

COUNTERPOINT

Rape: A crime for which hush-up society ought to stand trial, too

By ROGER PULVERS

Mika Kobayashi is a brave woman.

Ten years ago she was the victim of a horrendous crime. For a long time she could barely function in society, yet she overcame the trauma to write and publish two books about what happened to her. Kobayashi's going public with her own story has since helped many others living with deep psychological stress.

"Seihanzai Higai to Tatakau to iu Koto" ("Fighting the Harm that Comes from Sexual Crime"), the title of the second book, published by Asahi Shimbun Shuppan in October, illuminates her message. Rape is a singularly brutal crime; and the ordeal faced by victims in its aftermath, particularly in traditional societies, only compounds that brutality.

On a summer night in 2000, Kobayashi, aged 24, was riding her bicycle home from work when she was stopped by a man sitting in the driver's seat of a large parked four-wheel-drive car. He held a map in his hands and asked her the way to the station.

The car was stationary beside a park just minutes from her home, and Kobayashi thought nothing of getting off her bicycle to help. After all, this is Japan, where the streets are famously safe, even at night.

Before she knew it, another man grabbed her from behind, shoved her into the back of the car and, brandishing a box-cutter in her face, said: "If you don't want to get hurt, just shut up."

Blaring music was turned on, and she was raped.

"My parents and brothers lived five minutes away by car," she

writes, "but there was no way I could tell them about this."

At a complete loss what to do, Kobayashi managed to summon the presence of mind to send her ex-boyfriend e-mails — though they all comprised just one word: *Shinitai* (I want to die).

Finally, "not wanting to go home by myself," she went to the police, who took her to a hospital.

Months of post-traumatic stress disorder followed, which showed itself in her loss of appetite, aimless walking about and persistent thoughts of self-blame. "Everyone's looking at me as if I'm dirty," she thought. "I'm the only dirty person. I'm nothing but a nuisance to society."

But then, in 2008, Kobayashi somehow mustered the courage to write her first book telling her story. It received such wide acclaim that she threw herself into action, making contact with thousands of Japanese women who have suffered from sexual violence. The present volume collates information gleaned from those contacts, and reveals the real situation of sex crimes in Japan.

According to a Cabinet Office survey conducted in the fall of 2008, 3.1 percent of Japanese women have been raped once, and 4.2 percent twice or more — making a total of 7.3 percent.

Kobayashi calculates that this adds up to more than 3 million such victims now living in this country. Further Cabinet Office statistics (relating solely to heterosexual sex crimes) show that rapes are committed on a ratio of about half by "people known to the victim" and half by "strangers."

Among those rapists known to their victims, 18 percent are parents, 11 percent brothers or sisters, 4 percent other relatives, 11 percent boyfriends or girlfriends, 5 percent spouses, 2 percent grandfathers, 16 percent co-workers and 4 percent teachers — with the remainder classed as "others." (The categories are mainly genderless, because the sample includes a very small number of male victims.)

As for the scene of the crime, 23 percent of rapes occurred in the victims' homes, followed by 11 percent at a hotel.

But with the rape itself, in most cases the victims' real trauma has just begun.

As a result of her research — done with the help of the nearly 3,000 victims she corresponded with — Kobayashi found that only 4 percent went to the police and only 3 percent to a hospital. A full 85 percent of rape victims went nowhere.

It is a fact that the number of rape cases going to trial in Japan is 1 percent of the total . . . the known total, that is.

This is where the self-blame comes in.

When Kobayashi asked her respondents why they had not reported the crime, they answered in this order: "I was ashamed"; "I didn't want to have to remember it"; "I thought that if I just kept everything to myself, it would go away."

"The rapists know this about us," writes Kobayashi, "and they often take photos and videos of the victim, threatening to release them publicly."

Japan is well equipped to handle cases of sexual crimes. Hospitals are authorized to issue the morning-after contraceptive pill to victims. Virtually every city, ward, town and village has a "Women's Consultation Center."

But, as Kobayashi points out, "even some people working at city, ward, town or village offices don't know about the existence of these centers, and women who have approached such offices often hit a blank wall of ignorance . . . or the official may know a lot about domestic violence but have very little experience in dealing with sexual crime."

Yet, behind all the surveys and statistics lies a more sinister and unpalatable fact — that this is a society which thrives on hush-up.

Don't ask; don't tell; and, above all, never confess anything about yourself that someone might someday use against you.

The institutions of political democracy are widely effective and universally adhered to in Japan; but the social mores governing interpersonal relationships have made only modest forays out of the past.

Japan is a country constantly wrestling, in every sphere of public and private life, with a recalcitrant neo-feudalistic mentality: "What you don't acknowledge ceases to exist."

Given all this, Kobayashi has defined her role.

"I want to work together with friends to exert influence on the various apparatuses of government, beginning with education, in order to make this a 'society where people can confess (what's happened to them).'"

"We don't have a moment to lose. I want to tell people that it isn't only them who are victims struggling with and being tormented by sexual violence."

It took Kobayashi seven years to confess herself in public.

"I am Mika Kobayashi," she said at a symposium on sexual violence in 2007. "Seven years ago I was the victim of a sexual crime." She then found herself swamped by the media. She had opened the floodgates.

This is the way many social ills are revealed and exposed in Japan. After decades of denial and smugness based on coverup and ignorance, one brave person tells a story, and "all of a sudden" similar stories pop up across the country. Without these stories, perpetrators of heinous crimes retain a free hand to wreak havoc on the lives of others.

It takes great courage to shatter the conspiracy of hush-up when, traditionally, the fragments of shame fall onto your own head.

Kobayashi has gone on to batter those high walls of cruelty, smugness and ignorance, transforming her personal tragedy into something that gives practical help, guidance and hope to other women like her.

With women like Mika Kobayashi working in public, potential future victims of sexual crime may be protected from this society's crime-generating smugness and the collusive silence that has long put them in danger of their lives.

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