



To cite this podcast:

Krishnakumar, J., Araneta, K. (2023, April 25). Moving towards radical love in organising spaces (No. 37). [Audio Podcast Episode]. In *Pedagogies for Social Justice*. University of Westminster. <https://blog.westminster.ac.uk/psj/tools/podcast/> DOI: <https://doi.org/10.34737/w837y>

Podcast transcript:

Kyra: Hey everyone, welcome back to the Pedagogies for Social Justice podcast. For this episode, we are in conversation with PhD Researcher, Jo Krishna Kumar, based at SOAS, a part of the University of London. Jo is a Junior Fellow at the Centre for Applied Transgender Studies and the Communications Coordinator at the National Network of Sex Workers. Their research examines the intersections of documentary film, leadership networks, and the sex workers' rights movement in South India. In this episode, we discuss how classicism sometimes manifests in childhood, the PhD journey for Jo so far, as well as some of the key points raised in their article, 'Moving towards Radical Love in Organising Spaces'.

Where did you grow up and where are you currently?

Jo: I think the "Where am I currently?" answer is easier: I am in London, right now. And "Where did I grow up?" is the more difficult question, and it's usually what I started my classes with because, for a lot of Asian, African people, anybody who is not white basically, where you're from is...is a turbulent question. So, I am technically from a state called Kerala in South India, and my parents...my grandparents actually moved us, before I was born, to Bombay, where I was born and my parents grew up - Bombay is in Maharashtra, which is in West India - because they were in search of better opportunities. Then my dad moved us to Riyadh - "us" is my mum, myself and my brother - again, in search of better opportunities, and those better opportunities just took us to Sharjah, which is in the United Arab Emirates. So, I grew up there until I was 17, and then I came back to India to do my Journalism degree, then went to Bangalore to do my Sociology degree, and then came to London. So, the last few years, I've brought myself up, but until then, I have grown up in a bunch of places. So, I don't even think the word [third] culture cuts it [laughing] - it's many cultures!

Kyra: How would you describe your upbringing in terms of how gender and caste were almost seen and felt in your household? Obviously, you've just said that you've had to move around multiple times as a child.

Jo: I could start with gender. Gender-wise, I was...I knew I was trans I think from the age of nine, or maybe earlier or a little later, but just around the age of nine, and I remember like... So, all children know about things that might be right or wrong with them - like what I mean



by right or wrong is not that being trans is wrong, but more like...they know that something is missing or off when they're being treated in some way, and I knew that it was weird and wrong and I didn't feel comfortable when I was put in certain clothes, asked to do certain things. I mean, my parents raised both of us, both me and my brother, quite equally, so I would say, on the outside, we were quite...I wouldn't say an outwardly feminist household but...we both...like our education, both of our educations was very, very important, so there was...I never felt like I was lesser than my brother, but at the same time, something felt off because I was still expected to wear certain things, grow my hair a certain way. There were lots of expectations that were already put on me because I'm a girl so – or they assumed I was a girl [laughing]. So, in that way, gender did matter. But, yeah, so as I said, like I knew since I was very young. And my language to reconcile that was me telling my parents that I wanted to change my name, which is now my [dead] name, and I kept telling them that year after year after year after year – and I'm still there, which is why now my parents understand that it possibly wasn't a phase, if a child is telling you that they want to change their name so many times. But I think that was the only way for me to talk to them about something not fitting and me not being comfortable, yeah, which is what I meant by children know, you know – it's just about the language they use and how you listen to them, or maybe the questions you ask them to get them to tell you what they actually mean because, at that time, I didn't know any other word. I did not know how to tell them that I was feeling uncomfortable. And of course, the dysphoria with what I was meant to do after...after I hit puberty, and I was in an all-girls' school...so things were all over the place [laughing]!

Caste-wise, I would say that, within my family, we didn't feel it much because... I knew about the caste system because we are Nayars, and this is an oppressive caste, but it...I only knew about it more like, oh, my grandfather's name is something-something Nayar. But my dad did not take the Nayar surname, for some reason – I have not asked him that yet – and he gave all of us his name, his first name, which was...which is interesting. I'm yet to have a conversation to him about that. But I would say...I understood caste much more when I used to go to other people's houses. While we are an oppressive caste, we are also oppressed in other spaces, like by Brahmins, for example. I used to have a very, very good friend who...I mean, I think we used to call each other best friends, when I was young, and when I used to go to her house, I would get...I would be given water in a different glass. So, I didn't understand that until I was I think 17. Like it was a random memory that was there, but I just thought it's because I'm a guest, you know – a lot of people do that. And then I realised, much later, when I...did a little more digging and studying, that giving people different utensils to eat from, drink water from, is actually an inherently casteist practice, and I just didn't... But it's so normalised in our houses that, if there is a person who is domestically helping you at home, you would give them food and water in a completely different, em... you know... And it's usually...the kind of things people say around that are, oh, it's just to keep, you know, sanitary requirements, hygiene, etc., etc. But it's never usually that. It's definitely caste. So, that's how I saw it at home and around me, but...I would say that I was quite removed from it because I was in a diasporic society outside – not that it doesn't exist, but I think I saw it in school more, when there were other people talking, responding, with



the kind of relationships they had with their parents, the caste pride they attached to their name. It was then I...I think it was a lot more obvious, but not much at home. But of course, I grew up and I started noticing a lot more things at home, but not when I was growing up.

Kyra: It's interesting how, when you're a child and you don't really have, I guess, the language to understand those things and it's only almost later, when you're an adult, that you can really reflect on some of those experiences, and I guess it's almost kind of bittersweet, isn't it, coming to that understanding...? But yeah...

