

## **Women in Shiatsu: empowering us all**

### **Alice Whieldon and in conversation with Gill Hall**

Growing out of the 2017 European Shiatsu Congress (ESF), a conversation started about women in Shiatsu. Specifically, some people at the Vienna Congress expressed a view that the lack of women on podiums and running high profile workshops reflected an ongoing problem. Gill Hall and I discussed this together and collaborated in a webinar and in developing these thoughts.

As we know, the overwhelming majority of practitioners are women and a disproportionate number of international teachers are men. For some of us, the Shiatsu environment can feel like stepping back into a world we thought we had left behind in the 1980s. This essay is a reflection on some of the issues discussed, privately and publicly. It is not based on formal research and, I suggest, it would be good to put some research together to get a better idea of some of the facts.

That so many international Shiatsu teachers are men may be puzzling given that so many teachers at a local level are women. But I suggest there are some fairly straightforward reasons for this.

Women still tend to be in caring roles in relation to children or other family members; they have commitments that make travelling abroad regularly, and for weekends, next to impossible. It would be interesting to know how many female international teachers have children. I do not have children but, despite this, my own sense of freedom is somewhat compromised by my dog!

My former partner and I decided to have a dog and he, my partner not the dog, travelled the world for work as a well-known speaker on human rights. But the perceived pressure to care for our canine friend wasn't a consideration for him when he agreed to speak in Australia, or the US. I, on the other hand, started planning dog-care the moment I was invited down the road for an evening. This is a very personal instance and won't reflect all relationships, but many women nod in recognition when I mention it. This is what women do and this has made it hard for us to establish ourselves on the international scene; we feel bad about those we believe we may be failing at home.

Also, there is a question of whether many women *want* to be on the international scene. It is hardly glamorous, and women tend not to have the kind of support from partners or students that many men seem to attract automatically. Exacerbating this is that women may not notice the support on offer and so fail to reach for it; we fear to claim it as our own.

Moreover, women may be slower to assume the mantle of authority. Classically we do not assume we have something to say that others will automatically want to hear. We may be surprised when people show an interest. Men seem, sometimes, to be happily freer of these particular anxieties. Gill notes here to say that women don't have to follow the same model of authority as men. She is right: this model of authority is arguably patriarchal. Not only do we need to find a way to take on our authority so that is not aggressively patriarchal, but being an authoritative woman, and likely an intelligent, articulate one, often attracts vilification from women at least as much as men.

We discussed the way this links with the medical model and medical training which is often highly hierarchical and awards huge authority to doctors. Are we aping that in Shiatsu by buying into this model of what we do? Gill, a group facilitator, comments that training in business has developed in such that employees are encouraged to be more aware and empowered, where team work and decision-making are encouraged; lectures are less and less the norm. This is very unlike most Shiatsu training.

Shiatsu is a chronically low-paid business too. In 2018 in the UK, all companies employing more than 200 people were legally obliged to publish data on pay. It is already well established that the UK is a relatively poor performer in terms of gender equality in the workplace, but the figures still sent shock-waves through us as the reality of the discrimination became clear in hard numbers.

We are not geared to think of Shiatsu in terms of salaried work but, if it were examined as such, I suggest it would be down there at subsistence pay in many cases. Whether we like to admit it or not, women are programmed to undervalue their work and accept low pay, especially for work that can be classified as caring. To think of charging proper money for Shiatsu sessions, let alone workshops, can send us into states of worry about our worth that highlights how deeply disempowered we can feel in the whole arena of the money and business. It is a sense of disempowerment that is thoroughly internalised.

The world of work is still the world of men; we are there on sufferance. It's not on our terms; the hours do not suit the cycles of our bodies, our caring commitments. Arguably it does not really suit anyone, but we haven't finished the work of carving out a space for ourselves that serves us better. Working from home on a part-time basis in Shiatsu may suit us nicely on the face of it, but few people earn well at it.

Men, are under greater pressure to earn a proper living and show up in the public domain. This mindset more easily lends itself to cultivating connections and promoting therapy work as a business. There are of course women who make a living from therapies, but I suggest that there are a disproportionate number of men in the therapy industry making enough to live on comfortably. This is due to a web of attitudes and assumptions so complex and so unconscious that it is hard to untangle the personal from the general.

The independent nature of Shiatsu practitioners also leaves us potentially isolated and often outside the institutions in which the majority pass their working week. While many of us have gladly left those institutions behind or never engaged with them in the first place, it is nevertheless those institutions which, at their best, perform a consciousness-raising service that is invaluable. Workplace diversity workshops, fair recruitment processes and protocols for dealing with harassment and bullying may be dull or heavy-handed at times, but they educate in ways that Shiatsu trainings are unlikely to address.

The lone wolf practitioner may have avoided the numbing political correctness of office etiquette, but they may also be in danger of ending up in a backwater of outmoded and unexamined prejudice. Women have, after all, been the majority participants in Shiatsu workshops led by male teachers; men may have put themselves forward, and why wouldn't they, but it is women who have chosen to attend.

