

Why #MeToo Failed in Japan

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Abstract

Farnush Ghadery of King's College London argues that the #MeToo movement is a "...transnational feminist consciousness-raising endeavour [...] that surpasses the universalising and Western hegemonic language exhibited by global feminism" (Ghadery 2019, p. 254). Its success varied, however, from country to country. In the following essay, it is put forward that the failure of the #MeToo movement in Japan can be attributed to two main factors: an unprepared socio-historical climate and an incompatible cultural setting. Neil Stammers' instrumental and expressive dimension framework, Research Mobilisation Theory and Political Process Theory are used to analyse the process and outcome.

The #MeToo movement is often associated with actress Alyssa Milano, who posted a tweet in October 2017 calling for survivors of sexual harassment or assault to reply to her post with the hashtag #MeToo (Rosa 2019). Overnight, the hashtag was posted 300,000 times, and within forty-eight hours, one million times (Ghadery 2019, p. 256). Google searches about sexual assault shot up by 86 percent in the eight months following Milano's post (Kaplan 2018). The tweet came at a crucial time when allegations against Harvey Weinstein were circulating, and the hashtag became a platform for women to voice their experiences with a sense of solidarity. Milano is not the movement's founder, however: Tarana Burke initiated it in 2006 to "help survivors of sexual violence, particularly Black women and girls, and other young women of color from low wealth communities, find pathways to healing" (Me

Too Movement 2018). While keeping in mind the original roots of the movement and remembering the work of the black civil rights activist who is often forgotten, it is still significant that social media catapulted the movement far beyond Burke's expectations. Now, #MeToo has spread globally, and has come to define the gender equality movement. Farnush Ghadery of King's College London argues that the hashtag-generated movement is a "... transnational feminist consciousness-raising endeavour... that surpasses the universalising and Western hegemonic language exhibited by global feminism" (Ghadery 2019, p. 254).

Ghadery uses the example of #MosqueMeToo to demonstrate the "transnational" nature of the movement (Ghadery 2019, p. 253). The hashtag #MosqueMeToo is used to unite women who experience sexual assault during the Muslim pilgrimage, the hajj. In South Korea, the #MeToo movement sparked widespread protest which led to political reform: by the end of 2018, seven new laws were passed that aimed to tighten laws surrounding sexual assault (Hasunuma and Shin 2019, p. 102). Under her theory, Ghadery argues that examples like these show an ability for the movement to come into being in various localities while being context-specific, and without carrying the problematic aspects of global feminism that erase the important differences characterising women's experiences around the globe. Ghadery would probably argue that the success of the movement is relative, which is in line with the transnational approach to feminism. This does, however, make it more difficult to determine what success means in countries that have vastly different social and cultural structures than the Western countries, predominantly the US, against which the movement is often discussed. Despite this concession, there is a country in which the movement has clearly failed: Japan.

An examination of Japan makes for a thought-provoking analysis because of its status as a largely Western world power, seen in its position as the only non-Western country in the G7. The country has a public image of peace, security and advancement. It has the third largest economy in the world (IMF 2016), the second-best education system in the OECD (OECD 2015), and the lowest

murder rate (UN 2019). Nevertheless, Japan ranks 110th out of 149 countries in the World Economic Forum's global gender equality rankings (Japan Times 2018). This statistic is but one of many that challenge the idea of Japan as the ideal peaceful, secure and modern power. In the following essay, I will put forward the hypothesis that #MeToo failed in Japan due to an unprepared social and historical climate as well as a cultural setting that is fundamentally incompatible with the structure of the movement. Additionally, I will use Stammers' instrumental and expressive dimension framework and two other social movement theories to assess the process and outcome.

Hasunuma and Shin's comparative analysis of South Korea and Japan is extremely useful in theorising the reasons for which the movement was unsuccessful in the latter country, due to the two countries' similarities with regards to gender equality at the time of the movement (Hasunuma and Shin 2019, p. 98). In South Korea, there were two important movements that foreshadowed #MeToo, one in the 1990s during which "Hundreds of women who had been forced to serve as sexual slaves for the Japanese imperial army during World War II came forward in Korea and other Asian countries after a half century's silence" (Hasunuma and Shin 2019, p. 99). More recently, in the years leading up to #MeToo, there have been many protests against technology-related sexual abuse against women, such as hidden cameras in bathrooms and the publication of sexually explicit material without the consent of the subject, known as "revenge porn." A network called "Citizen's Action to Support the MeToo Movement" was created by women's groups, with the mission to "[...] support victims, to raise public consciousness, to push for reforms to prevent sexual harassment, and to seek justice" (Hasunuma and Shin 2019, p. 101). They organised street protests that saw tens of thousands of citizens participating (Han 2018 cited in Hasunuma and Shin 2019, p. 101). Altogether, these are important points that contrast with how the movement played out in Japan: first, the movements that took place before #MeToo, and second, the creation of a unified network that organised successful civil action.