Jo: Yeah, [...], but at the same time, you're like I'm never going to be happy [laughing]! I know that, oh my God, about the systemic injustice that you know about, it's just... Once you figure that out, it's a lot more difficult to just live in the world...being...happy. But, actually, the flipside of that, now that I think about it, is I've grown up with a lot of diversity around me in the schools that I was in. We had...now that I think about it, there were children of all castes and religions, etc. etc., but at that time, you're not realising these things – you're children! And that's a good thing because you are naturally... You know, it's parents usually who are saying things like, "Oh, don't hang out with that kid" or "Don't do this" or "Don't do that". But kids naturally... I mean, the problems we have are very basic: "Why did you copy my notes [laughing]?" Our issues are very basic, and that's amazing – like I can't tell you how much I'm trying to work very hard to go back to my child-self, where, you know, we aren't obsessing over other people's cultural identities, where they come from, what they know, stuff like that, not in a good way of course, but, yeah, I don't know, just thinking about how was I before all of this nonsense permeated my brain...? But, yeah, like I used to study with children from all over the world, and there were so many kids who were Muslim also, that I realised that there were not enough Muslim kids around me when I...came to India, and I started noticing that there were very clear separations when I came to India, which, I mean, of course leads us to questioning, you know, the fascist [side] [laughing] of what is happening in India. But, yeah, like I felt like the separations were a lot more obvious when I came back home than it was outside, so that was the flipside.

Kyra: What kind of shows and what books did you read and watch growing up, and I guess what kind of representations were you exposed to?

Jo: Unfortunately, a lot of Bollywood [laughing]! I say "unfortunately" because that's...that had a lot to do with...em...how I then constructed myself. I kept trying to date men. I didn't feel like there was any other option, even though I wasn't very happy in a lot of these relationships. I wasn't very happy trying – like but I just used to force myself to like...find things to like about...the men around me, which is really, really sad because I just feel like that's such a waste of their time and my time. If I just knew them as people, I could have



possibly had friendships, but, instead, I had to focus on being a certain way and, I don't know, attracting a certain kind of person. It just sounds so bad right now [laughing] but that's...that's really sad, that Bollywood did have a lot of...a lot to do with it.

Books, I used to read a lot. I have to say "I used to" because I feel like I'm buried inside academic journals and articles that I can't read a nice book anymore, like I don't have the focus to just read a book properly [laughing], which is really sad. But, yeah, I feel this about so many other people who used to like just swallow books in a day, but now we can't anymore – that just doesn't happen. But, yeah, I used to...I used to love reading Goosebumps. I still am a huge horror fan. I really, really like reading horror. Yeah, I used to read a lot of Goosebumps, I used to read a lot of other R. L. Stine work, I used to read...I've read all of Secret Seven – Famous Five, not much, I used to like Secret Seven more. Most of the cartoons, main cartoon network was much better – I used to watch it [laughing]...it's [some '90s kid thing that happens] [laughing]. But yeah, I used to love [Pot of Gold]. I used to love all of...everything that was on TV, I used to watch it, Looney Tunes. I think some of the most... I guess, when I think of like [cool] memories of my childhood when it comes to media and stuff, there are just a few movies that I've watched that are just stuck in my brain, like Jaws and Jumanji [laughing]!

Kyra: Oh, I love Jumanji!

Jo: Jaws, Jumanji... And I had CDs, right? So, that's what...like we had a few CDs and then you'd just rewatch the same thing. Some of these things are just stuck in my head forever, like their entire plotline is stuck in my head. So, I think those are the things that I remember most, but I still really, really love consuming media in all forms, some of which I'm also using for my PhD, but like I really, really enjoy, em, media analysis and just...even if not analysis, just watching what other people are watching, asking what other people are watching. I even like ask my students what they're watching right now because I want to know what other people are watching, reading, listening to, especially in the case of podcasts. There is so much that's happening...yeah... So, I could just go on about what I used to watch, but mostly these things. Still love horror a lot. So, yeah, even when I was a child, I would be watching a lot of horror.

Kyra: I feel like I have to ask you: what is the scariest horror movie, in your opinion, that you've watched?

Jo: I...can't say for now, but when I was young, there were I think two... Bollywood is not very good at horror, but there were two films that scared the shit out of me, I remember



that, but I think it's just me, as a child, I was not okay with what I was saying on-screen and I think that...I couldn't sleep so that's what I would say, okay, that was [something from] horror. There was something called [Squee-hay] or something – it's some anthology, and it was weird. That's one of the films. And the other film, I cannot remember, but like...I have like random scenes of it in my head, but I can't remember what the name of the movie is. I've completely forgotten. But I did really like *Insidious*. That was a good film. Because, now, my understanding of horror is also...it's a lot more deeper – it is not just about jump-scares – like I want a good plot. So, now, we think about those things, right? Like we want a good plot – what are you scaring me about...?

Kyra: Yeah.

Jo: Which is why, now, I've...opened up my tastes to, em, fantasy, supernatural, and...what else...psychological thrillers, because, obviously, that is...that is scary, [in my case]. As an adult, those things are scarier.

Kyra: So, my next question was: when did you start to look at your environment through, I guess, a critical lens – like was it from a kind of early age or was it when you entered the university...?

