S4, #19: Sanju Pal: Turning Pain into Change: The Endometriosis Campaign That Made Legal History

Joyce Harper (00:02)
Hi, I'm Joyce Harper and I want to welcome you to season four of my podcast, Why Didn't Anyone Tell Me This? Together with expert guests and those with lived experiences, we will give you some tools to empower you to live a life of good health and happiness.

Joyce Harper (00:22)
Today I'm joined by the remarkable Sanju Pal, whose fight for justice has sparked a national conversation about women's health and equality in the workplace. This episode will be particularly valuable for anyone living with endometriosis, PMOS, PMDD, fibroids, menopause related symptoms, or any other gynaecological condition that is affecting them in the workplace, as well as employers, managers, and HR professionals.

Who want to create healthier and more inclusive workplaces. After developing severe endometriosis and undergoing surgery, Sanju was dismissed from her job at Accenture whilst recovering. What followed was a seven-year legal battle that led to a landmark court ruling in January 2026 recognizing her endometriosis as a disability under the Equality Act 2010. But Accenture have appealed and the case continues.

After listening to this episode, if you want fairer working conditions for anyone experiencing a gynaecological condition, there are some actions we would love you to do. Please sign the petition. Write to your MP.

I wrote to Kemi Badenoch and she has replied, so I'm getting that conversation going. Please donate to the crowdfunding and join us at the Royal Courts on the 10th and 11th of November 2026. And let's work on education of employers. I do not expect every line manager to understand women's health, but I would love to see women's health ambassadors in every company who do understand our issues and can support us.

Joyce Harper (00:01.561)
Welcome, Sanju.

Sanju (00:04.462)
Joyce, what a joy. You are living and breathing epitome of joy and here I am with you and I'm so delighted. Thank you for having me. It means the world to me.

Joyce Harper (00:15.493)
Well, I'm really excited to talk to you t today, but we are going to get onto a very heavy topic about what you've been through. So let's start by can you tell us about your life so far and what led you to become an endo warrior?

Sanju (00:30.944)

Yeah, I mean, what a question to start with. And I think I have to say that I've always been a warrior for justice. And that, I think, stemmed from being able to have been born and brought up in London, but go to a very rural part of India, Bengal, from a young age and see huge deprivation and see the stark contrast in living conditions, in education opportunities, in life chances and that then compelled me to set up the education charity that I still run called Rise and that looks at ensuring that all young people have the opportunity to fulfil their potential and that is looking at justice for these young people and I can't imagine not having that in my life like not being a warrior for justice. Obviously it started in education and that's pretty much because I did the Teach First program and I need to give a big shout out to them. know, what an incredible organization that enabled me for two years to go through this leadership development program in an inner city London school and turn around the attainment for these young people and they fell in love with maths. I can you believe it?

There were young people who obviously had been let down by the system and this program came along, gave me a chance to be a teacher, which I was for two years, and that's what led me to care hugely about education and rights of young people and educational opportunities of young people. So yeah, I've always been a warrior for justice. I don't think I thought in my life plan would be a warrior for justice for those with endometriosis, but that's how things turned out that I was already a bit of a fighter to begin with.

Joyce Harper (02:23.823)
Yeah, thank goodness. Yes, being a fighter is is really a amazing skill that it's so important that we have people like you around. So you've you've mentioned we've mentioned endometriosis. So endometriosis is something that you've been living with. Just for those that don't know what it is, we I have done a podcast with Ertan Saridogan, who's one of the world leaders in endometriosis. So if people want to learn more, they can find out more about the clinical aspects and treatments, etcetera there. But can you just start with explaining what endometriosis is and what it was like for you living with endometriosis? Well still living with endometriosis.

Sanju (03:03.125)
Yeah, endometriosis is a condition with a gynecological source where lining of the uterus grows outside of the uterus. And in fact, it can be found in many different organs. And I guess we have to picture the fact that when we menstruate every month and the tissue bleeds, different parts of our body start bleeding. And so it's a whole body inflammatory condition. In my case, I had endometrioma, large cysts, growing on my ovaries and I had to have emergency operation basically to ensure that my uterus wouldn't twist and that it was quite life-threatening because it was such a large endometrioma. But there are so many different symptoms. know, mine was debilitating pain at the time when I was first diagnosed. I had fatigue, nausea, loss of appetite, very sensitive body. I just, I would say it almost felt like, you know, I would say it was like a disease. I didn't know how to cope. And that was at its worst. I still have very difficult symptoms every day, but they are not what they were when I first needed that surgery and I've done a lot of work on lifestyle, holistic therapies to try and control my condition and the symptoms. But I know for the millions of women living with this condition in the

UK and globally, that it is debilitating. It makes life very impossible and not just when you have a period. These symptoms can ebb and flow, they recur, they fluctuate. And you just don't know. You could wake up one morning and literally feel like you've been hit by a bus and you can't get out of bed. And even if you sleep, you don't seem to recover. You're still fatigued. You can have pain that, you know, is sometimes really hard to describe, but I know that it's been described as sharp stabbing. For me, it feels like a balloon is growing in my body and I just don't know how to control that sensation. And, you know, I had that recently, kind of debilitating pain again. And I had an emergency scan and I've got the end of each growing again. That's just the nature of this condition. You don't know when you might need to have surgery again.

Joyce Harper (05:31.963)
And and what age did y it first really start affecting your life?

Sanju (05:37.614)
So how old was I mean I don't talk in age Joyce I mean I know I should embrace my age but I it was 2018 it was summer 2018 when I first started feeling like this is a different kind of pain this is the kind of pain that is not going away and it's kind of almost always there. So I was diagnosed, what's that coming up for eight years ago? And at the time I had private medical healthcare, so it was really in many ways straightforward for me to go and see a gynaecologist, Dr. O'Caro, he's still my gynaecologist and him tell me that, or you need immediate surgery because your condition is so serious. And that in itself, you know, I still, when I talk about it, I find it very difficult to kind of get my head around because when you're given a diagnosis, go into denial. So when you're given a diagnosis, you go into denial. my God, I can't speak. When you're given a diagnosis, you can go into denial. And that's what I did. I wanted to push through, push through the pain, push through the fatigue, push through what was happening in my body, just

so I could continue to thrive in the workplace. And it's because I've been on this journey myself that I feel so strongly about this, that we sometimes do not prioritize our health. We prioritize our career and ambitions over looking after our own body. And endometriosis, I think, has been named as one of the most painful conditions. It is that, and it's more than just that. know, when I say it,

I have friends who have thoracic endometriosis growing in their lungs, terrifying, coughing up blood. It's unimaginable. And we're only beginning to talk about it enough so that more people are hearing about it.

