

## From a Whisper to a Roar

Interview Summary	
<b>Name:</b> Jill	<b>Date:</b> 23.10.2019 <b>Age:</b> 55
<b>Key issues:</b> Sexual abuse. Lesbian visibility. Women's spaces. Feminism. Trans rights. Radical activism.	
<b>Narrative summary</b> Jill speaks of the most significant point in her life being the sexual abuse she suffered as a child from a family member. This sexualized her early in life and she had relationships with boys until her awareness was woken by attending a National Union of Students conference on abuse. Since then she has been passionate about speaking out. She took a break from having relationships which gave her the space to recognise that she was a lesbian and the comfort derived in women only spaces.  She was very involved in student politics, becoming President of the students union at Liverpool, starting a Gay Soc and organising a big debate on Section 28 which was the point at which she publically came out. She also spoke at the huge Hyde Park Section 28 rally about the importance of an open education for children on sexual matters so they could learn to speak about abuse.  Jill speaks about the scene in Liverpool in the 80's and the current lack of women's spaces which she sees as a great loss for younger lesbians.  She became involved in the Liverpool Anarchists which squatted a large building and turned it into a social centre and began working at a radical bookshop. This is a women's co-op and she explains how they work collectively. Jill has also been involved in a women's holiday centre in Yorkshire which is a not-for-profit cooperative to provide holidays for women and their young children, with special times being made available for women with older boys. She believes it is very important to have women only spaces, whilst not being anti-men.  She is very in favour of trans rights, but has concerns about how those impact on lesbians and feels there is an unhealthy polarisation of the debate around these issues. Trans people and lesbians should be natural allies in opposing gender conformity. She feels there is a lack of positive lesbian role models to support young people who are questioning their identity and that butch lesbians, in particular have been pushed out.  Jill feels attitudes have improved, but legislation hasn't been forward thinking enough to enable people to nominate someone in the next of kin role.	
	<b>Length of interview:</b> 55 mins





Evelyn: So today is the 23rd of October 2019, and we are recording an interview for From a Whisper to a Roar, an oral history project conducted by Opening Doors London, and supported by the National Lottery Heritage Fund.

Today I'm interviewing the wonderful Jill. So could you start by telling me a little bit about your early life and how you came to an understanding of who you really are?

Jill: Okay. I think one of the things that's really significant for me in it is that I was sexually abused as a kid, by my eldest brother, right the way through my childhood until early on at university. So I had a very straight life at that point because I would say I had my sexuality physically imposed on me as well as socially. So there was no barriers to me having sexual relationships with boys because it was what was happening all the time anyway.

So it was only when I started to speak out about having been abused... I'd been to a meeting at an NUS, National Union of Students, conference about sexual abuse, which was quite mind-blowing, because, oh my goodness, people can say this out loud, and so I started speaking out about it then. So I made a very conscious decision at that point not to get into... I was single at the time... not to get into any relationships because I just thought I could probably do with a bit of time away from all that, and a bit of head space.

And then, through having that time away from relationships, because I'd kind of gone from one relationship to another really, all the time, so suddenly having that gap made me to start to realise I've never fancied any of these guys that I've gone out with. I've gone out with them because I liked them or trusted them or they liked me or they fancied me, or whatever, but I'd never fancied any of them. The sex was fine, it's not that there was anything that I didn't like about any of it, but I'd never fancied them. So that was quite interesting to suddenly realise that. And then the more I thought about it, I'd questioned a couple of times when I was a teenager whether I was a lesbian, but there was nothing you can go by when you're a teenager, especially at that time, when it really wasn't okay to be lesbian or gay.

Evelyn: What sort of time are we talking about?

Jill: Well, I'm 55, nearly 56. So to-

Evelyn: We're in the '70s.

Jill: I was born in '63. So it really wasn't okay to be lesbian or gay. I'd never even held hands with a girl or kissed a girl. So it's quite hard to decide, well, yes, I'm a lesbian. I didn't feel that sexual attraction to anybody really although there was a couple of girls... looking back, there was a couple of girls that I did fancy but not in such a really clear way that was obvious enough to me at the time, if that makes sense, in comparison to the very present heterosexual sex that was in my life then. It was kind of insignificant in a way. So

it was only by having that break from relationships that I realised I've never fancied any of these guys and yet there has been a couple of girls that I'd fancied. So I thought that was quite interesting, and then I thought, well, perhaps I'm bisexual then.

Then I went to a women only disco. It was part of an International Women's Day week worth of events, and I didn't particularly want to go. I'd always socialised much more with guys than with women. I didn't particularly want to go but felt I should because of the role that I was in at the time. So I went along to it and it was, again, really eye-opening. It was like, this is really nice, this is really different, this feels really relaxing, really safe, I'm enjoying this far more than I do in mixed places.

So there was a couple of things that came round that time that I was involved in, in student-

Evelyn: Can I just ask, where were you living at this point?

Jill: In Liverpool.

Evelyn: Liverpool, yeah. Carry on.

Jill: And I was involved in student union politics. So there were a few women's organisations and women's events and stuff. So then I started to take down my barriers to going along to some of these things and was feeling more and more comfortable with that. One of the most common things is, people think that if we're lesbians and we've been abused, that we're lesbians because we've been abused, and I would say it's the opposite. I would say I was straight previously because I've been abused, and it's only when I got away from that pattern and that conveyor belt towards heterosexuality, and took a step off that and thought about it, and realised that I wasn't.