While South Korea had years of groundwork in place, the social movement incubator in Japan was switched off. #MeToo in Japan was born in a cold, unwelcoming situation, without the necessary nutrients to fuel it. “Fewer women came forward and many preferred to remain anonymous” (Hasunuma and Shin 2019, p. 102). Women’s rights had not had any influential stepping stones that could lay the groundwork for #MeToo, and rather than creating a solidarity-building alliance among women, Japanese women actively (and passively) turned against each other. In the following paragraphs, I will conduct an analysis of a case study written by a Japanese person as well as additional accounts by Japanese people that help to point towards an explanation for the movement’s torpidity. I believe my fluency in Japanese and English will reduce the chance of a cultural mistranslation, although as someone who has spent considerable time outside of Japan this essay in no way claims to be an objective angle.

Shiori Ito, a Japanese female journalist, was a key actor in Japan’s #MeToo movement. She made headlines when she came forward to accuse her well-known senior colleague and mentor, Noriyuki Yamaguchi, of rape (Hasunuma and Shin 2019, p. 104). Although she was not the first to speak out, she was the first person whose name and face Japanese people could see; the others before her were anonymous. Her story quickly became national news. In her English article on *Politico* she describes the legal and medical barriers to help she faced, such as insufficient assistance by Tokyo’s only rape crisis centre, an overwhelmingly male police force, their unwillingness to process her claim, and a dehumanising requirement of reenactment in front of said police officers (Ito 2018). She says, “As I went through the ensuing criminal case proceedings, I came to realize how Japan’s system works to undermine survivors of sexual assault” (Ito 2018). Eventually her case was dropped and she faced massive backlash from the media and Japanese men and women online, to such a degree that she had to eventually emigrate to the UK (BBC 2018). She goes on to say that the “Japanese media are usually silent about sex crimes - they don’t really exist” and that “it is taboo to even use the word ‘rape,’

which is often replaced by ‘violated’ or ‘tricked’ if the victim was underage” (Ito 2018). Here, we see how Japan’s media may have contributed to a general lack of understanding about the issue at hand. Ito’s ethnic identity was brought into question, something characteristic of Japanese culture: “There were arguments over my nationality, because a true Japanese woman wouldn’t speak about such ‘shameful’ things” (Ito 2018). As a Japanese woman, I can attest to the fact that national identity is extremely important to the Japanese people. Statistically, this can be observed in the country’s ethnically homogenous makeup, with over 97.8% of residents being Japanese (Official Statistics of Japan 2018), as well as low immigration and refugee status approval rates. From my personal experience living there, “being Japanese” is extremely exclusive, and even someone like myself who has Japanese citizenship, Japanese family, is fluent in Japanese and has gone to school in Japan is considered, even by my own family, as a *gaijin* (“foreigner”; literally “person from or on the outside”), because I have non-Japanese physical characteristics. This is a common experience for many half-Japanese or people living in Japan who do not look native. Therefore, Ito’s nationality being questioned by the public could show a deeper thread in the cultural circumstances that led to the failure of #MeToo. A Google search in Japanese with the terms “詩織 伊藤 出身” (translated as “Shiori Ito origins”) results in multiple links to websites debating her background. This suggests that Japanese people have a narrow idea of how a Japanese woman should behave, and that Ito’s behaviour was inconsistent with these beliefs.

However, despite South Korea’s similar ethnic makeup, with over 96% of the population being ethnically Korean (World Atlas 2019), people did not respond in a way that alienated the victim. In her article for the BBC, Ito writes: “There is a strong social stigma associated with speaking out against sexual assault and a common perception that victims are less valuable to society. This is why many stay silent” (Ito, 2018). Perhaps this stigma, if it did exist, was less tangible in South Korea because of the more extensive history of speaking out against sexual abuse. Of course, it

should be noted that everywhere — even where #MeToo has been “successful,” victims face hardships when they share their story. However, what sets Japan apart is that the number of people against the victim was disproportionately large. It was a widely accepted stance in the media and thus in general society that Ito’s (and other survivors’) appearances and testimonies should be questioned: “Rape myths are widespread. Japanese society blames victims, saying it’s the woman’s fault — what they wear, where they go, how they behave [...]. We haven’t really had a #MeToo movement not because victims haven’t come forward, but because Japanese society wants them to stay silent.” (Ito, 2018). Additionally, education about consent seems to be lacking. The concept is not mentioned in Japan’s rape laws (BBC, 2018). This decision to leave it in a grey area is “... a very Japanese way of communicating — not saying much but trying to read what the other person is saying” (Ito, 2018).