Joyce Harper (07:29.315)
Do you think we are talking about it? Certainly in my area, lots of people are talking about in our conversation that we conversations we've had before recording this podcast. You've made me realise that I'm I'm going to do a mini-series soon about lived experience. And one of my dearest friends, I talk to almost every day, Jo Gifford, has really been suffering with those symptoms some of those symptoms you mentioned. And I'll be I'll be talking to Joe more about that in in the miniseries and other people with different lived experiences. But as you said, it's so it's so different for every woman, isn't

it? It's it's such a varied shall we call it a disease or disorder? How d how do you refer to it?

Sanju (08:09.697)
I mean, I do sometimes start saying it's disease. And then I caught myself saying that the other day and I was like, goodness, how do other women and those with endometriosis feel about this being called a disease? But is that the way that it will be taken serious? It is a progressive, non curable disease that is underfunded in research that is not supported enough at diagnosis. know that. Yes, we've had some recent developments in tests that can enable diagnosis but waiting times for treatment and then we get into the area of the workplace where there is a complete lack of equality for those with endometriosis. It is a disease that's affecting and permeating every aspect of our lives.

Joyce Harper (08:55.853)
Yeah, and you mentioned the physical symptoms, but what effect does this have on your psychological well being?

Sanju (09:06.519)
I mean, I think it has absolutely torn me apart in moments. I often talk about the darkness that has surrounded me in my legal proceedings, but I think I still haven't really delved into the darkness that surrounded me when I first got the diagnosis and then I was told that my fertility was going to be affected. And I still don't think I fully faced into the fact that I'm not going to have biological children. I haven't even really tried. I did a round of egg freezing that was unsuccessful and I've kind of shut that door. My heart goes out to all the women with endometriosis or indeed any gynecological condition that affects fertility because to face into that is a very, very difficult thing psychologically.

And you're carrying that while you're trying to deal with that diagnosis every single day and the symptoms every single day, how it's affecting your identity, your ability to perform. You know, I talk about the fact that when I worked at Accenture, the tagline is high performance delivered. I stopped being a high performer in the way that I understood that to be because I couldn't put in those hours anymore. I couldn't, you know, run around the country as a management consultant anymore. My body wouldn't let me. Things started shifting and catching up with that emotionally and mentally is so difficult. And I know now from the thousands of messages I've received that's a similar thing and it is important to talk about this because we know of stories, very very horrific stories of women taking their life because of this condition. So it's important to talk about this as difficult as uncomfortable as it is. It is a mental health journey and

Sanju (11:01.993)
I do know there is some light and hope though. I know that we have an amazing endo warrior called Michelle D'Owah who has just founded EndoMind because it's looking specifically at the mental health support needed for those with endometriosis.

Joyce Harper (11:21.851)

And as as you said, you're being told number one, you've got this disease. Well, I think we should call it let's call it disease. Number two, you're gonna need surgery. Number three, you might not have kids. I mean that all of that is so much to take on, isn't it? I mean, how how did you deal with that?

Sanju (11:34.658)
Yeah.

Sanju (11:42.04)
Gosh, well, I didn't initially. I just was like, la la la la la, everything's gonna be okay. Get back to work soonest, you know? And so that's what happened. So I had a month off after surgery, but my recovery was slow. And that's the other thing. I think people think, it's just, it's like keyhole surgery. you know, it's not a lot, but.

They really do a lot when they're in there, right? They're excision of this tissue that's growing elsewhere. They're chopping out cysts from your ovaries. They're doing all sorts. It's painful. So for me, a month in, I was like, I need to get back to work. I'm trying to make senior manager. The next promotion point at Accenture, a really big deal. Once you make senior manager, it's sort of like, once you made senior manager, you'll go all the way to managing director. And that's what I thought was my path. I was going to be a this corporate giant who I had a great sense of belonging with and I went back to work too soon. And you know have moments particularly like I don't often go to bank that's where I was based Bank station and I remember like hobbling past the Bank of England and being like I've got to get home but I've also then got to get up tomorrow morning and I can barely walk.

But I still was turning up, trying to demonstrate that I was able to do it all until I had to go back off sick again. And, you know, I was bleeding every single day, the symptoms were out of control.

I think it's important to say this because I think this comes hand in hand with the denial of the condition, the denial on what it's doing to your body and the denial about how we can represent ourselves in the workplace and get support. Because I was putting my hand up and saying I was struggling, but it wasn't really getting through. There was no real support forthcoming. It was like either you're on the client project or you're not.

Sanju (13:47.384)
There wasn't really a sense of, okay, well, the client wants you to be in the office, but we understand that the occupational health report says you can work from home, so let's talk to the client about it. Nothing like that. It was very black or white. I did eventually go onto a phased return the second time around, and the phased return was very generous. you know, I had time to adjust myself back into my client role, and I thought things were great.

You know, I thought, okay, Accenture being really supportive now, HR are fully aware of what's happening with me and my symptoms, and they're giving me a gentle ride in. And then I was on the bench. So that means I was technically not adding value to the

business because there were no jobs in London. My reasonable adjustment that I was given was a London restriction, so I wouldn't have to travel up and down the country, but there were no jobs there.

And I'm feeling guilty, but I don't know what to do because it's like, well, I can't travel out of London.

But I also don't have any jobs in London. Okay, I'll make sure I'm adding value in different ways because I've been at the organization for 10 years, everything's going to be fine. No one's telling me and no one's having meetings with me. You I have my return to work meeting and that's it until I get a letter saying out of the blue that I've been underperforming and that I'm going to be invited to a meeting four days later and I may be dismissed. And I was like, what?

Are you joking? Like shock, horror. And that was the moment that I realised that the workplace was not supportive, that I was no longer someone that was going to add the value that they needed and that the endometriosis and my disability was the end of my career.

Joyce Harper (15:45.307)
It's it's just you can't believe that. You've been there for ten years. You have a major operation and you're trying to get back to work in a phased way and they and they do that is is really quite heartbreaking. Now I know that you've had thousands of letters now from women who have been in that situ of similar situations to you as well.

