
article

Sexual harassment of women politicians in Japan

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In 2016 in Japan, three women were appointed to politically powerful and historically significant positions. Koike Yuriko became the first female governor of Tokyo, Renho Murata became the leader of the opposition party, the Democratic Party, and Inada Tomomi became only the second woman to lead the Ministry of Defence. Despite these gains, the Japanese political world can be a hostile place for women. Japan's national legislative assembly has the lowest representation of women among OECD countries, and harassment of women in politics is common. Situating Japan's experience within the emergent violence against women in politics (VAWP) literature, I draw on a 2014 survey of women politicians about their experiences of sexual harassment and from interviews with individual women politicians to examine the extent and nature of sexual harassment in Japanese politics. This is a 'hidden' problem due to ineffective legislation and a lack of awareness of what constitutes sexual harassment, even among politicians. I argue that the first step in combating sexual harassment of women in politics in Japan is to make it visible.

key words Japan • politics • sexual harassment • VAWP

Key messages

- Sexual harassment of women politicians in Japan is a serious issue, yet a mostly hidden one.
- The efficacy of Japan's anti sex-harassment legislation is curtailed by the nature of the law as well as by a culture of sexual exploitation of women and girls and a lack of awareness of what constitutes sexual harassment, even among politicians.

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Introduction

In this article, I examine the scope and nature of sexual harassment suffered by Japanese women politicians. I focus on the experiences of women politicians specifically to illuminate the way that sexual harassment constrains women's participation in public and political life, in a country that ranks last among OECD countries for its representation of women in politics. By doing so, I contribute to the growing body of literature on violence against women in politics (VAWP) – a body of work that gives a name to the violence and harassment facing women politicians and suggests solutions to the problem. I suggest that sexual harassment of Japanese women politicians acts to

remind women that they are ‘space invaders’ (Puwar, 2004) because they encroach on a deeply male-dominated realm that is characterised by masculine norms, and that has typically been perceived as a ‘public space’ for men, held up against the ‘private’ sphere that women occupy. I argue that one of the challenges facing women politicians in Japan is that their sexual harassment remains, to a large extent, an unspoken problem and sexual harassment laws are insufficient for dealing with the issue.

In the first part of the paper, I review the emergent literature on VAWP around the world. This literature has named sexual harassment as a type of violence – one that, according to recent research, is not uncommon in politics across the globe. South Asian countries, such as India, Pakistan and Nepal are covered in this literature (UN Women, 2014) but so far, the situation for women politicians in East Asia is rarely mentioned. Japan is an anomaly in the industrialised world for faring very poorly in women’s status across many sectors – notably in economic empowerment and political representation. Shining a light on the sexual harassment of women politicians is an important step in clarifying obstacles to the pursuit of gender equality in politics.

In the second part of the paper, I set the context for discussing the sexual harassment of women in Japanese politics by briefly exploring sexual harassment as a cultural and legal concept in Japan and then discussing the widespread cultural and political acceptance of sexual exploitation of women and girls. I argue that there are limits to what an anti-sex discrimination law can achieve in the prevention of sexual harassment in a patriarchal culture where women are routinely sexually exploited and where many people, including politicians, do not understand what constitutes sexual harassment.

In the third part of the paper, I analyse data from interviews with women politicians and survey results to demonstrate the extent and nature of the problem of sexual harassment of women politicians in Japan. I cite cases from interviews with Japanese women politicians conducted between 2007 and 2016, and draw from a 2014 survey on sexual harassment carried out by a feminist politicians’ organisation, the Alliance of Feminist Representatives (*Femigiren*). Over the eight months I spent in Tokyo between 2007 and 2008 I contacted all 41 women Liberal Democratic Party-affiliated Diet members at the time. I was able to interview 13 LDP women out of the total 41 requests. This low number led me to approach women from the main opposition party, the Democratic Party of Japan, with three of whom I gained an interview. These interviews were for my PhD research and did not include specific questions about sexual harassment, but were open-ended and focused on the women’s experiences and motivations as politicians. In addition to these interviews, I conducted interviews with five members of *Femigiren* between 2012 and 2016. I was a supporting member of *Femigiren* and chose these women to interview based on their relative seniority within the organisation. I took a discourse analysis approach, looking for themes in the interview data and the *Femigiren* survey results that fit within the categories of sexual harassment identified in the VAWP literature, such as ‘psychological’, ‘symbolic’ and ‘sexual’ violence.

