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A feminist critical discourse analysis of sexual harassment in the Japanese political and media worlds

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ABSTRACT

This article examines sexual harassment that has occurred in the interconnected worlds of media and politics in Japan in the context of the global (mostly Western) #MeToo movement. It argues that this harassment by male political leaders constitutes a pattern of sexual harassment and should not be seen simply as individual incidents that exist in isolation from each other. This pattern occurs within a cultural context that discourages speaking out about individual grievances—a particularly noxious cultural norm for women in a patriarchal society. The naming of this pattern of sexual harassment is important to address Violence Against Women in Politics, a problem facing women in politics around the world, including Japan. The public and media outrage directed at individual sexist statements made by male politicians often dissipates after some time has passed, only to emerge again after the next sexist incident makes headlines. By establishing this as a pattern of sexual harassment, I aim to make visible the problem of sexual harassment as a systemic problem facing all women working in politics or in close proximity to politicians in Japan.

Introduction

Japan has most things associated with democratic, industrialised and advanced societies, such as a free press, free and fair elections, high levels of education, excellent levels of good health and a robust if stagnant economy. The country is, for example, the only Asian nation to appear in the World Economic Forum's list of Top 16 countries in the Social Progress Index, ranking 15, above the US and just below Germany. The Social Progress Index measures things like health, basic medical care, access to and attainment of education, tolerance of minorities, and personal rights and freedoms ([The Social Progress Imperative, 2017](#)). Further, when it comes to political rights and civil liberties, Japan scores a high 96/100, in the 2018 Freedom in the World Report (a survey of political rights and civil liberties survey by [Freedom House \(2018\)](#) in the U.S), outscoring all other Asian countries and the United States, placing it in the company of Portugal, Denmark, Germany, Iceland, the United Kingdom, Australia and Canada.¹ Despite these glowing report cards, when it comes to gender equality, Japan does poorly and is an anomaly amongst advanced democracies. Japan has particularly poor levels of women's political and economic

empowerment. According to the 2018 World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index, Japan ranks 110 out of 149 countries ([World Economic Forum, 2018, p. 21](#)). The main reason Japan ranks so poorly in the GGI is its poor representation of women in politics. Women constitute only 10% of Lower House seats, placing it 164th out of 193 countries in Inter-Parliamentary Union's ranking of women's representation in national assemblies ([Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2019](#)). Furthermore, Japan's stagnation on this issue compared to other countries can be partially explained by the adoption of electoral gender quotas in a growing number of countries. The small number of women in Japanese politics has been a problem for decades, but no serious measures have been taken to address the issue, in contrast to many other countries where affirmative action measures have been adopted.²

To compound these statistics, the numerous sexual harassment cases that have emerged in recent years in Japan in the world of politics, and its closely-related industry, the media, provide glimpses into the routine misogyny that women in those fields are confronted with. It is this world of the media, the bureaucracy and politics where the #MeToo movement in Japan found its legs. The movement gained momentum in early 2018 after a female journalist accused the highest-ranking official

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¹ When it comes to democracy, however, Japan's ranking of 22nd amongst 165 countries in the 2018 Democracy Index, compiled by the Economist Intelligence Unit, and its inclusion in the 'flawed democracies' cohort should give pause for thought ([The Economist Intelligence Unit 2018, p. 24](#)).

² On 16 May 2018, a bill was passed that urges political parties to adopt measures to ensure women comprise 50% of all candidates in all elections. The legislation is non-binding and contains no punitive measures for parties that do not comply, but nevertheless represents a significant development after decades of women's groups campaigning for gender quotas ([Mainichi Shinbun, 2018a, n.p](#)).

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from the Ministry of Finance of sexual harassment, which ignited public anger towards the political establishment. This paper examines the issue of sexual harassment in Japan in the context of the international #MeToo movement, which has seen a large number of women around the (mostly western) world, make accusations of sexual harassment against powerful men, in the public eye. The #MeToo movement began two decades ago in the USA when black activist women began speaking out about sexual violence in a consciousness-raising bid (Zarkov & Davis, 2018, p. 3). Since Hollywood director Harvey Weinstein was accused in 2017 by multiple women of sexual assault, women in a wide range of countries, including the USA, Australia, South Korea and India, have come out to publicly name and shame other powerful men from mainly the media and political worlds.

Given the poor statistics mentioned above regarding gender equality in Japan, it may come as no surprise that the #MeToo movement arrived later in Japan and with less gusto than in many other advanced democratic societies (Hasanuma & Shin, 2019). The #MeToo movement was also more muted in some other Asian countries, such as China. On the other hand, Korea, which ranks similarly to Japan in many of the indices discussed above, including gender inequality, provided an interesting contrast to Japan when President Moon Jae-in made a powerful public statement supporting the vibrant #MeToo movement in that country and all women who had suffered sexual harassment (Yonhap News, 2018). By contrast, Japan's Prime Minister Abe Shinzō, has been silent on this issue.³

In the following sections, I begin by briefly reviewing the literature on sexual harassment in politics in order to place Japan's experience in the broader international conversation about Violence Against Women in Politics (VAWP) that has emerged in recent years. I then use feminist critical discourse analysis to read comments made by male public figures from politics and the bureaucracy to consider the way sexual harassment is spoken about and framed by men in public positions of power. These comments appear with enough frequency to present a pattern of harassment that characterises the polity generally; a pattern which therefore warrants critical feminist scrutiny. This pattern of sexual harassment is supported by gendered and sexist cultural norms in Japanese society that support the sexual objectification of women and girls and discourage women from speaking out against violation. An exploration of how these norms operate and the effect they have on women is provided as scaffolding for this section, as these norms both support and are consolidated by the comments discussed. I conclude by suggesting that sexual harassment in Japanese politics is comfortably embedded within normative cultural ideas about sexual relations between women and men and is therefore perhaps difficult to identify and articulate. Articulating it and acknowledging it as a systemic problem facing women in politics and the media is the first step in being able to confront it.