Sanju (16:01.89)
Yeah.

Sanju (16:11.745)
Yeah. Yeah.

Joyce Harper (16:12.389)
Can you say any more about this? It's it's not it's not just happened to you, has it?

Sanju (16:20.717)
It is heartbreaking as the word is unfathomable and I call it a national crisis that there are so many women right now being pulled into a meeting and being told that they are not performing in line with expectations but haven't been put on a performance management plan, haven't been given any sort of support, haven't even been given time to be referred to occupational health, to put in a reasonable adjustment.

Employers seem to think they're above the law and they are demonstrating how unfair the workplace is for those with endometriosis.

So I'll get messages pretty much daily saying that I've asked for a reasonable adjustment and they won't give it to me and if they don't give it to me my job's at risk and the reasonable adjustment might be can I just have one day to work from home? Now I

appreciate that that might not be possible in every industry, in every sector, in every job role but I do look at particularly at global corporates like Accenture where it's a huge operation, there are other roles available. I just don't know what's stopping employers from being humane, from being, I guess, that beacon of light that we all need because that's their role, that's their legal duty to support an employee. So there's not just not making reasonable adjustments, there's harassment, I've heard...

Sanju (18:05.899)
Women say that because they've taken sick leave because of the pain that they're being harassed and pushed out that way. And we know from statistics, one in six women with endometriosis are forced to leave the workplace. One in six women. I can't get my head around this.

But you see, there is an underlying root cause here. And this is the thing that I think has come out of my case. And the thing that I'm trying to fight for right now with many, many other endo warriors across the UK, which is that for endometriosis to be considered a disability, it needs to be listed in the Equality Act guidance.

This guidance is 60 page guidance that talks about which conditions could be a disability. There is not a single gynecological source condition. And because there is no specific information, employers are finding a way around this. And that is a loophole that we need to address urgently.

Joyce Harper (19:18.947)
Yeah, so it is it is quite astounding. so many things came into my head then. But let's go back to that meeting. So you had four days notice and you had this meeting and they told you in the letter that they might dismiss you. So what happened when you went in?

Sanju (19:35.51)
I went in with all my medical evidence, occupational health reports, feedback, feedback that I got from my line manager on that day that said, you know, I was a pleasure to work with, that I was so organized. These are some of the things I remember that I've, you know, really rolled my sleeves up and got stuck into the project and it's making great headway. The kind of things that I guess are tick tick tick when you're a management consultant. Like basically you can project manage, you can get things done. And I went into that meeting with real trepidation, like I'm getting sweaty palms even thinking about it because

I had been told, you know, off the record that when you get invited to a meeting like that, that's the end of the road for you, that no one gets to keep their job after that meeting. And I was like, you know, I had such hope, you know, that's the warrior in me. was like, no, justice will prevail. I will make my case. I will make it clear that I've been here for 10 years, that I am a loyal employee and that I love this organization and I want to continue to contribute to this organization, but I just need a bit more time and it didn't make any difference. They had already made up their mind after a very sort of brief exchange between a managing director, a very senior person in the organization who headed up talent and organization. That was the practice area I was in. And it's kind of ironic that I

was in a people person operation that didn't use any processes and then the HR director, the HR directors are those two who basically just said, you're underperforming and we're gonna have to let you go. And even though, mean, I asked questions like you haven't put me on a performance management plan, why is that? And it was just met with silence. And of course,

That many years ago, I didn't have that strength that I do now. I say, know, advocating for yourself with an illegal framework. I didn't say things like, I've got endometriosis, which can be considered a disability under the Equality Act 2010. You haven't made a reasonable adjustment to the performance process. So can you please do that? Can you refer me to occupational health? And then can we have another meeting? I didn't say that.

And these are all the things now that I think with hindsight, it could have been a very different path for me, but then maybe it wasn't meant to be. And this is the journey that I was meant to go on, which has, you know, been a seven year legal crusade against one of the world's largest corporates. And

I know how small I felt in that meeting, how scared and intimidated I was. So when they said to me, you're sat with immediate effect, I didn't have it in me to say, that can't be lawful. I didn't say that. I cried and I left the building.

Joyce Harper (22:47.439)
But I think of how many women would know all the legal jargon and w their standpoint. I mean, who who would know that?

Sanju (22:57.421)
This is it. Why don't we know? Isn't it fascinating? The Equality Act came out in 2010, 15 years ago, and none of us really understand that piece of legislation, how it can support us, how we can use it, what it actually says, what it means.

I don't know why. And I genuinely think if out of my case just comes a greater level of education and understanding for this piece of legislation, then that's a job done. And I know we're already seeing it happening because I have had, you know, those who've written to me, if they've said, I'm being pulled into a meeting, I will try my best to get on the call with them. I will tell them about the basics of the Equality Act 2010, what they can ask for and several have not lost their job. And it's just, I think, the beginning of a huge movement of, in particular, women saying, I'm not going to put up with this anymore. I've got a condition that is debilitating, that's affecting my life and work. It is a disability, and you need to consider it as such, and then you need to take on board your legal responsibilities. We're seeing it. But we do know that, like I said, because there's no specificity right now in this 15 year old guidance, I mean, you more than anyone know who operates from research that is that out of date. think in the conversations I have, it's like, well, it's, know, we've written the legislation, we've written the law, so it's done now. The interpretation of the law, the implementation of the law. That is why we need to update the guidance so that without a shadow of a doubt, no employer can ever

say to a person with endometriosis that it's not a disability, that they don't know what to do because it should be written. That's my belief.

Joyce Harper (25:04.144)
Yeah. And so that day, I can't imagine how you felt that day. I mean, goddy, I would have cried as I'd cried as well and gone home and cried in my pillow. When what what happened after that? How how did you get the energy to think I'm going to fight this? Because I know, well, it's you're on a seven year and we thought you'd finished, but there's been another setback. So let let's guess go through that. We thought we were gonna be jumping for joy and then something else. Anyway, let's so let's let's start seven years ago. You go home. And the and tell tell us what happened. Tell us the sequence of events.

Sanju (25:43.277)
I the meeting, I mean I've never even talked about it in this level of detail, god how am going to be able to do it without sopping my eyes out?

