taboo and stigma surrounding sexual violence by making the issue invisible and relegating it to the private sphere. Kobayashi’s deteriorating relationship with her parents further worsened because they were also against her decision to go public and appear in the media

⁵ Translations from Japanese are by the author of the chapter unless specified otherwise.

(Kobayashi 2011, 211). Similarly, Itō's family opposed her choice to go forward with her name and face (Itō 2022, 266).

When institutions minimize victims' experiences, refuse service, or fail to provide the needed support, one can speak of "institutional betrayal" (Howard Valdivia et al. 2023, 504). An example is the experience of Itō when the police decided not to arrest Yamaguchi and the prosecution dropped her case (Itō 2017). The media can also contribute to institutional betrayal and reinforce silence when they fail to give proper attention to the case, and they perpetrate a narrative based on rape myths (Hasunuma and Shin 2019). In Itō's case, while foreign media gave great coverage to the story following the NHK documentary, the mainstream Japanese media were slow to take up the story, contributing to the silencing (Guarini 2023, 465).

In other cases, victims themselves decide to stay silent as a form of "testimonial smothering" because of shame and self-blame due to the stigma still surrounding sexual violence and the subsequent fear of retaliation or negative consequences (Howard Valdivia et al. 2023, 502). Feelings of shame, of being "dirty" or "unworthy," are often common among victims of sexual violence (Osawa 2023, 128–129). Moreover, the way women are socialized in Japan makes it difficult for many of them to speak out. Itō (2022, 76–78) explains, for example, that she "unconsciously thought that it is not good for women to express anger" and that she was always told that girls should not use vulgar language. Policing of women's speech (Nakamura 2014) as well as values and cultural factors, such as endurance, self-control, or social prescriptions against drawing attention to oneself, also make it difficult for Japanese women to speak up (Burns 2005, 51). This was the case of Yamamoto, who took over two decades to be able to talk about the sexual abuse she suffered. In her case, she was a child at the time of her victimization and the assailant was her own father, a person whom she thought could be trusted and who was supposed to take care of her. As a child, she was unable to understand what was happening, recognize it as sexual violence, and talk about it (Yamamoto 2017, 54). Lack of sex education and awareness of child sexual abuse, as well as stereotypes reducing sexual violence to stranger rape, likely contributed to her decades-long silence.

When a victim's behavior does not align with rape myths' stereotypical images, she might lose credibility. Burns (2005) conducted an in-depth analysis of court cases involving sexual violence in Japan in the late 1990s and early 2000s in order to understand how biases and rape myths might influence judicial decision-making. She observed that to determine the reliability of a victim's testimony some markers of truth are, for example, strong physical resistance, sexual inexperience, evidence of significant shock and distress, promptness in reporting the sexual attack, and a consistent and comprehensive clear description of the event (Burns

2005, 111–118). Psychological studies show, however, that reactions, such as freezing, are common responses to sexual violence and that memories of traumatic events are often fragmented and incomplete (Hopper and Lisak 2014). Talking about her own experience of rape, Kobayashi (2011, 17) recalls how “my voice was gone. I could not scream. It was like I had forgotten how to. I tried to fight back but my body would not move.” She points out how the image of a victim struggling with all her might is far from the reality in many cases (Kobayashi 2011, 19).

During her press conference in 2017, Itō was heavily criticized for her demeanor and her clothes, in particular for having the top button of the shirt undone, which did not match the ideal image of a victim of rape (Hernon 2018). Moreover, after the rape, her father asked her why she was not angry and the police officer told her that if she did not cry or get angry more, it would not feel like she was a real victim (Itō 2022, 174). In another example of how the ideal victim image works even in court, Kobayashi (2011, 130) reports the story of a friend who during the trial for a rape case was reprimanded by the judge who asked: “How can you be so composed in this situation? Is it because you are lying? Normally a woman would not be able to stand here like that.” Alcoff (2018, 201) explains that “the emotional intensity of disclosure is often used to police survivor speech”—if she displays anger or too many emotions, she might be labeled as hysterical and discredited, while if she shows self-control and calmness, she might be suspected of not being a “real” victim.