Sexual harassment in politics: framing the problem as violence against women

Politics has been recognised as a hostile and potentially dangerous profession for women. The growing body of VAWP literature shows that violence, harassment and bullying are serious problems facing female politicians around the world (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2018; Krook, 2017). One of the results of VAWP is the silencing of women's voices from the political landscape. In March 2018, Marielle Franco, a member of Rio de Janeiro city council was assassinated by a group of men. Gabrielle Giffords, member of the US House of Representatives survived an attempt by a man on her life in 2012, but eventually was forced to

³ Abe and his government is instead focused on ensuring women can be utilised for the purpose of economic growth and has co-opted a form of neoliberal feminism to pursue this goal, known as 'Womenomics' (Dalton, 2017b; Ueno, 2014, p. 34).

retire from politics due to the brain injuries she incurred. Jo Cox, a British Member of Parliament was murdered by a man 2016. In 2003, Anna Lindh, a member of Sweden's parliament was murdered in a department store by a man. While the assassination of women politicians sits at the extreme end of the spectrum of VAWP, all types of violence, including harassment, impacts negatively on women. This treatment can have the effect of sending a message to women politicians and to broader society that women do not belong in politics, and it is, after all, better left to men. Studies have shown that harassment of women in politics potentially deflates the political ambitions of women and girls in that country (Krook, 2016, p. 16). Sexual harassment has been recognised as extremely damaging to women's careers as it is associated with 'decreased job satisfaction, lower organisational commitment, and greater likelihood of withdrawing from work' (Krook 2018, p.71). This should be cause for concern in Japan where the under-representation of women in politics is more pronounced than any other advanced industrialised country. I have argued elsewhere that the rampant and varied sexual forms of sexual harassment that Japanese women politicians face should be recognised as violence (Dalton, 2017a). The growing body of VAWP literature around the world produced by feminist scholars challenges the idea that sexual harassment is merely the cost of doing politics (Krook 2018, p.71; National Democratic Institute, 2017). This paper adds to this conversation by investigating the situation in Japan and consolidating Krook's (2018, p.65) argument that sexual harassment should be understood as a structural problem facing all women in politics, rather than as individual incidents affecting individual people.

Sekuhara: sexual harassment in Japan

Like working women in most countries in the world, women in Japan have endured sexual harassment in the workplace for many years, but the legal concept and the language with which to talk about it emerged in the 1980s. The hallmark sexual harassment case, which occurred in Fukuoka city, began in 1989 and concluded in 1992 and involved a woman worker successfully suing her employer who had ignored her multiple complaints of harassment by a senior male editor and eventually fired her.⁴ Sexual harassment in Japan is commonly known *sekuhara*, but the phrase found in the piece of legislation pertaining to sexual harassment, the Equal Employment Opportunity Law (EEO) is 'sexual speech and behaviour' (*seiteki gendō*).

In 1997, the original 1986 EEO was revised to include regulations on employers to prevent sexual harassment against women, thus making sexual harassment in the workplace a crime. Specifically, the amendment of the EEO enforces an affirmative obligation on employers to prevent sexual harassment from occurring in the workplace (Article 11).⁵ Employers are thus obliged to inform and educate workers of policies surrounding sexual harassment, establish internal systems to respond to sexual harassment grievances and immediately respond when notified of an occurrence of sexual harassment. If an employer fails to do this, they may receive a corrective order or face a public announcement of non-compliance by the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare (Bohrer and Fujita 2013, n.p). The law does not define sexual harassment, but instructs employers in the following way:

⁴ The Fukuoka case was particularly significant because it was the first case to have won without physical components. It was the first time the court found in favour of a claim of 'hostile environment' (Patterson 1993: 217–218). The finding was also significant because the definition of sexual harassment was now much broader. This propelled employers to seek advice and start inviting experts to run educational seminars in order to avoid future litigation. It also prompted the government to issue informative pamphlets and the like to companies (Patterson 1993, pp.220–221).

⁵ Originally, in 1997, sexual harassment was covered by Article 21, but since a further revision in 2006, it is covered in Article 11 (Tsunoda, 2013, pp. 176–77).

Employers shall establish necessary measures in terms of employment management to give advice to workers and cope with problems of workers, and take other necessary measures so that workers they employ do not suffer any disadvantage in their working conditions by reason of said workers' responses to sexual harassment in the workplace, or in their working environments do not suffer any harm due to said sexual harassment (Article 11 of Equal Employment Opportunity Law).⁶

Guidelines on how to achieve this are provided to employers by the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare. The MHLW provides a definition of sexual harassment on their website that seems to align more or less with the U.S. definition of 'quid pro quo' and 'hostile work environment'.⁷ The guidelines, called 'Employers: Countering Workplace Sexual Harassment is your *Obligation*', are also available on the MHLW website. These guidelines list ten measures that employers are obliged to implement to counter sexual harassment, including awareness-raising procedures, and comprehensive complaints and response systems. Specific instructions on how to achieve these measures and examples from companies are provided in the guidelines (MHLW, 2015, pp.6–21).