Joyce Harper (25:52.677)
We can we can cry. I c I cry sometimes on the podcast. If if I I think crying's fine. Let's cry.

Sanju (26:00.567)
think it's just, it was so brutal. And I think I should say at this point know, like, it wasn't just a job for me. Nothing is ever just a job. I believe, I believe in contributing to society and making a difference. That's basically in my lifeblood. I get that from my parents, who were, you know, uprooted from their homeland during the partition of India, who worked hard to get an education and then came to this country and had to work hard again against all odds with race discrimination, all levels of inequality to push through for me and my sister who is a doctor in the NHS to give us these opportunities and believe that, you know, we can shatter every ceiling because the sky is the limit.

And that's, know, that's what I believe in rise as well. These young people living below the poverty line, first generation learners, because of the legacy of the British Empire plundering Bengal and many other parts of the world to have to rebuild education systems. You know, this is this is the stuff that is made, had made me who I am and is in my core. So

That's why I get so upset when I think about that moment because I think it just epitomises the injustice, the brutality, the supremacy of this corporate giant that could just do whatever they felt to me. And I left the building and my dad was waiting outside at the Bank of England and I just sat with him on the bench for a long time and then I had to pick myself up.

Sanju (27:56.364)
because I had a RISE trustees meeting that evening and I did pick myself up. And then the next day I remember it. I went to Wimbledon with my sister. It was denial. It was the

sort of like, is this really happening? it is. And I think to myself now, like, gosh, that timeline of events is a little bit blurry for me.

It's a bit hazy, but the main thing is that my family were like, we're going to fight this. So we, we approached a law firm and the first step was to appeal. So that's what we did. We hadn't actually received the policy that said we could appeal or what the manner of the appeal would look like.

And it was at this point that Accenture started referring to the process as a disciplinary process. And this is also something that I find horrific. So no process was actually used to dismiss me, no capability, no sickness management plan. Suddenly it started being referred to as a disciplinary process. So I had to appeal to be heard by a disciplinary panel, which I was.

Now we fast forward to September of 2019 and I had a two hour grilling by another managing director, another person in HR who at this point are asking me all the questions that they could have asked me at the termination meeting. How is this condition affecting you?

How difficult is it for you? What are you doing to look after yourself? There were loads of questions and I was like, wow, maybe there's a chance. But there was also a tone that was very much like it's your fault. You're just a poor performer. You weren't up to scratch. And by this point, I think they had started these very difficult accusations about my character.

Sanju (30:08.081)
And that night I had my first panic attack. I didn't know it was a panic attack. I thought I was dying. For anyone who's ever had a panic attack for the first time, I actually thought I was dying. I stayed over with my parents that night and I woke them up at like three o'clock in the morning and they supported me through one of the worst nights of my life. And I went to the GP and she was like, it's a panic attack. And that was the beginning, I guess, of my mental health decline.

But concurrently, this is the thing I think it's quite hard to convey sometimes, like how can someone who's falling apart mentally still push and push and push? But actually, that's what people are doing across the world right now. Those torn apart by war, those living in abject poverty their mental health is declining, but they fight because that's what humans do. We fight for what is right and what is just. And that's what I did. And so when I eventually got the outcome of the appeal hearing, which was they uphold their original decision and they're not going to give me my job back, I made the decision with my family to go to employment tribunal. And that's what we did. We submitted our employment tribunal proceedings on the 19th of December 2019 and after that there was no looking back.

Joyce Harper (31:31.791)

But the these things, they do take why do they take so long? Why why is that twenty nineteen? It's twenty twenty six. What happened over those seven years? I can't imagine what that was like for you.

Sanju (31:41.26)
and it was in many ways like torture and it's just getting worse and this is the thing it's like how many how many battles can we can we kind of fight and solve but you know our justice system our justice system is on its knees the tribunal system that affects you know every single one of us who are employees or employers at the moment i think the wait time is above five years to get heard i mean i know covid has obviously impacted that as well But that's another reason that employers are like, well, we can just get away with this because no claimant is going to hold on for five years to get their story heard in court. It's another crisis. And so what happened in those seven years was a long waiting game and a lot of patience.

There's a preliminary hearing, you have to agree what the list of issues are. These are all things that I'm learning, working very closely with my lawyers. You eventually have a hearing and then they say, you need to write a disability impact statement even before then, know, words like the grounds of resistance, so Accenture come back on your initial claims and say why they think the claims should be struck out. It's so much paperwork, Joyce. The final bundle was over 3000 pages.

And I knew every single page. Like I had trawled through that because that it was like at that point it was just me in my life and my case. But that's how much it meant to me that fight for justice. Like how can an employer get away with this? This is not right. So I will use my capability. And I should say actually another thing in that termination meeting, they said you have considerable talent. So

Sanju (33:36.394)
I used my considerable talent. went and got a master's in law. I got a distinction from the University of Law. I used my considerable talent to work closely with my lawyers every step of the way. And with all the different preliminary hearings, we finally had a full hearing in May 22.

I stood in the stand for two days and I gave evidence on oath. I was faced with my previous colleagues who gave evidence against me, who built this picture of me being a terrible person that no one ever liked, that they should have sat years ago, but they didn't. You know, Joyce, I could write a book about the things that I've heard about myself, but I've had to keep going.

Because that's not me. I'm a person with integrity and honesty and authenticity and they can't take that away from me even though they have tried. Seven years also included the final judgment where I won on unfair dismissal but I got my compensation diminished 100 % and I lost on disability discrimination and I appealed.

I waited a year to hear back about the appeal. So we're now in May 2023. That summer, appeal rejected. We apply again to have an oral hearing. We're now in September 2024.

The oral hearing, we have a judge who hears me, who says there are merits in this appeal. Proceed. And then...

December 2025, another year, we have the full hearing. And then in January this year, the judgment where we won and the things that we won on endometriosis, considered a disability, my endometriosis, considered a disability. That there was disability discrimination, that the model that they use, the corporate up or out model that they didn't adjust is not potentially lawful and that my compensation that was diminished by 100 % was a wrong decision. But it's taken me seven years to get that.

Joyce Harper (36:04.251)
I mean, it if they wanted to dismiss you, if they didn't think you were performing before all this happened, they should have done it before. Why would you do it when someone has got something like endometriosis and going through all this? I mean, that doesn't make any sense. That's that's really bad management. That's ri I'm anyway, let's park that for now. Let's park that for now. So so you heard you heard that you won. When what months were that was this year. What month was that?

