

UNWINDING THE BONDAGE OF PATRIARCHY IN THE BODY

by Katie Spataro

It seems as if we are now experiencing a cultural climax of the work done to expose patriarchy and shed light on how it has impacted personal and collective trauma over the past several hundred—if not thousands—of years. Patriarchy, as used here, refers to the systematic, oppressive relationship structure of power over another, and how historically the dominant roles of power have been both imposed on and taken by men within the family, religion, the workplace, government, and communities.

As we all hold within us a reflection of the world around us, the damaging effects of patriarchy inevitably show up in our bodies, highlighted through negative body image and shame, gender role oppression, control of fertility and birth, reproductive injustices, and restrictions in our sexuality and sexual expression. We all feel these negative effects in different ways and throughout different parts of our lives, and while each person will have unique experiences of patriarchy in the body, it is nearly impossible for anyone to escape them entirely.

In my practice as a somatic sex educator, I have witnessed and observed how patriarchy shows up as bondage in the body. I intentionally use the word bondage, borrowed from the practice of BDSM (bondage, discipline, dominance and submission, sadism and masochism), to describe the somatic experience of patriarchy. From

this perspective, bondage means to be tied up, restricted, restrained, lacking full mobility, containment, restriction of breath and circulation, literally to be held hostage. Of course, within a BDSM context, bondage involves mutual consent, whereas the bondage of patriarchy is nonconsensual and often unrecognized consciously.

The field of somatic sex education is one of the important modalities for supporting the unwinding of the bondage of patriarchy in the body. Somatic sex education offers unique opportunities because it involves somatic inquiry in a trauma-informed context while working within the realm of the erotic, using the exploration of pleasure and arousal to support presence in the body. In this way, practitioners of somatic sex education provide radical support in the embodied release of patriarchy's effects in the body.

The ideas presented here were sparked by my own observations in my practice as a doula, somatic sex educator, and Holistic Pelvic Care practitioner. I refined them in conversations with my colleagues at Seattle Sexological Bodyworkers as well as experts in the BDSM field, and filtered through my experiences as a woman and mother. I acknowledge the context in which I practice somatic sex education is shaped by my experiences as a white, western cisgender woman, and that these identities provide a lens which both informs and limits my point of view.

How patriarchy shows up in the body

In my practice, I work mostly with ciswomen and non-binary people assigned female at birth. Oftentimes my clients grew up in fundamentalist Christian families. The intention and goals for our work together follow themes around finding presence in the body, experiencing more pleasure (from sex specifically), feeling comfortable expressing desires, managing/relieving pelvic pain, and healing from sexual trauma.

A common theme amongst many of these clients is that even though they may have left the church long ago or separated from family or partners still within that faith, the bondage of patriarchy is still experienced in their bodies. Patriarchal religions have shamed the body for millennia, the act of becoming embodied at birth even called out as "original sin". Even though we all came from the (female) body and from sex, these religions continue today to shame sex and eroticism, and by association of its sexual nature, seek to

control fertility and birth.

Intellectually, many of my clients have acknowledged these systems of oppression, and some have accessed the privilege of stepping away from them, leaving their churches and religions behind. However, the long history of patriarchal power in our ancestry can be wound in the body in such a way that even when the mind shifts, the body still holds the imprinting.

There are many ways in which I've noticed how the bondage of patriarchy can show up in the body. Some people experience various levels of disconnection, from vague physical numbness up to a complete lack of knowledge or deep misunderstandings of their sexual anatomies and reproductive cycles, and how they relate to their ability to experience pleasure in their bodies. This ignorance, which is fostered by patriarchal systems bent on controlling our sexuality, has created what sexologists describe as the "genital hole". This concept, which originated with A. H. Almaas, is a form of self-castration. It refers to such a complete numbing-out of the genitals and surrounding areas that a person is actually cut off from their proprioception, or physical awareness, of these parts of their body.

