

STATE LIBRARY OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

Transcript of an edited interview with

Lena Van Hale

STATE LIBRARY OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA — ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

DATE OF INTERVIEW: 2022
INTERVIEWER: Rita Alfred-Saggar
TRANSCRIBER: Luisa Mitchell
DURATION: 34 min., 49 sec.
REFERENCE NUMBER: **OH4656/13**
COPYRIGHT: State Library of Western Australia

NOTE TO READER

Readers of this oral history transcript should bear in mind that it is verbatim and as such reflects the informal, colloquial style that is inherent in oral histories. The State Library of Western Australia is not responsible for the factual accuracy of this oral history, or for the views expressed herein.

INTRO: Death. It's the most inevitable part of life. Some might say it's the only guarantee. But it's also a topic that many people shy away from because it makes us feel uncomfortable, scared or upset. It's often swept under the rug, not acknowledged or talked about, until of course, we come face-to-face with it ourselves. We hope to end this taboo through a series of interviews with many different people from all over Western Australia. We talk to ordinary people about their views on the grief, loss, love and celebration that *is* death and dying. This is a conversation on death.

LENA: My name is Lena Van Hale and I really do want to talk about some perspectives around death and dying in my community as a trans person and also as a former sex worker [and] a sex worker activist.

RITA: These groups are often misunderstood. Can you tell us a little about that? What is a societal perception [of them] and is it always negative?

LENA: I don't think it's always negative, but it is very warped. In terms of sex work, there's a lot of propaganda about it. We feed the propaganda ourselves as sex workers as a way to remain safe, right. We know that sex workers do not use drugs at any higher rate than the general population. We know that sex workers often have quite a lot of industry satisfaction, have quite a lot of work satisfaction. We know that sex workers have lower rates of STIs than [the] general population. So all of us wrestle with these myths within ourselves in the same way, so many of us that come in the industry have to kind of pick apart what we thought we were going to see once we were in it. I think that that's different from a lot of other misunderstood groups because we actively will encourage propaganda, because it not only keeps us safe, it's good advertising, right. So, it's a very frustrating, mysterious place to be.

RITA: I think it's probably safe to say that we were taught to believe that sex work isn't a choice and people engage in it because they have to. Is that correct?

LENA: That it isn't a choice, that it's dangerous – yeah. There's a lot of sex workers that are agnostic on those questions as well, I think. I think that probably the average sex workers are like, yes, I choose to do this. I choose to enter the industry; but you could say the same for any work, that there's a level where working isn't always a choice for anyone, right? Like we all go to work and we all sustain ourselves. So that's a long-standing kind of philosophical argument about how coercive that is. One way I like to think of it is to try to give people the dignity to define what is coercive in their own life and what they've chosen in their own life. I've met plenty of people who've been in the industry, but thought that was very coercive, how they entered it, felt they had no choice. And for them, that could be very challenging. But I would definitely say they're a minority. The understanding in society is that that's most of us, but I think there's almost very, very few people who've actually been sex workers and been in [the] industry [who] share that [experience]. And I'm very sympathetic to those people. I don't believe that any of us can go and tell someone that their experience wasn't coercive or was coercive. So, we find it very offensive, both ways. I get very angry when people tell me that I was coerced. I'm like, I would know, I would know better than you, you know? And I think that a lot of us share that kind of thing.

RITA: In terms of a society that doesn't really talk about death and dying very much, do you think that your community and the communities with which you work, do you think that there is enough support for those communities to deal with the kinds of dangers that maybe they might be prone to, that other society members aren't particularly?

LENA: I'd say that the answer to your question is definitely no, that there isn't enough support, but probably what I would like to see [more] is agency a little bit. So, at the moment we can't really go to the police very easily. We can, but it's got an unreliable hit rate in terms of whether they turn us away, whether they're willing to talk to us, whether they respect what they're hearing from us, right. And we have data on research on that. So, it's about one in two police reports that we make will actually get written down, right? They actually tell us to leave.

RITA: But is living with the possibility of violence or a violent death an ever-present danger?

LENA: I think I definitely thought it was when I first into the industry. And for me, I have the advantage of knowing a lot more sex workers than the average person. Because I work with sex workers, [that's] my day job. I see sex workers every day. I see over 2000 people a year, even if a lot of those are just very brief. I know for sure how rare violence is because of how rarely we hear about it. And because of how many people I speak to who are career sex workers who have been in the industry 10, 15, 20 years, five years, whatever. And how frequent bad experiences are for those people. Because most people you talk to haven't had one, most people you meet will not have had a really seriously bad experience under where we live. This is obviously very different [in] different places in the world, but we shouldn't expect that, right?