The #MeToo movement relies on two things: individuals sharing sensitive personal information and a significant number of people willing to believe them. Japan’s conservative social atmosphere — in other words, a lack of people willing to believe victims — discouraged (and continues to discourage) women coming forward. Neil Stammers’ framework of the expressive and instrumental dimensions is helpful in analysing this. He proposes that the two dimensions should not be considered as opposing forces but rather as dynamic and interdependent. The expressive dimension is the “construction, reconstruction and/or transformation of norms, values, identities and ways of living and being” and instrumental activism is designed to “achieve specific goals” (Stammers 2009, p. 164). The #MeToo movement is heavily reliant on the expressive dimension. The success of the movement depends on whether or not the expressive dimension — women working to change perceptions of sexual harassment and assault through individual contributions — is taken seriously, in order to access the instrumental dimension - social, political and legal change that is brought about *because of* a change in norms and values. In other words, #MeToo works when women share

their experiences and society accepts them and responds with political reform in order to change the circumstances that brought about the need for the expressive activism. In the case of Japan, this specific makeup of the expressive and instrumental dimensions of the movement were incompatible with the society. As stated above, the expressive dimension requires women to come forward and society to believe them: Japanese society values conformity, making it difficult for women to speak out from the beginning, and when they did come forward despite the difficulties, they introduced sanctions that ensured women would be too intimidated to follow suit. In contrast, American society values individualism, and responses were overwhelmingly positive. A similar case could be made for South Korea, which saw the expressive dimension be supported through a far more receptive environment than that of Japan.

Resource mobilisation theory and Political Process Theory are useful in looking at the success of #MeToo. In the former, resources are deemed vital for success. In this case it is helpful to look at the intangible assets - such as commitment of participants, legitimacy, and social-organisational resources (Staggenborg, 2015). In South Korea, women were willing to come forward publicly using their real name (commitment of participants), their claims were taken seriously by the media and eventually the government (legitimacy), and they formed a network of women's groups that organised well-attended and fruitful protests (social-organisational resources). In Japan, women were largely unwilling to come forward and were mostly anonymous (no commitment by participants), their claims were questioned and invalidated (lack of legitimacy), and there was no comparable movement infrastructure (lack of social-organisational resources).

Political Process Theory says that "social movements are most likely to emerge when potential collective actors perceive that [political] conditions are favourable" (Staggenborg, 2015). This theory can also add to the reasoning behind the movement's higher level of impact in South Korea compared to Japan. In South Korea, the Candlelight Revolution was taking place - the protests calling

for the impeachment of former President Park Geun-Hye (Hasunuma and Shin 2019, p. 99). This created instability in the status quo (“shifts in political alignments” in Staggenborg 2015). Additionally, conditions could have been perceived to be favourable because of the high-profile women who testified and received positive reactions (comparable to the prominent celebrity figures that came forward in the US). In comparison, Japanese women silently watched as figures like Shiori Ito were discredited and harassed by the media and individuals. Ito’s departure to England, although entirely understandable for her personal safety, surely cemented the perception of an even more unappealing environment.

Of course, the fight is not over. As of July 2019, intoxication is a legal defence for rape in South Korea that significantly reduces jail time (Nam and Kim 2019). There is still much work to be done in the way of gender equality even in places like South Korea and the US where #MeToo has been “successful.” For the purposes of this essay, “success” has been taken to mean an outcome that includes significant legal and social change. Although this kind of change has been slow in Japan, there are signs of progress. In July 2017, after Ito’s case received national attention, the minimum sentence for rape was raised from three to five years, male victims were finally legally recognised, and the definition of rape was expanded from its original century-old definition (Ito 2019). However, victims still need to prove “violence and intimidation” occurred during the act, which is both logistically difficult and ignores rape that happens under other circumstances.

In this essay, I have explored a number of different ways of analysing the #MeToo movement in Japan. The lack of a foundation for the movement, such as preceding historical events, as well as the nature of Japanese social culture, which values group conformity over individual expression, contributed to the movement’s stagnation. The role of national identity is interesting here - expectations of people where ethnic diversity is not present (or more correctly, is ignored) may be different than in a more multicultural society. Does diversity of people allow for more

diversity of thought? Stammers' Instrumental and Expressive dimension framework shows that the #MeToo movement in its current global form is fundamentally incompatible with Japan because of its over-reliance on the expressive dimension, which in its current state, Japan is unprepared to provide. Additionally, according to Resource Mobilisation Theory, the lack of comparable *intangible* resources in Japan - such as participant commitment and legitimacy - contributed to the movement's failure. Political Process Theory suggests that social change happens when conditions are politically inviting, and in Japan this was not the case. Further research into the roles of national identity and geopolitical position in social movements would be of value.

While all of the aforementioned theories are helpful in assessing the situation, the main takeaway seems to be that systematic change is what is necessary, and the burden should not be placed on individual women to fight, but unfortunately this is the reality. In a situation like this, the least the government can do after failing women for so long is to ensure that women are not fired or demoted for alleging sexual harassment or sexual assault. This is a huge barrier for progress, and if Japan is to have a second-wave #MeToo movement, a better environment must be created for victims coming forward.

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