Finally, I conclude by stating that the sexual harassment of women in Japanese politics fits within the VAWP framework and should be understood as violence. The fact that it is not should be seen as being a key obstacle to equality in Japanese politics. VAWP in Japan remains to a large extent a ‘hidden problem’ and until women feel entitled to speak out against it, and politicians understand what sexual harassment is, anti-sexual harassment legislation, while better than nothing, will remain an inadequate approach to the problem.

VAWP literature

In recent years, VAWP has come to be recognised as a problem for democracies and for women. The violence and harassment that politically active women face when simply participating in democratic processes has been acknowledged as hampering women's political motivations, preventing full political participation and contravening democratic principles. Practitioners, activists and academics have designed a conceptual framework to give definition to and fight against VAWP. As a result, VAWP has been named and identified as an obstacle to democracy, and to women's participation in politics. These two things cannot be separated as women's access to and participation in all political activities is essential for a healthy and fully functioning democracy. VAWP has been described as having five 'types': psychological, sexual, physical, economic and symbolic (Krook, 2017, p. 79). Regardless of the type of violence, and regardless of the context in which it is perpetrated, it is often defined by three characteristics. These are

- a) aggressive acts towards female political actors, faced largely or only by women;
- b) because they are women, often using gendered means of attack;
- c) in order to deter their participation, as a way to preserve traditional gender roles and undermine democratic institutions. (Krook, 2017, p. 78)

VAWP research confirms what has been found for women in most male-dominated industries: that speaking out against sexist treatment carries risks, and women often choose to avoid those risks. A repercussion of accepting harassment and abuse as part of political life is that those acts become normalised and are difficult to speak out against. When a woman does speak out she runs the risk of being accused of 'playing the gender card' (Sawer, 2013, p. 115) or of being seen as not resilient enough for political life (Ross, 2002, p. 196). This has the effect of perpetuating the longstanding idea that politics is a man's world to which women are not suited. In 2016, the National Democratic Institute (NDI, 2017) launched a global call to action, #NotTheCost: Stopping Violence Against Women in Politics. The #NotTheCost campaign identified steps that different sectors could take to end VAWP (Krook, 2017, p. 85). Possible solutions included better media coverage of the issue and political party action. Another of the steps was to implement laws to specifically target VAWP. In 2012, Bolivia implemented one such law, *Law 243 against Political Harassment and Violence against Women*, and neighbouring countries Costa Rica, Ecuador, Mexico and Peru have seen similar bills introduced. The law in Bolivia has not, however, proven to be very effective to date, with only a handful of perpetrators having been prosecuted. The implementation of a law is nevertheless a positive sign in that the problem has been acknowledged by policy-makers as a serious one. In this way it is symbolically important. As VAWP remains a 'hidden problem' in Japan, this is not a viable approach to the issue at this stage. More fundamentally, recognising VAWP as a legitimate and serious obstacle to women's equality in politics in Japan is the first step.

Sexual harassment has been identified as a form of violence against women and is often included in the VAWP literature, falling within the category of 'psychological' violence. This paper takes its starting point from the feminist understanding that sexual harassment is a form of violence against women (Kelly, 1988, p. 76) and therefore the sexual harassment of women politicians in Japan should be understood

as VAWP. In this article, I situate Japan within this framework by shedding light on the extent of sexual harassment facing women in Japanese parliamentary politics. VAWP continues to remain ‘hidden’ in many cases, often because ‘violence’ is understood to only encompass physical attacks, but also because women are likely to remain silent about it (NDI, 2017, p. 15). Acts of harassment and abuse are often implicitly allowed by bystanders and endured by victims because they are dismissed as the ‘cost of doing politics’ (Krook, 2017, p. 84). These reasons might go part of the way to explain the absence of Japan from the VAWP literature. The rest of this paper lays out the argument that the sexual harassment of women politicians in Japan is indeed a serious problem and should be understood as a form of gendered violence. Next, I will explore the concept of sexual harassment in Japan and the cultural context within which sexual harassment flourishes.