We all go in expecting violence and we all go in kind of expecting that we are taking all these risks, but I felt much more at risk working in a bar. I felt much more at risk in all kinds of jobs. I've delivered pizza, I've done hospitality, and I think that those are all riskier. Like realistically we see more injuries in those work[places]. So, it's not, but there is a perception there is. You could be a sex worker for a really long time believing that. You could be a sex worker for a really long time feeling there's [an] ever present threat of violence that never occurs.

RITA: The other group that you work with, the trans community. Do you think the attitudes have changed within wider society about how to receive or interact with somebody who is different?

LENA: Yeah, I do think so. I do think radically... or maybe it's not so much the way that we interact and the way that everyone interacts with us that's changed, but we just are able to name it now. I feel like perhaps 15 years ago, 10 years ago. But as a trans person you'd move through society and no one would be able to name why you're different.

I came out in 2013, which was right at the very beginning of the current wave of understanding and inclusion that we've seen around trans people in society. We were really dubious back then about whether it would help. There was a lot of debate back then about whether visibility actually could harm us. Because we were like, well, before I'd walk down

the street and people would just be like, that's a strange looking person. Now I walk down the street and people are like, that's a trans person, you know? So, having a name for something gives people something to rail against as well. Luckily it hasn't turned out that way though. I think that definitely we have seen that shift very, very positively with that. But we didn't know, because it never happened before, you know, we'd never had something like that where a community like mine, which is a rather like maligned community, went from being not even named in society and the average person didn't even know that we existed, to being so well known about.

RITA: What do you think about society's attitudes to young people? So, teenagers, for example, who say, I don't feel that I am the person that people see on the outside and I want to be able to have surgery to be the person that I really am?

LENA: This is where I think the misinformation thing really comes in badly. Because I think that we've done ourselves a bit of a disservice in a way that we've spoken about trans people, in kind of reductive ways sometimes. Because I think that like everyone, regardless of where you sit on the issue and regardless of where you sit on who trans people are and what we are, everyone universally just wants the best for young people. But I don't think anyone's got a really good grasp of what that looks like. For me... and everyone uses their own experience, right. So, you know, I could talk to any person who's really concerned about young trans people in society. And they're like, well, if that had happened to me, then that would've been harmful, if I'd gone to doctors and they would've made me transition, that would've harmed me and then we're like, well, you know, people go through puberty and then feel extremely harmed by not being able to have been included.

I mean, in WA we have a five-year waiting list for a young person to be seen. So, if the average person can't get anywhere near, I mean, we don't put anyone anywhere near hormones until they're 14, 15. But what I would love is if the conversation was elevated to the point where no one accused us of operating on young people, because that's just not something that happens. Surgical intervention's not actually on the table for any young people. I always think about it in terms of like, because I really agree with someone who would be my ideological opponent on this, that they're very worried that we are going to put a young person on hormones and make them experience things happening to their body that don't match their internal sense of gender and how harmful and damaging that could be for a person. And I'm like, well, that's just what we want too! I just don't want anyone to have to go through that experience as well. But yeah, I think that we're going to have a few more years of this conversation being really charged and not very evidence based. And it's a bit unfortunate at the moment.

RITA: We were talking to people about suicide and suicide prevention and of course the numbers within the communities that you work with are significantly higher than even the shocking numbers that are on the table anyway. Why is that?

LENA: Because I think people are very alone. There was a great piece of research a few years ago that showed that for a trans or gender-variant young person who has just one person in their life that's inclusive to them and just one person in their life, be it at school, be it a friend, be it a parent, be it a doctor, who is able to be inclusive of their gender in any

way, whether it's just recognizing their gender, whether it's using a different name and pronoun in a certain space and just being there for them and being able to see them in that gender variance, then it reduces the risk of suicide significantly to almost just above the general population.

So, I think that shows just how critically alone people are. Because if the statistics that we do have are made up to such a high level of people who do not have an area in their life where they're supported in their gender and their experience and just even recognize that their experience is real then I think that's a really serious indictment, right? To see both those stats. Because we've known for such a long time the difference in suicidal ideation and suicidality and to see how much that reduces in young people with just one single person in their life that's accepting of them... I think [that] really shows just how much isolation and loneliness is driving the rest of those numbers.

RITA: And what about older people within that cohort?

LENA: So, with older people, it actually seems to be a similar thing because we are coming out in later life too. I can't quote research for this specifically, but my understanding of suicidality in older trans people is that the most dangerous point for any trans person is when they first come out. The critical time for anyone is in between someone's coming out to people in their life and where they've actually been able to seek help and seek affirmation and seek experimentation and start being able to try themselves on in their own skin and such.