Jo: Some things that I was personally affected by and was not okay with, like gender, very, very early, and, as I said, like, you know, I had my own language to figure that out and I was just...not very happy with... So, you know how, Savannah Shange talks about, in 'Black Girl Ordinary' – I don't know if you've read this person's work, but you should, it's amazing. She talks about how, you know, one of her interlocutors while she was doing this study just refused to be a part of the project and she talks about refusal, you know, and I feel like a lot of us, all of our deviances that we talk about, a lot of our deviances that we talk about, that other people are like, "Oh, this child is not listening, they are disobedient", it's actually refusal to do something that we're actually just really uncomfortable with. So, that's what I was thinking about immediately, and also because I'm teaching about deviance which is why it's in my head right now [laughing]. But I just feel like a lot of my...critical lens was just refusal. I would just not do some things. And I did not know the reason why I wouldn't do these things. My parents didn't know the reason. So, of course, they would just think I'm being disobedient, and I am the older child, so they expect me to do a lot more things than they expect my brother because I'm supposed to be the nice example. Like I...I stopped learning classical dance because it was too feminine for me, and I was put into a very... I was not allowed to explore anything about myself. But all these things, I know in retrospect, you know, why I stopped doing things, why I was refusing to do certain things, but at that time,



of course, it just felt like, no, I just don't want to do it...yeah, which is why we should take children seriously when they just say no about some things.

But when I talk about critical lens, and the language for critical lens, that would be university. It was during my Journalism degree because... I'm glad I did Media and Journalism as my first degree because I feel like, if I did anything else, I would not be as...in tune with what was happening in the world as I am right now, and it would have taken me a lot more time to just...figure these things out. While I was doing my Media Studies course, not only did we have all kinds of people, our professors were brilliant, because you were doing Cultural Studies, Sociology... And I did it in India, so it was very India-specific, and we were immediately, like literally in the first term, talking about caste, gender, race relations. We were talking about everything. We were talking about em...I mean, all kinds of systemic... justice, injustice, utopias, dystopias, everything, everything that you could possibly think of, we talked about, which is what gave me even the...which is why I chose academia as a tool for myself. That's how I see it: it's a tool. Like many other things, it's about tools, and I felt like academia is something that I have in my capacity to change the world with, like other people choose many, many different things. So, university, definitely. Not even in the 11th, 12th grade, which is...when I was 16, 17. I was old enough, but like...no [laughing].

Kyra: I mean, I feel like I'm really happy that, you know, you had this experience because, you know, I think, for some people, it's like...the awareness comes first, and then the refusal comes later. But, for you, you say how kind of, from a young age, like you were saying kind of no to things and you were practising that...kind of the power that you had to do that, because I think, for me, it was more kind of...I developed my critical lens, and I'm still kind of in the process of learning how to refuse certain things, how to almost say no, realising that there's power in saying no...

Jo: I think then it's interesting to also think about how... I used to say no as a child, and then I learned things, but, at the same time, it's not a linear process, right? At the same time, I was also learning other things. So, I'm still learning to say no now, and trying to go back to younger self [laughing] because younger self was a lot more smarter and they just didn't want to do what they didn't want to do. A good example, like my... There are two, actually, really short examples I can give you. One is a classmate of mine, when I was nine years old, recently met me and she was telling me that, "Oh, do you remember when the teacher used to give worksheets in class and you had to write your name? You would just write a different name every single time." I said, "I don't remember doing that", but other people do. So like even if...because...I came...like I'm 27 now, or am I 28, I don't know, I'm somewhere there. And I started questioning whether I ever was trans and I started gaslighting myself already, and then some whole other person, who haven't met for like eight years, is coming and telling me that, you know, "You were doing this as a child", and it just...put me back in place



and I was like stop questioning child-you and saying that it never happened. So, that's one thing.

Another thing was whenever my grandparents, and my parents, used to walk me to the nursery near my home in Bombay, I used to – it would be raining or it would be cloudy and I would be wearing dark, you know, shades, I would be wearing dark goggles, sunglasses, shades, and they would ask me, “Why are you wearing that? You need an umbrella, not shades – people will make fun of you.” And my immediate response to that would always be, “So, let them! Where did I learn that?! What is this confidence? I want this confidence [laughing] I don't have...I don't have the same kind of confidence that young-me had. So, it's just that, like I am in awe of young-me, and I just...I love it. I love young-me so much that I'm just trying to like trace back steps – what went wrong where? A lot of it was socialising me into some girl that they wanted to see, and that really, really screwed things up, I would say. But, yeah, I knew things. Then I got the critical lens, and then I would say it inhibited me a little more than I would have liked it to, and now we're undoing it to find [that].

Kyra: So, I guess I wanted to ask you a little bit more about your academic background. You've obviously shared some of that with us already, but is there anything that you wish you knew as a student that I guess you know now?

Jo: That things and plans change, and you don't have to have things figured out. I would be very, very anxious when I was much younger, thinking I don't have my life figured out. I... don't have a straight set ambition. What am I supposed to do about that? But it's fine. I'm okay. I'm doing great. And I'm doing projects that I have. I'm doing a PhD that I really love. And I feel like, if I knew that that's the more important part, I think I would be less hard on myself. Yeah, I'm just like, as I say, I'm trying to be less hard on myself now as well, and just... relax, it's okay [laughing]. The point of you on the Earth is not to constantly work and burn yourself out. If you're working, that's great, but otherwise, just relax – find a few moments at least to relax. I would like to know that, and, secondly, that there is nothing wrong in being a jack-of-all-trades, because I would be...I've always been the kind of person who likes to do multiple things, all kinds of things. I really...love and find joy in being able to do multiple projects, and, also, like take my learnings from each project and put it here and there, you know, to just...do cool things everywhere, meet new people and... But I would have so many people around me say that, “No, you need to master in something...” and I know now, at this age, that it's not true, and I understand that a lot of people don't even realise that that's not true at, you know, a much older age than me, but I just want to tell people that it's okay! It's actually great that you can do multiple things. What is the point of doing only one thing, and who are you doing it for? When I figured that I'm really happy doing multiple things, I should have just stuck by it, instead of trying very hard to do only



one thing – and then failing anyway. So, that’s what I would... I would just be chill about it then [laughing] and just, yeah...