Conceptualising *sekuhara*

Sexual harassment became a legal and cultural category in Japan after the development of the concept in the United States. The concept emerged in the US after the 1979 publication of feminist scholar and lawyer Catherine MacKinnon’s *Sexual Harassment of Working Women* (1979). MacKinnon (1979, p. 4) argued that sexual harassment at work was sexual discrimination in employment and should therefore be legally treated as such. This heavily influenced the way the concept of sexual harassment came to be seen in Japan.

It was in 1992, when the Fukuoka district court ruled in favour of a woman who was suing her employer for harassment, that sexual harassment became a legal category in Japan (Huen, 2007, p. 817). In 1989, the year the court case began, the newly coined term *sekuhara* (an abbreviated transliteration of the English phrase ‘sexual harassment’) won the ‘Word of the Year’ competition, an indication that the word (and presumably the concept) had reached the popular imagination. As a result of the intensive media coverage of this case and some similar cases that followed in the years afterwards, the concept of *sekuhara* came to be known and better understood by the general public, employers, and working women (Tsunoda, 2013, p. 189).¹ When Japan’s anti-sex discrimination law, the Equal Employment Opportunity Law, was revised in 1997 (to come into effect in 1999) it included regulations on employers to prevent sexual harassment against women, thus making sexual harassment in the workplace a crime. Specifically, the amendment of the EEOL enforces an affirmative obligation on employers to prevent sexual harassment from occurring in the workplace (Article 11).² 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).

If the law places the onus on the employer to ensure that employees understand what constitutes sexual harassment and to penalise those who perpetrate it, how does this apply in the political arena, where politicians are not ‘employed’ by anyone? More fundamentally, should we assume that politicians are sufficiently aware of what constitutes sexual harassment since they are involved in policy-making themselves? I think that we cannot assume this, as the incidences of and nature of sexual harassment

of women politicians suggests that there remains a lack of awareness in the Japanese political world of the harms of sexual harassment, to be discussed in further detail below.

Limits of sexual harassment law in a society condoning sexual exploitation

The potential effectiveness of an anti-sexual harassment law is hampered in a patriarchal society where the sexual objectification and exploitation of women and girls is routine, and where this is sometimes endorsed by male political leaders. In 2013, Osaka mayor, Hashimoto Tōru, encouraged US forces stationed in Okinawa to avail themselves of the sex industry more often in order to control their sexual energies (Johnston, 2013). He made this comment only hours after having defended the ‘comfort women’ system that the Japanese military established during its imperial expansion in the 1930s and 1940s. Hashimoto stated that the use of ‘comfort women’ was necessary in order to maintain military discipline, thus exposing his belief in the idea that there must be a group of women made available for men to access sexually so that the remaining women are ‘protected’ (Burns, 2005, p. 31). Both 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.³ His comments are certainly shocking to many, but his encouragement to US soldiers to take advantage of the sex industry exposes the reality of a flourishing sex trade in Japan. Criticism of Hashimoto and indignation about these comments glosses over the truth of a socially and politically sanctioned trade in women’s bodies that exists to satisfy men’s demands.

Japan’s National Police Authority claims that there are 31,749 sex industry venues in Japan (Keisatsuchō, 2016, p. 1). They are just one part of Japan’s sex industry – one that some estimate is worth almost 2 per cent of the country’s GDP, roughly equivalent to Japan’s defence budget (Shared Hope International, 2016, p. 113). Feminists from both within and outside Japan are critical of Japanese society’s ongoing commodification and exploitation of women (Burns, 2005; Muta, 2016a; Norma, 2011, pp. 510–511; Tsunoda, 2013, pp. 213–253). Through studying Japanese rape trials, Catherine Burns (2005, p. 2) argues that sex and gender norms, including legal norms, shape perceptions of women as sexually passive objects who must be conquered, often violently: ‘There is a highly visible mass culture of commodified female bodies, often eroticising their violation and degradation and this is augmented by a constantly changing array of cafes, clubs and services catering to predominantly masculine sexual pleasures.’ Propping up the sex industry are legal loopholes that allow the sex industry to flourish⁴ and high demand from men. Historian Caroline Norma (2011, pp. 509 and 511) notes that surveys have found that a significant proportion of Japanese men condone prostitution and that the majority of men between 30 and 40 believe that the sex industry is essential in order to do business in the country. This suggests widely held values that normalise men’s ‘right’ to sexually access women. This perceived right is theorised by Burns (2005, p. 23) as *sukebeiness* – a type of male heterosexuality central to Japanese hegemonic masculinity, defined by ‘perverse’, socially marginalised yet normalised desires and practices. Within this framework, sexual harassment and assault of women is understood to originate in men’s natural and uncontrollable sexual urges. Muta Kazue (2013, pp. 16–17), a leading scholar of sexual harassment in Japan, argues that many Japanese men who commit sexual harassment do not realise their actions are wrong or illegal. She makes this point not