I think there are lots of things that drive it also, things like poverty, right. But I don't think those are uniquely... like they kind of line up with a non-trans person in poverty, for example. But all trans people seem to experience this real danger period for emotional harm in suicidality, which is right around when they're seeking acceptance in the world and looking around themselves [and] seeing which of their friends are still okay with them, seeing if their family will still talk to them. I think that that's the real danger period for anyone.

RITA: What do you worry about, Lena?

LENA: I really worry about misinformation, the nuances of that information. I think that it's really challenging for trans people to hear about the statistics related to suicidality over a lifetime. We always hear that one in two trans people have experienced some level of suicidality over a lifetime without ever having the context that the vast majority of suicidality for a trans person is immediately after coming out, before receiving any type of help, before engaging in help-seeking. And so, we give people all this fear without giving them any hope, right? And I feel that's a form of misinformation in itself.

RITA: Has there been any research done on, once people have transitioned, whether there is an element of mourning from either family or wider friendship groups, the, I suppose, death of the person they knew and this new person that is? Talk to me a little bit about that?

LENA: This is great. I really wanted to talk about this. I don't know if there's any research at all, but we talk about this all the time. People talk about this all the time about mourning a

person. And a lot of trans people find this really offensive. I personally don't mind it so much, but I do understand why people find it really offensive. I think my family did this as well. They're like, oh, we're in a little bit of mourning right now. I was kind of like, well, shut up and come back and talk to me when you've dealt with that. Because I'm here, right? Like fucking hell. But I was a bit forceful with my family, right, in that sense. There are some people who are in mourning who, it's really painful with a trans person, because they're like, really? They're like, well you're dead to me and I'm not going to talk to you again. And I think it's fucked pretty up. It's pretty rough to happen to anyone in any situation with anything that anyone's going through.

I think that a lot of time with parents, particularly, they have this kind of view of where you're going to be in their head. They're like, okay, you know, married by 30, grandkids by 35, and they have all these things where they've got a little mental plan planned out for you. And then [with] transitioning, they have to rebuild all of that and it kind of takes away part of their framework for the world.

I think that children get really pissed off at parents for that. But I mean, it's been decades of their life building up this like kind of internal framework of their expectations of the world around them, you know? That's a really powerful thing that, you know, what you expect to see when you wake up in the morning, having to fully rearrange your worldview like that. I think that's a lot for a lot of parents.

I do think it would be good if parents would do that work without making their children, [without] dragging them through it though. I get a bit... I'm not very good at working with other trans people's parents. I think [it's] because my parents are very good. I think because my parents are very cool people. My approach is always, to parents, this is something really important for you to do on your own while your child's going through one of the hardest moments they'll ever go through in their life. Like, it's really important to sometimes separate those groups a little bit.

I don't think that we are really born with a, this is what gender looks like. But I feel like maybe we are born with a blank slate with gender written on it and then we fill in whatever it is. Like, I feel not many people have no internal sense of gender even from a very, very young [age]. And it seems to be something that kind of happens, but it gets filled in so differently based on all kinds of things. So, I wonder if we are born a blank slate, but it's a blank slate that's labelled, like we are born [as] a collection of blank slates.

RITA: Have you come across people who have transitioned who do mourn the identity that was once apportioned to them, which they've actively decided to change?

LENA: Yeah, it depends. I think so. I think a lot of people will have things that they mourn in terms of like, oh, this is going to be very hard for me to do now. I personally don't feel safe doing a lot of traveling anymore. I used to travel a lot and there's some places where I would only travel with people that I trust now. I feel like there's certain places I necessarily wouldn't travel alone. I never used to think about that, I was like I'll go anywhere. So, for me, that's very annoying. But it depends on what you relate to your gender, right? There are some people who will mourn, you know, oh, I can never do this, eat this food anymore, because

they gender it so intensely in their minds. I think that's very funny. People are like, I can never drink beer again. I think you can. But I think that it's just a symptom of how silly some of the things we gender in society are, you know. Like we see everything's just gendered. We have gendered advertising on bread, like on absolutely everything. I think a lot of people do that. Some people more than others. For a lot of trans people, the experience of coming to terms with themselves is more one of euphoria and it's the opposite. They're able to lift themselves out of this state of mourning, [from] things that they'll never get to experience, [and] be like, no, I can experience them.

RITA: So, marginalised communities often feel that they need to retreat into their own community because nobody else actually understands outside. You know, death and dying within a community that already feels pressured, is [that] something that reverts then into a private place rather than a public responsibility?