Politicians, however, as others have noted both in Japan (Dalton, 2017a) and elsewhere (Collier and Raney 2018, p. 447), often work under conditions quite different to other workplaces, and often do not have access to the same recourse measures as ordinary employees. This appears to be true for parliamentary staff as well. A 2018 Inter-Parliamentary Union report on violence against women in Europe found that when female parliamentary staff report sexual harassment incidents via parliamentary mechanisms, the perpetrator is not held accountable: while just over two thirds of the parliamentary staff who suffered sexual harassment reported the incidents, none of the harassers were held responsible (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2018, p. 9). This indicates that internal parliamentary mechanisms are inadequate for dealing with sexual harassment. In Canada, to address this problem, in 2014, the House of Commons adopted policies prohibiting sexual harassment of political staffers working for Members of Parliament (MPs) and sexual harassment of MPs by other MPs (Collier and Raney 2018: 447). While limited in its effectiveness, the introduction of such policies suggests at least an acknowledgement of the peculiarities of parliaments as workplaces that can sometimes result in unfettered sexual harassment. The cultural and political recognition that sexual harassment is a problem facing women in politics that needs to be addressed systematically has not taken root fully in Japan's public discourse, despite growing evidence of ongoing and systemic sexual harassment (Dalton, 2017a). According to two different surveys of women in local councils around the country in 2014, a little over 50% of women had experienced sexual harassment at work (Femigiren, 2015; New Japan Women's Association, 2015).⁸ These surveys were important in bringing together the experiences of individual women. While the term *sekuhara* has existed as a legal and cultural category in Japan for decades, occurrences of sexual harassment are typically perceived as instances of individual men behaving badly. I suggest that in the political world, it is more useful to understand the individual sexually harassing comments

⁶ This is the English translation provided by a Japanese law translation function on the Ministry of Justice webpage: <http://www.japaneselawtranslation.go.jp/>.

⁷ Muta Kazue (2009, p. 63) suggests that the understanding of sexual harassment is broader in Japan than in the U.S. Specifically, she argues that because the term *sekuhara* is so commonly used, and often to describe things are *not* harassment, the term is a double-edged sword for women: its general and depoliticised nature allows women to use it when speaking out against ill-treatment but it often glosses over the seriousness of some crimes when people use the term to talk about what is in fact not harassment but sexual assault.

⁸ Because of the New Japan Women's Association's affiliation with the Japan Communist Party, almost half of their survey respondents were JCP members.

and behaviours by male politicians as a pattern of sexual harassment. Making visible sexual harassment as something that colours political life for women will allow us to identify it as a specific obstacle to gender equality in politics.

In the next section, I apply feminist critical discourse analysis to several highly publicised comments made by politicians, bureaucrats and members of the media between 2012 and 2018—comments that were deemed by many to constitute sexual harassment, and comments about alleged sexual harassment incidents. Feminist CDA is a feminist approach to a research methodology, critical discourse analysis (CDA), devised by Norman Fairclough (2003). CDA was originally used to analyse language, often at the syntax level. Disciplines outside linguistics have found CDA useful to adopt to make more macro-level analyses of text. That is, CDA is used to analyse discursive patterns, characteristics and messages in texts. Discourse in this context refers to meaning-making in the Foucauldian sense. That is, discourse is understood as "ways of representing aspects of the world – the processes, relations and structures of the material world, the 'mental world' of thoughts, beliefs and so forth, and the social world" (Fairclough, 2003, pp. 128–129). Thus a key concern of CDA is how certain patterns or usage of language shape our understanding of social phenomena. What ideas do texts transmit; what do they omit, and what values and norms are upheld in this process? Feminist CDA is concerned with the way gender is represented via texts and assumes as its starting point that texts are produced within a patriarchal context. A central concern of feminist CDA is to critique 'discourses which sustain a patriarchal social order: that is, relations of power that systematically privilege men as a social group and disadvantage, exclude and disempower women as a social group' (Lazar, 2005, p. 5). By using feminist CDA to critique public comments by Japanese politicians and bureaucrats I aim to demonstrate that a pattern of sexist commentary underpins the political world in Japan, and that this suggests that many in that world hold ideas that do not facilitate the abolition of sexual harassment, but instead sustain it. Many of the comments are overtly sexist and do not require complex analytical tools to interpret them as such. Drawing from Krook's (2018, p. 65) argument that 'sexual harassment should be understood as a systemic, cultural problem, rather than a question of problematic individuals', my aim here is to bring these incidents together through a feminist analysis in order to establish an argument that they do not exist as atomised sexist 'gaffes' made by individual men, but rather they constitute a pattern that characterises political life for all women working in, or in close proximity to, the world of politics. To establish this argument, the sexual harassment comments I have selected are thematically coded into three categories: Mother as Ideal Woman, Sexual Object and Victim-Blaming. These three analytical categories capture the ideas inherent in comments and many comments fit within multiple categories.

Mother as idealised woman

'Shouldn't you hurry up and get married?'

(Tokyo Metropolitan Assembly member, Suzuki Akihiro)

'If you don't marry, you won't have any children so will end up in a nursing home funded by other people's children's taxes'

(Lower House member, Katō Kanji)

Despite changes and developments in our understanding of gender and gender roles, motherhood as the primary aspiration for women remains a common-sense assumption in most cultures, Japan being no exception. Japanese feminists have unpacked myths about maternity to find that they rest on the idea that as it is women who have the capacity to fall pregnant and give birth, it is their physiological destiny to do so. So too is childrearing because it follows 'naturally' from childbirth. This destiny imposes gendered expectations on all women regardless of what stage they are in life, and regardless of whether or not they are mothers

(Ehara, 1995, p. 4). A woman who refuses or misses out on her destiny is deemed to be defective. Maternal myths shape social and cultural understandings of women's 'natural' roles but, as Japanese feminists have pointed out, the emergence of these myths in the 1910s, and the forging of them in the decades to follow, demonstrates that there is nothing natural about them (Kano, 1995, pp. 56–57).