Should we perhaps be weaving consciousness raising into the fabric of Shiatsu training? Along with the active support of talented women on the international stage?

This is a difficult task when, we observe, many people don't recognise the problem to start with. I think we can only keep standing up and speaking and educating and it can be exhausting. Women are still being written out of *history*, and often by women themselves who don't appreciate what they are doing. I experience this regularly with respect to the book I co-authored with Kishi. Both in my hearing and in print, time and again, people talk to me about 'Kishi's book'. Who exactly do they think wrote it? What names are on the cover? It is clearly incomprehensible to many people that I might actually have written it *with* him, in partnership. I suggest this is partly because of the book itself and Kishi's standing as a teacher but I think it unavoidable that it is also because I am a woman.

Whatever I may personally feel about this (anything from indifference to rage in fact) it is astonishing to me that this still happens.

Talking about all of this only gets us so far. Action is essential. To make Shiatsu an environment in which women are represented at all levels in the proportions in which they practise Shiatsu will need structural change. Here are a few suggestions:

Not teaching at weekends – in the 1980s and 1990s, with big classes, it was possible in the larger schools to train during the week. While it is true that many people need to work during the week to fund their training, other trainings and education happen during the week, so this might say something about Shiatsu self-identifying as a fringe activity. A move towards working hours training as an option would not only demonstrate that we were taking Shiatsu seriously as a profession but would enable women to teach and study while children were at school or older relatives cared for.

We need to take a fresh look also at how we teach Shiatsu. There still predominates in Shiatsu a presentation style which is more expert-lecturer than skilled teacher and she notes that here with respect to medical training. This approach encourages an attitude of awe which often disempowers participants. Given that teaching and learning must ideally be focused on empowering students to take ownership of the material, we need to examine and emphasise the importance of teaching skills in our profession. Modern approaches effectively erase the teacher as a personality, lecturing from the front, and fosters an environment of dynamic learning driven by curiosity through support. This would also model our Seiki approach rather than the medical model of 'doing to' the patient.

We could make a clear distinction between grassroots Shiatsu for friends and family and those who want to make a career of it. Knowing the difference would enable us to make a choice. Choosing Shiatsu as a career would help us focus on what it takes to earn a good living from this kind of work and work more closely together to achieve this. As we worked together more, through professional associations and schools, we would have the critical mass to offer the kind of workplace consciousness raising that has hitherto been difficult.

For those who want Shiatsu to be their career it is vital that schools and associations actively support practitioners in charging proper money for their services which will, in turn, make it a more attractive profession to people from diverse backgrounds who may not have the luxury of working in Shiatsu as a second, or low, income. It would serve, not only to raise income, but also morale and competence; if you are paid more it focuses your mind on doing a good job. It is empowering.

Also, again for those who want to make a career in Shiatsu, national associations need to make sure that ratification is in alignment with recognised educational levels so that those without the funds to study may have access to education funding to study Shiatsu. If we are intelligent about this, we do not need to compromise our work to do so but we do have to get better at explaining and defending our approach as different from the medical model. We would all benefit from this. If we work together as a bigger body we could be eligible to apply for funding for adult education and thus enable less well-off women to train; this would be a great gain for diversity.

Some practitioners like to take Shiatsu to a sector of the public who cannot afford it as private health support. By not charging sufficiently in this way and in general, they are not creating some alternative to the health service. If we do not charge appropriately, we are not encouraging people to value and maintain their health. We are offering a cheap and easier option to going to a regular yoga, Tai Chi etc. If we charge appropriately it may free up some time to do volunteer work or promote shiatsu for free and make it a more widely used option.

Finally, a few words about women and the body and women and words. Barely at the level of consciousness we are inhabited with ideas about men and women; about gendered identities. We may have come some way in changing these, but the symbolisms of gender are still hard-wired in our systems. *Woman* or the *feminine* is object, associated with the body, the inchoate, feeling, emotional *inarticulate* body, Gaia, earth, defined by her relationships rather than her separate personhood. *Man* is subject, aligned with the public, the spoken word, the assumption of an individual, speaking self.

Shiatsu speaks to the emotion body, but the emotion body does not speak back much in ways we fully understand. We can get lost in it too easily and end up at the mercy of feeling; disempowered in fact by an accidental over-emphasis on the felt. We must *speak* the body, the emotions and, if we don't know how yet, we must keep on trying until language emerges and we recognise it as our own.

There is more to this issue than equal rights. We need to press for equality of opportunity as a vital outward manifestation of stepping into our power. We, women, need to keep speaking and finding our place in the outer, the public, world without losing our connection to feeling. Maybe this is what makes Shiatsu and Seiki so exciting and crucial – this work sits on that edge between those worlds. We can embrace our connection with body and feeling but please not at the expense of our ability to speak and act. The personal is the political and it goes both ways.

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