LENA: Yeah. It can be. I feel like if anyone around us in our communities dies, and I'm not talking [of] specifically the trans community, I'm talking like anyone around us dies, we all connect to that in some way, you know. None of us are neutral on someone around us dying, I think. I think that in a marginalized community, you have this feeling when someone passes as if we should have a unique level of ownership over that. I don't think anyone does, you know, I feel that can be very challenging for some people in marginalized communities. Like if we see a sex worker die, it becomes kind of our business, even if it wasn't. I don't know if that's a great way of explaining it?

RITA: So, is that because there's an element of advocacy that people feel that they have to perform?

LENA: Yeah. Or counter advocacy. It may often be the case. And definitely in trans communities. It feels like all of us, regardless of our intersectional identities and all of our other identities, we all have an agency and perspective on dying, knowing the people around us die. It's like having that community where someone dies, who has that relation to you, it almost gives you permission to start experiencing things and thinking about things in a way that's kind of a little bit taboo, if you're not. That makes this just a little extra layer of feeling uncomfortable, I think.

RITA: The last couple of years with the pandemic have been difficult for all societies and all cultures and all communities. Do you think that it's had a disproportionate effect on the trans and sex worker community?

LENA: Definitely on the sex worker community. So, on the sex worker community, I don't have to look deep at all to see that it's massively impacted. Because even just if it wasn't sex work, if we were just small business owners that are independent business owners, then we all went out of business, right. And as a sex worker, the money you make is also the habits you keep and the safety you're able to enforce. If I really need to pay rent, then I might take on and accept that client who makes me uncomfortable. I might stay a week longer and work in a place that I don't feel quite as good at, you know? And so, your income and how secure and regular you are able to work is like one of the biggest indicators of how safe you feel at work because you just enforce yourself. You have more time to think about that stuff.

So, a global pandemic took all that away from us. It would've made a lot of people lose their jobs, made a lot of people lose connection. Of course, the industry didn't even slow down, but... A lot of people stopped working, anyway. I also think that it's kind of a second pandemic to affect us too. A lot of people don't, like people forget a lot about HIV and HIV is still a pandemic. Sex workers in Australia, this is my experience, have really, really high levels of self-protection around this stuff. So, we did see, thankfully, the sex worker communities in Australia really band together. People really help each other out, a lot of mutual aid projects, and sex workers managed to not be as affected by catching the virus as a lot of other industries.

And definitely [were] far better than what people expected. The stereotype was that we would all catch COVID right, because we're all kissing people. Which ended up not being true. It ended up being more important if you're working in a supermarket and you are around a hundred people a day than just kissing five people a week, it ends up being much less of a risk because it's that infectious. So, sex work ended up being quite low risk, but because of the stigma around sex work... Sex work was already maligned. Like, we already saw sex workers as transmitting viruses before the pandemic. So, when a global virus came around that's killing people and everyone's just thinking about a virus all day, people just naturally gravitated to fearing and excluding and hating sex work a lot more.

So, we did see a lot of this stigma stuff happen. In my work I saw people turned away from shelters, turned away from women's shelters, turned out of doctors [offices], more [people] refused from police. And these are all things that always did happen to be honest, because we don't have a good system to protect sex workers, but these all increased, right? Like the percentage rate at which you are able to successfully access help reduced even more over the pandemic.

RITA: How does that compare to what happened with the other pandemic that you talked about, the HIV aids virus?

LENA: Something I think is really, really present in a lot of the way that we've responded to COVID, and that is common to the way that we responded to HIV, [is that] prevention against COVID became this like political fight where you are either for protecting people against COVID or against it, rather than having any kind of reasonable middle there. And with HIV, it was either use a condom or die. I feel like we kind of have this gap there where we are missing the reality of human behavior. I mean, I probably want stronger health protocols on most things, but I do think that we have some really not sensible ones as well.

RITA: You said earlier that HIV aids hasn't gone away. It's still there. It doesn't make the headlines like it used to. Is that dangerous?

LENA: What's dangerous isn't so much HIV aids specifically. It's probably not testing. For me, I work in sexual health, so I'll tell anyone, I don't care what you do, do tests, right? Like that's the number one. If you catch HIV today, you can expect for it to not shorten your lifespan. That's how far we have come, which is amazing and massive. And I think really just incredible. So, I'm past where I think it's important for us to talk about HIV as being dangerous. But I think that what we should take from it is that we had these ideas about sex and these ideas about talking about sex and these ideas about sexual health that didn't

stand up to a pandemic, right? The previous pandemic kind of crashed headfirst into all of our societal ideas about that stuff. And it exposed how harmful those ideas were. So, it's not HIV that's the danger anymore, it's not HIV for us to be scared of.