I'd come to the conclusion that I was a lesbian but it was a bit weird to pin that down in any way, thinking, well, maybe this is just because of what's going on for me at the moment and maybe at some point I will decide that I'm interested in relationships with men, so maybe I'm bisexual. But I just thought, I can't imagine that. I'd never felt any real attraction to men and I didn't previously think I shouldn't describe myself as heterosexual because maybe I might fancy a woman at some point. So I just thought it's silly to put that restriction on yourself. Again, that's part of society's pressures, that there's no barriers to people identifying as heterosexual.

So, again, by this point I hadn't held hands or kissed a woman, but I took that step and decided, right, I'm lesbian, I'm going to come out as a lesbian. I was a Student Union President at Liverpool University at the time, and it was when all the Section 28 stuff was going on.

Evelyn: So we're at '89.

Jill: Yeah. So I organised a debate in the student union. It wasn't part of the debating society but because of my position, I just contacted one of the people that organised the

different debates in the student union and said, "I think we should have one on Section 28, and I'll speak against it."

So they set it up with, I can't remember who, somebody speaking in favour of it, and then me as the first person to speak against it. So I stood up and said, "I'm Jill, President of the Student Union, and I'm here to speak against this debate as a lesbian and as President of the Student Union," and they all went, "Yeah!" There were huge cheers because obviously there were a lot of out lesbians and gay men there.

I'd been involved in the lesbian and gay society for a little while before that, before even I'd identified as lesbian myself, because somebody alerted me to the fact that there was no lesbian and gay society at the freshers' fair, and I just thought, oh, that's a big problem, we definitely need to have that so people don't come and think that they're the only one. So I quickly printed off a whole load of little leaflets and went round every stall in the freshers' fair and asked, "Would you mind putting one of these up because there's no lesbian and gay society stall, and it's really important to make sure that this gets set up again." So I was offering my office as a meeting space on one particular morning, to get another group going, and every stall except for the rugby stall was quite happy to put one up, but the rugby stall wasn't.

Evelyn: Predictable, eh?

Jill: Yeah. So I had... there were two women and two men came to my office at the time and I'd said, "Look, I don't identify as a lesbian but I just felt it was really important that a group got off the ground again, so I'm offering my office space. My suggestion is that I'll go and I'll come back in an hour or so's time. I don't know whether you want to have separate meetings for gay men and lesbians or whether you're happy to meet together. I can make another room available if you'd like to have two separate meetings, or if you'd like to have a bit of time apart and then come together." They decided, because there was only four, that they'd [inaudible 00:07:22]. So I did that and came back, and they encouraged me to stay involved. They probably could tell that I was a lesbian before I realised because people often do.

Evelyn: So often other people know before you do.

Jill: Yeah. So I came back and said, "Yeah, I'm happy to stay involved," but would want it to be really clear that I'm not a lesbian so it's fine for them to have space that is just lesbian and gay only as well. I would not be in the least offended if they'd have said, "No, you can't come to that." But I was happy to be involved in it because I felt it was a supportive thing to do, for them to have somebody in the role of president associated with them took away some of the stigma, I felt. So although I didn't think of myself as a lesbian at the time-

Evelyn: Today they would say-

Jill: ... I didn't care if anybody else thought of me as a lesbian.

Evelyn: Today they would say straight allies, wouldn't they?

Jill: Yes, but that concept didn't really-

Evelyn: Exist then, no.

Jill: ... exist in the same way then. So I obviously then had a fair bit of contact with quite a few lesbians and gay men, became quite good friends. I don't think I was a perfect ally in lots of ways because, like most people, who haven't been brought up thinking about any of these issues, but then over time got to know some a bit more and became quite good friends with a couple of them, and then came out before the debate that I was talking about, I'd come out to a couple of them prior to that. And then, like I say, I just thought, well, I just need to arrange a debate and get it over and done with really. I don't want to be closeted.

Evelyn: No, no, go for it.

Jill: At the time it felt really, really important for people to be out as lesbian or gay and it was really significant when a couple of celebrities came out as lesbian or gay.

Evelyn: Yeah. The visibility issues were crucial at the time.

Jill: Yeah. So on the one hand I'm not a big fan in the labels kind of idea but at the same time, it was really important at that time.

Evelyn: And how did it feel just before you made that speech?

Jill: I'd already done a lot of different public speaking type things. I'm not somebody that gets anxious about doing that. So I was quite happy and quite confident in doing it. I didn't quite expect such a positive reaction as I got, and I knew it was going to be put in the student paper and stuff, which of course it was. They had a stupid little cartoon, the person in the cartoon. So it was a picture of me sitting behind a desk and somebody else coming in with a speech saying, "Les Been." It was just like, how pathetic. Anyway. So that was my coming out story.

Evelyn: And did you become very involved in politics in general and women's issues?

Jill: Yes. Already before this point, after I'd been to this meeting about sexual abuse, I started speaking out being abused and that was the main thing that I was doing at the time. Well, Section 28 stuff as well. The next academic year, I got elected on to the National Student Women's Committee for the NUS, so I spent a year as a volunteer going round speaking about sexual abuse.

Evelyn: And what year was that?

Jill: So that would have been round about 1989. So when you're saying '89, I think it was '88-

Evelyn: '88, because that was the-

Jill: ... this one, when it started.

Evelyn: Yeah. '88, that all the campaign started up. '89 when the policy went through. Did you get on a lot of the Section 28 marches?