As ideas of women's autonomy and liberation from the straight-jacket of patriarchal gender norms, including compulsory motherhood, have begun to take root in Japanese society, these notions about the inherent connection of women with motherhood are not as commonly espoused today as the past. However, sometimes politicians' public comments emerge to remind us that women's physiological destiny as mother remains an attractive idea to some of those in political power.⁹

Women's relationship with the Japanese state has historically been linked to women's social roles as caregivers (Mackie, 2003). Women politicians have often been constructed in the public imagination as 'daily life' experts (LeBlanc, 1999); usually this has involved being a mother. Campaigning on the basis of having experienced and therefore being able to represent 'daily life' issues, including child-rearing and children's education is a well-worn strategy for many women politicians that appeals to common sense assumptions about women's roles in society. In the current socio-demographic climate in Japan, where more and more women are remaining single and not having children, there can be fierce public scrutiny on the motherhood status of women. Women in the public eye are scrutinised regarding motherhood status: if they are not mothers, why not? If they are mothers, are they *good mothers*? This sexist scrutiny often comes from colleagues. In 2014, Tokyo metropolitan assemblywomen, Shiomura Ayaka, came under such scrutiny when she became the target of sexist 'heckling' during a speech she was making about improving Tokyo for working mothers. Some of the taunts included, 'Can't you bear children?' and, 'You should have a child yourself first!' (Asahi *Asahi Shinbun*, 2014, n.p). These taunts are imbued with the idea that a woman's primary function in life is to reproduce, and those who do not are fair game (Shiomura is a single, childless woman in her late-thirties). After much public and media outrage at the incident, LDP Tokyo assemblyman Suzuki Akihiro stood forward to make a formal apology, admitting that he had yelled out 'Shouldn't you hurry up and get married?' (BBC News Asia, 2014, n.p). His apology itself is worthy of analysis, as it reveals deeply embedded assumptions about the inherent and necessary connection between womanhood and motherhood. Suzuki explained that he had made the comment in the context of the social issues of the very low fertility rate and trend of people delaying marriage. He made the comment out of concern for people who leave marriage too late. He said: 'My comments were lacking in concern for people who can't marry [or have children] even if they want to'.¹⁰

In Suzuki's apology, we see an individuation of harassment. Suzuki apologised to Shiomura on the basis of hurting her feelings, and the feelings of others like her, who, for reasons beyond their control, had not married or had children. The apology therefore constructed the heckling as something *personal* rather than an incident of structural discrimination against women. Catherine MacKinnon (1979, p. 87) notes that the use of the word 'personal' in court cases that dismisses women's sexual harassment claims is to 'individuate, devalue, pathologize and isolate women's reactions to an experience which is common and shared, practically without variation, by countless women'.

⁹ Australia's first female Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, fell victim to this scrutiny. This involved being called 'deliberately barren' by a male colleague and being pressed by a radio interviewer to confess that her (male) partner was in fact gay. These were but two examples of the wide range of misogynistic treatment Gillard had to field from both the media and her colleagues. See Sawyer (2013) and Gillard (2014) for more details.

¹⁰ The full interview is available online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rOnSb06nHJQ>

Similarly, Suzuki's words depoliticised the incident and turned it into an individual incident between two people - the rude man and the hurt woman. The apology acknowledged the man's rudeness towards Shiomura rather than acknowledging the issue of systemic sexist treatment of women in politics, and of women in general (Dalton, 2017a, p. 215). Furthermore, in Suzuki's press conference, a member of the press asked Suzuki if he had a family, to which he responded yes, he had three children and as a father he regretted his words to Shiomura. A journalist then asked, 'How would you feel if your daughter was 35 and couldn't have children?' This question supports the idea that what occurred was a hurtful insult to a childless woman and has the effect of bringing women's fertility back into the spotlight.

Survey comments in a 2014 sexual harassment questionnaire sent to women members of all local councils throughout Japan reveal that many women experience similar comments from their colleagues. One woman wrote that she had heard one of her male colleagues saying, 'women who don't have children are Class A war criminals' (Femigiren, 2015, p. 12). Several others wrote of being asked when they were going to have children or get married. It is important to note that the urgings to get married and have children come not only from men but from women too. It is also important to note that male politicians are also harassed if they remain single. They are bad-mouthed for being single, encouraged to hurry up and marry and 'warned' that there are 'rumours' about them being homosexual (Femigiren, 2015, p. 38). Nevertheless, while being a man does not seem to seem shield one from harassment about being single, the childless taunts are mostly reserved for women.

There have been several prominent childless women politicians in Japan, including suffragette Ichikawa Fusae and Socialist Party leader Doi Takako, both of whom enjoyed enormous popularity. Despite this, the pressure to be a mother persists for politicians. Noda Seiko, one of the most powerful female political figures in Japan, said that until she reached her 40s, she believed she needed to 'discard her femininity' to succeed in politics, so she kept her hair short, did not paint her nails and did not have children. At a support meeting one day, a female senior official told her that to gain more popularity with women voters she should marry and have children. Noda subsequently had a child at the age of 50 (Kobayashi, 2015, p. 67). According to a survey of 172 people carried out by the liberal magazine AERA, 'childrearing' was the top answer for 101 respondents for the multiple-choice question 'what experience do you want women politicians to have?' (Kobayashi, 2015, p. 66).

