

Sarah (00:00)

Workie Ticket Theatre is proud to present our bonus episodes to complete series one of the Womxn Up? Podcast. This includes four real life interviews with some of the women who inspired our audio plays. Episode Seven Amneet and Jojo these podcasts contain adult themes and some strong language.

Sarah (00:27)

So in episode seven, today we are hearing from Jojo Workie Ticket founder, who you should know well, by now, you'll know, her voice and a lady called Amnet. And the theme of this podcast episode is maternity. So I'm just going to ask Jojo some quick questions about how we really came up with the idea for the theme for this episode. So firstly, how do you know Amnet? How did you come across Amnet?

JoJo (01:03)

She was the chair of Maternity Voices Partnership, which is I don't know if it's an organisation, but a group. I came across it on Facebook when I was pregnant.

Sarah (01:14)

Right.

JoJo (01:15)

And they were just amazing. They were literally going to the hospitals and seeing all these women are really scared what you're doing. They were talking to like midwives and they were bringing back all the information. So when I was massively panicking about what was going on because I'm sorry, I was pregnant.

Sarah (01:32)

How pregnant were you?

JoJo (01:34)

I went into lockdown. I was about twelve weeks. So they actually rang me the RVI and said, didn't they have an early scan?

Sarah (01:45)

That's nice of them.

Sarah (01:47)

Little did you know what was coming?

JoJo (01:48)

Well, we kind of knew by that point. I think that's what was going to happen. And part of this Maternity Voices, they were just really good. And she had found out she was pregnant halfway through the pandemic as well. So I think that was a massive impact on her, too.

Sarah (02:09)

So did you kind of stay in touch and support each other?

JoJo (02:12)

And I just asked her, can I interview you? Because your story is important. But also she knew a lot of women who were pregnant, and she'd been in that role where she was going back and forth at the hospital and speaking all over the midwives. And I just thought she'd be a really interesting person to talk to. She also runs a charity as well for women who lost babies. And I just thought she'd be really interesting to talk to. But it was her story that I was interested in the most because obviously there was a massive impact of the pandemic was on her so

Sarah (02:53)

Well, we listened to the interviews last week, and I think they're great. And they really kind of highlight

some important points and some big oversights that obviously new mams, especially first time mams, I would imagine, are probably still really struggling with now.

JoJo (03:15)

Yeah. And it's funny because now my little girl Luna is 16 months and women are coming over and talking to me and saying, how old's your daughter? I had a baby during the pandemic, and we actually have those conversations with each other. What is she like, and I mean, Luna is wild. It's quite nice, though.

Sarah (03:34)

Isn't it, that you've got that it feels quite unique that she's a pandemic baby. And that is your story. Although it was no fun at the time, having a baby in a pandemic, obviously.

JoJo (03:49)

I mean, 2020 wasn't too bad. It was probably last year was the worst when I had that, it was nice. Only recently I was in Whitley Bay in a restaurant and the waitress came over and was like, talking. And she said that her door our shys away from people. And she was wondering if that was part of a 'Pandemic Baby' even. I said, well, no, mine doesn't as I talking to her. So, yeah, there's that conversation. But then she actually said and it was really lovely moment because I was with my friend Rob and she was like, Wasn't it horrible? And she looked me straight in the eye and I was like, yeah, it wasn't really tough. And I was like, yeah, it was. And it was like that really lovely connection I got with I just was completely stranger. I came over. I mean, Rob kept saying, oh, this is what Geordie women are like. He said it was nothing to do with that, but it just felt really lovely that she had that kind of conversation with me about that.

Sarah (04:47)

Right, well, without further Ado, here are some lovely little snippets of an interview with you and an interview with Amneet all about maternity during the pandemic.

Sarah (05:06)

All right. Okay. So it's great that when we're talking about maternity, we've got our very own maternity during a pandemic expert on board. So, Jojo, how was the whole experience of being pregnant in a pandemic? Was it as hideous as I imagined that it might be?

JoJo (05:28)

Yes, I can't think of anything that was great about it, to be honest. A lot of people are like, oh, yeah, I got to spend more time with my kids.

Sarah (05:37)

Yeah.

JoJo (05:38)

I was like, oh, great. Yeah, I was throwing up at the very beginning.

Sarah (05:42)

So how many weeks were you when the lockdown happened?

JoJo (05:48)

I was twelve weeks. Exactly. Because what happened was that I got a phone call. I kind of knew we were going to go on lockdown before everyone else because I got a phone call from the hospital, the RBl. And they said, we're going to book you in for a scan. And I said, oh, my scan isn't until next week. And I'm like, no booking in early. Can you come early? And I said, Well, yeah, suppose. And I was like, why we want it locked down? Because obviously it was kind of rumours coming around then. And they're like, no, no...

Sarah (06:21)

We're just going to get everybody in.

JoJo (06:23)

Yeah, we're just trying to get everyone in early. And I thought that was odd. I was meant to be getting yes, it was about 12/13 weeks.

Sarah (06:34)

How did you feel when the lockdown was announced? In relation to being pregnant?