Kyra: So, I guess, what would you say you’re still learning, in terms of, I don’t know, maybe your position in the University or just as an individual? Yeah, what do you think Jo is still learning?

Jo: [Laughing] [Everything]! I’m still learning how to sit in meetings without my eyes bleeding. I’m still learning that it’s okay to not know everything in a room. Of course, there’s a lot of pressure we put on ourselves when... Like I know this specifically as, you know, a person who is coming from a South-Asian background. It’s...it’s unfortunate and it’s violent to expect a whole, you know, em...a whole cultural group of people [laughing] to behave a certain way and be South-Asian about it and, like, you know, be great at their jobs – and that’s also violent, you know. That’s...stereotypes are very, very violent. So, I’m just trying to...be completely okay with...yeah, that’s okay if I don’t know something. There will be... there will always be meetings, always groups of people where I can’t, in quotes, “contribute”, but I’m contributing by just sitting there and learning, and that’s something I’m properly trying to practise, em, as I go, like on an everyday basis. And just also to slow down. I think I’m learning to slow down, em, and just take things one step at a time. Because I’m definitely one of those whirlwind kind of people: I’m doing everything all at once, running, jumping, too much energy... No such thing, but that’s definitely my ADHD, running, jumping, doing everything at once. But also to slow down and remember to rest while I’m running and jumping. Nothing wrong with running and jumping, but I need energy to run and jump so...

Kyra: So, I guess, what motivated you to do a PhD, and what was your journey into doing that?

Jo: Oh [laughing]. Viewers must note Jo has put their entire head in their hands [laughing]. What motivated me to do a PhD [laughing]?! I don’t know! I think, yeah, so I...I’m only the second person in my family to do a PhD, the first person to do a Social Science one. So, I don’t come from a family where this is a normal thing. Nor is it something where I could have gotten any support from, and my parents keep telling me that “I wish we could support you but we don’t know what to support you with”. And I’m like, “Yeah, me neither! I don’t know what you can support me with [laughing], other than just listen to me rant, I guess...” So, my uncle is a PhD, and he did his PhD in Pharma, and this is quite some time back, but of course Pharmaceuticals and Anthropology are very different [laughing], right, different things, but it’s really sweet that I can still talk to him at least about the perils of doing a PhD and just, em, about writing something so big, and even though...like he’s never done



qualitative research and stuff like that, but it's really nice. So, as I was saying, I think seeing him, firstly, do a PhD was really inspiring for me, which is...it is, I think, for a lot of children from Brown families or Black families, where we're like...we somebody and we're like, "Oh, I can also do that!" I was very much like that. So, when I saw, you know, Dr Nayar [laughing] do the PhD, I was just like, oh, I also want a "Dr" before my name. So, that was the first reason. So, I had it in my mind. But it was more like, well, if it naturally comes to me, I'll do it, because, again, like I didn't have anybody doing a Social Science PhD, so I didn't know what that meant also, and I knew I'm not going to do it in Pharma. So, I just kept studying and em...after I finished my Journalism degree, I realised that I want to specialise in a subject, and while I do really enjoy writing, I do enjoy the research part a lot more. I am not very happy turning out writing very fast. I didn't want to do a lot of reporting, unless it is on something that I have properly spent time and effort on just looking at. So, I was...I mean, I had a lot of methodological questions already about, em, what I wanted to do with my writing, what I wanted to do with people, what I wanted to write about, stuff like that, so... which is why I chose Sociology, and I went and did my Sociology degree and that was when...

So, when I was doing my Sociology degree, there were lots of people who had already done their PhDs, and, during my dissertation, that's when I started looking at...sex work, em, and... I just got really interested in the topic. It actually comes from caste because...we had this... class in the Sociology module that talks about being in caste system, and while we were talking about that, I happened to ask my professor how it works in things that are sexually motivated because I didn't understand. It's a very naïve question, now that I realise, but, em, as a child who didn't know anything, or anything better, I just asked him, "How is it possible that upper caste people have an issue with lower caste women, but when it comes to sexual gratification, they are okay with having sex with them, if they're not okay with touching them otherwise, you know, because it's, in quotes, "polluting" to the upper caste man?" And, at that time, I didn't understand sexual power or like, you know, that sex is used as a way to inflict wounds and stuff like that – I wasn't thinking that way, which is why I asked him, and he said, "Why don't you go find out?" and that became my thesis because I wanted to look at the caste system and how caste or class and race – race comes in because, when we talk about sex workers, there are people who are not just Indian, there are people who are Nepali also, so people's racist ideas already plays on who they choose when it comes to, em, you know, being customers who are requesting sexual favours, em, or, you know, yeah, just taking part as clients. So, I was just interested in a lot of these things, and I did my dissertation during my Master's level on that, and, after I finished my dissertation, I realised...there seems like there's a lot more work, so I'll just do a PhD, I guess. I tried to run away from the sex-focused question many times. I tried to do all kinds of other things. But it just seemed like this needs to be what I focus on, and that's how I...that's how I applied for a PhD. I don't know if I was motivated...but it's mostly anger.



Kyra: What is your research question at the moment? Obviously, I know it's something that changes over the process of doing the PhD, but, right now, where are you at?

