

# Education in Context: Examining Attitudes Toward Sexual Assault in Japan and Developing an Educational Tool for High School Students

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**Abstract – In Japan, the reluctance to talk about sexual assault has led to a culture where harmful attitudes toward the crime create a toxic environment for survivors of sexual violence. These attitudes are only reinforced by the lack of a standardized curriculum for sexual violence education. Without education, misconceptions of the crime are able to persist. This paper discusses the reasons behind this silence in Japan, and how to use the understanding of the silence to effectively educate students about sexual violence in Japan’s context. Through examining a variety of academic and non-academic resources, I discovered that the main barrier to better outcomes for survivors is the reluctance to discuss what is considered a private discussion in public. With this understanding I created a sexual violence educational tool that addresses the pressing issues in Japan’s culture surrounding sexual violence. Normalizing the discussion around sexual assault is a vital step in creating a better environment for survivors in Japan.**

*Key Words* – sexual violence, Japan, education

## INTRODUCTION

The United Nations have cited 17 Sustainable Development Goals to achieve by 2030. Of them, Goal 5 aims to “achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.” Aside from being a “fundamental human right,” empowering women and girls will enhance the lives of over half the global population, thus creating a more progressive, sustainable world (“Gender Equality: Why it Matters”). Currently across the world, girls and women continue to face many forms of gender inequality, one of them being gender-based violence. One form of gender-based violence is sexual violence, which is a term that “refers to crimes like sexual assault, rape, and sexual abuse” (“Types of Sexual Violence,” 2020). Sexual violence is any sort of non-consensual sexual contact, and can happen to all genders of all ages (“Sexual Abuse,” 2020). The attitudes surrounding sexual violence are a facet of gender inequality because they encompasses a society’s perception of gender roles. Therefore, examining the above can give insight into the culture that surrounds sexual assault and the way survivors are treated within their community.

Within Japan, historical practices of depicting women as objects and as inferior beings has led to a society where it is taboo to speak out about sexual assault. As Jake Adelstein, a crime journalist (1993-2005) for the Yomiuri Newspaper, says, “Japan is a very sexual society.” At convenient stores, it is common to see sexual magazines on display in view of anyone who enters the store, including children. According to Motoko Rich, the Tokyo bureau chief of the New York Times, “there is a sense in the culture that it is OK for a man to view women as objects” (Woods, 2018, 18:47). However, “to talk about date rape, or sexual assault... you don’t see open discussions about that,” says Adelstein (Woods, 2018, 4:55). This creates a destructive cycle, one where distorted images of gender enforce distorted perceptions of gender roles, but there are no open discussions in place to fix these skewed perceptions. The acceptance of these perceptions of genders, especially of women, feed the toxic culture surrounding sexual assault, including misconceptions about consent, the psychological consequences of sexual assault, and even the very definition of sexual assault. Although it is common for many women, especially high school girls, to be sexually assaulted on the train, not many come forward (Woods, 2018, 42:45). One reason for the under reporting is because many are unaware that these actions count as sexual assault. However, Hiroko Goto, a law professor at Chiba University, says another reason is because survivors of sexual assault are often told to “forget about it,” or act as if nothing happened. “Victims are always told it’s their own fault” (Woods, 2018, 6:10).

In this paper I examine the attitudes toward sexual assault and survivors in Japan. Using this cultural context, I developed a peer to peer educational tool that addresses unique issues in Japan pertaining to sexual assault.

## EXAMINING JAPAN’S ATTITUDE TOWARD SEXUAL ASSAULT THROUGH THE LAW

Japan’s penal code pertaining to sexual offenses was created in 1907. In this original penal code, the crime of rape was limited to cases where the victim was a female. Additionally, the crimes of rape and other indecent acts were only prosecutable upon a formal complaint by the victim (Kitagawa, 2018). The section of the code that required a “formal complaint by the victim” illustrated the law’s disregard for

the aftermath of the crime - the confusion, the feelings of guilt, shame, and more - that makes it very difficult for survivors of sexual assault to report the crime (“Sexual Abuse,” 2020).