The bondage of patriarchy also restrains and restricts our vital life force energy (libido), which can show up for some as a lack of desire. Cut off from our root connection, the bondage restricts blood flow to the genitals. This makes engorgement and arousal responses difficult at best or impossible at worst, causing discomfort and "dysfunction". The human nervous system physically and energetically connects the pelvis to the jaw. Because of this connection, restriction or numbness in the pelvis can restrict the voice and one's ability to speak out. It's no wonder so many victims of sexual violence remain silent.

An overwhelming number of women experience symptoms of pelvic pain at different times of their lives, which is often overlooked or under-treated by medical professionals. Birth is physically traumatic, and yet almost no care is given to the pelvic floor muscles afterward. This almost utter lack of attention results in common outcomes like organ prolapse, painful sex and incontinence, all of which are largely preventable with proper care. This is a symptom of a culture that disregards women's health, and has successfully abolished the ancient traditions of postpartum body care.

For many people, their experiences of sex are violent, even when self-pleasuring. Straining to reach orgasm, their muscles clench down in habituated responses causing restriction in physical mobility and breath and sometimes resulting in pain or discomfort after orgasm. Sex education in schools fails to cover how to experience healthy pleasure in our bodies and as a result, patriarchal conditioning has cut off our understanding of the full range of orgasmic states and limits access to fuller sexual expression.

The top-down, power-over model of patriarchy is also internalized with our mind-over-body mentality, which values the mental and intellectual while subordinating or even rejecting the body's innate wisdom. The internalized bondage of patriarchy is a learned response, likely stemming from very early experiences as infants and even on into adolescence of having our bodies shamed and our boundaries violated. These micro- and macro-level invasions and assaults impact our ability to fully honor our own desires and arousal. Even worse are the physical and psychic impacts of knowing that we do not own our fertility as the patriarchy continues to control access to birth control.

Bringing the unconscious restriction of this bondage in the body and its resulting wounds into conscious awareness offers us more access to our own choices. While the bondage of patriarchy limits our experience in our bodies, knowing this provides opportunities to feel into our habitual responses and invites in other possibilities.

Somatic sex education

Somatic sex education offers various ways to support building awareness of the body's constraining and limiting patterns, and bringing in more choices that invite the unwinding of patriarchal bondage. Working with clients on simple boundary exercises, sensing into what "yes" and "no" responses feel like in their body, practicing how to ask for what they want, learning about anatomy and arousal patterns, and uncovering deep-rooted beliefs about giving and receiving are a few of the tools used in somatic sex education.

While a variety of tools and exercises can be introduced by the practitioner, the real value of somatic sex education lies in following a client-centered and trauma-informed approach without a prescription or agenda applied by the practitioner. Many clients initially come in expecting something to be done *to* them, rather than asking

specifically for what they want. This in and of itself disrupts the learned habit of passive receiving or more accurately, conditioned enduring of something they don't want. Empowering clients to tune in and practice allowing their own desires to arise from their bodies rather than their minds, opens up their experience of receiving in a whole new way.

Somatic sex education practices that explore the embodied experience of "yes" and "no", and having those choices welcomed and celebrated, often bring into awareness previous experiences when those choices were ignored and violated, either by another person or within themselves. Simple exercises in somatic sex education, when carried out slowly and with intention within a session, can reveal places where our clients overextend their yeses, give beyond their consent, or are closed off to receiving. Bringing awareness to the disconnect between the mind's responses and the body's responses helps teach clients how to feel safer in their bodies.

Most people have experienced being touched or penetrated without their explicit consent at some point in their lives. Somatic sex education works with the body, including the genitals, in a way that requires explicit consent on more than just the surface level. Somatic sex educators do not enter or even touch without the client's full and embodied consent. This means that we first teach our clients to deeply feel into what their body is saying and honor that, even if their mind is saying something different. Having the client's internal responses be honored externally by the practitioner begins the unwinding and allows the client even more space for movement and choice.

In my practice, I include the techniques of Holistic Pelvic Care, a gentle pelvic floor release developed by women's health physical therapist Tami Kent. This genital touch, which is not intended for arousal, involves slow and gentle pressure on internal fascia combined with acute presence, intention, and breath awareness. This experience can be incredibly grounding for some clients, bring up strong emotions or stories for others, and provides inquiry into this part of the body in a non-threatening way. What I've noticed with many clients, even those who have tried other more clinical versions of pelvic floor releasing, is that it allows them the space to open up without being worried about being penetrated or entered without their consent.