RITA: We're talking about things that we're not good at talking about. Do you think that the next generation will be much more comfortable talking about intersectionality and all sorts of sexual proclivities because things have already been shaken up?

LENA: I think the proof's really overwhelming that that is happening. That our current generation of young people definitely are better than my generation in talking about stuff like this. And I think that we were probably better than our parents' generation and so forth. I think it's about information. Maybe it is about inclusivity as well. I didn't know that trans people existed until I was an adult, until I was like, quite a few years into being an adult. I never heard of us at all. I had absolutely no clue because that was kind of the average level of conversation about our society, [it] was so low, the information didn't exist or people who didn't know about us, [it] was very hush.

The reason I really like talking about HIV, not that it wasn't a horrible thing for the world to go through and seeing so many people die, but actually I think that so many of us were lost to the virus, you know. I didn't know for many years, I couldn't put my finger on why something was a certain way for many years, which is [that] when I came out, I was 23, just 23 and there were no other trans women in this generation above me. If I met another trans woman who was much older than me, typically she'd been out for as long as me. So, I might meet someone who's in their forties or fifties, but we both came out at the same time. It took me years to realise exactly why that is and why there's this big hole in my community, specifically of who we still have alive and who is around as role models and elders to people who are coming alive today. I think that's really amazing. I am part of the first generation of trans women in Australia who can come out in their twenties and still expect to live into their fifties.

The greater our social acceptance and inclusivity is, the more of us are able to come out young. And the more of us are able to live our full lives without suffering and without all the suffering that goes along with that. But for the last couple of generations, the younger you came out, the more likely you were to find harm in other ways, most predominantly being the HIV pandemic. Imagine a world where the last four generations of queer, trans and non-binary people [existed] where there was no HIV. Imagine what art and culture and politics and what all this would look like with all those role models still in the world, who aren't there now. And we have no idea what it would look like. We have no idea.

RITA: Has social media been a boon or bust?

LENA: A boon. Yeah, almost exclusively a boon. Just being able to give people the words for the things they're experiencing, just to be able to see a role model, you know. They may not be getting direct support from a role model, but they do get the representation. I think that that's huge. I think that's really huge. But I'm a little critical in terms of how well connected we are over social media. Because I think that it doesn't necessarily replace or do a great job of doing direct support or in-person community [support], compared to that

community stuff. But I think that the information is enough. Like I think that's so positive for it to already be good enough.

I'd like to see just enough accurate information that we don't have people who go through what I went through, which is get to adulthood without knowing that people like me exist at all. I think that on its own, like a generation of that, takes out so much misinformation and it takes out so much fear of people who don't know any other trans people, who don't know anything about us. And it also empowers so many people who are coming out now to not retreat into our communities as much, which isn't necessarily negative, and I'm not trying to talk bad about retreating into our communities, I will advocate it to some people, but I think it's important to always have both.

I think like 80 to 90 per cent of people in my life I didn't speak to after the very first time I saw them after coming out. So, I lost an enormous amount of people. And I went through this process of constantly being surprised, by being like, I thought that person would be really accepting and they're really not. I thought this person would be really unaccepting and they really are accepting. It was kind of a little bit of a process of mourning. To me it was kind of like, all my emotions were about that, [they] were kind of like as if they were in another language and it never occurred to me at all that it was anything to do with gender. It was just kind of like this misplaced feeling. Then once I started testing, applying gender to it, it fit so well [and] made a lot of sense. Just getting the words, having the language to describe that, yeah. Realising that there were gender variant people and people who transitioned their genders or had variant genders and non-binary genders and such the like.

RITA: What would you say to somebody like that, a young person who's finding it very difficult to really find their place in the world?

LENA: I advocate for what I will sometimes call radical honesty. I think that every secret you keep, you never know how much it harms you. You never know how important it might be to be able to communicate it. You think that things are impossible to let out. Often if you look at them from a different angle, they can be quite easy to let out and being able to just verbalise things that are happening to you and just be truthful and be able to open that stuff up is one of the most important things you'll ever, ever learn in your life.

OUTRO: Thanks for listening. This interview was recorded on the lands of the Whadjuk Nyungar people, and we pay our respect to their Elders, past, present and emerging. This oral history collection was commissioned by the State Library of Western Australia and produced by Luisa Mitchell from the Centre for Stories. Narration by Luisa Mitchell, editing by Mason Vellios and special thanks to executive producer and interviewer, Rita Alfred-Saggar.

END