This original code lasted for 110 years before the first major revision in 2017. The revision redefined the crime of rape to include all people as victims (Article 177, Japan Penal Code. Accessed through <http://www.japaneselawtranslation.go.jp/?re=02>). Additionally, the revision enabled crimes to be prosecuted without a victim complaint (Article 180, Japan Penal Code. See link above). The 2017 revision therefore marked a marginally improved attitude toward sexual assault in Japan, one which only partially acknowledged the complexity of the crime. However, the current Japanese law still defines the crime of rape narrowly. Unless force, violence, or intimidation can be proven, the crime is not considered rape. Lack of consent is simply not enough to convict the perpetrator (Article 177, Japan Penal Code. See link above).

By defining rape as a crime where the victim is unable to resist due to force, violence, or threat, it reinforces the dominant narrative that rape is a violent act that takes place among strangers, when in fact the reality is that the perpetrators of these acts are often someone that the victim knows.

Furthermore, the law excludes psychological factors that can contribute to an inability to resist. Studies show that “many victims simply freeze when they are attacked,” regardless of whether there is force or violence involved (Woods, 2018, 11:37). The law not only “[echoes] socially dominant values and conventions,” but also establishes “dominant narratives,” and excludes incidents that do not conform to those narratives (Burns, 2005, p.5). The law makes it the victim's responsibility to say no, when in fact consent should never be assumed unless there is a yes. This fails to meet international standards for sexual violence protection by the law (Amnesty International, 2011). The failure of Japan’s law to revise this critical clause is evidence that there is little discussion, as well as incentive, to reflect the complexity of sexual violence, as well as little progress towards providing justice for a majority of survivors.

Although many factors contribute to harmful attitudes toward sexual assault and gender, what it boils down to is the lack of education and discussion around the matter. Sexual assault education programs can increase rape knowledge, as well as change attitudes toward the crime (Anderson & Whiston, 2003). Specifically, long term educational programs can be particularly effective in altering “rape attitudes and rape-related attitudes” (Anderson & Whiston, 2003). Instead of burying the topic in to shame, we must speak out about it in order to clarify rape myths, clouded views of consent, and the tendency to blame the victim.

## EDUCATION IN JAPAN

Unfortunately in Japan, the skewed perceptions of gender roles and sexual assault are only enforced further by a lack of organized education. Like many other countries, the Japanese government issues a standardized curriculum outline for various subjects for all grades through high school.

However, there is no standardized guideline for sex-ed in Japan, resulting in the inconsistent content of these classes. Without strict guidelines, teachers are free to skip over content they deem unimportant, or even worse, are unaware of (“New Learning Guidelines and Sex Education: Focusing on Junior High,” 2020). This poses a problem, as there is a risk for individual views of sexual assault and gender to be passed down without check. As for the few books that have been published for school guideline use, the Japanese Association for Sex Education (JASE) states that they are outdated, some even published back in 1990. Even the more recent published guidelines are deemed as *fujūbunn*, or insufficient, by JASE and in need of revision.

It is vital for sex-ed and sexual assault education to be taught together because young students must be aware of sexual violence. In a world where 1 in 6 women and 1 in 33 men are victims of rape or attempted rape (“Victims of Sexual Violence,” 2020), it is essential that students are taught how to react to or respond to an uncomfortable or dangerous situation. Furthermore, the lack of discussion around sexual assault is what allows destructive narratives to persist, which forces survivors into further shame and fear.

Although it is a school’s primary job to teach this, many independent companies have compiled their own educational resources in an attempt to provide better education on the matter. However, as most of these resources do not fully address the pressing issues in Japan’s culture surrounding sexual assault, they do not directly combat misconceptions of gender and sexual assault in Japan. Therefore I aimed to create a sexual violence educational tool that addresses the topic in the context of Japan.

## EDUCATION IN CONTEXT: EXPLORING ATTITUDES TOWARD SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN JAPAN

Prior to creating this educational tool, I examined a variety of academic and non-academic resources, including journal articles, documentaries, news articles, legal documents and existing educational platforms. Through my literature review, I discovered the main barrier to better outcomes for survivors is the reluctance to discuss what is considered a private discussion in public. Two main reasons I have uncovered for this silence are the traditional gender roles and the lack of a standardized sexual assault and sex-ed curriculum for students in Japan.