to defend them but to highlight the depth and extent of rape myths (Muta, 2016b, p. 118) and general misunderstandings and miscommunications between men and women when it comes to romance and sexual encounters (2013, pp. 66–67). Japanese masculinities scholar, Hidaka Tomoko (2010, p. 127), discovered, after interviewing 39 white-collar men between the ages of 20 and 80, that the majority of men neither understand sexual harassment nor think it is important. They subscribe to the biologically inevitable narrative that justifies men's uncontrollable sexual urges, thereby constructing sexual harassment as something that will never be eradicated. It is within this context of widespread and legally sanctioned sexual exploitation of women that I analyse the sexual harassment of Japanese women politicians. In the next section, I briefly outline the unequal gender situation in Japanese politics and then go on to explore the results of a sexual harassment survey conducted by *Femigiren* alongside data collected through interviews with women politicians.

Widespread sexual harassment of women politicians in Japan

By international indices, in general, Japanese women have low status compared to men in many areas of life. In particular, high levels of inequality between men and women in Japan can be found in levels of economic and political empowerment. The pay gap is the second highest in the industrialised world, after Korea, with women, on average, earning 74 per cent of what men earn (OECD, 2015). Women comprise less than 2 per cent of the nation's mayors, less than 10 per cent of company heads and only 18 per cent of court judges (Gender Equality Bureau, 2013). And finally, Japan has the lowest proportion of women in its national parliament among OECD countries: a mere 12 per cent of seats in the national assembly are occupied by women.

Politics is male dominated not just numerically, but culturally as well. It is characterised by masculinist norms and practices, including smoking, late-night and early-morning meetings, minimal childcare facilities (Dalton, 2015, pp. 104 and 107), an indifference to gender equality policies outside those that seek to encourage women's increased participation in the workforce (Ueno, 2014, pp. 8–10), and sexual harassment. Male dominance of politics is normalised to the extent that outside feminist activist circles, it is rarely remarked upon. But in 2014, an incident at Tokyo metropolitan assembly brought widespread media and public attention to the issue of sexual harassment and sexism within the world of politics.

On 18 June 2014, Tokyo metropolitan assemblywoman Shiomura Ayaka was addressing the Tokyo assembly when she was verbally attacked by male members of the assembly. She was talking about her party's policies to make Tokyo a more liveable city for women so that they could feel more confident to have more children while remaining in the workforce. During her speech, she was jeered by male voices along the lines of, 'Can't you bear children?', 'You should have a child yourself first!' These jeers were met with laughter from some other men and slight nervous laughter from Shiomura herself, perhaps a self-preservation reaction in an attempt to mask her shock. MacKinnon (1979, p. 48) notes that in response to sexual harassment, women will often attempt to appear flattered in the hope that the harasser will stop. Shiomura's laughter at that moment, aside from masking shock, might also be interpreted as a common response by women to 'let the man's ego off the hook' (Mackinnon, 1979, p. 48) and to laugh along at what must be a funny joke. Shiomura's mask fell, however, and by the end of her speech she appeared to be in tears.

This incident was picked up by domestic and international media and a media hunt for the so-called hecklers began. On 23 June, assemblyman Suzuki Akihiro stood forward and admitted he was the one to have yelled out, ‘Shouldn’t you hurry up and get married?’ He made an official apology by holding a news conference.⁵ Individual sexist comments by male politicians, such as Suzuki and Hashimoto, that make it to the public, are generally condemned in Japan by the mainstream media and general public. Another example is when Koike Yuriko was elected as governor of Tokyo on 31 July 2016. She is the first woman to hold this position and only the seventh woman to become a governor in Japan. Despite her extensive career in politics, including five months as Defence Minister 2007, and a lengthier stint as Environment Minister (2003–2006), she did not escape sexist taunts. Former Tokyo governor, Ishihara Shintarō (1999–2012), enjoined voters to vote against her because, in his words, ‘We cannot leave Tokyo to a woman with too much make-up.’ This was reported widely and critically by the media. Ishihara is no stranger to making sexist and offensive comments. He once remarked that there is no place on earth for ‘old hags’ past the age of childbearing (Asakura, 2004, p. 9). Many brush away Ishihara’s comments as those of an old man who is laughably out of touch (compare Roger Pulvers, in Radio National, 2016). The disparate nature of media reports of major and public sexual harassment incidents like these makes it difficult to make a macro-level argument about structural harassment of women by men. Tokyo metropolitan Shiomura’s public harassment, however, became the impetus for a group of feminist politicians to uncover the extent and nature of sexual harassment in politics in Japan.