JoJo (06:39)

Well, I was at work still and I was refusing to stay off work because I was just like, I'm pregnant, I'm sick, I'm fine. Because at the time that we weren't talking about us being vulnerable or anything. And I think it's one of those things.

JoJo (06:53)

Wasn't it, at the time, yes.

JoJo (06:54)

But also I kind of didn't trust Boris Johnson.

Sarah (06:58)

EEEE Why?

Sarah (07:01)

Because at the time I was thinking, it's just making a big deal. It's not a big deal, really.

Sarah (07:08)

I think everybody. Well, I don't know. I definitely had some moments of real panic. Like, I think for the first time in my life and I wasn't even pregnant.

JoJo (07:21)

I was just in total denial, Sarah. Like, at first completing a denial, I was like, no, I'm fine. I went for my scan. Luckily I was one of the lucky ones because I got two.

Sarah (07:33)

Your partner went in?

JoJo (07:34)

Yeah.

JoJo (07:34)

So JC came in with us and we were like, dead short. We didn't know we're having a girl at the time, but we're like, oh, yes. Or the baby blah blah can't wait for the next month. When we found out it wasn't allowed at the next one. And then for me, because I've already got two other kids, I was more concerned about them.

Sarah (07:54)

So that was my next question.

JoJo (07:55)

Yeah.

JoJo (07:56)

Do you think you would have been more panicked had it been your first baby?

JoJo (08:02)

Absolutely. This is why I couldn't believe first time mam. I really felt for them. I've spoken to loads of first time mams, as you can imagine, and loads of first time mams. We didn't know any different.

JoJo (08:21)

Yeah.

Sarah (08:22)

And I suppose probably you maybe have less social pressures. That whole thing about buying up drinking, buying up drinking in the first twelve weeks that everybody does every time you go out, we'll actually have you know.

JoJo (08:35)

It was funny because I've got a friend, Amy, who works at a supermarket around the corner, said which one it was. And she hadn't seen me until obviously for months. So I actually could keep this pregnancy secret.

Sarah (08:53)

Like private, yeh.

JoJo (08:54)

Yeah.

JoJo (08:56)

I guess that's probably the only positive because I had a miscarriage a few years ago and I was really worried that I was going to lose this one. So I kind of just thought I had already said before the pandemic had come about, me and my partner had already decided we'll try and keep it a secret. But I popped really early because it was the third. So it was pretty obvious by twelve weeks I was pregnant. And so I hadn't seen Aimee for ages. She's the key worker. I wasn't allowed in a supermarket, kind of thing. It was ended up having a shield, those kind of things. And then I sort of walked in. She was like, oh you're pregnant... Because I didn't put it on social media either. And I was like, oh, yeah, Hi.

Sarah (09:40)

It's good for keeping things quiet, wasn't it? Yeah. I wanted to ask you about your midwifery experience, how that differed from your first two pregnancies.

JoJo (09:53)

Yeah, it was really bad. The hospital experience was phenomenal. I could not have asked for a better support by the RVI. They were amazing. And even though my partner wasn't allowed in until he has a baby, now.

Sarah (10:21)

That's what you had to wait for, wasn't it, before partner was allowed in on the day?

JoJo (10:27)

Yeah, I had to wait until I was about to push. Basically, they let them in a little bit earlier. So it wasn't too bad...well...

Sarah (10:34)

How about you kind of did you have any midwife appointments?

JoJo (10:37)

Yes. So the maternity support leading up to the actual so from that last scan, I was then just like kind of left.

Sarah (10:47)

I think it would be scary for a first time. Well, and somebody in your situation who previously had a miscarriage, the hand holding kind of well, it's not there at the best of times, is it, because they're so overstretched? But I guess even more so...

JoJo (11:05)

What had happened was my midwife had been told that she had the shield, so I didn't then get another midwife in her place. So I got one phone call, and this is Community Midwives. Any kind of scan at a hospital, they don't sit you down and have a midwife. And I saw the doctor a couple of times, and then that was it. I had one phone call from the midwife, and then it was kind of like that was it. And that's when I got really scared, to be honest, because I was like, I'm kind of on my own here. And then from that, I don't think I saw community my wife until I was 28 weeks pregnant. And I was at that point, itching quite a lot and feeling really ill. And when I was mentioning it, because they were scared to come near you because they've got a mask on, you've got your mask on. It was really impersonal. And again, this isn't a dig at the midwives or the NHS. Yeah. It was kind of like when I was saying, I don't feel right, this isn't right. I'm not feeling very well. It was kind of like, you're fine, bye, having a baby.

Sarah (12:29)

Do you think that was like one particular midwife who you came into contact with, or do you think that that was because they were stretched and couldn't offer the services?

JoJo (12:43)

They were completely stretched. But the only thing the thing is they could have done other things. Like I had to go into a doctor surgery where everyone was coughing just to get my midwife appointment. I don't know why I wouldn't have a midwife appointment at issue. I start that's where I want to.

Sarah (12:59)

Absolutely.

JoJo (12:59)

I was going to a place where everybody was sick, so it was like a fortress to get in. And then I'm standing there.