Jill: Every single one, yeah. Every single one. And I spoke at one. I spoke at the biggest one down in... Would it have been Hyde Park? I think, I'm not sure... Whichever park it was, down in London. I wasn't raised as a speaker, I just went up there thinking, well, I want to get up there and say something because, for me, one of the things that I campaigned on a bit with Section 28 as well was that it's not just about the right for lesbians and gay men to be mentioned openly in schools, and lesbian and gay sexuality, it was about sexuality in general and that how do we expect kids to speak out having been sexually abused when we're not giving them the language to do that? No adults around were talking about it. The concept of the term sexual abuse was never mentioned when I was a kid, I'd never heard of the idea. So how was I supposed to explain what was happening to me? So that was my thing when I spoke at Section 28 stuff, it was as a survivor, and the fact that we need to talk far more openly about sexuality in general.

So at this thing in Hyde Park, I decided I wanted to get up and say something. So I just went up to them at the stage and said, "I'd like to get up and speak." They were a bit like, "Well, who are you?" I said, "Well, what do you mean?" "What do you want to say?" I said, "I'd like to speak out about sexual abuse because we're always hugely silenced as lesbians who've been abused, and the automatic assumption is that we're lesbians because we've been abused and it needs to be spoken about more openly. The stuff we're talking about around lesbian and gay sexuality needed to be talked about in schools. It's wider than that. We need to talk far more openly and honestly about sexuality in general." They were a bit like, "Oh, okay. We'd probably better say yes, I think."

So I can't remember which was before or after, but it was between Michelle [indistinct] and Michael Cashman. I can remember it was in between them two but I can't remember which way they were. So, yeah, they just said, "Okay, but you can only have two minutes or three minutes." So I said, "Yeah, that's fine," and I got up and spoke. One of my friends came up to me afterwards and she said the whole crowd... and it was about 50,000 at that one... that the whole crowd went silent, which they hadn't for any of the other speakers. Because nobody ever spoke out about having been abused, particularly lesbians and gay men. So for somebody to do that was quite astounding, I think. So the whole crowd went silent for it.

Evelyn: Do you think that was partly because of the cliché of, if you've been abused, that's what's caused your-

Jill: Yeah. But the thing that's-

Evelyn: ... sexual orientation?



Jill: ... ridiculous about that, they say that as lesbians, we're only lesbians because we've been abused. But gay men, they say they're only gay because they've been abused by men. So it doesn't make sense even at the most basic level. They're saying it's put us off men for life and they're saying it's made them attracted to men for life.

Evelyn: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Bizarre.

Jill: Yeah.

Evelyn: Bizarre.

Jill: It's all about silencing us. It's about making us feel we shouldn't speak out about it. My very first girlfriend was warned by somebody I know now was a mutual friend earlier, that I wasn't a proper lesbian, that I'd been abused. And that's quite common. It certainly was then, and I think probably still is now in some ways.

Evelyn: Shocking. So in terms of your social... the social side of things, at this point in your life, how did you find your folk? Was it all through women's groups?

Jill: I went to... There was quite a lot of-

Evelyn: Could you recognise someone in the street from the way they dressed at that time?

Jill: Yeah. We all had that gaydar thing going on.

Evelyn: For the benefit of generations to come possibly listening to this, what kicked in your gaydar in the street, that there's another lesbian?

Jill: To some extent it was about how somebody's... the hair and the kinds of clothes they might wear. To some extent it was that. That was probably a large part of it at those times. There was a lot of-

Evelyn: So what was the look?

Jill: ... cliched things. DM's, Dr. Martens shoes. It was mostly lesbians, of women that wore those. I can't remember what those... chinos trousers, quite often those would be worn.

Evelyn: Taking me back there.

Jill: Hairstyles. Having short hair was still quite unusual for women, so that was a big part of it as well, especially if it was shaved or spiky or something. So it's just things like that. But also you'd catch a glimpse of somebody and there would just be that knowing, slight pause-

Evelyn: Because somebody recognised you because of your look possibly.

Jill: Yeah.

Evelyn: How was the lesbian social scene at this time?

Jill: There was loads of women only things at the time, and that's a huge loss that there isn't now, I think, for young lesbians now. Like I say, that was one of the things that was quite significant in me being able to put aside society's expectations around my sexuality, was to be able to have some women only space where there were no men, so you weren't performing for men, you weren't thinking of men at all. As soon as you could let go of that, you could see beyond it. So to not have women only space I think is a huge issue for young women who are trying to suss out their sexuality.

In Liverpool at the time, there was Thursday night and Sunday night, there was a choice of two places that were women only. There's nothing now. I was going to say ever. There might be once every couple of years there'll be something women only.

Evelyn: So paint me a picture. Where did you go on a Thursday night?

Jill: Well, they were both quite small bars, and one of them was down in a basement.

Evelyn: So often the case, it's the lesbian thing.

Jill: They were very small, very packed. But it was great.

Evelyn: Was there music?

Jill: Yeah, yeah. Disco. And quite loud.

Evelyn: Lots of booze or not so?

Jill: Yeah. I would say that issues around alcohol and tobacco were quite common amongst lesbians because pretty much... and gay men... pretty much the only socialising that was available was in pubs and clubs. I mean, I didn't. I would go down and have water and people would say, "I'll buy you a drink. It's all right." It's like, "It's all right, I'm fine. I'm quite happy with just water." Sometimes I'd have alcohol but mostly wouldn't.