In Japan, historically and presently, public expressions of dissent with the norm are uncommon, if not taboo. Women are especially aware of this outgroup. Specifically, when women voice their opinion, it can be seen as “unfeminine” in Japan (Woods, 2018, 19:35). Because sexual violence education involves teaching being assertive about personal boundaries, these gender roles make it difficult for women to hold an open discussion about sexual violence without being criticized for breaking the traditional expectation of womanly behavior.

A quote from politician Sugita Mio in “Japan’s Secret Shame” illustrates this expectation for women quite well:

“If you’re working as a woman in society, you’ll be approached by people you don’t like. Being able to properly turn down those advances is one of your skills” (Woods, 2018, 34:07).

Her words demonstrate the deep and complex reasons behind the silence in Japan. She, like many others, focuses on why the woman was not able to avoid an inappropriate “advance,” rather than focusing on the wrong of those “advances.” The origin of these beliefs is at least in part from the media, where women are viewed and pressured to be compliant (Woods, 2018, 18:50).

It should be noted that while these views reflect the struggles of a specific scenario, wherein the victim is a woman and the perpetrator is a man, they do not capture the distinct and equally substantial struggles of men, LGBTQ+ persons, persons with disabilities, elderly persons, and other frequently ignored survivors.

Ultimately, these factors that create a culture of silence around sexual violence reinforce harmful attitudes about the crime, specifically, victim blaming and clouded views of consent. With this in mind, I aimed to create an educational tool that addresses these two main issues within the context of Japanese culture.

## DEVELOPING AN EDUCATIONAL TOOL

I created an educational tool that can be used as a guideline for teaching about sexual assault in Japan. My educational tool is in a PDF format, and the PDFs are posted on a website to ensure easy access to them. Because attitudes toward sexual assault differ in various communities and cultures, I chose a format that would allow for a standardized, yet flexible and personalized education.

### FORMAT

I first identified the lack of a standardized curriculum for teaching sexual assault in Japan to high school students, and created my tool to bridge that gap (“New Learning Guidelines and Sex Education: Focusing on Junior High,” 2020). Students who want to learn or teach the topic of sexual assault can access the PDFs which include evidence based information. I wanted my tool to be a reliable, standardized, and convenient tool that people in Japan, mainly high school students, can easily use to educate themselves and others in their community.

Additionally, my tool will allow flexibility in the learning process. The first way my tool allows flexibility is the setting and group size of learning. Because sexual violence is a sensitive, serious, and personal topic to discuss, those who wish to learn about it on their own may do so by accessing the PDF on their own, thus allowing for personalization and confidentiality. For those who wish to learn in a group setting, they can decide on the composition of the group. Being able to choose who to discuss this topic with puts the power in the hands of the learners, thus eliminating possible feelings of

powerlessness that otherwise might be felt in a larger traditional classroom setting. Feeling in control of the ongoing discussion is especially important when the receiving audience includes survivors of sexual violence. In these situations, it is essential that the way the information is being taught ensures feelings of trust and safety (Konradi, 1993). The second way my tool allows flexibility is in the teaching style. In addition to aiding the traditional adult teacher to student format, my tool will allow for peer to peer education. Research has shown that youth are more likely to change their attitudes about topics such as sexual violence if the relayer of the information is somebody who they feel faces similar pressures and concerns (Sloane & Zimmer, 1993).

Especially in Japan where many are reluctant to discuss sexual violence, we must be creative in our approach. Therefore, the PDFs, which lay out what topics to cover in sexual assault education, will serve as a standardized yet flexible and personal educational tool that can be customized to individual communities’ needs in Japan. Additionally, I plan to translate the PDFs to make both an English and Japanese version. Much of the progressive information and research on sexual assault is in English. Therefore by making my tool bilingual, my hope is to bridge the gap between these two communities.

## CONTENT

The PDFs include basic information about sexual violence, common myths about the crime, the psychological aftermath of the crime, as well as tips for safety planning.