Sarah (13:07)

Everybody was ill. Yeah.

JoJo (13:09)

So I'm like one of these random doctors in the middle of North Shields. I don't even live in North Shields. I'm like trying a password to get in. I'm there. I get in and I'm like, yeah. And I'm sitting there roasting hot and people are coughing around is that one person is heavily pregnant in the summer. And I was thinking, this is just so odd. Why would you treat pregnant women like that? Why wouldn't you just put them in like a Surestart safe? I thought, okay, I'm not asking for Fluffy, like.

Sarah (13:36)

Spa?

JoJo (13:39)

Yeah. I just thought it was just such an odd thing to do that I was kind of like left around sick people.

Sarah (13:47)

I guess probably just everything. And that is because of the government, in my humble opinion. But everything was left. So until the last minute, that actually did have time to work out that plan of action, to move people into a start and all the rest of it. The more people I've spoken to through just generally life, but also through this podcast, the more I realized that everybody, no matter what your role was, kind of working on the hoof, everybody was kind of just fighting little mini fires every day and kind of making it up as he went along.

Speaker 3 (14:30)

And the thing is, I was making all these excuses all the time for the midwives. I was just saying stuff like, it's not their fault, but I think they were so stretched. I mean, they could hardly fit me into an appointment. Every time I went for an appointment, they were like, oh, yeah. And then it was just

unreal. It's an unreal situation. And I know everybody keeps going on about it, but I felt like pregnant women had been completely forgot. I know that there were like another group of people. I mean, let's face it, pregnant women, the only vulnerable group that weren't vaccinated first they offer that.

Sarah (15:10)

Well, the thing I think pregnancy, it's like anything to do with pregnancy, isn't it? Whether it's had three pregnancies and every time the guidance on alcohol has been different or eggs or nuts. And so it's just an evolving science, isn't it all. And I think that has been really difficult because you didn't know, were pregnant women going to be really vulnerable to this or were they going to have no difference?

JoJo (15:41)

Now, they are rushing pregnant women didn't get them because a lot more ended up in hospital. I know it was hard and who can know what the answer is? Sorry to that. And there wasn't an answer to it, but I know that the answer could have been that they were already stretched, like the midwives were already stretched. And that was pretty obvious. And then one of mine was off shielding, so there wasn't another midwife to help that.

Sarah (16:09)

And also, I think at the beginning, all the health professionals were catching it, weren't they, as well? So if there weren't children, they were probably ill with it and isolated. So in terms of your hospital experience, that was much more positive.

JoJo (16:26)

So everything was fine with the RVI? Absolutely. Great. And then kind of still really itchy after the pregnancy. It's a long story that I'm just not going to go into for lots of different reasons. But obviously, I ended up with, like a liver disease that was connected to the pregnancy.

Sarah (16:53)

Which if you'd been monitored more closely.

JoJo (16:55)

I feel personally would be 100% if I had. I don't want to say that.

Sarah (17:04)

But I think that across the board, whether it's a pregnancy related disease or whether it's cancer or whether it's diabetes or whatever, there's been a hell of a lot of late diagnosis and things missed.

JoJo (17:20)

Yeah. And the worst thing is that when I went into another hospital, not the RVI, that was when it just got worse in terms of, like, my care, because I didn't even see a doctor. Even my aftercare was all on the phone. I mean, that's ridiculous to allow pregnant women to not actually have their post care checkup. How could you even do that? And again, first time mothers wouldn't have known any different, but added.

Sarah (17:54)

You didn't have a C section, did you?

JoJo (17:56)

No.

Sarah (17:57)

I wonder what C section after care was like, being interested in wanting to look into.

JoJo (18:05)

I mean, the midwives who came to the house afterwards came to the house. And that's what I couldn't understand why I couldn't see a doctor then if I wasn't like that.

Sarah (18:16)

Now, even all this time on getting into a doctor is like getting into a fortress.

JoJo (18:21)

But you're thinking, well, having a baby is a major operation. And the doctor was lovely. And she was saying, this is ridiculous. This may all ask all these questions about it. And I can't actually look at you see, it was no Zoom. It was like on the phone and she was saying, how are you feeling? I said, I'm feeling pretty rough. And, you know, it was kind of like dismissed. And I think it was like, oh, well, she hasn't got over to be all right. It felt a little bit like that throughout the whole pregnancy.

Sarah (18:54)

I think, again, you've had a recent experience with it, and I and my family. But I think that has happened with cancer and other illnesses as well, that there's been such a huge focus on COVID that other things have just to a certain extent.

JoJo (19:18)

My sister in law was pretty much the same as well. She was not in the Northeast. She was in Yorkshire. And me and her had kind of each other to bounce off. And I had said to her, you should definitely watch the Handmaid's teal. And she started watching it during the pandemic. And she said to me once when we were talking about all these different things that couldn't speak or midwife or a doctor, we were denied this. And I was telling just other conversations that I have with other women. There was another woman as a baby. Now there's another woman whom I spoke to who had quite a few women who I spoke to who denied contraception because they had to go to the door. How you have to have they were told, no, you can't have it. And it's like, Hang on a minute.