Evelyn: And of course we forget how much... because smoking was allowed in clubs and pubs so it would be probably a fog going down the stairs into...

Jill: Yeah.

Evelyn: And what were the names of the places in Liverpool?

Jill: The New Court was the place, the bar that we used to go to. It's not called that now. The other place was The Courtyard, I think. Interestingly, a different place, but called The Courtyard. There was a place that one of them set up. I can't remember what the name was. It had previously been a men only bar and then she took it over, the woman who's from The New Court, she took it over, and I offered to go on the door because she just needed some women to help out, get it off the ground, so I offered to do that. So that

was very interesting because as a group was approaching, you couldn't always tell, because everybody was quite androgynous, so you couldn't always tell whether somebody was a woman or a man, and I'm aware this had previously been a men only venue.

Evelyn: Oh, right, yeah.

Jill: So I was like, how do I approach this because I don't want to-

Evelyn: Turn any women away.

Jill: ... be negative. Exactly. I don't want to be negative in any way whatsoever towards anybody being gender non-conforming, especially not towards butch lesbians. So I would just say, "Hi. Have you come for the women only night?" That's the only thing I could think of. But it was on the spur of the moment, I hadn't thought in advance, and as some women would approach, I thought, oh, I hope they're women, I think they're women, but I'm not quite sure. So it was all very much androgynous, the whole lesbian look at the time. Now you've got a much wider range of looks amongst lesbians.

Evelyn: Because it's interesting back in the day, it was very butch and femme, and then it moved.

Jill: This was a little bit past that point.

Evelyn: Yeah. And then it moved to being far more, as you say, androgynous or far more homogenous look. Interesting. So happening in Liverpool.

Jill: Yeah. No, it was brilliant. It was really good. I'm really glad that I came out at that time, and when there was that opportunity of loads of social things going on.

Evelyn: Mm-hmm (affirmative). So on the political side of things, how did your interests develop?

Jill: Like I say, my first real focus was speaking out about having been abused and just making a big issue of that, and then Section 28 stuff followed on from that. Then I started working in a radical bookshop in Liverpool.

Evelyn: Oh, right, yeah.

Jill: Started off as a volunteer first and then got taken on as a paid worker, and I still work there now. So that was perfect. And I was involved in the Liverpool Anarchist group at the time as well.

Evelyn: Okay. Tell me about the Liverpool Anarchists.

Jill: Well, it was very straight but it was where I was at politically. I was never interested in individual political parties, and I wasn't interested generally in party politics, but I was

quite strongly radical and I liked the way that they did things. They squatted a huge building and turned it into a social centre. So lots of us would sleep there. I slept there almost every night for a few months, just in a sleeping bag on the floor because that's what was available for us to do. So that secured the premises. We did quite a lot of work to do it up.

There was a café every Saturday. So you could either bring some food or buy some food or go and do the washing up. Do you know what I mean?

Evelyn: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jill: It was a donations box but you could bring food in exchange for some of the food or you could do washing up in exchange for your food. It wasn't anything really fixed.

Evelyn: And where was it?

Jill: I really liked that. It was opposite where the bookshop was at the time actually, although I wasn't working at the bookshop at that point. In the old Liverpool Post and Echo, which is the newspaper-

Evelyn: Oh, right, newspaper building, yeah.

Jill: The old building, yeah.

Evelyn: So you had the café on a Saturday. What else went on there?

Jill: All kinds of discussions. There were a couple of homeless people that came and slept in there sometimes as well.

Evelyn: So did you have a lot of specific discussion groups?

Jill: Can't remember that much. I just remember that there were loads of discussions.

Evelyn: So what was your next step?

Jill: Well, working in the shop was the next thing really, and that felt perfect because it meant just by going to work I was involved in all the politics that I agreed with. So in a way, my activism became my work. It's a standing joke in the shop that I don't read books, I'm just involved because of the politics really, not because of the books.

It's a women's co-op, and I very much believe in co-ops, and pretty much the whole of my working life I've worked in co-ops of one sort or another. Because I had a break of about 10 years when my kids were little, when I first moved over here to Todmorden but the work that I did over here was almost completely co-ops as well.

Evelyn: So for the benefit, again, of future generations, tell me how the co-op works.

Jill: So there isn't anybody in charge, everybody's equally responsible for everything. So we all do some cleaning. When I first started working in the bookshop, we would rotate pretty much all the jobs on a monthly basis, but then there were some people who were not confident with doing the accounts, for example, so if you followed on from them doing the accounts, you'd have two months' worth to do. So it didn't work ideally but it meant we all did equal share in running the business and doing the cleaning and sitting on the till and ordering the books. It was all shared and there was nobody in charge. So we'd have meetings about every four, five weeks, and still do. It's still a cooperative.

In some ways that's a very natural way, I think, for women to work, and in some ways it's a very challenging way because we're not brought up to work collectively. We're brought up to work competitively and to be competitive all the time and stuff, and we're brought up with all kinds of hierarchies, race, class, sex, everything else. So in some ways it's very natural for us. I think women do more naturally work cooperatively, but it's also quite challenging.

Evelyn: So what are some of the major issues that have stood out for you across the years that you've been fighting for?

Jill: I'd still say sexual abuse is my main one. I've just started doing a little bit more stuff about it in fairly recent years, but that's always been one of my main things.

I'm also involved in a women's holiday centre up at Horton-in-Ribblesdale. So that's a big part of my activism and has been for about the last 20 years.