Sanju (36:28.833)
Yeah.

Yeah, it was it was the 19th of January 2026, a day I'll remember for the rest of my life. What a day. And what support. What a great way to start this year of the firehorse. I lost you for a second. You still there? Yeah. You went away for a second. And what an incredible way to start this year of the firehorse. It was like.

Joyce Harper (36:51.726)
Yeah, it's all fun, yeah.

Sanju (37:01.581)
You know, I think I should say that after the hearing in September 2024 was the first time I started sharing my story a little bit wider. I put a crowd justice page together because I was struggling with the legal costs. And that's when people started reaching out to me to be like, my God, this happened to me too. But it wasn't.

I guess until this year that it happened in earnest and across the UK because of the incredible support that I got from so many amazing journalists who cared about my story enough to want to share it. But I have to talk about this community, this endometriosis community, these sisters that I have, these endo warriors across the country who have basically, since the judgment was handed down, have held me, have supported me, have loved me. Like...

transformative and to finally understand I'm not alone and I think that's another thing like what's happened this year for those with endometriosis is we're not alone it's okay we can use our voice we can speak up we can share the challenges we're having and you know what the government are going to start listening and they're going to do something about it and we're all going to band together to make that happen

Joyce Harper (38:17.171)
You know, we've got so much got the women's health strategy, we've got all of these things happening and policies finally being updated and changed or even written for the first time. So I I do think what you've done is just groundbreaking and as you said, it it is making a difference to thousands and thousands of women around the country. But you had a but. So you January everything's good, fantastic, best day you're gonna remember it. But what's happened since then? There's always a but.

Sanju (38:48.525)
There's always a but what was I listening to? my god. Do you watch Ted Lasso? Are you a fan of Ted Lasso at all? I don't know if you do. think it's just it is joyful and it's just got so many brilliant quotes because he's kind of like this like unabashedly motivational coach of this football team. But there was the reason I thought of it just now was

Joyce Harper (38:57.721)
No, I haven't actually. Maybe I should, maybe I should.

Sanju (39:17.429)
someone was like I hate butts and then he was like you know the song where it's like I love butts but I cannot lie or whatever anyway it made me think of that anyway a big but Before the but I should just say, know, obviously we have the judgment come out and then my local MP Tulip Siddique has been incredible, raised my case in parliament in the International Women's Day debate. There have been other endo warriors petitioning for things like menstrual leave. That's gone into a debate in parliament. We've had a debate on endometriosis services. We've seen things happen and movement in a way that has been unprecedented. Like 2026 is the year for equality for those with endometriosis in the workplace we thought and we believed that this landmark judgment would set legal precedent but also precedent for employers to do the right thing and do better. But alas, Accenture have appealed. They've appealed the judgment on seven grounds and now I will be forced to the Court of Appeal at the Royal Courts of Justice on the 10th and 11th of November, so the three month countdown has begun. And so the work is far from over, because as I say, justice is in jeopardy those of us who have begun to use my case, this legal precedent, to support themselves in the workplace, that is at risk and it is a terrible state of affairs but it is where we find ourselves and why we need to speak even louder and why we need to work together even more right now and why the petition in particular is so important because employers want to find a way around this so that they

Sanju (41:21.941)
can continue to discriminate and ensure that we don't have equality and we have to say no to that.

Joyce Harper (41:31.299)
Yeah, you you are leading the way in your case is so important. We we can't we can't let it fail. We we can't let this appeal win at all. It as you said, you're leading the way, but it's so many women coming right behind you. They are right behind you. So t tell us what we

can do. So you've mentioned the petition. Tell us what everyone can do. I have written to I've signed the petition the other day. So my MP is Kemi Badinock.

Sanju (41:55.788)
Yay.

Joyce Harper (41:58.519)
I've never emailed her before because I've had various friends that have emailed her and anyway. So anyway, but I did. I emailed her and said, Oi, Kemi, come on. So but but come on, Kemi. so but t tell us what we can do. So we've got the petition, MPs. T you tell us what we what do we need to do. Because as your work also always says, it's not just endometriosis, it's all those other gynecological conditions that affect

Sanju (42:10.773)
Can we come on?

Joyce Harper (42:28.313)
women and there's so many, too many to name, but we know what they are. So what can we do?

Sanju (42:32.801)
Yeah.

Yeah, thank you, Joyce, and thank you for being the trailblazer that you are to just bring this to the masses. So the first thing to say is the petition headline says, add gynecological conditions such as endometriosis to the Equality Act 2010 guidance. And yes, there are too many to name, but some of them that we've started to just so that people can understand what we mean exactly. Gynecological source conditions, adenomyosis, PCOS, now PMOS, fibroids, any kind of

even you know PMDD, valvodynia, premature ovarian insufficiency, know perimenopause, menopause, there are so many things that we are being affected by. It's a spectrum of course we're not saying that everyone with these conditions are being disabled but it needs to be considered that it could be a disability and at the momet under recurring and fluctuating conditions there is not a single gynecological condition listed. So this petition is specifically asking the government to amend this guidance that was published 15 years ago to update it to include these conditions so that if you have this condition and it is disabling you you can go to your employer and say look at this guidance this is an example of a condition that can be disabling and now

Sanju (44:06.207)
I need you to support me through reasonable adjustments, through referring me to occupational health, through giving me more time to give me the support. And right now we know employers are not doing that. So this petition is crucial. We need to get 100,000 signatures within six weeks. We've got till the 27th of September. So I would say, please sign the petition, share it far and wide with whoever you know, write to your MP, tell them about it. Because when this petition goes to Westminster Hall, you have

an opportunity for your MP to represent you in parliament, to tell your story, and there is nothing more powerful than that. And I think we sometimes think MPs don't do anything, but I've seen it myself, my MP, I went to her surgery, 15 minutes she spent with me, she cared, she listened. If an MP doesn't respond right to them again, find a different way, but we must, we must involve our MPs because that is the way we're gonna make change in this country. Other things that we can do. If you are part of the women's network write to them ask if they can send the petition link out. Now I know that some people are of the opinion that this petition is not needed because the Equality Act 2010 covers any condition that is a long-term condition that affects your normal day-to-day activities but as my case shows quite literally that that does not stop an employer from treating you unlawfully and that is why this petition matters and that is why we must have formal recognition in the statutory guidance so that we do not have another case like mine.