Sarah (20:02)

I think I can.

JoJo (20:05)

It was that kind of stuff going on as well. And I think that that was only happening to women. I'm not saying because obviously they're female things, aren't they take the pills to have a baby, those kind of things.

Sarah (20:19)

And I remember that I actually wonder whether the vasectomy service grounded to a halt or they still do over the counter, can't you?

JoJo (20:31)

Well you could get viagra over the counter. So that was all right. You can't get the morning pill when you can, but you get asked all the questions. So there was all that kind of stuff. But I would just remember my sister in law saying something like, It's all gone a bit handmade tale, hasn't it? That kind of thing.

Sarah (20:49)

So last couple of questions I wanted to ask after you've had a baby, when everybody just swamps you, it's kind of a little bit lovely, but a little bit overwhelming. You obviously couldn't have that because nobody was allowed in anybody's houses. How was that? Did you feel a bit, like, abandoned, or was it actually quite nice to just be in your own little family unit?

JoJo (21:20)

I liked it. I did like it. It was nice. I didn't like my Nana not being able to hold the baby. That really upset me. I did upset her, but she wouldn't say because she's like that breed of woman where she just wouldn't admit it. But I could see it, you know, and I would take Luna around and hold her up against the window, and she'd sort of go, she's lovely, Hinnny. And then, honestly, I was just crying because it was winter by that point. I was born in October. And kind of like I just got to the point where I was just crying my eyes out in a garden and thinking, this is just so cruel.

Sarah (22:05)

Because I was by that point.

Sarah (22:08)

It just felt endless, didn't it?

JoJo (22:10)

And I'd spent the whole pregnancy going. And, showing her my belly, which she couldn't rub. And let's face it, I don't like anyone touching me pregnant belly. But I wanted me Nana to. There was those kind of things that I just thought, this is just inhumane. And also, I know this is really awful, but in the back of my mind, because of the way we were living with death tolls every day, I kept thinking, what if my Nana dies and she doesn't get herto hold her only great granddaughter, she's got great grandsons.

Sarah (22:41)

But everybody who has elderly grandparents who are lucky enough, like we are still have elderly grandparents. Absolutely. I felt like that all the time I kept thinking, one of them is going to die and I'll not have cuddled them for a year or something. It was just bizarre.

JoJo (23:04)

So that was all right. I mean, that was horrible. Sorry. And then stuff. Not having people flocking your house, that was nice. But then it kind of feels like I've lost that. I lost that pause. There's a lot of things that I feel like I've lost this last 18 months in particular. The other thing that I feel like I did lose in terms of maternity is that I was too ill to breastfeed properly and there was absolutely no support whatsoever. So I lost that. I do feel like I lost my maternity because I was home schooling.

Sarah (23:45)

All of those groups and connections that you make by going to baby massage or whatever.

JoJo (23:53)

You decide to do three classes, all those kinds of things.

Sarah (23:57)

Even if it's just a toddler, where you go and sit in a Church and have a cup of coffee and people say, Isn't she lovely? It's still a connection, isn't it? And that's another one that I've really thought about first time moms as well, because I know I felt that was so important to me with that first one to kind of feel like, oh, God, I'm not the only one who's not getting any sleep.

JoJo (24:23)

And mine was like, because I'm an older mam. Yeah. So for me, I was like a first time mum again. Yeah. Manchester was where I had the kids, so I have no real proper mommy friends who have had babies. Sorry. And so there was nothing like that connection for me wise, but I do feel like I totally lost that maternity. I remember breastfeeding and trying so hard to breastfeed while Ryan was on a team's meeting, live session, the baby's crying. I can almost probably feel the judgment from their parents. Not in a horrible way. More like someone helped her. And I'm trying all this and I just thought, this is just how, again, that's just inhumane. And tears were rolling down my feet.

Sarah (25:29)

I certainly had plenty of hormonal moments with three at home school, but I think throwing the new baby hormones into that as well, that must have been so hard. Which brings me actually to me last question that I've got on my list for you. How do you feel like your mental health has recovered if it took a fashion, which surely it did?

JoJo (25:58)

Sorry. That was something that was never, ever discussed at the maternity appointments. Probably because they just knew that if they asked, every pregnant woman about their mental health would all be just like, well, it's just very poor. And there was no kind of after support for that whatsoever. There was no poor discussions around that.

Sarah (26:21)

When you think about women who have poor little psychosis and things, and.

JoJo (26:30)

What was positive is that this project then grew up with those ideas like if I'm someone who's in a privileged position, which at the time I didn't feel privileged, but I am a lot more privileged than what some women would have been during the pandemic who were pregnant, like you say, first time mothers or women who were struggling with money.

Sarah (26:54)

Suppose in the sense that you can identify that you have in these feelings and then find a different way, of course, them creatively and doing something practical.