There seems to be a gap between victims’ experiences of sexual violence and the idea that society has of it, and for many people sexual violence feels like something far away, not related to them, something they might just hear on the news or see in a TV series (Maenosono 2022, 2). One way to close such a gap in people’s perception is to make victims’ voices heard (Saito and Otake 2020, 4). We have to change the common perception of what rape scripts and rape victims look like in order to make it easier to recognize sexual violence when it happens. This could also reduce the risk of secondary victimization from the police, such as when Itō had to re-enact the dynamics of the rape using a life-size doll while several male police officers hovered over her taking pictures (Itō 2018, 107), and also from family and friends as in the case of Kobayashi’s mother who admonished her not to tell anyone else about what happened (Kobayashi 2011, 96).

This section focused on how rape culture and rape myths contribute to silence victims. The following one will highlight the importance of victims’ voices and their subversive potential to challenge misconceptions.

5. The importance of victims' voices

It is important to think about the reason why victims' testimonies are of such crucial importance in challenging the dominant narrative of sexual violence. Although some argue that victim's personal stories do not have that much power to create change, according to Burns (2005, 133), "subversive stories" that break the silence around sexual violence and present an alternative "reality" are an important form of resistance. Similarly, Nicholls (2021, 4) points out how over the years thanks to feminist activists' efforts and movements, such as #MeToo, there has been a great change "in cultural attitudes about the seriousness of sexual violence as a widespread social problem." Victims' personal narratives can become a form of activism, they contribute to awareness raising and play a crucial part in bringing about change in society.

Alcoff (2018, 39) rightfully notes that just speaking up is not enough to make victims' speech politically effective and bring about social change. We also need to consider the conditions and context of its reception, interpretation, and uptake. Regardless, she stresses that the victims' voices are essential.

Speaking out also has the potential to reframe the issue, moving from a private individual trauma to a broader social sphere. It implicates the hearer in a social interaction that raises political and moral demands. And speaking out can empower victims, as an enactment of constructive agency and a new formation of assertive subjectivity. Hence, there is good reason to believe that speaking out has an inherent political effect. (Alcoff 2018, 179)

Talking about one's own experience of sexual violence is not easy. Kobayashi (2016, 5) explains that "whenever I appear in the media the sign 'victim of sexual violence' is attached to my back. Even though I published a book, I still have a hard time revealing my name and face, to be honest, every time I say 'I am a victim of sexual violence,' I feel a lump in my throat, and it is not fun. It is not something you get used to." Every time they are interviewed or asked to speak at events, it is arduous and painful to recall traumatizing events. Nevertheless, they chose to tell their stories in their own words and open up about the mental, physical, and relational consequences of sexual violence, to show the painful and difficult recovery process they went and still go through, and to denounce victim blaming and the secondary victimization they have experienced. Kobayashi (2016, 7) hoped that she can "help people to gain greater understanding not only of victims but also of the people around them."

Victims speaking up and writing about their own experience of sexual violence is a form of empowerment. That is especially true in a cultural environment like Japan which tells women not to be emotional or hysterical (Ogawa 2022,

34–35), and polices women's speech as women's femininity is evaluated based on the way they speak—they should not talk too much and use an elegant way of speaking avoiding rough language (Nakamura 2014). Women talking about their experience of sexual violence works to give visibility to the issue by placing it on the public agenda for concrete legal and institutional change (Burns 2005, 157). Itō's memoir *Black Box* raised the issue, for example, of the lack of preparation of police and hospitals in dealing with rape drugs. As a result, the newspaper *Asahi Shinbun* picked up the topic in a series of articles. The National Police Agency also issued new guidelines and instructions to improve proof collection and preservation in rape cases, and to check for the use of rape drugs. Finally, the cabinet office posted on its website a series of practical advice on what to do if a person suspects that they have been drugged and sexually abused (Itō 2019, 143). While Itō was not able to prove that she had been drugged, her denunciation had practical consequences that hopefully will allow other victims in the future to be believed and treated more fairly.