Jo: So, timestamp, I am in my fourth year. I am writing the second draft of my PhD thesis. I have given in my first draft, as of September 2022. Right now, my thesis is about the political mobilisation of sex-working women in South India, two specific states, Maharashtra and [Andhra] Pradesh, and how their efforts in political mobilisation is archived or not archived in documentary film. So, the way it reads is I take the reader through how documentary film has functioned, and why it's important to look at film when we talk about vulnerable communities, especially sex workers, who are constantly in front of the camera, especially in documentary film, and then I move on to talk about how they network and how they have a language to work with each other, even if they don't share the same, in quotes, "linguistic language" but, instead, they have tenets, they have things that they believe in, and how the social movement works, really, across the world, and then I finally end my thesis by talking about two very specific states and the collectives in these states, and how they've been... yeah, working as collectives, and their day-to-day life. It's an ethnographic project, so there's a lot happening in there. But, yeah, that's my research question.

Kyra: And I guess, in what ways do you feel like your positionality has almost aided your research and...? You know, I like to think that we are our research, in a sense, and, you know, it doesn't just come from nowhere, and it's not something that you can always be objective about, I think, especially within the Social Sciences. So, yeah, how do you feel like your positionality has aided you in the research process?

Jo: I definitely am not the kind of person who thinks that there's something called objective research because...we are going to have feelings about our research, no matter what we're researching, and, as you said, yes, especially in the Social Sciences, and I feel like, just generally also, you want certain results and I think it's better to be aware of that than to not be aware of that and to pretend like it's not going to...it's not something that you might be, em, accidentally confirming through your bias. So, em...my positionality... As I said, the reason that I even started this project was because I was curious about one certain thing, but at the same time, I'm already a part of the trans and queer movement in India, and during one of these times, I did meet a sex-working person in Bombay who was telling me about how she doesn't feel that...em...she or sex workers are a part of the queer movement in India, and I think that really set me off to another like whole different world because I...I guess, again, I do really enjoy the fact that a lot of these big things that we do come from very small points of...some people might call it naivety...but some people might call it...just the innocence of being like "But why? That's not cool. But why?" you know, "Why aren't you a part of this community? Why can't you be? Why shouldn't you be? Who's stopping you?" And those are the questions that, really, I would say, motivated me, non-academically, and I



think that's still why I do the work that I do. It's very activism-based, a lot of the stuff that I... think about the reason I write, and the way that I write, the reason I use participatory methodologies, for example, are because I don't want to do the same horrible things that research has already done to people, especially people like sex workers, trans people, and queer people. So, I do have a direct, you know, em... I have been on the other side, as the researched person, as a trans person, so, em, there are lots of things I would not want to do to somebody else that was already inflicted upon me. So, that way, my positionality does aid the way I look at a lot of things, but, at the same time, it's a double-edged sword because, at the end of the day, I am still looked at as an upper caste person. Of course, caste is relative, but, em, I still come from a dominant caste position, and people might say, and it's true, that, you know, a lot of things are easier for me to speak about – but that's exactly the point. More and more people should speak about these things. More money should be put into understanding a lot of these things, qualitatively, em... But...yeah, that's...that's what my work is, and I understand that...I don't know if 100%, but I know 80% I understand a lot of these things, and keep it very close to my heart and carry it, as I do my work, because I really don't think there's any point, em, wanting to create a project that is towards social justice if you do not know where your place is in this...large web of, you know, injustice.

Kyra: Absolutely. Have there been any other challenges, I guess, that you've encountered in your PhD so far? Like, you know, this is such a sensitive topic, and these are vulnerable communities, and I guess what have been some of the challenges for you in trying to really kind of...do the research but also kind of the analysis part as well?

Jo: I think a major challenge would be Covid because Covid happened in my second year, which is when I was supposed to do fieldwork, and I did not want to go to India during Covid because...I would not like that. I wouldn't like a researcher coming into my house when there is a global pandemic happening. So... And at the same time, I'm very, very cognisant of the fact that Anthropology can be very extractive, if not deployed properly [laughing], and it has been very, very extractive, especially, you know, the institution that I'm at has a history of extractive, em, anthropological work. That's also exactly why I'm there. I made a conscious choice of being at SOAS. So, em, the main challenge was definitely Covid, but I feel like I've...tried and figured my way around it by thinking about, oh, what would...? There are other options, always. You don't have to go trouble a community to do your research. You really don't. So, I sat and watched films. Films were not a part of my thesis question from the beginning, but I couldn't do anything else so I watched films, and I sat and wrote about films.

I started working with the National Network of Sex Workers because I realised that, during a pandemic, there might be a lot of stuff, admin-wise, that I might be able to do, even if I'm sitting in London, and, at that time, I didn't think that I'm going to work with them or



anything research-wise. I didn't even tell them that...that I plan to ask you about my research at some point. They knew I was a PhD student, and I just didn't bring anything else up. They knew what my topic was, etc. etc., but nothing else about that. So, I worked with them for a year or so. Then I talked to them and asked them whether they would be okay with me doing a small, em, chapter on leadership and how they work and if it's okay that I do participatory research with them. They agreed to that. I applied for a grant, got all of them paid, because I do not want to do any of this work for free, for them to do it for free, because they would rather earn that money, you know, the two hours that they're spending sitting and talking to me, they could be earning somewhere else, so why do that, right? So, I did that, and then, because I knew them for, by this time, one and a half years, two years, they knew me very well, they asked me to come down to India, so that's where I did two workshops with them, talking about leadership, talking about networks, the kind of work that they do, the crisis intervention they do on the ground. So, honestly, it's really not...it wasn't a tough topic to...work in at all. I feel like a lot of people say things like, "Oh, working with sex workers, maybe it's exciting but also so challenging!" but it's really not because they are people, and if you treat them as people, it's like doing a research project with anybody else. So, it's not...it was absolutely fine. I just...I would say I was quite thoughtful about what I was doing, and I asked them at every point, even if I didn't know anything, it was okay if they thought that I'm...I don't know, the most useless researcher in the world, but I asked them whether they're okay with everything, and I'm able to confidently go ahead with my research because the community is with me and, at this point, they are like... They gave me a break from working at NNSW so that I could complete thesis and they said, "It's important that you write the thesis, so go finish it." And I think, for me then, the thesis is done. I don't...like, you know... We need to realise that...at the end of the day, the communities get nothing unless you, you know, really think about it, because you're getting a doctorate, em, on their backs, no matter how well you do your research, so you better make it worth it, for yourself and them, if you want to sleep at night [laughing]. I'm a little dramatic but that's... that's what I actually think.