After the Tokyo metropolitan assembly incident, *Femigiren* carried out an investigation into sexual harassment in municipal-level politics. In 2014, the group drafted a questionnaire to submit to the approximately 200 members of their alliance but eventually sent in excess of 500 to municipal and local level women councillors across the country, including those who were not *Femigiren* members. They received 143 responses.⁶ On the basis of these responses, they published a leaflet and a booklet called the *Report on the Questionnaire about Sexual Discrimination Experience in Municipal Legislative Councils* (*Femigiren*, 2015). The leaflet was distributed to as many councils as possible and to anyone who requested one, including women’s centres and public libraries.

The cover of both the booklet and the leaflet is a cartoon depiction of what happened to Shiomura Ayaka. A young woman stands at a podium saying, ‘I have questions regarding the political stance of the mayor.’ Before her sit nine men in suits behind desks. One is asleep, another is laughing, two more look bored and have thought bubbles above their heads: ‘Geez you’re not very cute’ and ‘What cheek asking a question like that even though you’re a woman’; and one is jeering, ‘Do you cook for your family?’

While this situation might appear extreme or exaggerated, upon surveying the situation for women in politics via interviews and the data from the *Femigiren* and secondary sources, it is clear that sexual harassment incidents are experiences shared by many women. Fifty-two per cent of respondents said that they had experienced some sort of sexual harassment from another council member or member of staff. Almost 20 per cent said that they had experienced ‘countless’ incidents of sexual harassment (*Femigiren*, 2015, p. 11). At first glance it would appear that the higher percentage of women in the council, the fewer incidences of sexual harassment occur, but this is not necessarily the case. Six of the eight respondents who were the

only women on their councils had experienced sexual harassment (75 per cent) and 8 of the 12 members of councils that contained only two women had experienced sexual harassment (66 per cent), but more generally, the percentage of women who responded that they had experienced sexual harassment was 73.3 for those from councils where women constituted less than 10 per cent of members, 57.6 per cent for those from councils with between 10 and 20 per cent female members, 36.7 per cent for those from councils with between 20 and 30 per cent female members and 47.6 per cent of those from councils with more than 30 per cent women members (Femigiren, 2015, pp. 8–9). The type of sexual harassment that women endure in Japanese politics ranges from sexist heckling and taunts about appearances or marital status to silencing and unwanted physical touching. The ‘psychological’, ‘sexual’ and ‘symbolic’ violence categories identified in the VAWP literature are particularly useful for understanding how women politicians narrate their experiences, as detailed in the next two sub-sections. Often, cases of violence overlap into multiple categories.

Heckling and infantilisation: psychological violence

One of the more prominent and visible forms of harassment which women politicians encounter is heckling. Indeed, the incident that mobilised *Femigiren* to carry out its survey was an overt and much-publicised case of heckling. Heckling was raised by many Japanese women politicians as an example of harassment that they had either witnessed or experienced, both in the survey and among women I interviewed. One informant, who was a member of the national Diet at the time of our interview (2008) stated that the heckling in local and prefectural councils was ‘awful’. This was in response to my question about whether she felt that politics was a sexist environment. She did, however, make a distinction between national level male politicians and local level male politicians, saying that men in the national Diet tended to be more sophisticated and less sexist. It has been found that women politicians who speak out for women’s issues are heavily attacked (Krook, 2017, p. 82). Indeed, many of the heckling instances raised in the *Femigiren* survey results support this finding. In the ‘free comments’ section of the survey, one woman narrated an incident when she was heckled with a comment, ‘I’ll do it for you!’ during a discussion about breast cancer screening (Femigiren, 2015, p. 36). Another was heckled for the entire duration of her question about setting up a gender equality ombudsman. The same woman was heckled for suggesting public funds be re-directed from a beauty pageant to support for working women (Femigiren, 2015, p. 31). Yet another was heckled with, ‘These days there are no feminine women anymore’ when posing a question on gender equality issues (Femigiren, 2015, p. 33). Feminists and women campaigning for gender equality are often deliberate targets for harassment.