Evelyn: So tell me about the holiday centre.

Jill: Again, it's another not-for-profit women's co-op. It's got a sliding scale of payment depending on income. It was set up originally... there was somebody who inherited some money and there was a bit of fundraising from some of the women, and a bunch of them went round trying to find some suitable premises. They went to an auction for the place it is now, it's an old vicarage, and apparently some guy that was bidding against them, one of the women just went and sat next to him and said what they wanted it for and he stopped bidding, which is lovely. So that was set up in 1980.

Again, like I say, it's a cooperative. There's two paid workers but everybody else, the co-op and the managing committee are all volunteers. So I'm involved on the management committee and have been on and off for 20 years, and I help out as a volunteer with DIY and all kinds of other bits and bobs, house sitting sometimes.

Evelyn: So what do they offer?

Jill: They offer holidays for... it's women only, and with children. Boys up to their eleventh birthday can go at any time, and after their eleventh birthday until their fifteenth birthday, they can go at older boys' times. So that's because it's still important to provide that space for the mums, so that effort to make sure there are times when

women with older boys can still come. So it's not so much that it's providing service for the older boys, it's more that it's for the women.

Evelyn: So, would you ...do you have a lot of sympathy for the separatist stance?

Jill: Yes, I'd say I do. I was not completely separatist but very much in support of that, and fairly separatist in my early twenties, late, mid... probably much all the way through my twenties probably. Not in terms of what anyone else should do, but it can be quite a healing thing. I'm not talking about stuff around sexual abuse, just generally healing from the impact of patriarchy, to have that space away from it.

I think that's one of the really powerful things that the women's holiday centre offers, to have that space away from that, where there aren't men there, so it's not dominated ever by men, and women come together, and women cook together. The food is provided but you cook yourself, and women cook with strangers. There's not many places you can do that, and it succeeds in creating a temporary sense of community with whoever's there at the time, because women cook together. And they have so many interesting conversations. The level of honesty and disclosure that comes about around that kitchen table is incredible. Women have conversations they would probably never have with anybody else because they've got that sense of it being a safe space. It's really powerful.

Evelyn: Mm-hmm (affirmative). So your-

Jill: It's not that I'm anti men in any way, it's that I can see the power and the impact of having some women only spaces. There's a women's only disco in Todmorden once a month and women dance completely differently. They relax on a completely different level, to be in a social space when men are not around. Again, it's not about being against men, it's about being away from that impact. It's not about not all men, and all this kind of stuff. It's just that it's different, it's completely different, and it's much freer to be in a women only space.

Evelyn: So your politics are very much in line with, say, second wave feminism?

Jill: Yeah, I'd say, yeah.

Evelyn: So were you involved in a lot of the feminist movement groups or conferences?

Jill: No. I've never really been involved very much. I supposed I'm starting to be a bit now, but I've never really been involved in women's conferences as such. Again, partly by working in the bookshop, and it being a women's co-op, it kind of fulfills loads of those needs already, and also there isn't very much spare time then to go and do other things as much.

Evelyn: So-

Jill: And I'm a vegan. I've been a vegan for well over 30 years, so that's a notable aspect of my politics as well, my activism.

Evelyn: What do you feel about the LGBT community now and how people come together?

Jill: I don't think there's an LGBT community now. I think we've-

Evelyn: Do you think that's different from-

Jill: I think it's hugely different.

Evelyn: ... past?

Jill: Yeah. I think there was a real sense of identity around the Section 28 time because that had to happen and we came together mostly very successfully. I know it took a long time to get it off the statute and it got passed and it got a long time to get off the statute books, but the success of that, and the sense of community did happen at that point.

I remember being at one lesbian and gay conference where there was a discussion about whether to include bisexual people and I argued against it. I said, "I feel that there should definitely be lesbian, gay and bisexual events but there should also be lesbian and gay only events, and that it's very different for lesbians than it is for gay men because bisexual men [inaudible 00:29:41]. If we've got a lesbian and gay disco, you've still got most of that freedom that you get at a women only one because the gay men are not coming on to you. As soon as you've got one that's open for bisexual people, the bisexual men potentially are going to be coming on to the lesbians and the lesbians are aware of that. It's-

Evelyn: Changes the dynamic.

Jill: ... totally different. Yeah, very much so. I think the addition of trans people is another step that's taken it away from that closeness as a community and that identity with each other. I totally support trans rights. I think there's very different issues there. There's some commonality there but there's also some [inaudible 00:30:24]. It's not about sexuality. I'm not sure how and when it was agreed to add the T on to that. Like I say, it's not about being against trans. I'm totally in support of improving trans rights, but I don't think we have that same sense of community anymore because now it's... Like there was an event that was advertised, that I saw recently, it was LBGTs. I thought, what's S? I was racking my brain, couldn't work out what the S was, and so I was Googling it in the end and eventually it came up with that it's straight.

Evelyn: Oh.

Jill: There isn't that core identity in the same way now, and there's a lot of pressure... I totally agree with the concept of the plus, but at the same time, it's far too open a door

because one of the biggest groups that's pushing for places within that are paedophiles and people that are into different kinks.

And queer. I don't like the term queer. We'd argued very successfully in the late '80s that it should be lesbian and gay, not the gay liberation front, not the gay this, that and the other, lesbian and gay, and that lesbian had to come first because of the double oppression. So that was understood and agreed, and within a couple of years it's become queer. It's like they'd learnt from the arguments of feminists and come up with something that we couldn't then use as arguments against because queer isn't a male term. So you can't use that same argument against it. But, again, it makes us invisible. And what does it mean, queer? There's no definition of what it means. So you get people who are straight but into particular kinks, for example, who then define themselves as queer.