But no other challenges really, other than Covid and... But I would...I would be one of those irritating people that say that it was...not good that Covid happened but...because it happened, I really just stopped and thought about, okay, is this how I want to go ahead with my thesis...? And it's really sad that we need a global pandemic for that. I wish it would have happened just generally but...that's what happened. I really stopped in my tracks and thought about what I want to do with my research and whether I want to go ahead and how. And I don't think ethics can be taught. Some amount of ethics can be taught, but a lot of ethics is...you really reaching deep into your soul and asking whether you...really want to do that and what's going to happen if you do something.

Kyra: So, I guess, what advice would you give to prospective PhD students, particularly those in the Social and Political Sciences?



Jo: What advice would I give...? Be flexible. A lot of people have told me that your PhD doesn't have to be the most important piece of work that you ever do, so stop putting the pressure on yourself. Do something you really enjoy because you need to push it to the end. It's a long project – you know, not a lot of projects run for four years, five years, some people, six, seven, eight, I don't know how many years, so really try and enjoy every bit of it. Some parts, you will not enjoy – like I'm not enjoying editing as much as I enjoy doing the research part, but it has to be done. But of course, it's still fun for me because I'm writing about something I love so much. So, my main advice would just be: be flexible about it, and I think, the more flexible you are, the more fun you will have with it. What I mean is, you know, like...if I wasn't flexible, I feel like the cinema thing wouldn't have worked, and I think I would have just pushed my PhD into a lot more years, and I would have done something that I, in the end, would not have been very, very happy with, even though it would have made sense with my research question. But there are...you can keep the goal the same and do other things methodologically to get to the same goal. My goal was to talk about everyday living experiences and social space with sex workers, and that's what I'm doing anyway, just in a completely different, and I would say, in a way that the sex workers themselves were happy to contribute to, so...yeah...

Kyra: So, I wanted to dedicate some time to talking about your recent article, 'Moving Towards Radical Love in Organising Spaces', in which you kind of problematise feminist organising spaces, specifically, I guess, the kind of "taken for granted" aspects of how they function, and I guess how we might practise love and mutuality in these spaces a bit more. What were your motivations for writing this piece and I guess bringing these spaces into question?

Jo: So, as, em, if any of the listeners are reading the piece, or they end up reading the piece, you will know that it comes from a lot of pain, and it's not a piece that I think me or my co-author, Annapurna, would have wanted to write at all because, yeah, it just came from...not a very nice place. We are glad that we were able to write the article, but it was more of a processing thing because something not very nice happened to us in organising spaces. Main motivations were just that, em, literally, we were in a space where we felt like...we felt heard, in the kind of activism that...we and the people around us were practising, and we felt like this is possibly not how we can fight anymore, there needs to be a better solution, and we felt like weren't able to...we've forgotten how to talk to each other as feminist activists, and if we are re-creating the same things that we ran away from outside of feminist activist spaces, em...and then we're just re-creating them inside, the same patriarchal norms, the same hierarchies of age, of experience, of educational level, class, caste, then, honestly, what is the point? How are we going to think about social justice outside if there is no...there is no justice, there is no talking to each other, within our group? So, that was the motivation.



Kyra: And, I guess, what are some of the major internal issues facing a lot of feminist spaces today?

Jo: I'm just a small person – I can't tell you all the major issues [laughing], but stuff that I've seen, em, while, you know, writing this paper, the reason why we were writing this also is because, unfortunately, we're still in a space, of course, you know, the category of woman has been recognised to such a level that anybody who is in, in quotes, "threatening" that category is, em, is being questioned. So, I guess then, we just need to ask: why is the category of being a woman so fragile? Because, yeah, I don't know whatever is the reason for people being...trans exclusionary or sex worker exclusionary, and these are the main two groups that face the most out of...cis woman feminism. It's usually trans people or sex workers who are not listened to very much and who are demonised, weaponised, vilified, em... So, I think that's one of the issues. I never find a reason as to...like I don't have a good reason as to why somebody thinks these groups should be out of feminist spaces, but, okay, that's number one.

Number two is there seems to be a practice of an age hierarchy in a lot of these spaces, where a lot of, in quotes, "older" feminists, or feminists who have been there for quite some time, don't want to listen to the ideas of younger feminists when they enter these groups. They don't want to listen to what the younger feminists have to think, have to say, have ideas about. And there are a few things that you want to do constantly, which...you just keep doing, like these are the same strategies of fighting that you keep applying, and if there are younger feminists who are telling you, "Maybe we should do something else because, out of our limited experience, this might work," we have a lot of older feminists saying, "Well, that's not how we used to do it." But the times are different. What is the...? Like we can't do this whole Boomer thing of, you know, "When we were young, we used to do this so we must do the same thing..." But, no, times are changing, so we should come up with new solutions because it's not like the systemic problems are changing, right? They're actually just becoming strong – the right-wing is only becoming stronger because they have like the same, em, I guess.. I mean, there are other scholars who've worked on this, but they have a very set agenda and set things, and I feel like the feminist movement is eating ourselves up from the inside, and that scares...us so much [laughing], which is also why we wrote the article. But yeah, like there are lots of ways in which, you know, feminist spaces are being [really exclusionally], which...hurts us greatly, em... There was this other point that I was thinking about, but I can't think...I completely forgot it, but if it comes back, I will tell you.