The practice of receiving

The pioneering work of intimacy coach and erotic practitioner Dr. Betty Martin provides a valuable model for understanding the prevalent and often unconscious patterns in patriarchy. Betty refers to her model as “a radical inquiry into the nature of giving and receiving”. Her “Wheel of Consent” provides somatic sex educators with a framework for supporting clients in better understanding their habitual responses to patriarchal bondage. Using the Wheel, practitioners help clients by illuminating places where we break the boundary of consent by over-giving or enduring unwanted touch, or where we are taking without consent, or failing to check our entitlement.

For many of my clients, these habitual responses involve putting up protective barriers that limit and restrict their ability to fully receive. We acknowledge together that this armoring has served a purpose of self protection and can be very necessary at times – that the walling off, closing down, or seizing up is the body saying no, or pause, or go slower. Respecting this response and not pushing past it is an important part of their healing, particularly for my clients with pelvic pain symptoms.

But learning to truly receive touch and pleasure, in an embodied way, is directly connected to the unwinding of patriarchy’s grip on the body. In order to open up to receiving in an active way, it requires us to ask the questions “Want do I truly want?”, “Am I worthy to have what I want?”, and “How do I ask for what I want?” These questions directly contradict the cultural beliefs that sex and pleasure are shameful, that we are wrong for seeking pleasure, and that we don’t have the right to control our own bodies.

The one-way-touch nature of somatic sex education means that the client is always in the role of receiving. Practitioners empower clients to ask for what they want, within the context and agreements of a session, as a way of practicing this state of active receiving. For these clients who have endured painful experiences in this part of their body over time, the journey towards a more active receiving state involves patience. While some clients may learn valuable skills and tools in one or two sessions, others choose to engage in more ongoing sessions for deeper exploration.

One of the outcomes of unwinding the restraints around receiving is having greater access to the arousal states that arise when the nervous system is in its more relaxed, down-regulated condition. When the root is open to receive, the experience of arousal arises without effort or clenching. Practitioners offer breath coaching to up- or down-regulate the nervous system, so that clients can find their “learning zones”. These “learning zones” are described by somatic sex educator Caffyn Jesse as the critical places where our clients feel just enough stress to be challenged to learn, without feeling unsafe or checked out.

The unwinding

As the bondage of patriarchy is unwound in the body, clients may discover increased somatic awareness and a sense of relief or freedom that comes with creating more space for breath, movement and pleasure. They may experience a sense of loss and grief as well. The unwinding can invoke a sense of coming undone, a loss of containment that may have provided a sense of comfort and safety, even though it may have been causing harm. There may be a period of numbness after the bondage comes off, when there is not yet full mobility, or there may be fear of unwinding as it involves the unknown, unsure if safety nets are in place to catch us when we let go.

The process of unwinding may not be a linear one, as healing happens backwards and forwards, across generations, and as we realize we carry the bondage of ancestral trauma. We bump up against places of discouragement when we realize that despite our best efforts, we’re operating in systems that are designed to keep us bound up. Race, class, and gender privileges provide access to more resources and safety nets, while those who are more vulnerable within these systems have less access to those same resources and safety nets.

The unwinding can illuminate areas in our lives, even outside of intimate relationships, where we are holding on to narratives that aren’t ours or that no longer serve us, which can feel disorienting. It may impact current relationships, families, and communities, and clients may fear losing or changing those relationships even if they are unhealthy. Within intimate relationships, it may require redefining what sex is and what sexual relationships look like.

Somatic sex educators provide radical support not only in the process of unraveling, but also in the types of aftercare needed during the process. Along with therapists and health practitioners who understand the value of somatic sex education, somatic sex educators play a strong role in offering support and a safe container for the unwinding of the bondage of patriarchy in the body. And ultimately, it is only within a safe-enough container that the wounds can become the womb.