The assumed essential nature of motherhood for women is perhaps not therefore an idea prominent exclusively amongst politicians, but more of a cultural norm. Women politicians receive pressure from both their colleagues and their constituencies to represent mothers by *being* mothers (Dalton, 2015, pp. 95–96). Furthermore, male politicians have also made comments constitutive of these ideas in relation to women in the general public as well. In other words, the targets of comments like these are not only women politicians. For example, in a highly publicised and highly criticized case in 2007, former Minister for Health, Labour and Welfare, Yanagisawa Hakuo, used the phrase 'baby-making machines' to describe women during a speech he was making about the declining fertility rate and its effect on the economy. In May 2018, Lower House member Katō Kanji made a speech at a friend's wedding which made it into the news for its comments: 'I would like you to definitely have at least three children' and, 'If you don't marry, you won't have any children so will end up in a nursing home funded by other people's children's taxes' (Teramoto, 2018). Comments like these typically draw widespread condemnation and some wonder hopefully if it is a matter of time before the older generation politicians retire and give way to the younger cohort who, it is assumed, will be less sexist. Certainly Katō is in his seventies, but Suzuki Akihiro was in his early fifties when he heckled Shiomura. Katō's comments are in fact reminiscent of former Prime Minister's 2003 comment that women who

had not borne children should not receive the pension (Ichikawa Fusae Memorial Association, 2003, p. 4); a comment that also drew widespread criticism. The idea that the 'next generation' will be less sexist is perhaps somewhat sanguine. Hashimoto Tōru, former governor of Osaka, and infamous for his occasional sexist commentary, to be discussed below, is in his forties.

Sexual object

'I'd like [your troops] to use Japan's sex industry more'
(Osaka Governor, Hashimoto Tōru)

'It can't be ruled out [that she was a plant]'
(Finance Minister, Asō Tarō)

In 2013, Osaka mayor, Hashimoto Tōru told a U.S. commanding officer in Okinawa that the U.S. forces stationed should avail themselves of the sex industry more often in order to control their sexual energies (Johnston, 2013, n.p). His exact words were, 'I'd like you [your troops] to use Japan's sex industry more' and, 'The marine forces' rampant sexual energy can't be controlled unless they make use of the sex industry' (Sankei West, 2015, n.p). In response to media questioning about these comments, he responded, 'It's not like there is a causal relationship between [using the sex trade] and bringing incidences [sexual assault by US forces] under control, but the use [of the sex trade] needs to be directly acknowledged. Soldiers are placed in extreme life-threatening situations and we need to think about allowing for release of that energy' (Sankei West, 2015, n.p).

His conversation with the U.S. Commander came only hours after having defended the 'comfort women' system that the Japanese military established during its imperial expansion in the 1930s and 40s. Hashimoto stated that the use of 'comfort women' was necessary to maintain military discipline. His comments were widely condemned by women's groups and commentators in Japan and Korea as indicating a lack of awareness of the human rights of women (Amnesty International, 2013; Femigiren, 2013; Women's Active Museum on War and Peace, 2013). His comments to the U.S. Commander were also met frostily by the Commander himself and authorities in Washington.

Despite his comments causing widespread criticism, Hashimoto, who was a lawyer before entering politics, showed his knowledge of the legal system. While prostitution is illegal in Japan, loopholes allow the trade in women's bodies to continue, and by and large it is socially sanctioned; sustained due to high demand from men. Japanese and Western feminists have long been critical of Japanese society's ongoing commodification and objectification of women (Burns, 2005; Muta, 2016; Norma, 2011, pp. 510–511; Tsunoda, 2013, pp. 213–53). Feminist historian, Caroline Norma (2011), argues that Japan's corporate entertainment industry, which includes hostess bars, facilitated the development of what is now an enormous prostitution trade.¹¹ Surveys have found that a large proportion of Japanese men support prostitution and a majority of men aged between thirty and forty claim that the sex industry is necessary for doing business (Norma, 2011, p. 509 & 511). This suggests widely-held values that normalise men's right to sexually access women. Muta (2009, p. 60) notes the routine urban scene where this access by men can be witnessed—businessmen on trains reading sexually explicit magazines or newspapers—and points to this as evidence of the daily and normalised sexual harassment of women.

At times, views that uphold men's right to access women sexually can be heard circulating within the corridors of political power. Hashimoto's comment that the prostitution of women by soldiers is