Kyra: And I guess, in what ways can feminist spaces replicate family structures based on seniority and parenthood, like you kind of allude to in the paper?



Jo: Yeah. So, this is another one of the issues that we've seen...which we wanted to point to because I feel like we don't talk about it enough. A lot of feminist spaces, because of the seniority thing, when there are younger feminists who enter these spaces – oh yeah, also, sorry, I remembered what I wanted to talk about... Can I do that?

Kyra: Of course, yeah.

Jo: It's just that, unfortunately, a lot of feminists also come from feminist families or activist families – and we can apply this to many other, you know, social justice movements. It could be communist families. It could be any families – like just children who have activist parents, for example, activist grandparents, and that's amazing, that's great, but what ends up happening is they tend to take a lot more space and they expect other people to follow the same kind of...em...I don't know, rule-book, apparently – apparently, there is a rule-book which a lot of people don't know anything about. I don't come from a family that had access to a lot of these activist spaces, if you were talking about, em, [communist] spaces in India. I wish I did, but I just grew up in a completely different place – but that doesn't mean that I don't have equal or more to give or contribute to these activist spaces. So, that creates another hierarchy that might...not be very obvious, but, in the kind of strategies that we use, the kind of language that we use, whether we are letting people understand or even letting people in, em, it's a challenge, I feel, that people need to talk more about. And also about like expecting everybody to be the same amount of work, the same amount of...you know this...that actually can push someone away from the activist circles that we are trying to create and the activism that we are trying to do. We actually need more people in numbers who understand more things, and not to like push more and more people away because they don't have access to certain information or language. And, unfortunately, in a lot of feminist circles, or in just general, you know, in quotes, "work circles", we have a lot of people who can learn... If you...if you put so much importance and pressure on learning the language of being feminist, then it is very easy for people who are not...who don't actually practise these things in real-life to look feminist. So, a lot of people enter spaces where they don't actually practise a lot of the things that they talk about. And why do you think that's happening, right? Because we trust people based on the language that they're able to speak. And that is inherently...castist, classist...it's a lot of these things because not everybody has access to the same kind of information or the same kind of language to talk about the same kind of things.

But, yeah, so talking about how feminist spaces can replicate family structures, it's very, very similar. A lot of the points I was talking about before, about how, em, when... It's very close to how corporates call themselves families, when you've not actually made the effort to know each of your family members, and there are usually people who are in senior positions



who tell you how to do things because that's how it's always done. And that's quite...it should be questioned, at the least, about why we think we should be doing this. It could have worked, that's great, but why do we think we should be doing this? So, that can happen a lot of...a lot of, in quotes, "menial domestic labour" falls on people who are, em, women, or people who are of minority genders, em, so a lot of the same family patriarchal structures can just like recreate themselves in, in quotes, "feminist spaces". So, are they really feminist spaces if they're not actually challenging anything in the personal? And Anna, in the article, writes about how, em, yes, you know, the personal is political, but is the political always personal or have you just separated it [laughing], and, you know, you are a feminist outside but when you go back home, those values don't adhere to you anymore? And in that case then, what are we doing? So, I think like we just...I feel like we forget [laughing] to just stop and ask: what are we doing? Because maybe if we asked that a little more and we were a little more self-reflective about what we are doing, it might work, like all of our activism might work [laughing]. And I'm not saying it doesn't work. Of course, half of the rights – not half, ALL of the rights we have as people, the fact that I'm talking on this podcast, is because of activism. I'm not saying that. It's just that...there are more and more and more groups. There's a lot of funding going around here and there. There are all these kinds of conversations about safe spaces and inclusion, but there is not actual inclusion happening. Em...and I think we just need to take a step back to see whether it's actually happening and what that means for people. So, long-winded answer to that [laughing]!

Kyra: No, I completely agree, and I think, yeah, it's not the sense of what's happening isn't working, it's like who is it working for, who is it only working for...

Jo: Yeah.

Kyra: So, I guess, where does radical love come into this space? How do we make room for that? And I guess what does it mean, for you?

Jo: I actually have a thought that was a slight following up from what we were talking about, you know, just...and I'm hoping it would automatically connect itself to this question, but, you know, just this understanding that just because a space is feminist doesn't mean that it cannot have all these other kinds of, em, differences. Of course there are, you know, feminist spaces, there will be people who are, eh, coming from oppressive castes as well as oppressed castes, as well as people who are rich and people who have been historically poor within their families, who belong to all kinds of different classes, working class people, sex workers... There are so many kinds of people that form these spaces. So, really, we need to ask ourselves whether our inclusion is inclusion for everybody. Just by marking a place as feminist or queer-friendly or safe does not automatically make the place safe. I was joking to



somebody yesterday [laughing], saying that, usually, when a place is demarcated as a safe space, it might not be – it probably isn't if it needs to be demarcated. And, often, these... these really nice actually safe spaces are just...places where people are being open to each other. But, yeah, I mean, I guess that opens a whole new conversation about language and words and inclusion, etc., etc., but I think a different podcast episode for that one!