Alcoff (2018, 2) argues that "it is the voices of victims that need to remain at the center of the fight for cultural change. [...] [T]his knowledge must be heeded to enlarge, enrich, and also complicate our understanding of the problem." The inclusion of victims' voices and experiences in lobbying campaigns for the reform of the penal code was crucial to push for legal changes that can better reflect the reality of sexual violence. In 2020, Yamamoto was chosen as a legislative council member to discuss the penal code reform. This was seen as a great victory by advocates as, for the first time, victims' voices were actively included in political discussions on sexual violence. In her memoir, Yamamoto (2021, 221) argues that "it is tiresome to talk about one's own experience of sexual violence, I wish people would understand without [victims] talking about it." Nevertheless, she believes that no matter how hard it is, victims need to keep speaking up so that they can create a law that reflects the lived experiences of victims. She believes that "if we can create a culture of no tolerance of sexual violence, [...] we can surely create a society in which people live without fear of sexual violence and respect each other's sexuality" (Yamamoto 2021, 223). Spring, the organization founded by Yamamoto, mainly focuses on lobbying activities for legal reform. Since 2018, Spring members hold a special lecture once a year at the National Police University detailing how to deal with sexual violence cases. By listening to victims' stories and learning from their experiences, the lectures aim to foster a better understanding of the needs of sexual violence victims and minimize the risk of secondary victimization and mistreatment when dealing with the police (Spring 2022). These are merely some concrete examples of how including victims' voices in the conversation on sexual violence can lead to concrete institutional changes and improvements in how victims are treated.

Another important aspect of sexual violence is the psychological impact it has on victims. Mental health is still often a taboo in Japanese society and in the case of sexual violence, lack of understanding of the consequences of trauma is still an issue. In Japan, the concept of PTSD was only introduced after the Great Hanshin Earthquake in 1995. Only recently, it began to also be applied to sexual violence cases, but it takes time to understand trauma and the psychological consequences of sexual violence (Tsunoda 2013). While expert studies are indeed important and have more scientific authority to educate on the topic, victims' voices are equally fundamental in breaking the stigma and taboo of mental health issues and trauma.

Kobayashi (2011, 57) recalls:

Every day I did my best to live like nothing had changed. I spent my life at work and in social situations where I was surrounded by people and could not talk about the incident, trying not to let others know that something had happened, so I think it looked like everything was the same as always. The speed of time and the rhythm of daily life had not changed. However, when I was alone, life was not at all the same as it had been before.

The rape deeply compromised her relationship with sex, and flashbacks along with panic attacks became a daily occurrence. Similarly, Yamamoto (2017) recalls how to an outside eye she lived her everyday life normally, but, in reality, the trauma of the sexual abuse she suffered in her childhood left her with a fear of men and sex, led her to alcohol addiction for a period of time, and obsessive-compulsive disorder. Similarly, in an interview, Itō commented on how she relied on alcohol, sleeping pills, and other medication to cope with PTSD (Womany 2018). Victims speaking out about their mental health, their response to trauma, and their emotional journey and sharing their side of the story, can contribute to challenging simplistic, stereotypical ideas of how victims should behave for their experience to be considered valid.

Talking publicly about one's experience of sexual violence can also play an important role in establishing a connection with other victims. For Kobayashi, finding other victims on online forums played a crucial role in her healing journey (Kobayashi 2011, 126). After publishing her first book, she received thousands of messages from other victims, who had never disclosed their experience to anyone, felt isolated, or did not know what to do. Being able to interact with people who have been through similar traumatic experiences can be extremely empowering as it allows victims to realize that they are not the only ones and that what they are feeling and going through is valid. The fact that when a victim goes public, she often starts to receive messages from other victims, can be seen as an indicator of how powerful and valuable such testimonies are and serves as inspiration to

speak out or get involved in various forms of advocacy and activism. At the same time, however, it is also an indicator of how society still fails to support victims.

Speaking out is a risky choice. It may result in backlash, victim blaming, negative reactions from family and friends, strained relationships, and secondary victimization. There are many risks that victims might face upon speaking out, even more so when they decide to do it publicly, revealing their names and exposing themselves. In fact, according to Kitahara (2021, 22), fears of retaliation and secondary victimization are one of the main reasons why in Japan the #MeToo movement remained rather quiet, with few victims coming forward and many deciding to stay anonymous. The fear of slander and further trauma is a very real and valid one as exemplified by Itō's case. The question emerges as to why victims, despite the great risks, still decide to speak publicly to denounce sexual violence.

Itō (2022, 32) explains that she chose to be a journalist to tell the truth about various issues, so she felt like she could not turn her back on her own truth as that would mean denying not only her past self but also her present. Itō (2022, 32) explained:

I decided to make public what happened because no matter how much I pursued the truth and tried to point out the absurdity of the justice system, there was a thick wall called "power" and "system." How many people, thousands, no tens of thousands of people have choked back tears in front of this wall? My beloved sister and the children who will live in the future may suffer the same fate. With that in mind, I decided to speak out, using my real name and my face.