Joyce Harper (45:50.511)
So everybody, everybody, we even if we're not affected by any of these conditions, we all know somebody that is, we all of us do. So if you've ever thought you need to be a warrior about something, this is it, this is it, whether you're man, woman, whatever, this is it, because we all know somebody and we want your case to be successful and to be something that changed thousands and thousands of lives.

And that would be so so amazing. So we'll put the the the podcast is going to be out a little bit later than than you said. It's gonna be out in September. But I am gonna put that little clip out in the next few days before the podcast comes out. So get people moving and so they can hear more when when they listen to the podcast. It's just it's just so important. We we don't want people to have to go through what you've been through. It it's just

Totally unacceptable. So if you had the attention of every employer listening today, are there things that you would say to them that they can better support any of their employees, especially those with gynee conditions? And and after that, I'm gonna ask you because I I know that a lot of women don't even want to want to discuss these things. So we've just done a podcast, I've just done a podcast mini series about trying to conceive.

And even if you're trying to get pregnant and even if you're trying to get pregnant without going through fertility treatment, but if you're going through fertility treatment, lots of men and women, because it affects both of us, decide not to tell their employers, even though they're going to go through ups and downs, they may have a miscarriage, all these other things that can really affect them physically and mentally. And we don't tell our employees because we're so worried about all the crap that happened to you.

Sanju (47:37.761)
Yeah.

Joyce Harper (47:45.721)

So let let's think about the employees first and then we're gonna go on to what we can try to support anyone in the workplaces, haven't they? So if you wanted to say something to the employers, what would you want to say to them?

Sanju (47:46.476)
Yeah. think the time is now to change the narrative of what it looks like to have a conversation between an employer and employee. And this is where employers can leave the charge. Be that best practice employer who says that we're not afraid to have these conversations with our employees. We value them. We trust them. We know that they want to contribute to us as an employer, as to society, that's what we are. We are humans who want to make a difference. That's why we come to work every day. So for me, it is ensuring that if we provide an opportunity for an employer to be more open about what does that conversation look like? What could it look like if we can see a member of staff struggling?

If they're taking time off work more than is expected, can we have a gentle, curious conversation with them about what's going on and lead with humanity? know, processes, policy, the law comes later. We're all just here trying to get by. We know how difficult life is. I just don't understand why we wouldn't sit down with an employee and say, what's going on for you? How can we help you?

That's the first thing I would say. But of course, the flip side to that is being comfortable to talk about these things. And it is so difficult. you know,

I want to give anecdotally as well what happened in my case, because my sick notes didn't say endometriosis. And that is something Accenture have used against me to say that your sick notes didn't say endometriosis, notwithstanding my occupational health reports did, that I talked about it. I talked about it when I had a recurring endometrioma. I told my line manager, I told my, you know, a managing director who was my career counselor. I talked about it till the cows came home but they still again found a loophole so we we don't have to disclose anything but I would say if we can all build courage to talk about these things. But again, it comes handed out. It's like this double edged sword, isn't it? This cycle of we can only build that courage if the employer is going to listen and give us the support to share that. But we know it's already happening. There are so many employers who we can say are trying to change the narrative. So let's continue to lead with that conviction to say that we can do better, that we want to give a level playing field to all our employees, even if they do have a debilitating

So Yeah, that's where I come from first. And of course, then, you know, with my management consulting background, then it comes back down to the senior leadership team, having, I've said this before, honest conversations about what they mean for their people when they're writing their people strategies, when they're writing their policies, when they're training their people, what are they really doing to ensure equality for those with a disability? And I think an extension also on the other side is so many people I speak to say no I'm not going to disclose my disability because then I won't even get an interview. We have the Equality Act 2010 exactly so that these situations

don't happen. But we've been living in fear for so long that we feel that we cannot share our condition because then we will be penalized. But we know we can be penalized anyway, like in my case. So it's a whole sort of systemic change that needs to take place right now. And you mentioned the women's health strategy. For me, it's an intersection between health, justice, work and pensions and equalities and I've said this I think I said it like on national radio live that we need to get these ministers in a room and talk to each other and understand how these conditions manifest in the workplace how employees become claimants in David and Goliath legal battles how do we stop that from happening how do we ensure that equality is actually happening it's a huge piece of work Joyce it's it's a crusade isn't it

Joyce Harper (52:29.891)
Yeah. It is. I and for me, where my link comes in is what I'm really aware of is that they have a lack of education. So they just don't understand. The MPs don't understand. Our employees don't understand. We were never taught about this stuff at school. How are anyone is anyone supposed to know? Women still don't understand about menopause. I'm in the process with working with two charities to set up evidence-based.

Websites to educate people about fertility and to educate people about menopause. We we are we're still at that stage. People find it very hard to find reliable education. So, in a way, I'm not defending them, but I I'm not surprised the MPs don't understand. I'm not surprised surprised the employers don't understand, and the and the lawyers and all the people that have dealt with your case.

For many of them, they are not going to understand what you've been through. They're not going to understand endometriosis. They're not going to understand how that affects your life. So for me, my crusade on this needs to be that we need to educate everyone about any of these gyneological conditions that can affect women women and the workplace, but even in their in their private life. It's obviously it's all wrapped up together. And I was going to ask you how it's affected you on in your own life, but they're all they are all wrapped up together.

So for me, education's going to be at the top of that pyramid. We have got to get that diffuse down the whole thing. And then those people can make an informed decision about how they feel about it. So for our employers, I mean, and my my own university is I'm working on this, it's very much a work in work in progress. I don't expect every line manager to understand all the female gyneological conditions and the all the things that can affect a woman in the workplace. I don't expect them to do that. But if we had a champion, a female gynecological champion or a women's health champion or I mean I'm I'm apparently the menopause champion in in my institute, but we haven't even worked out what's a new thing. We haven't actually worked out what that does. But or a reproductive health champion that can also help men we absolutely mustn't forget about the men. There are situations that can seriously affect men. so I think we need to have champions in every company. If it's a big company, they need lots of them in various departments, so that employees can go to that person, knowing that they have the knowledge and the understanding of any of the acts, policies, guidance within the company that they need to have.

