

“I don’t want to live in a world where such things can happen.”

David McNeill

Abstract: *With the embers of the Johnny Kitagawa scandal still glowing, more victims of sexual abuse have come forward with disturbing claims about a major figure in Japan’s entertainment industry. One of them talks to David McNeill.*

One day in November 2015, Emi Sato (a pseudonym) heard the ping of a message arriving on her cellphone. An aspiring entertainer, then aged 25, Sato was looking for work in the television industry. The sender was Kazutaka Ozawa, a comedian, who invited her to a ‘gathering’ of industry types in the Roppongi Grand Hyatt Hotel in central Tokyo. Sato sent a Line message saying she’d be there.

Ozawa was in suite 1502 when she arrived, she says, along with two other women, both in their twenties. Ozawa promised they’d be meeting a “world-famous VIP”, Sato recalls. The women were told to place their phones on the table, which were confiscated and put into a bag. “I just thought this is what happens in the entertainment world,” recalls Sato. The room doors slid open an hour or so later and in walked Hitoshi Matsumoto, she says.

Though ‘world famous’ was a stretch, Matsumoto (now aged 60) was certainly a Japanese A-lister, one half of arguably Japan’s best-known comedy duo, Downtown, and a nightly fixture of primetime television. Several hours later, he would orally rape her, she says. Ozawa and another man in the suite also sexually assaulted her, she says, before dismissing the three women with their cab fare home.

These claims were first aired in December 2023 by Shukan Bunshun, a weekly tabloid with a record of

scoops, particularly in entertainment and politics. Since Sato and a second woman in the room went public, roughly another 10 women have come forward anonymously to tell their stories. Some suggest that Ozawa was, in effect, Matsumoto’s fixer, arranging young women to attend ‘parties’ where they were subjected to unwanted sexual advances and assaults. Bunshun says younger male comedians for years, in effect, paid tribute to older stars such as Matsumoto by procuring women as a sign of respect in the hopes of earning their favor, a practice the magazine called ‘*sei jōnō shisutemu*,’ or sexual tallage system.

Despite initially and reflexively defending its biggest star, Yoshimoto Kogyo Co., the Kansai-based talent agency that manages Matsumoto and hundreds of other entertainers, has since launched an internal probe into the claims. The company’s governors are surely mindful of the false tone set by another Japanese industry giant, Johnny & Associates Inc., after its founder, Johnny Kitagawa, was posthumously accused of multiple historical sexual assaults in 2023.

Johnny’s then president, Julie Fujishima, initially attempted to cast doubt on Kitagawa’s victims before public pressure forced her to launch an independent inquiry, which confirmed that her uncle had sexually abused children going back decades. Roughly 1,000 of Kitagawa’s now adult victims have since come forward to demand compensation. Johnny & Associates has been dismantled and a new company, Smile-Up, is attempting to put the scandal to rest, with mixed results.

Kitagawa’s prolific pederasty was enabled by the mainstream media, which ignored decades of red flags and survivors’ testimonies because of its deep

commercial interdependence with Japan's most powerful talent agency. Matsumoto has been less fortunate. Most of the media has reported the Bunshun story, albeit with little detail. In January, Matsumoto announced he was suspending his career and suing the magazine's publisher.

He has since maintained a self-enforced silence, except for an occasional tweet proclaiming his innocence and his determination to return to the airwaves. On March 25th he tweeted that he was "confused, frustrated and sad" by the women's stories and said his voice was being drowned out. "I want to tell the world the truth and do comedy as soon as possible," he wrote. Ozawa (50), too, has retreated from the public eye but ceded nothing to his accusers. "There is absolutely no truth that we set up a drinking party for the purpose of sexual intercourse," he said in January.

Matsumoto demanded ¥550 million yen in damages from Bungei Shunju, the magazine's publisher, at the start of the defamation trial on March 28th. Bungei's lawyer Yoichi Kitamura rejected demands to reveal the identities of the two women, "including their names, addresses, birth dates, cell phone numbers, as well as their Line messaging app accounts and pictures." A statement by one of the alleged victims said she had already been harassed and threatened for coming forward.

Journalists have tread around the accusations carefully, however, declining to publish interviews with any of the women. Only The Asahi Shimbun has published a follow-up story. Bunshun, which had to legally defend its reporting of Kitagawa after being sued for libel by Johnny & Associates two decades ago, again feels isolated. (The Tokyo High Court concluded in 2003 that claims of assault by several of Kitagawa's victims were true. Kitagawa's final appeal was dismissed in 2005, yet he continued to abuse children for years afterwards.)

Such potentially ruinous claims against a major star might have prompted a flurry of follow-up stories in mainstream media outlets but many depend on

contract entertainers from Yoshimoto Kogyo to fill their schedules. The century-old company is Japan's biggest employer of comedic talent and is involved in the making of about 5,000 TV programs annually. Yoshimoto also works with the government on initiatives such as Cool Japan, which promotes Japan's cultural industries. Television news, meanwhile, considers the story an "entertainment scandal", difficult to verify and therefore not worth spending the resources it would cost to do so, said one producer who spoke anonymously.