important for military discipline, and to protect local women from rape, exposes his belief in the idea that men have natural sexual impulses that are potentially violent if not satiated. In this way, Hashimoto sees women as *sexual objects*. One does not have to delve deeply into feminist theories of sexual objectification to argue that Hashimoto's comment suggests a view of women as *objects*, but philosopher Martha Nussbaum's (1995, p. 257) list of characteristics to identify objectification provides confirmation: Hashimoto's comment suggests a view of women as serving a function (instrumentality), interchangeable (fungibility), having the capacity to be exchanged for money (ownership) and not worth extending subjectivity to (that is, their feelings and experiences are not considered). Having thus established this comment as objectifying women, one further step is required to confirm that it is also a sexually objectifying comment. Nussbaum's list is not necessarily exclusive to *sexual* objectification, but Catherine MacKinnon's (1989, p. 329) definition is: 'To be sexually objectified means having a social meaning imposed on your being that defines you as to be sexually used, according to your desired uses, and then using you that way.' Hashimoto's comments reveal a perception of women as existing for male sexual gratification. It suggests a view of heterosexual relations based on gendered norms whereby women are passive objects and men are active agents with natural urges that must be acted on. This particular view of male sexuality is called *sukebeiness* by Catherine Burns (2005, p. 23), who claims that this type of sexuality is central to Japanese hegemonic masculinity and that it assumes the right to sexually access women: 'male sexuality is constructed as natural, hydraulic and uncontrollable' (Burns, 2005, p. 33). Burns draws from Anne Allison's explanation of *sukebei* behaviour amongst men in Japan's hostess bars—Allison (1994, pp. 60–61 & 72) uncovers a common discourse that men have a 'sukebei nature', which entails the objectification of but also the *possession* of a woman. This view of male sexuality is also at the heart of the second comment listed at the beginning of this section, by Finance Minister Asō. On April 18, 2018, Ministry of Finance's top bureaucrat Fukuda Junichi bowed to pressure to step down from his post after being accused of sexual harassment by a TV Asahi woman journalist. She recorded him on multiple occasions making requests such as, 'Can I touch your breasts?' and 'Can I kiss you?'. She complained to her manager about it who advised her that it would be best to avoid making a fuss. She subsequently sent the recordings to the weekly magazine *Shūkan Shinchō*, which published the story on April 12 (Asahi Shinbun 2018b, p. 35). Fukuda denied the allegation and said he could not recognise his voice on the recording. The woman has stayed anonymous, despite urging Cultural myths and supports for raps by male politicians to reveal herself so a 'proper' investigation can be carried out. During a Lower House finance committee meeting, Asō mentioned that it 'couldn't be ruled out' that the woman was 'planted' in order to get a story (Sankei News, 2018a, n.p). In this we see the assumption of inevitability of sexual harassment, at least where women journalists and MOF officials are concerned.

With assumed inevitability comes victim-blaming. If men cannot help themselves, it becomes the responsibility of others to avoid potential harassing situations. Failing that, the harassed should at least handle the situation without ruffling too many feathers. In fact, in would appear that in a work context, smiling in the face of sexual harassment is the response usually expected of women. Journalist Taga Mikiko (cited in Niven, 1992, p. 17) recalls being advised by older women colleagues to respond to sexual harassment by smiling and ignoring it, as this was a 'sign of maturity'. Failure to do so can often lead to shame being placed on the victim.

Victim Blaming

'Certainly Deputy Secretary Fukuda may have said something appalling, but I think that for someone from a television station to secretly sell it to *Shūkan Shinchō*, that itself is a set-up. I think that

¹¹ There are a reported 31,749 sex industry venues in Japan (Keisatsuchō, 2016, p. 1), and some estimate that Japan's sex industry is worth almost 2% of the country's GDP, roughly equivalent to Japan's defense budget (Shared Hope International, 2016, p. 113).

in some ways, it is a crime' (Lower House member, Shimomura Hakubun)¹²

The woman journalist who accused Fukuda of harassment was accused by Liberal Democratic Party Diet member, Shimomura Hakubun, of having conducted 'some sort of crime' by taping a conversation between herself and Fukuda and sharing it with the media. Shimomura thus shifted blame from the accused to the accuser, suggesting she had committed a crime. In doing so, he helps to sustain myths and beliefs about male violence against women. If we are to understand sexual harassment as a form of violence against women, and we are to understand sexual violence as a continuum upon which sexual harassment, rape and other form of violence exist (Kelly, 1988), it is not surprising to find similarities in the way that victims of both sexual harassment and sexual assault are sometimes treated. 'Victim-blaming' has been identified as a cultural belief underpinning 'rape myths'—ideas about who can be a rape victim and how they should behave (Burt 1980). Martha Burt's study was the first to test the connection between attitudes towards sex and gender and beliefs in rape myths. Her finding that an 'acceptance of interpersonal violence' was the strongest predictor of rape myth beliefs is most pertinent to the argument made here. The acceptance of interpersonal violence is 'the notion that force and coercion are legitimate ways to gain compliance and specifically that they are legitimate in intimate and sexual relationships' (Burt 1980, p. 218). Burns (2005, p. 2), who explored conventional Japanese understandings of gender and sex by investigating how courts deal with rape cases, argues that Japanese sex and gender norms, including legal norms, shape perceptions of women as sexually passive objects who *must be conquered*. To some extent, the acceptance of interpersonal violence is codified in Japanese law. Tsunoda Yukiko (2013, p. 151) explains that the crime of 'rape' (gōkan) must include force or intimidation of a degree that the victim was unable to resist. If it is found that the victim could have resisted the force or intimidation, the crime might be 'criminal assault' (bōkō) or 'criminal intimidation, threat' (kyōhaku) but not rape. If, Tsunoda (2013, p. 152) goes on to ponder, the essence of 'rape' is that despite the victim not consenting to intercourse it was forced upon her, the debate about the level of force seems out of place. She concludes that this peculiarity in the law exists precisely because it is generally understood that some amount of force is 'normal' in sexual intercourse (Tsunoda, 2013, p. 154). When it comes to sexual harassment, Tsunoda (2013, p. 190), who is a feminist lawyer and one of the country's leading experts on the issue in Japan, says that 'victim blaming in sexual harassment is part of Japanese culture'.