There's issues that we all have in common to some extent, and we'll have disagreements on some of it as well, but there's huge differences there. I just feel it's a bit like that if your brain's ... if you open your mind, your brain will fall out [inaudible 00:32:34]. I think you start to lose any sense of identity, and I think that's the point that we're getting at at the moment. I don't think there is that sense of identity at the moment. I think for people who are involved in the queer scene there perhaps is because especially the people that are primarily focusing on trans rights at the moment, there's probably a sense of community with that, and I think there's probably becoming a sense of community amongst those feminists who don't agree with that, but there isn't that lesbian and gay community now within the LGBT. I don't think there's an LGBT community as such, I think it's separating it.

Evelyn: Do you think that's new or do think there've always been tensions?

Jill: There's always been tensions for sure, but I think this is taking it to a very different level.

Evelyn: Mm-hmm (affirmative). So are there some things you've become involved in more recently?

Jill: Yes. Like I said, I'm always involved in the women's holiday centre. I did try and get a women only disco going in Liverpool with one of my colleagues a couple of years back but we didn't get it advertised in time to go into Pride thing for Liverpool so it wasn't very successfully attended so we didn't manage to get the venue again.

I went to the Lesbian Strength march that was in Leeds recently.

Evelyn: So what's that looking like now?

Jill: I think there's some more events that are going to be planned. I hope there will be anyway. I think it's really important to get lesbian visibility back. I think lesbian visibility is not really there at the moment.



One of the things that I've been doing is looking at a lot of stuff online about stuff around trans rights and all the varying different arguments for and against. Not for and against trans rights but for and against the way that it's being framed. I don't know if anybody's against trans rights, but the way it's being framed is obviously contentious. From that, I came across stuff around detransitioners, which is a really interesting voice that's not getting heard. So that's some things that I'm doing at the moment, is trying to watch more YouTube videos about stuff like that.

What's really common amongst both detransitioners I've spoken to in person and what I've seen on YouTube, is that they're saying that as young women, they didn't see any positive portrayal of lesbians at all, and in LGBT groups, trans was the main thing and pansexual and non-binary.

I know there was a thing fairly recently with an LGBT group, I think it was in Manchester, where there was an event. I thought, that's good, let's have a look at the organisation, and I watched their little introductory video and it didn't mention the word lesbian. I thought, how can you have an introductory video that doesn't say... it said everything else that you expect it to mention and a few others, but not lesbian. It had nothing about lesbians on it at all. I think that's quite common at the moment.

I think that in the way that we try and fight for better rights for trans people, we've got to not let that have a negative impact on lesbians, and I think that is what's happening unfortunately. That's very difficult because then you get labelled transphobic for saying that. I don't know how we get past that.

Evelyn: It's quite a polarised debate at the moment.

Jill: Very polarised, and anybody that raises any concerns is completely demonised and that can't be right. That's a big red flag to me that there's something going really wrong with this, that we need to be able to have these discussions. We've had plenty times with uncomfortable discussions in the past, within the lesbian and gay community.

I was remember when I was first involved in stuff, in fact the same conference where there was a discussion about whether to include bisexual within the phrase, there was a man who was arguing very strongly that we should reclaim the word pervert and call ourselves perverts, and myself and a couple of others were saying, "No. There's significant differences." It's part of paedophile information exchange and all that kind of stuff that was going on at the time, and there was paedophiles who were infiltrating the gay movement, the gay rights movements, and who were focusing, in terms of their identity, on being gay and disguising the paedophile aspect of their sexuality, if you like. So we had some very uncomfortable discussions around that and about how gay men needed to take a stand on this and they needed to be saying, "No, that's not okay." So that started to happen.

So we've had lots of really uncomfortable discussions about stuff in the past and we can have these discussions. If you try and prevent people have discussions face to face and have it all online, people get really nasty really quickly online. There's death threats and

rape threats against people that are labelled as TERF, trans exclusive radical feminists. There's no male equivalent to that term, and the vast majority of people who are radical feminists are lesbians.

So that's really anti lesbian, the stuff that's going on, and that really concerns me. It feels a bit like a witch hunt. If you're labelled a witch, you're a witch. If you're labelled a TERF, you're a TERF, and there doesn't seem to be anything you can do to get people to listen to you with any respect once you've been given this label TERF. I haven't been given the label TERF but I'm sure plenty of things that I do come within what would cause me to be labelled a TERF, if somebody chose to do that, because I'm involved in women's holiday centre, and that has a policy of born and raised female.

I do think that the unique challenge that's going on the moment is around stuff around self ID, that if somebody could just self ID, and in that moment they change from being a male with a position of power over women, having been brought up and raised with that, that in that moment the argument is that as soon as they identify as a trans woman, that they have less power than the biological women. I don't see how that's possible. I don't think you suddenly change your place in the hierarchy like that. I think that there are unique things there politically that need to be discussed. It's a tricky one.

Evelyn: It is. It's very complex. It's very complex.