JoJo (27:06)

Yeah. So I kept sitting there thinking because I was really struggled sleeping. I've got really bad insomnia anyway, and my anxiety is really bad because that was what I kept thinking. I've got a history of mental health, well, of anxiety. And no one had even asked me about that. And I was so anxious, so anxious. My partner was born out of work a lot because he was classed as a kind of key work. I saw he was working a lot and I was on my own quite a lot. Well, I was on my own three children. No one ever that subject never came up about mental health and I was angry. I think that's what happened. Yes. As you say, I just sat there for a while and just thought I can't. And I think it did teach me a lot about mental health as well in terms of the idea of this project and the woman up. And that's why there's a question mark, because I felt like I had to just crack on and get on with it and actually did fail in my eyes a lot because I was struggling. I couldn't breastfeed properly, I was struggling to home school and I was actually physically ill as well and didn't realize that was creeping up on it.

Sarah (28:21)

And I just think all those kind of things, I really genuinely thought I was going to have a breakdown. There was nothing I could see myself heading towards a brick wall.

JoJo (28:32)

I think that's been quite cathartic, hasn't it, through this project or doing the interviews, reading the surveys that we've all felt like we were going to hit a brick wall for whatever reason, no matter what your circumstances, almost nobody has come out unscathed. And that in itself is quite comforting, I've found.

Sarah (29:01)

And it's horrible to see it like that.

JoJo (29:03)

But it is because you kind of feel like, oh, actually, it's not me, it's the situation.

JoJo (29:13)

There's maybe nothing throughout this whole project, there's only been two women that I've asked that I've said, Would you like to be involved in this project? That actually has pretty much been fine. Two out of one, hundreds of women that I've spoken to. And then I've said, oh, no, but that's good too. Not all of you are kind of losing the plot.

Sarah (29:40)

To coin Cheryl Cole anymore, Cheryl Tweedy. It was an emotional roller coaster and I think we all hit the wall at different times also. Like, we're going to have those breakdowns at different times and then all of kind of emerged and at different times.

JoJo (30:05)

The only thing that I worry about now and this is probably something good to end on, I suppose, is that PTSD doesn't happen now, not just for me personally. I'm just thinking about a lot of women

who've been in this position or in terms of all the different women that have spoken to. But if we're just talking about maternity, I don't know how that's going to affect me in the future. So I worry about what's the impact going to be. And it's just getting back to the government. We were promised a lot of money around mental health halfway through the pandemic when everybody was talking about mental health and coming out of lockdowns and all that kind of stuff.

Sarah (30:45)  
It's quiet, isn't it?

JoJo (30:47)  
Yeah.

JoJo (30:47)  
And it's all gone a little bit kinder. And I think at the time when they were asking that was the same time that my partner could have gone in for a pint with these pals, but he couldn't come in with me when I was in labor. And that was when I remember the point where that was when they started promising money for mental health. Well, I'd like to know where it is, and I'd like to know what's going to happen, because everything when you fund something, that funding only lasts a certain amount of time. So for me, it's like that's not being offered to me now. Is it going to be offered to me six months down the line? I doubt it. And I think that's what I worry about, the future of all of our mental health.

Sarah (31:28)  
Yeah, absolutely agree. I think once the physical health implications of the pandemic are out of the way or receded or whatever, then when it comes to actually processing it, I think a lot of people are going to be shell shocked, like you say, yeah.

JoJo (31:52)  
We just have to see what happens.

Sarah (31:57)  
When that time comes around.

JoJo (31:59)  
I'm hoping that we'll get more funding. It's always about funding, isn't it? And we get more kind of like funding, maybe explore that, maybe do face to face workshops where we can speak to women and explore that maybe a little bit further. But who knows? Because I just feel like that's how I found it more therapeutic in a sense, because I've been able to speak to a lot more women and go, actually, I found a connection with you. I've been through the same or we've been through something like you say, we've all been able to talk about it, and we've found spaces, even the workshops that were delivered, there were a lot of women talking about what had happened to them. So hopefully in the future, that will happen again, but we'll see what happens.

Sarah (32:46)  
Okay.

JoJo (32:47)  
All right, then. Well, thank you very much, Sarah.

Sarah (32:49)  
Thank you.

JoJo (32:56)  
So today we're going to be interviewing Amneet Graham about maternity and pregnancy during the pandemic. So we've both got our babies, if you can hear them in the background, Luna and India. But this is what it's like during a pandemic when you've got children. Would you like to introduce yourself, tell me your name, what you do and what you're part of kind of your role was.

Amneet (33:22)

So I'm am Amneet Graham and at the time of the pandemic I was the chair of the Maternity Voice Partnership for Newcastle. So that's an organization which is basically made up of professionals, so midwives doctors and anyone involved in maternity, as well as families. And we work together to improve services and to hear feedback from families and just to generally talk and discuss maternity services. So I was chairing that for Newcastle at the time, and as well as that, I also chair and founder of charity that supports people who are pregnant again after a loss. And at the time of the pandemic as well, I was newly pregnant. I found out just before the first lockdown. So my role was quite central to everything that was going on. So obviously the lockdown happened and go from my maternity voices. If I put my maternity voices out on first, it was a lot of panic because we've kind of got stories through from the January about this new virus that was around, but I don't think anyone was really taking it seriously. I remember that I actually attended a big conference on March the fifth that year.