Kobayashi (2011, 10–11; 2016, 7) illustrates that the main aim of both her books is to help people better understand the reality of victims of sexual violence and the people around them. To do so she shares not only her experience but also, in the second book, the things she has seen and learned as she interacted with other victims, became more involved with the media, and started speaking publicly. Finally, Yamamoto (2017, 11) talks about her experience as a survivor of child sexual abuse, a nurse, and an activist, because she says: "I hope that through this book, understanding of sexual violence will spread in Japanese society, that one day this suffering will cease, and that this book will be of some help to you as you walk the road to recovery." Over the years, she often heard people tell her that "there's nothing we can do, sexual violence will keep happening," or that "it is strange for people to talk about it," and even that "victims who cannot endure it [我慢する *gaman suru*] are at fault" (Yamamoto 2017, 10). When she hears these kinds of comments, she cannot help but feel that the reality of sexual violence is still not understood (Yamamoto 2017, 10). She feels the need to speak up about it because for so long she was silenced, and nobody helped her. Knowing that there are many more people in a similar situation, she hopes they can receive the support

and understanding that they need (Yamamoto 2017, 196). Making people realize that sexual violence is not something far away and disconnected from them can create a society that helps and protects victims who speak out so that they are not subject to victim blaming.

6. Conclusion

This chapter tackled the issue of how victims' voices complicate the discourse around sexual violence in Japan by looking at the example of three women who decided to speak publicly and became advocates. Rape myths and sexual double standards shape society's understanding of sexual violence, and fuel victim-blaming tendencies and stigma. The structural silencing of victims rooted in sexism, gender discrimination, and misogyny reduces sexual violence to a taboo and a personal problem, making it invisible. Talking about it and denouncing it is seen as shameful and frowned upon. Those victims who decide to tell their stories and denounce societal ignorance of sexual violence do so at significant risk of secondary victimization and slander. Victims' testimonies show how this silencing can be cultural and systemic as victims are, for example, dismissed by the police, the judiciary, or support services, such as One Stop Centers, and can also become the target of vicious slander and bullying. Silencing, however, can also come from people close to the victim. Such a negative reaction upon disclosure can seriously compromise a person's ability to further talk about the harm they suffered, to look for support, and recover.

Nevertheless, their voices have the subversive potential to erode such commonly held misconceptions and shed light on the reality of sexual violence and its consequences, as can be seen in the three case studies. Speaking up can also be a strong source of empowerment as victims can take control of their narrative and tell their stories with their own words, find allies, make meaningful connections with other victims, and develop a deeper understanding of their experience. As Burke (2021, 7), the original creator of the "me too" movement, argues, "exchange of empathy between survivors of sexual violence could be a tool to empower us toward hearing and into action." By reflecting on the consequences of their decision to speak out and go public, Kobayashi, Yamamoto, and Itō acknowledged the importance of the connections that they have built with other victims as well as with activists and supporters. That solidarity provided comfort from isolation, supported them in their healing journey, and allowed them to continue their advocacy despite the psychological burden of trauma and backlash.

As argued by Alcoff (2018, 2), victims' voices and experiences must remain at the center of the struggle for cultural, social, and institutional change as their knowledge and experiences can enrich and complicate the understanding of the

problem. By breaking the silence, these women contributed to placing the issue on the public agenda, shedding light not only on the lived experiences of victims and the lack of awareness and understanding in society, but also raising concrete issues on how the media, medical institutions, judicial systems, and law enforcement treat sexual violence victims. These three women, after publicly telling their stories, became advocates themselves and not only met other victims and supporters, but also interacted with experts and professionals. All those encounters and experiences provided them with new knowledge and a deeper understanding of the nature of sexual violence and the structural forces silencing victims, informing their activism. Victims' voices alone are not enough to bring social and cultural change. With better sexual education, gender equality, and media representation, however, victims' testimonies can contribute to changing the dominant narratives on sexual violence. By debunking rape myths, they create a society that is more welcoming for victims that decide to speak up, offer them better support and do not stigmatize or silence them.

The scope of this chapter is limited as it looks at the testimonies of only three victims, all of them women, and relies on their memoirs. The chapter has only briefly touched upon the issue, but it is important to also look at the role victims' voices played in social movements and lobbying efforts for the legal reforms. Future research should focus on how public and media reception of victims' speaking out has changed over time and give more attention to the voices of male victims as well as LGBTQIA+ individuals.

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