It happens a lot when they are drinking. I don’t think the drunk MPs remember. They said things like, ‘You’re too fat!’ (I am self-conscious about this so this was the most shocking one); ‘You’re going to a [love] hotel after this aren’t you!’; ‘Feminists are the dreadful’, ‘old bag’, etc. (Femigiren, 2015, p. 34)

I was named the ‘sekuhara council member’ on account of my frequent questions to the council about workplace sexual harassment. One day I was

waiting for the elevator. When it stopped I tried to get in but the male council member inside saw me and said, 'I'll be accused of *sekuhara* in a tiny elevator', laughed, and closed the door without letting me in (Femigiren, 2015, p. 32).

The #NotTheCost initiative developed by the NDI identifies sexist heckling as a form of 'psychological violence', which can 'seek to delegitimise women as political actors' (NDI, 2017, p. 18). While often excused as innocent political banter, when heckling is directed at a woman *because she is a woman* it is then that it becomes a form of sexual harassment. It has been recognised around the world that women politicians often bear the brunt of a particular sexist heckling precisely because they are women. In Australia, women who complain about sexist heckling, among other things, are often accused of playing the 'gender card' (Gillard, 2014, p. 112) and in effect told to put up with it.

Other forms of psychological violence identified by the #NotTheCost programme include women receiving threats from their own families for engaging in politics. Kamikawa Yōko, who was Minister of State for Gender Equality at the time I interviewed her in 2007, mentioned that 'in general when women decide to run for office' their husbands threaten them with divorce. In Japan's case (and this might be applicable to other contexts too), I would suggest that the *infantilisation* of women – as a type of psychological violence – also serves to delegitimise their presence in politics. This might also be regarded as a type of paternalism, or *benevolent sexism* (Glick and Fiske, 1996, p. 491). One woman I interviewed narrated an incident when she was in the elevator in the Diet buildings and some visiting (male) prefectural councillors boarded the elevator. She asked them what floor they were going to and, not knowing she was a member of the Diet, they responded with, 'and you, young lady, what floor are you going to?' Other examples include male politicians saying things like, 'having a woman besides me makes things more enjoyable' as an intended compliment to the woman. The woman local councillor who raised this particular comment in my 2016 interview with her also told me of her 'elderly' male councillor colleagues wanting their photo taken with a newly elected young (30s) woman councillor. There are many examples of this in the *Femigiren* survey results as well, indicating that while the men who make the 'compliments' might believe their actions to be harmless, many women at the receiving end are uncomfortable. One councilwoman writes of being told, 'You have just the right amount of meat on you; I bet you'd be delicious' (Femigiren, 2015, p. 34). Another overheard a man say, 'She's beautiful – I'd vote for her if she ran for mayor' (Femigiren, 2015, p. 36). Yet another narrates a story of when she took her daughter to observe a council meeting. A male councillor tickled the daughter's chin and said, 'Aren't you cute.' He then turned to the woman, poked her chin and said, 'Mum is cute too' (Femigiren, 2015, p. 34). Others are more deliberate in their infantilisation, telling women they are 'not cute' (*kawaiikunai*) or ordering them, 'You're a girl, so behave' (Femigiren, 2015, p. 35). Psychological violence such as this disempowers women and 'puts them in their place' (NDI, 2017, p. 18), reminding them and those around them that they are intruding on male territory.

Disempowerment through fondling, prostituting and gender stereotyping: sexual and symbolic violence

Survey results reveal that women politicians are often at the receiving end of men's expectations of women to fulfil the role of sex object, or other stereotypically feminised role.