Amneet (34:50)

It was big NHS Better Birth conference and there was loads of people like over 500 people. And I couldn't have even thought two weeks later we would be locked down. Yes, lockdown happened and then I also fell pregnant and things started to happen. Like the restrictions started to come in, so you had to attend your appointments on your own and we had people come messaging. What's the RVI like, what's the hospital doing, what are their restrictions? Can I take someone along to my scan? I think that was the big one that scans. You had to go on your own. Now for people that I looked after who were pregnant after loss and that I was going to in that category as well, that was really difficult because there are people who have gone to Scams before and had really upsetting you and they were kind of being forced to go to a scan on their own because of covet. And it was really hard for the partners as well. I really felt for the partners. My husband really became quite unwell. He had a lot of mental health issues anyway. And the fact that he was sort of excluded from the pregnancy by the health care services made things even worse for him.

Amneet (36:10)

He actually hit a crisis point in remain that year. But there was a lot of panic and a lot of panic from the hospitals as well, I think, because no one knew what this was. And no one knew how to handle it, or then you get the news that some people carry it without any symptoms. And the hospitals were really up against it as well because they had to listen to government guidelines and make sure there was two metre distance and things like that. And so things came in where at the hospital people had to go for inductions and couldn't have their partner with them. So they were established labour. And that was the start of an induction. I've had an induction before, and sometimes it takes a long time, but you really need someone with you at that point. So there's a lot of people going through it on their own. Then there was people who there was a lot of confusion about childcare and can someone look after my child while I go into hospital, or am I going to have to go into hospital and give birth on my own? So there's a lot of people worrying about that.

Amneet (37:21)

And I don't think anyone in our area had to go through that. But I've heard stories around the country where people have given birth on their own because there's no one to look after their older child because no one can mix with it.

JoJo (37:37)

There was a woman in the Ward next to me when I was having mine who did she was on her own. She was unbelievable.

Amneet (37:44)

Yeah. Just really horrific. So, yeah, a lot of worries about that and maternity Voice partnership. We were just this organisation that we had about 400/500 members on our Facebook group. I don't share it anymore. I left in I think it was October last year, and we were on 1.5K members. And the thing is what we were doing was we were communicating with the trust and we were communicating with the people who need to know what's going on. And there were certain circumstances where the trust was just a little bit slow in communication or people didn't know where to go for that information. So we became like this sort of central board of information where people could go and be like, okay, I know

what's going on now. I know where I can ask questions. I know how to get hold of whoever. And yeah, we started doing weekly Q and A sessions with the midwives at the hospital. So people would send in their questions, and then on a Sunday or whatever, we'd go and send them off and we'd get the answers back the next day or a couple of days later. And I think people were really appreciating that because they were getting information through.

Amneet (39:08)

And then we put together a table as well. Very clearly go, if you're going to your twelve weeks down, this is what the restriction is and so on. So we became like this real central bit of communication between the trust and the users. And that was one of the real big points of the MVP anyway. And I think it really took off during COVID and people really wanted to engage as well.

JoJo (39:39)

It was a very supportive network because when I joined, a lot of women felt like they were in the same boat. So we all kind of support each other. There was never any kind of nasty facebook comments. It was always dead supportive and all that. I remember kind of admiring you, which is why I wanted to interview you, thinking, wow, you are taking on so much. Like if these women, these women are so anxious, including me, lots of women asking questions, and I felt it for everybody as well. Take your partner into that scan. Yeah, well, not especially for the first time. It was bad for everybody, but if you don't know what, you're going to hear those kind of things too. So I just thought it was brilliant, brilliant kind of place to be.

Amneet (40:31)

Yeah, we had influence as well over things. So the whole partners at scans, that was a huge thing that was bothering a lot of people. So I did polls, I did surveys, and I took that information to the people at the hospital, the senior people at the hospital. And I did a presentation for them and said, this is what people want, this is what their worries are. It wasn't long after that, actually, that they introduced the whole buzzer system where you can have a partner and they have to sit somewhere else in the building and then you brought them up to the scan. So I felt like all of us, collectively as people who use maternity services, had some influence over what was going on as well and that we kind of made that change happen. So we made our voices heard and that was really powerful.

JoJo (41:19)

It was definitely in general. I know you've answered this a little bit. What kind of an impact do you think the pandemic had on pregnant women in general, do you think?

Amneet (41:29)

I think on their mental health. You had people who maybe hadn't gone through the pregnancy process before and weren't having much contact with the midwife. So I had people who spoke to me and said they had one appointment and then weeks later, the next quote would be like nearly in the third trimester or whatever. So those people kind of. It must have been quite isolating. I mean, for me, I was pregnant as well. So for my mental health, it was really hard. It was really isolating. I couldn't go out and do things that would normally distract me and keep me going, like going and having a cup of tea at a cafe and things like that and going out and enjoying a family day out. So I was left to my own thoughts and my own devices a lot. And that was really difficult, especially in the first trimester. So it had a big impact on people's mental health. People couldn't interact with each other apart from online. I mean, I suppose a good thing was a lot of online support was built. So there were things I attended that were going on halfway around the country, like support groups that I wouldn't normally have been able to attend, but I could attend them because it was all virtual.