Jill: We shouldn't be hiding. Because that's one of things I'm doing, I'm trying to have these discussions with people respectfully and get people to see we need to be able to discuss this. It doesn't do anybody any favours to pretend it's as simple as anybody is what they say they are, because what's your definition of a woman then? There's no definition of a woman other than the biological kind of definition that isn't circular. If it's anybody who identifies as a woman, but identifies as what? Anybody who identifies as somebody who identifies as somebody who identifies... Do you know what I mean? There has to be some kind of definition because otherwise all our legal rights become meaningless. If we can't define ourselves, if we can't define the oppression that's based on that, then how can our legal rights be held up? They can't.

Same with being lesbian. The amount of pressure that's put on young... and again, this is a really common theme amongst not just detransitioners but other young women that I've spoken to, young lesbians, where the norm now is that they're expected to include trans women within their sexuality. That's a significant change and I don't think that's right, to have that expectation put on anybody. I think it's absolutely the rights of women to draw those boundaries where they are for themselves and say, "I'm not attracted to somebody with a penis," because over 80% of people don't have any surgery so it's not just as somebody identifies.

I find it worrying, the self ID thing. I think that that takes away all our boundaries. We're labelled as TERFs if we say we're same sex attracted. We're supposed to be calling ourselves same gender attracted. But that's a lie. I'm not attracted to somebody based on their gender. It's not their gender, whatever that means. Do you know what I mean?

Evelyn: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jill: And then I've heard the phrase where they're saying that that makes us vagina fetishists or genital fetishists. So there's all kinds of really dismissive terms being used against lesbians.

Evelyn: And you think that butch lesbians particularly are under pressure?

Jill: Yeah. I think that the stuff around gender's become much more present again in terms of expectations on kids. Toys for kids have become very gendered, clothing for kids. When my kids were little, and I was trying to find just slippers for them, it was all Barbie or Action Man, pink and fluffy or tartan or... There isn't stuff in between. I remember going to a guy in the market who had slippers, saying, "Have you not got any unisex slippers?" He was completely baffled, said, "Well, what do you mean?" I said, "Well, like animals or something like that that either boys or girls can wear." He called me over a couple of weeks later, said, "I've got some of them slippers you asked about." I said, "That's great." So I bought a couple of pairs each for my kids, and then two weeks later he called me over again, said, "I sold all those slippers." It's just not available. There's hardly anything available to bring children up without these gender expectations on them.

So I think gender has become much stronger again. So I just think there's less visibility of butch lesbians. The lesbian scene became much more... lipstick lesbians became a thing. That's good in some ways, it's got to change. People have to got to be whoever they are, but again, in that, promotion of that, because that fits society's stereotype better because they're being women in the way they're supposed to by wearing lipstick-

Evelyn: Looking feminine.

Jill: Yeah. So then butch lesbians were pushed out and made fairly invisible. I'm not talking about any individual. I'm not blaming individuals for doing that or anything like that, but that's just what happened socially.

When I first came out in the late '80s, when we used to go down to Pride marches... because every year we would all go down, it was like a pilgrimage to go down to London for the Pride march, we'd do it without fail. Every year when we'd stop at Watford Services, you'd go to the toilets and there'd be women, especially older women, little bit confused and concerned that we were walking in. It's just like, "It's okay. We're all women." I haven't had that happen for a few years, and then it subsided then, as being lesbian and gay became a little bit more acceptable and so people got used to the fact that there just are women that have short hair and look like this and that's okay, but I've noticed in about the last three or four years it's become an issue again, and women look very concerned when we walk into the toilets with short hair. I wouldn't say I'm butch, I've just got short hair. I don't think I'm butch looking at all.

Evelyn: Not particularly.

Jill: But I get that happening again now, women concerned when I go into toilets, and I think it's because of this issue around stuff around self ID of gender, that women are not sure now who's coming into the toilets, and women are concerned. Because the vast majority of women don't want that.

Evelyn: Mm-hmm (affirmative). So taking the long view, I guess there's been a whole succession of equalities legislation over time, and a certain amount of attitudinal change. Have you felt that? How's that pattern been for you?

Jill: I never got behind the whole serving in the military campaign or the marriage equality. Obviously I was never going to campaign against it but those things never felt a priority to me because, yes, I agree that we should have equal rights to things but I have no desire to copy what I would see as the worst aspects of heterosexuality and male structures and stuff. Marriage comes from property law. It comes from the woman being the property of her father. That's literally why he gives away the hand in marriage, because he's transferring his property to the husband. So as a feminist, why would we argue for us to be able to do that on a same sex basis? It certainly wasn't a priority for me. So I would never have opposed them and I didn't oppose them, and for those people that want that, fine, whatever. So a lot of the equality stuff is stuff that hasn't really been a priority for me.

The legal equality stuff to me is less significant to the social equality. The thing that is significant and didn't get addressed in civil partnerships or in the changes to marriage, I would have liked to have seen it to be a little bit more forward thinking, that it didn't have to be necessarily even a partner because there's lots of people who are single. There are more lesbians and gay men, I'm sure, that are single as they get older than there are straight people, but that you should just be able to nominate anybody to be your next of kin, kind of thing.

Evelyn: To make those end of life decisions when you're no longer able to, that sort of thing.

Jill: So I felt like it's a shame that the civil partnership wasn't a bit wider in that sense, to just be that you should be able to nominate anybody. As far as I understand it, the marriage equality doesn't include things like pension rights automatically. It's not real equality yet. It's partial equality, but it's not really equality.

And things like visiting rights in hospital. Your immediate family have visiting rights. So unless somebody has some legal recognition as being your immediate family, so your partner, or if you're single, your closest friends, who are likely to be other lesbians and gay men, won't have access. So you might end up only being able to have straight people who are your immediate family, who've you've not had any contact with for years, come to see you in hospital.

