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# Japan's dirty little secret: the sex-crime shame which silences women

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When I heard about the tragic murder of 21-year-old Irish exchange student Nicola Furlong in Tokyo, it brought back many memories of my time living among the Japanese in a country perceived as the safest in the world.

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While it's little comfort to Nicola's family, this perception is generally true, although the country's record is not quite so impressive when it comes to sexual crimes against women.

I spent a year there in the 1990s, mainly in Kyoto but also on the northern tip of Honshu, the largest island, in a remote town where people left their doors unlocked and spontaneously asked total strangers like myself in for tea.

In the countryside petty crime is very rare, and even the big Japanese cities are extremely law-abiding. As a man at any rate, the thing that strikes you in a city like Kyoto or Tokyo is how unthreatening the atmosphere is at night.

Street crime is low, public fights are rarely seen, rioting is unheard of. With the exception of the zero-tolerance state of Singapore, Japan has the lowest homicide rate in the world.

The country has a population of 127 million, yet in 2009 there were only just over a thousand murders -- around a tenth of the US murder rate.

The incidents of serious crime in Japan are also low. But the statistics don't tell the full story. As anyone who's lived there will tell you, sexual offences are under-reported and a subject of secrecy and shame.

Japan is a profoundly paternalistic country, and unevolved attitudes to women still persist.

Although official rape figures are low, experts believe many attacks go unreported in a country where women still tend to get the blame and even end up being stigmatised.

On subways in Tokyo and Osaka, rush-hour assaults and molestations are alarmingly common according to numerous surveys, but many of these incidents are not reported, with women enduring their traumas in silence rather than risk the ignominy of publicity, and a trial.

Foreign female friends of mine preferred not to travel around on their own at night in Osaka or Tokyo, and noticed a tendency among Japanese men to assume that all Western women are promiscuous.

Japanese women who frequented the Irish bar in Osaka where I worked deflected any talk of harassment, and found the subject embarrassing, but tended to socialise in pairs.

There's also a fashion among young urban women for dating Westerners, and it's common to see sylph-like Japanese beauties arm in arm with staggeringly

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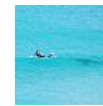
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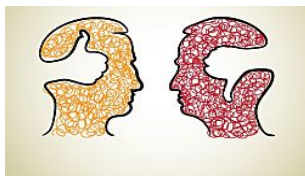
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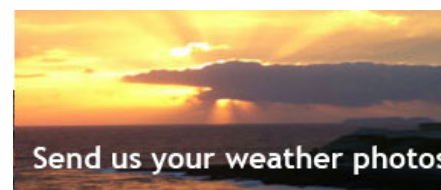
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