Amneet (42:54)

So that was a positive that came out of it. But the actual nothing beats face to face interaction, really. And I think the lack of agility classes that were available as well, face to face, that would have impacted people. We had a lot of people come through the MVP asking just general advice about not that medical advice, but things like about feeding and things like that because they just weren't sure and they weren't able to access that support easily. It had a huge impact on pregnant people.

JoJo (43:32)

I think also I never got asked once about my mental health. So even though I had I think it was three appointments. And then I actually said to them, you know, you've never asked me about my mental health. And they sort of looked at me the midwives as if to say they were probably too scared to ask because I think everybody's mental health was just shot to pieces. So they were probably scared to kindness see it. But I remember thinking in the car on the drive home thinking, I think they've asked me and then I was thinking I'm sort of, all right, I'm talking as best as I can, but what about women who aren't? That's what I was thinking. You see the wider kind of families as well. Like, what was the impact that was having on kind of the partners to not be and I feel for people who.

Amneet (44:23)

Lost advocacy. So probably people who may not speak English as a first language or people who just come to the country or vulnerable people as well, who had lost having the right to have an advocate with them, and they had to go to these appointments on their own. And I know particularly for me, when I go to consultant appointment, I like my husband speed up, obviously, so that he can hear what's going on. But also because I don't always take in all the information. And so I felt like it was quite difficult to make decisions and really listen to what was going on and take it all in. And for people who are in a more vulnerable position than me, that must have been very difficult. And so, yeah, you kind of lose your advocacy in that instance.

Amneet (45:19)

Yeah. And I mean, obviously kind of you sort of and stuff the kind of stuff around women's mental health and the Northeastern stuff. And probably a little bit about this as well, thinking about kind of like the community midwife support, like what was coming out of the Facebook group, what they seeing midwives regularly.

Amneet (45:39)

There was a lot of it was difficult to get a hold of their midwives, I think because there were different pathways that the Royal College I think it was the Royal College that come up with the pathways and they selected which appointments were absolutely vital and which ones could be swapped for a phone call or whatever, or which ones could be missed out completely. And I think it would cause a little bit confusion. Some people believed they were high risk and they were missing certain appointments and they couldn't understand why. And then they thought they were being treated badly because of it. But actually it was all in the pathways that not everyone reached the pathways. They're quite big and they're quite complex. So the real thing is there needs to be more communication. And that was all people wanted. They wanted to know what was going on and to be able to have a point of communication and not being able to communicate easily with the community midwives, that was difficult, especially like people who were having trouble booking, getting a booking appointment, or hadn't had a scan letter through for ages or whatever.

Amneet (47:00)

There was a lot of that going on as well as well.

JoJo (47:03)

From the Midwife point of view. It was hard because obviously we're not blaming the midwife. It's not there, was it? But mine was shielding. So I didn't even get to meet my actual midwife at all. And I didn't realize that, like you say, it's about communication. If they just said that to me, I might have been a little bit less. I don't know why, but I just felt like it was that lack of communication with a lot of pregnant women. And that's why the group was so good, because even though we were sort of communicating with each other in that group so much better and going, right, well, this is what's happening. This is what's happening in my area.

Amneet (47:40)

I turned up to one of my I think it was my very first appointment, and they changed the times earlier in the day and no one had told me. So I turned up in the afternoon and I was just in floods of tears because I was hormonal anyway. And I was just like, this is really difficult for me. Pregnancy is really difficult for my mental health. And I was gearing up for this appointment and then turned up and no

one was there. Well, there was a midwife there, but it wasn't my turn. My turn had gone. But yeah, I think I do feel for the midwife as well. It must have been a lot of stress because they didn't want to at the end of the day, they want to be supporting people through pregnancy and supporting them and their families and enjoying that experience with them. So this must have been a very difficult time for them, and they were getting a lot of stick for it from people. It wasn't really their fault. It was out of their control.

JoJo (48:40)

They were just showing the best they could, really, at the time. And there was a few times where I was very frustrated, but at the same time, I kept seeing again, you crying. I'm so sorry.

JoJo (48:51)

I'm not blaming you.

JoJo (48:52)

But you just had that frustration, didn't you?

Amneet (48:55)

Yeah.

JoJo (48:57)

The other thing I was going to ask about, because I have had conversations with some midwives that I kind of know. Do you think some of the restrictions were fair? Like, do you think some of the hospitals are key to some of the restrictions?

Amneet (49:13)

That's a difficult one. I think there was an obvious issue I was dealing with and the space that was available, it wasn't really built for purpose anyway. When it came to things like not being able to have a partner on the induction suite, it was unfair. Obviously, everyone feels that's unfair, but at the same time, it was fair because there wasn't really anything they could do physically to make that distance happen. And they had to think about Clover and the risks for people. So in terms of when it literally physically, you can see, yes, there's a need for that restriction. That was understandable. There were some things that were a bit questionable. And I was like, particularly around the differences between giving birth in the birthing center and where you get your own room and then giving birth and delivery suite. And I think they tried to keep it so that everyone had the same experience. But if you were in the burden suite, I'm kind of being penalized because of. Am I being penalized because of covert? Because actually there's no risk to me here because I'm in my own room, but I have to go with the rules because they want to cover that whole hospital.