I was taunted, 'Put a swimsuit on and go for a swim' when we went on inspection tours near the ocean. (Femigiren, 2015, p. 32)

At a restaurant we went to after the after-work dinner event, my bottom was touched. (Femigiren, 2015, p. 34)

It was at an inspection site at dinnertime at our lodgings. I was the only woman there. During the interim of a dance show of a kimono-clad geisha, a male councillor lay down beneath the geisha's legs, looked up and laughed. (Femigiren, 2015, pp. 31–32)

The employment of geisha or 'companions'⁷ for after-work events by some local councils seems to be a longstanding tradition. At a seminar at Rikkyo University in 2007, the presenter – a councilwoman from a small town near Tokyo – told us about her experiences in local politics. She mentioned that 16 years previously 'companions' would often come to the after-work drink occasions and that prostitution of women was common. On overnight trips, she would hear conversations on the bus on the way home between her male colleagues about the woman's services the previous night. She also said that this does not happen these days. Yet, an informant told me in an interview almost 10 years after this lecture that at her local council, the practice of hiring 'companions' for after-work events is not uncommon (Interview, 2016), thus suggesting that the practice of having 'companions' at work events is alive and well.

Unwanted physical touching was also reported in the survey. One woman tells of an elderly councilman approaching her from behind and squeezing her waist from both sides. In shock, she recalls remembering little of the immediate aftermath other than the indifference of the bystanders (pp. 32–33). Survey comments suggest that some male politicians struggle to see women as their equals and instead expect them to perform stereotypically feminine and subservient tasks. Expecting, and indeed ordering women to pour drinks at after-work events is so common that it features as a comic in the awareness-raising pamphlet created and distributed by *Femigiren*.

At an after-work dinner event I was requested to pour the drinks by a man who said, 'Obviously it's better to be served by a woman'. (Femigiren, 2015, p. 33)

At a friendly get-together I was told 'You're a woman so pour the drinks'. (Femigiren, 2015, p. 36)

The symbolic violence inflicted by these comments is in the way that they 'seek to deny women's competence as political actors' (Krook, 2017, p. 80). Women are reminded that, despite being elected officials in the same capacity as their male

colleagues, they are indeed subservient to men and must continue to serve them in wife/sex object/caregiver roles. One woman complained about her male colleague who asked her to wipe his sweaty brow (pp. 36–37).

Silencing women politicians by cutting off their microphones has been recognised as another form of harassment in some countries (NDI, 2017, p. 18). One local councilwoman I interviewed in 2015 was silenced when her words were deleted from the minutes of a council meeting. Upon hearing about her dilemma, members of *Femigiren* came to her support immediately by filling the seats of the chamber at the next council meeting (along with the councilwoman's local supporters whom she had called in) ensuring she was listened to, and afterwards, confronting, *en masse*, the speaker to denounce his removal of the councilwoman's comments from the minutes. According to the councilwoman, subsequent to this show of support, the speaker stopped harassing her and never deleted her speech from the minutes again.

The relevance of this story of support is in its demonstration of the potential for women politicians of organising *as women for women*. Solidarity among women politicians is important for addressing VAWP (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2016, p. 10). In this case, the councilwoman had a support group to turn to when she felt something was amiss. But many do not have this support, and many do not know how to articulate their discomfort, which also depends on the context. The same informant told me that at an after-work drinks event, a male colleague whispered to her, 'What are your nipples like?' She was so stunned that she did not respond because she could not quite believe what she had heard. Not knowing how to respond is not unique to Japan, and has been recognised as one of the obstacles to combating VAWP (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2016, p. 8; Krook, 2017, pp. 81–82). I would argue, however, that the lack of comprehension about what constitutes sexual harassment even among politicians (both male and female) remains a serious problem in Japan's case. When Suzuki Akihiro apologised to Shiomura Ayaka for yelling, 'Shouldn't you hurry up and get married?' at the Tokyo metropolitan assembly, he said, 'I recognise that there are women who want to get married and can't, and those who want to have children and can't. My comments were lacking in concern towards people like that' (BBC News Asia, 2014, np). His comment indicates a lack of awareness of the structural violence embedded in his heckle and instead re-constructs his behaviour as one of thoughtlessness for women who cannot have children or find husbands.

Comments in the *Femigiren* survey also indicate that sexual harassment claims are sometimes brushed off as being trivial (p. 33). Some LDP women I interviewed in 2007 and 2008 also dismissed it as a trivial concern, a not uncommon response by women working in male-dominated fields who do not want to be seen as 'victims' (Frühstück, 2007). One informant went to so far as to say that as politicians, women should know how to use sexist treatment to their advantage (Interview, 2007). This approach, while effective perhaps on an individual level, is not a helpful response to a systemic problem, which, because of its gendered nature, affects all women.