And that they can then support you. Because I've heard so many stories, I'm sure you had. I went to my line manager, sometimes it's a w it's a woman as well, and they weren't sympathetic and and there was that problem. But I do think that comes from a a situation of not being educated. So I think if we had those, but going back to the the part about the employees, that there is going to be lots of employees that don't want to divert divulge this situation that they're living with.

Sanju (55:47.788)
Yeah.

Joyce Harper (55:49.967)
to their employees, isn't that? And you've pr you've probably heard so many of these stories. It becomes very tricky if you're not getting support or don't feel that you're gonna have the support. It's very hard to know who to talk to, isn't it?

Sanju (55:54.699)
Yeah. Yeah. You're right, we're stuck between a rock and a hard place. And I just want to also say that I think I completely echo what you've just said about the education piece. I think with education, know, like, you know, knowledge is power, but literally comes strength and courage. Because if we can fall back on what we genuinely know is facts, that's what we can lead with. I also love your idea about these champions. And I

I think already organically that's happening, right? There are some people in the workplace who do know more, who are slightly more educated on this matter and topic, perhaps because a family member has the condition or their best friend has the condition. So I would say if you're one of those people and you're listening now, brilliant, this is a chance in many ways to start approaching your employer and say, I've just heard this podcast. Actually, that's a great idea should create a champion for men and women's health who is going to be able to be that point of contact whenever there's an issue because we want to retain our talent. That ultimately has to be the goal. And speaking of education as well, think about our younger members of society who are entering the world of work. And I have met mothers who have told me that they've had their daughter go on an apprenticeship or a summer job and then be put through a disciplinary process because they've had to take time off work because of their condition. Imagine, Joyce, imagine entering the world of work age 18, 19 and already being penalised. What does that give you in terms of your worldview of your career trajectory and your ambitions? That's why we do need to do more in schools. And I think what's interesting, as someone said this to me recently when I went to a Teach First event, I'm still quite an active ambassador within the social innovation unit And he said to me, Haven't we just had a bit of policy go through where schools have to educate on endometriosis? Isn't it wild that we have that, but we don't have endometriosis listed in the Equality Act 2010? was like, wild is the world. Wild, wild, wild. But these conversations are happening and they need to permeate through all parts of society, including starting at school. And like you said, even starting to talk about this in PSHE. Why aren't we learning about the Employment Rights Act, the Equality Act 2010, these pieces of law that affect us all? We're so scared of the law. And I say the law is there to

protect us, but we need to have the knowledge about it. And what I love about this conversation, Joyce, is there's such a belief in hope and change.

We can make change. We have to believe that we can and we have to find the people around us who are going to help us to do that And I'm sure you would say the same thing, know, people can reach out to us if they want more ideas of how to do this, because it's going to have to be at a much larger level, permeating through all employers and by all employees. That's what I believe. And slowly but surely, we will see that courage and conviction to start talking about these things a little more. And we will start to see a shift, I believe, in in in the kind of this this balance or imbalance in these processes that employers use to hire people and then fire people.

Joyce Harper (59:42.391)
We we are lucky, as you said, we are lucky in the UK that we actually do have in our PSHG curriculum that we have to teach about reproductive health, we have teach about lifestyle, to teach about menopause, and then it w that was updated in 2019. Then it was updated again to say we have to include about endometriosis, difficult periods. So with well-being for women, I've helped well-being of women.

I've helped develop with a brilliant GP Sharon Dixon. we have been working with well-being of women, and we have developed two lesson plans for teachers to teach about endometriosis and and other issues and to make sure and painful periods to make sure everybody won't every not just obviously females to have that, but everyone to have that education to understand. And I must admit, we never thought about.

The Equality Act. We never thought about how this would affect girls going forward in their career. And I think it's just so important. We learn so much at school, which we will never use in our future lives. All those things we learn, the geography and the blah blah blah that we never use again. And these are the nuts and bolts that we really, really need to learn all about our reproductive health, but all about everything we've spoken about today. So And even if we teach it at schools anyway, we have got the big catch up because we've got all the adults out there. I mean, I always I always say I've done a lot of work about menstruation. I always say that so many of the women have told me, but my husband or my boyfriend doesn't support me. And I say to them, but they've never been taught about this. How can they support you? Don't give them some slack. How can anyone support anyone if they haven't had the education? So just to summarize.

Sanju (01:01:26.785)
Yeah. Yeah.

Joyce Harper (01:01:35.365)
Sanju what or what we are going to do, we are going to work on the education of everyone to make sure they understand how this can affect women at home and obviously in the workplace. We need to make sure that people sign the petition. The link will be in the show notes. We need to make sure people hound their MPs to get their MPs to stand up and support them. And we need to make sure that employers.

Sanju (01:01:36.129)
Yeah.

Joyce Harper (01:02:05.967)
Get on board with this. Get a champion, whatever they want to call it. If they want to I think they should probably have a separate one for men and women because there were different issues. And I think the person supporting you needs to be someone that can be empathic and understand about these things. Not necessarily someone that's been through it, but someone that understands. So that we get them in the in the in the workplace. That can be somebody that you can go to without telling everybody in your office, your line manager, everything, what's going on in your life. But someone who's there and who's got your back and who supports you so that what happened to you does not ever happen to anyone ever again. Have I missed anything out there is there anything else we need everyone to do?

Sanju (01:02:52.813)
think right now I would also add that we've just had a parliamentary inquiry into endometriosis in the workplace and the recommendations are coming out on the 14th of October. And I think we all need to just be very aware of that date and what's going to come out of that. Because I hope, for example, you know, we're talking about recommendations in this call. This is the sort of stuff that I hope, know, thousands of women have submitted their stories and evidence. But, the conversation is starting to happen in parliament and let that continue. And that's why being forewarned and forearmed on this content is so important. So 14th of, sorry, so 14th of October, a date for our diaries, particularly if you have endometriosis.

And then the thing that I'm going to say to everyone is put the 10th and 11th of November in your diary and come on down to the Strand, to the historic Royal Courts of Justice and let's demonstrate to these judges there'll be three judges presiding over this appeal on seven grounds. Let's show them that we mean business and we are not here to have our justice and our rights in jeopardy.