A central part of any culture is its language, and a quick review of some of the literature on gender and language reveals the significant role it plays in sustaining sex and gender norms, particularly those that sustain victim-blaming discourses. The Japanese language places limitations on women's ability to push back against oppressive gender norms. A 2007 best-seller, 'Women's Dignity' contains a whole chapter with advice on how to speak with 'dignity' (Bando, 2006, pp. 47–66). This includes using formal language at all times, even with female friends, and not using 'negative' words. 'Feminine' language encouraged of women is polite, soft, thoughtful and refined (Okamoto, 2010, n.p). This has repercussions on women's capacity to assert themselves in the case of sexual harassment. Muta (2013, p. 110) illuminates this point by discussing the normative acceptable reactions by women to being groped on public transport. Specifically, she claims that people who observe public groping (*chikan*) are unlikely to show sympathy to a woman who tells her molester to stop in forceful language. Muta (2013, p. 110) suggests that the social crime of a woman using 'masculine' language is perceived to be greater than the crime of a man sexually molesting a woman. A molested woman finds herself in a

dilemma: she can use appropriately feminine language to *ask* the molester to stop (*yamete (kudasai)*) and probably gain sympathy from bystanders, or risk bystander indifference, or even scorn, by *telling* him to stop with assertive language (*yamero*) that is, *because it is assertive*, understood to be language reserved for men.¹³ Women who do speak out therefore often find themselves being blamed and shamed.

An inability to voice one's concerns manifests in low rates of reporting. Like in many countries, the rate of reporting for sexual assault in Japan is low. Some studies suggest it is particularly low. The low rates of sexual assault compared to in the United States (one in fifteen women versus one in five respectively) suggest low reporting rates (Rich, 2017). A comparative study of attitudes to university campus sexual assault in the United States, Japan, India, Vietnam and China discovered that Japanese students were the least likely to think sexual assault was a problem on campus and also less likely to say they would seek help if they were sexually assaulted (37% respondents said they would not seek help, compared to 5.3% in the US, 7.4% in India, 10.1% in Vietnam and 11.4% in China) (Kamimura et al., 2016, p. 1135). Japanese society does not encourage speaking out, and this is particularly true for women. Harmony is usually preferred over individual self-assertion and this leads to a collective and unspoken discouragement of speaking out against perceived grievances. As Huen (2007, p. 813) notes, '[t]he focus on harmony and homogeneity has significant implications for Japanese women'. In a hierarchy-based society, deference to authority is expected, and authority is usually male. The norm of deference to authority combined with Japanese gendered norms that encourage women to display docility and acquiescence makes for a social structure that places women in a position where it is difficult to speak out against assault or harassment. In Japanese workplaces, a group ethos discourages speaking about individual needs and instead relies of the maintenance of group harmony. It is regarded as impolite to disrupt this harmony, and this is particularly so for women (Muta, 2009, p. 58).

Within this context, where victim-blaming is normative, the journalist who accused Fukuda of sexual harassment resisted the cultural norm of keeping quiet. She might have felt emboldened to speak out because of the groundwork laid by the women before her, in particular, fellow journalist, Itō Shiori. Ito (2018a) made headlines when she came forward publicly in 2017 to accuse a fellow journalist Yamaguchi Noriyuki of raping her. In talking to the press, writing a book and refusing to hide her face or name, she attempted to make the case that Japan was a difficult and lonely place for women victims of sexual violence and that change was needed. The hostility from the Japanese media and silence from political leaders that followed her coming forward, and the online bashing she received from people intent on shaming her seemed to confirm her argument.

In Itō's 2018 book, *Black Box*, she argues that Japanese society must do more to support rape victims instead of vilifying them. She describes the lack of support as making her feel as though she was fussing over something trivial. She lays this out by narrating her experiences navigating legal, medical and social systems as a victim of sexual assault.

Itō discovered that firstly, there is no national hotline for sexual assault victims so initially she was at a loss as to where to go, even for the most basic advice. One friend suggested she go to the police at least. So Itō visited the Harajuku police station, only to discover that more trauma awaited her. The picture she paints of the police system is one that is woefully inadequate to deal with sexual assault victims; on the contrary it seems to be a system that re-traumatises victims. During the

¹² After being criticized by the Japan Communist Party, Shimomura retracted his comment, with the comment, 'My words were inappropriate. I retract them and apologise' (Sankei News, 2018b, n.p).

¹³ The testimony of one *chikan* victim suggests lukewarm bystander responses to *chikan* are common regardless of the language used when speaking out. A high school girl who designed anti-*chikan* badges for schoolgirls, in response to daily incidents of *chikan* on her school commute, said that even when she spoke up and said things like, 'this person is a *chikan*, please help me', no-one assisted (Tanaka & Kawai, 2016).

two years of the investigation, Ito had to tell, and re-tell, her account of the crime to so many different officers she lost count of their number. Some of these statements were given in front of groups of all-male officers. She was repeatedly asked whether she was a virgin at the time of the crime, and, upon enquiring as to why this question was being asked, was told it was standard. Even more egregious was the crime scene 're-enactment humiliation' she underwent as part of the police investigation:

The re-enactment wasn't done at the scene but instead at a martial arts training room on the top floor of Takanawa police headquarters. The floor was covered in a blue plastic mat, and hanging on the walls was gear that looked like martial arts uniforms. The room slightly smelled of sweat, so it seemed like it was being used for physical training by lots of police. The re-enactment was done in this room in front of a bunch of police officers—all male—and involved re-enacting the rape scene using a plastic doll as the perpetrator. 'Ok, now go to sleep over there', I was told, as I lay on my back in the room surrounded by male officers. One of these officers then placed the lifelike, human-size doll on top of my body. 'Is this about right?', 'Perhaps if we move it a bit this way?', the officer said as he moved the doll on top of me. The flash of the camera went off, and as the shutter began to click I found my disassociating self completely frozen (Ito, 2018a, pp. 129–130).¹⁴

In coming forward to tell her story publicly, Itō defied Japanese social norms that discourage women from speaking out against sexual assault or harassment. She was an anomaly in country where reporting sexual assault is unusual, to say nothing of facing the media with the allegation. Her courage and subsequent activism set the stage for women from her industry to raise their voices. In an interview published in early 2018, Ito (2018b) said that she felt as though the #MeToo movement was beginning to take hold in Japan, but the media was not as supportive as she had hoped. Recent developments suggest that journalism is an industry where the sexual harassment of women is common. The MOF allegation attracted a great deal of public attention and mobilised a large number of protests and enquiries into sexual harassment of working women.