Yoshimoto Kogyo has declined to comment on the case.

Bringing powerful men to book for sexual assaults is notoriously difficult. Yet, over the last decade, the American legal system has succeeded in mauling or toppling titanic figures such as Bill Cosby, Roger Ailes, Bill O'Reilly, Harvey Weinstein and Donald Trump, often after their victims spoke to journalists. The women faced a very familiar gauntlet of scrutiny and secondary abuse; of private self-doubt and public questions, notably: why did they take so long to come forward, and why were they doing so now?

Sato says she tried to put the night behind her, blaming herself for her own naivety. Yoshimoto Kogyo seemed so powerful, she said, going to the police meant "I'd have been wiped out." But given Matsumoto's fame and media ubiquity, forgetting proved impossible. "I didn't even have a TV because I didn't want to see him." One day, Sato says she was walking through Roppongi and saw him looking down on her from a giant billboard poster. "It was like a ghost haunting me," she recalls. A lawyer put her in touch with Bunshun, Japan's most aggressive scoop machine.

Sato gave the magazine a detailed description of the evening at the Roppongi Grand Hyatt. She said that Matsumoto seemed listless and in a bad-mood from the start of their encounter. Initially he sat on the sofa beside Ozawa and they began talking shop, ignoring the women. At some point, he turned to ask their names. The questioning seemed aggressive but practiced, as though it was routine, says Sato. Nobody smiled.

Matsumoto then asked: ‘Who wants to have my baby’?

“I didn’t want to be rude, even if it was a joke,” says Sato. “I was like, ‘c’mon, what are you talking about’. We all treated it as small talk. We just let it go. I started to think the whole meeting was a prank.”

Out of nowhere, she recalls, Ozawa shouted that they were going to play a game. Matsumoto disappeared. She says she was half pushed/led by Ozawa to a door into the next room. The door shut and she says she found herself in a bedroom, with Matsumoto lying on a bed. “It was all so weird,” she says. “I was hoping it was all a prank and that this was the climax. He was so famous. I didn’t know what to do. I said, ‘I’ve been watching you on TV since I was a child and I’m so honored’. I wanted to show I respected him.”

She says Matsumoto ordered her to come to his side.

“I was terrified. I was trying not to be rude but I stayed where I was and put my head down. He stood up and came in my direction. He was naked and had an erection. I didn’t believe it was happening and yet it was. It was like watching an accident in slow motion. I crossed my arms; he took my right arm and pulled it away. And with his left foot he kicked my right leg wide. I realized he was really strong. He shouted: are you going to have my baby? I just kept saying ‘sorry’ because he sounded angry and my mind went blank. He tried to kiss me, he pulled my shirt off, ripping the buttons. I crouched down. He put his penis in my mouth.”

When the assault was over, Sato says she went to wash out her mouth and was groped by a second man in the confined space of the bathroom. Back on the sofa, Ozawa apologized for Matsumoto’s behavior, then also started to touch her. “He took my right hand and forced me to masturbate him, like a doll,” she says. When the assaults were finished and all three women had returned to the room, she says, there was deathly silence. “It was like a funeral.” The three women were dismissed with 10,000 yen each for taxi fare.

Seven years ago, Shiori Ito accused another powerful man of raping her in an upscale Tokyo hotel. Though she, too, was slow to go to the police, who eventually declined to prosecute her attacker, she went public, sued him in civil court and wrote a bestselling book, *Black Box*. The book was both a startling j’accuse (she outed her assaulter as Noriyuki Yamaguchi a biographer of then prime minister Shinzo Abe), and a wrenching account of the psychological aftermath of rape, in which she describes herself as an “empty shell, ruled by fear.”

Ito’s long legal battle ended in 2022 when Japan’s Supreme Court ordered Yamaguchi to pay Ito about 3.32 million yen in damages. The Tokyo district and high courts had both earlier acknowledged that Yamaguchi had sexual intercourse with Ito without her consent. “The voices of the victims of sexual assault are finally being heard,” she said afterwards. Ito had endured years of trolling and threats against her life before the verdict, and still cannot open her email account because of the volume of hate mail she receives.

Sato says she understands that she will be called a liar, or worse. After she got home and had a shower, she sent a Line message, thanking Ozawa. He published the message after the *Bunshun* story broke, attempting to show that Sato was a willing participant, not a victim. When she told her actress friend about the evening, she says she, too, had a strikingly similar experience with Matsumoto at the Grand Hyatt. Sato says she thinks there are many more victims and she feels compelled to speak out on their behalf. “I don’t want to live in the kind of society where such things can happen. All we can do is fight.”

Author’s note: I conducted a one-on-one interview with Sato in Tokyo on March 28, 2024. The interview lasted about two hours and before it started, we laid the ground rules: Sato revealed her real name but did not want it published because she fears a backlash from Matsumoto fans. She had offered to discuss her assault because she and Bunshun do not have confidence that the story will be widely covered in the Japanese media. All her quotes come from the interview.