I am so grateful I've got to say it to everyone who has supported me on this journey, whether it be through family and friends and seeing you, to messages, to sharing posts and stories, to donating to my Crowd Justice page. It is a tall order now to try and get myself in a financial position to fight this. If you can and you would like to, you can make a contribution. That is so appreciated. I cannot even tell you. And just last month, we launched the Strategic Action Network for Justice UK. 25 endo warriors came on to a call. Just we were inspired by, know, the football in England doing so well. And we were like, we need to put a dream team together. And we did and the name that we came up with, lo and behold the acronym is my name and my name in Sanskrit means victory together and we are going to be victorious together.

Joyce Harper (01:05:13.165)
Wow, wow, look, there's more, more coming up. Right, so the 14th of October in the diary, 10th and 11th, we need to be down there. And I'm going to put all your links on on the show notes. So people need to follow you so they know where to go on the 10th and

9th of November. And please, if if everyone, even if they can just donate a ten o or whatever they can donate to your crowdfunding, that would be really amazing. And follow.

Sanju (01:05:38.859)
Yeah. It would be amazing.

Joyce Harper (01:05:40.985)
what you're doing, say the name again. You're the strategic

Sanju (01:05:45.543)
Action Network for Justice UK. Yeah, yeah, exactly.

Joyce Harper (01:05:48.347)
We can follow your initials. Can see that that's yeah, that's your name. Very good, very good. I never know what to call things I work on. I'm like but that's a that's brilliant. It's a brilliant that's your name as well.

Sanju (01:06:01.229)
It happened so organically Joyce, I mean, that's, you know, that's story for another time. But honestly, we are here to, we say unite voices, drive action, and advance women's rights. If you are interested in any of that, join our movement. It's a network. And so everyone is welcome.

Joyce Harper (01:06:20.601)
How do we join it?

Sanju (01:06:23.383)
So at the moment we have weekly meetings on a Wednesday at one o'clock. If you are interested in joining a meeting, just find us on Instagram. All the details are actually on my Crowd Justice page and they will be obviously in the show notes. Just drop us a message and we'll send you a calendar invite. It's as simple as that.

Joyce Harper (01:06:40.771)
Right, Wednesday's one o'clock, everyone. Join some of those for sure. Wow, there's so much, so much there, so much. Right. I I'm going to finish off. I'm going to finish off with the questions that I ask everyone. I thought we I thought I thought I was gonna feel really sad at the end of this podcast. And I always have these questions so that if we've gone heavy, but I don't feel sad. I don't feel sad. I feel really like I'm ready, ready for action. Yeah, come on, everyone.

Sanju (01:06:44.179)
It's... Yeah!

Sanju (01:07:02.067)
Yeah. Yes, come on! Yeah, ready for strategic action. That's what it's about, Joy.

Joyce Harper (01:07:09.669)
Come on, we we ready for strategic action. Let's let's do it. Let's do it. So I'm I'm really excited. But my last questions I always end on a bit of fun. So what makes you happy and where is your happy place?

Sanju (01:07:20.971)
Yeah yeah complex question but when I thought about it I'm gonna say and it feels right to say this I'm gonna go back to my roots I'm gonna go back to waking up in a village in rural Bengal called Shonnanga, with the birds singing, the sun streaming through, immersing myself in nature, in the family home that my father built after he lost everything from the partition of India, that has literally turned into a place that gave me such solace last year when I was trying to find myself again after the horrific years of the legal proceedings. And I did and I came back to myself and I am the strong warrior woman again after many many years of mental health battles and I in a very typical Indian way invite you all to come. When we have got through this chapter, this crusade, we're all gonna have a lovely time in Bengal and you're all invited to our family home in Shonnanga.

Joyce Harper (01:08:26.231)
wow, that's j that's that's really, really beautiful. And I I think you you've you know, we're with you. We all want to hug you, we all all want to be with you. There's gonna be so many, so many with you, honestly. And it and it's it's I I love a story where people have turned something really negative into something incredibly positive, and you you are not alone. Now, the very last question I ask everyone as well, and I I have no idea what you're going to say.

But what advice would you give your younger self?

Sanju (01:09:02.721)
God, I hadn't actually thought about this one, blimey.

Joyce Harper (01:09:06.275)
It's a it's such a hard one. And some people say something very specific, some people say something more general, so

Sanju (01:09:17.313)
I think I want to say...Nothing is permanent and that is the beauty of life. It is constantly ebbing and flowing and I would link that to one of my favourite quotes in Anne of Green Gables which is, tomorrow is always fresh with no mistakes. So if you've woken up and you've had an atrocious day, don't you worry, it's not gonna stay that way.

Joyce Harper (01:09:48.825)
Wow, that actually made me have some goose pimples. That was amazing. That was amazing. Thank you so much. Thank you so much. Well sorry that you've been to all this shit, basically, but thank you for continuing to fight. And yeah, we are we are there with you. We will be with you. And everyone needs to follow you, give you, give you your sub give you support and we will all really manifest success in this and hope that it all works

out. So thank you so much for all the work you've done over these years and we will we will definitely be in touch. But thank you for doing being on the podcast.

Sanju (01:10:34.477)
Joyce, where do I begin to share my love and adoration and admiration for you? I met you in February and here we are and I have been an ardent admirer of you since I met you in February and everything you do, the manner in which you speak, how you lead is literally, I don't know, it warms, I know, my heart and soul and it does for thousands and millions of women in this country and beyond a very, very special kindred spirit and thank you from the bottom of my heart for this conversation because yeah, it's taken me to places that I haven't necessarily been before and I'm very grateful.

Joyce Harper (01:11:16.795)
You make me cry now. State of us We've got girl crushes going on here.

Sanju (01:11:25.197)
You gotta love a girl crush, right?

Joyce Harper (01:11:29.508)
Gotta love a girl crush. I I always say, you know, I used to be a bit of a I used to a lot of my friends used be guys when I was younger. But god, I bloody love women. I I honestly I I love love spending time with men and they they feed me so much, they motivate me so much, and you are one of those. So, yep, I've just rubbed away a little tear. So, right, everyone, we will see you soon, and we're going to really.

Sanju (01:11:54.391)
See you soon.

Joyce Harper (01:11:57.455)
be hoping that everything works out with this next bloody appeal that you've got to fight. So thank you so much for all your work. Thank you.

Sanju (01:12:03.426)
Thank you. Thank you, Joyce. Onwards and upwards.

Joyce Harper (01:12:07.513)
Yeah.