Evelyn: Yeah. It's a possibility, yeah. Do you feel that attitudes have changed over time?

Jill: Yes. Attitudes have changed massively, and that's great. There's a lot of improvement in that. I don't know. I don't think it's all good, but, yeah.

Evelyn: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Yes.

Jill: I think that because it's changed so much, which obviously is good, but it means a lot of younger people have no clue why some of the things that are important are so important, because it doesn't matter to them because it's not significant. Like, for example, lesbian visibility. I think young people don't notice, except like, say, the ones when they've detransitioned, they realise that was why it was. People don't realise what something is about until they're out of that situation necessarily. So it's when women have gone through that whole process, of the only credible option that's put in front of them being about transitioning and therefore fitting the gender stereotype of male, nobody told them that it was okay to just be who they were and just be a lesbian because lesbian visibility just wasn't there and wasn't mentioned in the lesbian and gay youth organisations that they're in. So that worries me a bit.

Evelyn: So when you were thinking of me pottering along here today with my little recorder, were there any issues you had in mind to talk about that we haven't touched on?

Jill: No, I don't think so.

Evelyn: Oh, good.

Jill: I didn't have anything in mind. I didn't quite know what it was that you were going to be looking for. I just thought, yeah, I'm happy to give you a bit of time for whatever it is that you're-

Evelyn: I'm very grateful for it.

Jill: One of the things I'm doing as well is a course on radical women in history, in Manchester. So it's a 10 week course. I've done the part one. This is part two I'm doing at the minute. One of the things that came up quite early on in that was that, basically, if it's not written down, it didn't happen, and that's why so much of women's history is invisible because it didn't get recorded. So I just thought, yeah, I'm happy to take part in this [crosstalk 00:50:10]

Evelyn: That's my mission.

Jill: Yeah, yeah. It's a concern for me how it will be interpreted and misinterpreted the things that I'm saying around stuff around lesbian visibility and trans rights, but at the same time that's important that that's recorded, that there are concerns, and that those concerns are not being against trans rights, it's about how do we do it in a way that we also need to still be improving lesbian rights?

There was the stuff around Section 28 and then the HIV / Aids stuff really hit. Loads of lesbians put a lot of effort into being very involved in that campaign, and the promise was always, from gay men, of how much they appreciated that and that the next big campaign for lesbian and gay movement would be a lesbian one, and that's never happened. I don't know if it ever will, but it's never happened.

At the moment now, trans is pretty much the only rights that gets talked about in lesbian and gay stuff. There are no lesbian and gay organisations that I know of that are talking about lesbian rights at the moment, and I think that's a concern. That needs to be a concern to all of us. It shouldn't be put in opposition. It doesn't need to be an opposition. Trans people and lesbians, particularly radical feminists generally, should be natural allies. We're all opposed to gender conformity and gender stereotypes.

So that's a bit of a red flag for me quite early on, thinking, hang on a minute, why is this not being done in a way where both groups are on the same side? I don't think both groups can be on the same side in the way it's being done. The only way that can happen is if the people who are doing the campaigning on trans rights are willing to talk to radical feminists. We agree on far more than we disagree on, right along the line. I can guarantee that.

But we need to be able to talk about things that we don't agree on, and that's the only way you can make progress when you've got fundamental disagreement in politics with a group that you're trying to work, or should be able to work together with, is to be able to discuss what you disagree on, and try and find a solution. You can't find a solution without discussing it, and the level of demonisation and silencing that goes on, and making people feel like they're on the wrong side of history and all this kind of stuff, that kind of intimidation isn't okay. It's never been okay, so why is it being accepted as being okay at the moment?

Evelyn: Interesting times.

Jill: Yeah, yeah. And there's some gay men starting to speak out about it just now. What's his name? Simon Fanshawe's now organising a lesbian, gay and bisexual group because of this, because everything is just focusing on trans rights, and it's not serving the needs of the lesbian and gay community anymore.

Evelyn: So to finish on a personal note-

Jill: I didn't intend to go into that by the way, it's just come up. I didn't think, oh yes, I'll speak with you and say all that. It came out of the questions.

Evelyn: Well it's come out naturally and that's what should be.

Jill: It is my biggest concern at the moment, in terms of campaigning, is to be able to find a way to support trans rights but also to make sure that we're filling the gap that's there around lesbian rights. It's got to be both.

Evelyn: Mm-hmm (affirmative). So looking back, and on a really personal note, thinking back to that young Jill, maybe before you headed off for university, what advice would you give her now?

Jill: Speak out. I think that's the only advice I'd give. Speak out and just be yourself. I think speak out's a really important part of it, particularly for me, from having been abused and not having spoken about it at that point.

Evelyn: Of course.

Jill: That's why I went to university. I needed to leave home and go to university. It's an easy way to leave home. If you've got that opportunity, it's an easy way to leave. There were grants at that time remember. So nobody thinks it's a negative thing because you're going to university. If you're leaving home, people will have concerns, but if you're going to university, that's a positive thing. So that's why I went to university. I didn't really care what course I did. I just needed to leave home. So speak out, I think. That's probably a common thread in what I've done. And just go your own way.

Evelyn: Yeah, absolutely. And you've certainly been speaking out this morning. So thanks a million for your time, Jill. It's been fascinating to hear your story.

Jill: Thank you too.