

# Japan's Secret Shame review - breaking a nation's taboo about rape

This important film focuses on allegations by Shiori Ito to tell the wider but hidden story of violence towards Japanese women



▲ Shiori Ito in Tokyo. Photograph: Tom Reed/BBC/True Vision Productions Ltd

**J**apan's Secret Shame is an extremely difficult documentary to watch. It is harrowing, frustrating and distressing. It is also an incredibly important film, brave and necessary, handled with care and quiet fury by the producer and director, Erica Jenkin. It tells a big story about violence towards women, about structural inequality and discrimination, by focusing on a smaller, more individual one.

In 2015, Shiori Ito came forward with a public allegation of rape against a prominent and well-connected journalist, Noriyuki Yamaguchi, who denies the charge. Over the course of almost three years, we see Ito's story unfolding, in awful ways and also in inspirational ones. At times, it is maddening beyond belief. Ultimately, it leaves the viewer with a sense of urgent upheaval, and perhaps, optimistically, the potential beginnings of a significant cultural shift.

In Japan, we are told, people rarely come forward with sexual assault allegations. At the time filming began, the country's rape laws had remained the same since 1907; there was a shorter minimum sentence for rape than there was for theft. Statistics holding Japan to a global standard would suggest that, culturally and structurally, sexual violence against women is not treated as a serious problem. For example, according to the documentary, there are 510 rapes reported for every million people in the UK, but in Japan that number falls to 10. Some might suggest that this means Japan is a safe country for women. Most of the contributors to this film, however, believe it is so taboo to discuss it that victims rarely even come forward.

Ito broke that taboo when she spoke about her accusations against Yamaguchi. This was before the #MeToo movement, which has had little impact in Japan, she says, although its emergence later in the story brought global attention to her experience. The early part of this documentary is particularly hard to watch, and one can only imagine how painful it must have been for her to relive that night. She recalls her account of the evening she spent with Yamaguchi in Tokyo. The story is not an unfamiliar one: she was more than 20 years younger than him, with ambitions of getting a job in the media; he was a celebrity journalist, the Washington bureau chief for a news station and biographer to the prime minister. She says he promised a conversation about a producer role which, of course, had to take place over dinner and drinks. She says she thinks she was drugged; he says she was drunk. A taxi driver testified that she asked to be taken to a train station so that she could go home. Yamaguchi took her to his hotel room. For the film, she returns to the outside of the building "to face it".

Ito gives a detailed account of what happened when she went to the police, from being asked to physically recreate the events of that night on a mattress using a life-sized doll to represent her attacker, to having to explain to a male police officer exactly why she wanted to speak to a female officer. (There was no female officer who could file the report - women make up only 8% of the police force, according to this film.) The rape crisis centre, the only one in Tokyo, would not give her telephone advice, saying she had to travel two hours for an in-person interview. She could not, she says, get out of bed.

In addition to Ito's desire to speak out in a culture painted as deeply resistant to such matters, the case became highly politicised and the focus of international scrutiny when police were ordered to drop an arrest warrant for Yamaguchi, with opposition MPs alleging some kind of high-level cover-up. Criminal charges were never brought, though Ito is in the process of bringing a civil case against him.

Japan's Secret Shame leaves the viewer with plenty to be furious about. I had a knot in my stomach from the start. But within this terrible story is a trail of hope, from the older women who treat Ito as a celebrity to those inspired to come forward with their own stories. At the end, we meet a woman who was raped but had never spoken about it until she reached out to Ito. "A drop of water on its own is nothing," she told her, "but when it gathers, it can form a tsunami."