This general education about sexual violence will increase knowledge about the crime, and therefore will increase empathy for survivors. The law illustrates the damage that an incomplete or inaccurate understanding of the crime can have. If there is education about the complexity of the crime, people will be more likely to change their attitudes toward the crime, and create a better, less hostile environment for survivors in Japan (Anderson & Whiston, 2005).

I also included an explanation and analysis of different aspects that contribute to the overall attitudes surrounding sexual violence in Japan. This includes examination of the penal code pertaining to sexual violence, as well as harmful attitudes about sexual violence that are especially pervasive in Japan, including victim blaming and clouded views of consent. I included this because it is important for one to first understand the attitudes toward sexual violence in Japan in order to understand why there is such little conversation about the topic. From there, it is possible to educate people about the dangers of this silence, and how to speak up with cultural sensitivity.

Additionally, throughout the PDFs I explain the “why” and “how” behind the topics that are included. In Japan, where most are reluctant to speak about sexual assault, it is important to explain *why* these topics need to be discussed first in order to get the conversation going. The “how” should be explained in order to give the teachers tips on how to deliver the content with cultural sensitivity. Whoever is teach-

ing the subject should keep in mind that if listeners are suddenly confronted with a topic they are uncomfortable with, they are likely to be less receptive to the information that is being presented to them (Konradi, 1993). Therefore, I included the “how” sections in my tool to create a guideline for how to discuss these topics within the cultural context of Japan. An example is given below from one section of my PDFs.

### EXAMPLE

As an example, from my research I knew that a topic like consent needed to be taught in a way that was approachable to Japanese students. It had to be presented in a way that people in Japan would be receptive to learning about. Therefore, I included a section called “How to talk about consent in Japan” where I give an alternative way to approach the topic by implicitly referencing consent through one of four themes: communication skills, decision making, personal space and interpersonal relationships. This method of teaching certain aspects of consent without explicitly mentioning the term is used in many schools in the U.S. (Willis, Jozkowski, & Read, 2018). Talking about these four themes is a way to establish respect for others’ personal decisions, and is also a way to teach young people to be assertive about their personal boundaries. Although an implicit reference to consent is not nearly as effective as an explicit discussion of consent, it is a starting point (Willis, Jozkowski, & Read, 2018). After all, an implicit reference to consent is an improvement from the current lack of conversation about consent

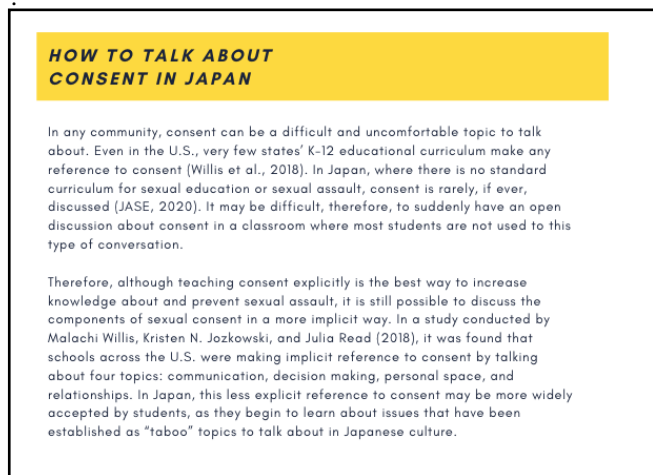


FIGURE 1: Example heading that provides context to the consent education portion of my tool. (Enlarged examples from my tool can be viewed at this link: <https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1N8h6Z5tBr4g6f9Fk22CsB8Jk0WKLTA03b0iCzuXb-vg/edit?usp=sharing>)

### FUTURE PERSPECTIVES

My plan is to first test this tool within my community at my school in a peer to peer education style. Ideally, I would work with small groups and have multiple sessions with these same groups. I will constantly be gathering feedback on the receptiveness of my peers, as well as how my peers’ attitudes toward the crime change over time. I also plan on training fellow peers on how to teach this material. After gathering feedback from my school, my hope is to expand to include students in other Japanese schools.

Although an uncomfortable topic, sexual violence education must be implemented in schools to teach young people how to protect themselves, as well as how to support others who are survivors of sexual violence. Only by normalizing the discussion around sexual violence can we hope for a better environment for survivors in Japan.

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