What does a radical feminist space look like for me and what does radical love look like for me? I think I'm just going to go back to young Jo because one of the motivations when we were writing this paper, and, you know, the paper has me and Anna just talking to each other, as well, like these sections where we're just talking to each other, because we did also want to break down some of the ways in which academia overanalyses some of our basic main thoughts, as though they're not important thoughts, unless they have, you know, five other people agreeing to it. It's fine if you don't agree, that's absolutely okay, but that's exactly what being radically open to other people's ideas is. It's okay if I don't agree, but it's still an idea and it should be [held/heard] anyway. But, yeah, one of the main things that was...our motivation was that, em...you know, baby Jo and baby Anna and baby [Eva?], and all of us, actually, we would just...if we had a problem with each other, we would yell at each other and just sort it out, and, the next day, you would still be friends – and I think that's what radical love is. And we've always known it. We've just forgotten it in this web of...being polite, being civil.. .

Of course, there are lots of colonial hangovers as well I need to talk about [laughing], in that case, where we are not allowed to just talk to each other without being absolutely polite and absolutely civil about it, without acting like you're not hurt or acting like, you know...or using other words to mean something completely as being... We know these words, like passive aggression, but what does that really mean, you know [laughing]?! Why are we being passive and aggressive at the same time? Isn't that strange?! So, like I just feel like, for us, radical love and being in an actually feminist space would be the openness to...to talk to each other about things that hurt each other, and fix it together, because if you don't have... It's not like we're not going to hurt each other. We're all absolutely capable of harm. And... then how do we reduce that harm in our space instead of walking away? That's...that's what happened in the space that we're talking about in the paper, that triggered the entire paper, the fact that, when we did hurt each other, even though we kept calling ourselves a feminist space, we didn't talk to each other. I stayed as the person who was hurt. Anna stayed as the person who was standing up for me. And the people who hurt us left the space. And that made us feel like, "Now what? Does the space just die like this because we couldn't talk to each other...?" And I think that just really disturbed us, that...and that's the end of the activism, you know, the fact that it could just...stop now because these people...like we just couldn't talk to each other and...which is why I think it's really important to think about how we build our spaces as radically feminist, as, you know, radically loving to each other, because there really isn't space for us to...hurt each other and not talk about it. And these



are not even people who... I'm not talking about a [turf] who fundamentally hates me and wants me to die. This is just a person who had a disagreement. So, if we are probably able to disagree with a little more love, then we will be able to...stay in these activist spaces, continue fighting, and actually fight, em, the kinds of things that are happening outside our spaces, em, with more love. And I don't mean that as love-love but more like...with that much more strength. So, yeah...

Kyra: Yeah. And I think, even me, like one of the things I took away as well, after reading the article, was like...I feel like we all need to just be able to be comfortable with like being able to be called in sometimes, and not necessarily look at it like "This person is calling me out, like I need to get out of this space", like I think, you know, we need to be more open, and I guess, also, be able to show accountability for when we've done someone harm, even if we don't necessarily understand how we've done that. Yeah, I had a lot of thoughts, I think, after reading the article.

Jo: I'm glad you had thoughts. But, yeah, that's the thing, right, like...a lot of people within feminist spaces already take for granted that, "Oh, I'm a feminist and I can't cause harm because I've gone through so much." But so have you all, and that's okay... But we're here to balance that together and hold the burden of having gone through horrible things together. It's not supposed to be...[laughing]...but yeah, yeah...

Kyra: And it's also something that like, I mean, you can call yourself a feminist or an ally and things like that, but it's like it's something that – it's a circular process. There's always something that you're constantly kind of working towards and doing the work, so I think...I mean, yeah, that's another conversation [laughing].

Jo: Yeah, it's a whole other episode.

Kyra: It is. It is [laughing]. So, unfortunately, we're coming to the end of our talk-

Jo: That was [fun/quick]!

Kyra: It was! I feel like we could go on for way longer than this, to be honest, but as a question I like to end on: what would you like to see happen or see develop within higher education in the next 10 years? I guess you could also answer that in, you know, within organising spaces – just what do you want to see?



Jo: Mm, what do I want to see...? Money. More money [laughing]. Yeah, I just... People need to have money, more money, to do cool things that they know they have the capacity to do but they have no funds to do. I feel like I've already... It's a very small thing, but I just need organising groups to, em... There are so many spaces that are in full solidarity with each other, and I love watching such spaces. I just hope more of that happens because it's...I think it's amazing to see what we can do together, and there are so many groups who do that already. I can talk about so many in London itself. I work with SWAM, for example, and SWAM and...and NNSW did an event together and raised money together. So, just being in such spaces where we're talking to each other and figuring out problems together makes...it really energises me, so I just want to be part of more of such spaces.

The same thing with higher education. I mean, I feel like higher education is a whole different...depressing conversation, because of how it's...we're like... We're in the middle of strikes right now [laughing]. I honestly...don't know what to say with regards to higher education being better, but I just hope some of the basic things get sorted out, some very, very basic things that, you know, you see, when you listen, how [long we've] been asking for, but just... Let us teach and let us research – that's all I want. I feel like everything else will come after, if people just had steady jobs, all of us, it would be much better [laughing]. But I don't want to end on such a sad note [laughing]! Look, we're doing our best and we are amazing and we all are in solitary with each other and it will all be okay, as long as we help each other – and that's that, that's it [laughing].

Kyra: Exactly. Thank you. Well, I just want to thank you so much for joining me here today. I feel like, oh, it's just been such a pleasure to hear you speak about your PhD, which I'm just really excited for you to finish – maybe not more than you are [laughing]! And, you know, the thinking that you've been doing about organising spaces and radical love, I mean, your work, it really does inspire me, and, yeah, I'm excited to see what's next for you. So, thank you again.

Jo: Thank you so much, Kyra.

To find out more information, access our tools, or get in touch, visit us at blog.westminster.ac.uk/psj.