After MOF's Fukuda resigned in April 2018, a survey of women working in the media industry was carried out by an association called 'Group for Thinking about Sexual Harassment in the Media'. The testimonies of 35 women were collected, containing 105 incidents of sexual harassment, some of which have been (anonymously) publicised (Kinkōzan, 2018, n.p). The English language publication, the Japan Times also enjoined women in the media industry to contact them with their experiences (Daimon & Mizuho, 2018, n.p). Some of the responses make for chilling reading. In many of the cases, the status between the harasser and harassed is stark—many talk of having experienced harassment when they were 'rookie' journalists. Some also talk about the male dominance of the industry and male-centric work culture involving late-night meetings and drinks events. Often women are left alone at night time with men of a much higher status than themselves.

Conclusion

When #MeToo-sympathising politicians staged a protest in the Diet building on 20 April 2018, by dressing in black and holding up #MeToo placards, one response by a member of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party was to tweet a photo of some of the women in the protest with the comment, 'For me [these women] are far from sexual harassment targets. This is my declaration to them all: I will definitely not sexually harass you' (Asahi Shinbun, 2018a, p. 8). After receiving criticism from followers, he removed the tweet and posted an apology on his homepage: 'I sincerely take on board the advice that my comment itself was

sexual harassment and offer my deepest apology to those who I offended and to the women parliamentarians in the photo'. Overtly sexist comments made publicly like this one and others discussed in this article cast doubts on the degree of understanding amongst political and bureaucratic leaders about what constitutes sexual harassment.

While it is tempting to think that these incidents are mere blips on the road to gender equality, we should be cautious in embracing the idea that this road is linear and would be smoother if it were not for the odd individual making unfortunate comments, especially in light of the frequency with which these incidents occur and the similarities that some of them bear to those of more than a decade ago. Political veteran and Liberal Democratic Party member Noda Seiko (cited in Ichikawa Fusae Memorial Association 2003, p. 6) has long been vocally critical of her male colleagues. In 2003, in the wake of several publicly condemned sexist comments by fellow members of parliament she commented that several of her colleagues in the LDP wish for a 'return to good old Japan' where women's rights were limited. There was a sense of déjà vu when, fifteen years after this, in response to the MOF's handling of the Fukuda sexual harassment incident, Noda again publicly condemned her colleagues' sexist commentary (Asahi Shinbun, 2018b, p. 4). Some say that the world of politics (and the bureaucracy) is several years 'behind' the rest of society when it comes to gender equality. Feminist lawyer Tsunoda Yukiko (cited in Asahi Shinbun, 2018c, p. 35) notes, 'Universities and private companies put a lot of effort into their [sexual harassment prevention] training. Have the bureaucrats at the Ministry of Finance really been running our country with that level of awareness? Have the changes in society not reached them? It's staggering.'

Finance Minister and former Prime Minister Tarō Asō commented in April 2018 that sexual harassment is not a crime (Mainichi Shinbun, 2018b). Despite his lack of sympathy and apparent disdain for the women involved in the sexual harassment case surrounding Finance Ministry's Fukuda, he was technically correct in a narrow sense in that there is no single crime called 'sexual harassment'. Nevertheless, there are legal provisions in place to that aim to prevent sexual harassment, as discussed, and victims can use these and other laws to make their case. But sexual harassment law in Japan is inadequate to cope with what many women perceive as a breach of their human rights and their ability to do their jobs in safety and in dignity. Space constraints prevent me from exploring the inadequacies of anti-sexual harassment legislation in detail, but legal scholars with more expertise than me have done some work in this field (Bohrer & Fujita, 2015; Tsunoda, 2013). One of the pitfalls of the law that has not been explored with much depth is that it does not provide for women who are not technically employed by anyone, such as, for example, politicians. An elected official does not have an employer she can go to and report harassment. Elected officials might also miss out on the education and awareness-raising that employers are obligated to provide. Given the privilege and status that comes with being a politician, one might be forgiven for brushing this off as a trivial concern. However, as the growing body of scholarship on Violence Against Women in Politics has shown, all types of violence against women in politics and women closing in close proximity with politicians including sexual harassment, pose serious impediments to democracy and women's rights. Parliaments are workplaces and should be as accountable as any other workplace to sexual harassment.

The lack of awareness evidenced in some of the comments and behaviours discussed in this paper and the frequency with which they emerge indicates a culture of hostility for women working in or with the world of politics. Viewing sexual harassment as individual incidents perpetrated by rude men neglects to acknowledge the systemic nature and isolating consequences of harassment. There is a discourse within the political world that constructs women as sexual objects, prioritises and judges their motherhood status and shames them when they speak up about harassment. This discourse creates a starkly different and unequal reality for women and men working in the field.

¹⁴ Translated from the original Japanese by Caroline Norma.

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