Conclusion

Sexual harassment serves to marginalise and control women even in places where they are ostensibly 'welcome'. It is a way for men who feel encroached upon to band together to undermine the professional integrity of their female colleagues (Puwar, 2004, p. 87). This has the potential to inhibit women's ability to exercise

their full citizenship as elected officials (Enloe, 2013, p. 79). In fact, VAWP leads to some women feeling demoralised and less likely than men to stand for re-election (Krook and Restrepo Sanin, 2016, p. 151). In addition to the harm inflicted on incumbent women, VAWP can make women less likely to run for office, even in contexts where they are already less likely than men to do so (Krook and Restrepo Sanin, 2016, p. 152). Surveys of Australian women found that many were turned off the idea of running for politics because of the sexist abuse that former Prime Minister Julia Gillard suffered, and similarly in the UK, more than three-quarters of participants in a women's leadership programme said that the sexist abuse of female politicians was a concern for them as to whether they would pursue political office (Krook, 2016, p. 16). No such surveys have been done in Japan, but given the extent of sexual harassment in Japanese politics and given the country's very low level of female political representation, this would merit investigation.

The violence that women in Japanese politics encounters is wide and varied, ranging from sexist heckling to silencing to unwanted physical touching. Yet this harassment of women is rarely discussed as an issue, much less named as violence – in this sense it remains hidden. I suggest that one of the reasons for this is that it is difficult for people to clearly articulate what constitutes sexual harassment in a culture where the sexual exploitation of women and girls is so widespread. I have argued in this article that the harassment of women in politics in Japan should be understood as taking place within the context of a culture where the sexual exploitation of girls and women is foundational and where sexual harassment is neither understood nor taken seriously by many, including those in politics. Because of this, many women do not have the language with which to respond to harassment, and even when they do, rarely is anyone listening. As has been found in other countries, harassment and abuse are seen as the 'cost of doing politics' and therefore are often not taken seriously. But accepting this is problematic because it removes the potential to make gendered claims. As politicians in other countries have discovered, accepting violence as one of the costs of doing politics silences women who want to point out and fight against sexist treatment (Albright, 2016). While sexual harassment legislation is welcome in these conditions, for legislation to be effective the first step for Japan is for the state, political parties and individuals to acknowledge that the sexual harassment of women politicians is a serious problem of *violence* affecting women and affecting democracy.

Notes

¹ It has been suggested that the term *sekuhara* is in fact a trivialisation of the term sexual harassment (Taga, cited in Niven, 1992, p. 17). *Sekuhara*-themed bars, where men can act out what they are forbidden to do in the workplace, lend validity to this suggestion and also to the claims that sexual harassment in Japan is regarded as an inconvenience to and imposition on normative male-dominated business practices (Patterson, 1993, p. 221). The term *sekuhara* is in fact not the term used in the Equal Employment Opportunity Law. The EEOL refers to 'problems originating in sexual behaviour' (Article 11).

² 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).

³ In addition to individual statements issued by groups such as Femigiren (2013) and Women's Active Museum on War and Peace (WAM) (2013), several Asian and international NGOs were signatories to a statement issued by Amnesty International (2013).

⁴ Prostitution is illegal in Japan, under the 1956 Prostitution Prevention Law. For detailed discussions, see Tsunoda (2013) or Norma (2011).

⁵ There remain doubts about whether it was actually him or whether he was his party's sacrificial lamb.

⁶ This is a response rate of 28 per cent. Respondents might have been more likely to respond if they had experience of sexual harassment. The low response rate might also reflect women's propensity to ignore sexual harassment. One national level politician, when asked if she had ever experienced sexual discrimination, responded that she did when she began her political career, but now, some years later, she might have become 'used to it' (cited in Dalton, 2015, p. 117). Women in male-dominated workplaces often trivialise harassment and discrimination in order to avoid being seen as weak or a victim (Frühstück, 2007, p. 98; Dalton, 2015, pp. 115–116). 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'.

⁷ 'Companions' are women who are hired as corporate entertainers to pour drinks and engage in light-hearted conversation.

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