Amneet (50:40)

There was a little bit of injustice there.

JoJo (50:45)

I was thinking, because you're allowed to be partners, aren't you pre qualified? You were.

Amneet (50:50)

Yeah.

JoJo (50:51)

So one midwife said to me, this is confidential, obviously, with the midwife, but she was seeing what hospital she works in is in North East, and she was saying that actually she agrees that maybe we should only have one birthing and partner because then you don't have your second one. It's like. And then the midwife has to deal with two birthing partners instead of just one. And she said that sometimes it felt a little bit more intimate for the couples who do have partners, obviously, that were there, it felt more intimate. That's just a personal choice, isn't it? I think we have that choice taken away from us.

Amneet (51:28)

Exactly. Yeah. I mean, I think if they're going to keep anything, it would have to be a case of giving people a choice. So I know that one thing that was being debated and thought about was the whole visiting postnatal visiting, because some people actually found it was quite good for them not to have visitors. Some people found that it helped with their feeding. Some people, on the contrary, found it was really detrimental to their mental health. They needed this and they were struggling after a C session or after birth in general, to cope with a newborn without any help, really. So, yeah, there were two sides to that. Some people thought it was fair and some people didn't think it was fair. I think the hospitals were in a tricky situation there. I'm not sure I'm not aloof anymore about that. I'm not sure if they decided to stick with the visiting or what.

JoJo (52:27)

Actually, it's still restricted, I think for Covid reasons, still in the North East, still going through that kind of is there a different variant up here, all those kind of things that have kind of stuck to that as well. I've sort of asked that were there any positive to some of the restrictions? I think the positive for me was that there wasn't many people coming up in my belly, which is what you do. There isn't that many people coming up to me and kind of harassing us about my pregnancy and talking about and going, oh, you put weight on all like that. But it was still I can't think of massively positive things because we're saying it's about choice.

Amneet (53:18)

And that wasn't really taken away for me. I couldn't find much positivity because for me, the pregnancy experience wasn't just about me. It was about me and my husband. And he got unfortunately missed out on a lot of it. So therefore, I didn't really see the positives in that. But one thing I did, I guess if I was to find any sort of positive, it was that we went home afterwards and we couldn't have visitors, and it was quite nice seeing in our own little bubble. And I wasn't leaving the house or anything like that. And I had a lot of issues with breastfeeding, but I managed to just stay in persevere because that was pretty much all I was doing. I was just on the sofa, I was breastfeeding, and I'm still breastfeeding now seven months. And that may or may not have happened if it was still the hustle and bustle or visiting and then things like that.

JoJo (54:20)

Yeah. I like not having lots of people at the house. I think it's a good one. In fact, a lot of pregnant women that I've spoke to have said the same.

Amneet (54:28)

Yeah.

JoJo (54:30)

And finally kind of I guess the personal questions around, like I guess you've answered them along with this interview, but we know you had a baby and obviously just was there any other kind of changes that affected you? How did the pandemic in general affect you? It doesn't have to be around maternity. Was there anything personal that you might want to share?

Amneet (54:57)

It was difficult. So I've got a toddler as well, and I feel like she grew up a lot in that time and missed out on a lot of social interaction and things like that. And it obviously was getting more difficult to entertain her at home. And it's strange as well that she's now used to sanitizing her hands and things like that. I just find it really strange because it's not something that you normally would do wash your hands, but you wouldn't constantly be thinking about sanitizing. So yeah, it was difficult raising a toddler and being pregnant as well. At the same time. I had borderline hyperemesis when I had India, so I was very sick in the first trimester, bed bound. I could barely look after my toddler. My husband was on furlough, which I guess was lucky for us at the time. So I don't know what I would have done otherwise. But not being a sort of access external support was really hard. And my husband got burnt out as well because he was running around doing everything as well. It was really hard to not have the social interaction. I'm so far away from my family.

Amneet (56:21)

It was really hard to not be able to see them just whenever or pop to do normal things.

JoJo (56:32)

When it comes to wanting to hug off your mam or that kind of thing.

Amneet (56:37)

And then even when things were because the restrictions were lifted a little bit and then things got really bad again. Is it actually safe? The restrictions are lifted, but I think we went out a couple of times. We went to White House Farm in sort of way when the first lot of restrictions lifted. And that was nice. But it was like I had to be even doubly careful because I was pregnant and it was just like I want to go out and do these things, but is it actually safe? So yeah, it was just full of anxiety the whole time after you've had baby as well.

JoJo (57:16)

I think for a lot of women after I've had baby, so I felt like a little bit safer. January is coming, you will have the Christmas and then all of a sudden we're in lockdown again, home schooling again, but also the fact that I was excited about being able to spend some time in postnatal classes and going to all those baby classes that you go to.

Amneet (57:40)

My little one missed out on all of that. I did lose my eldest, but my little one in India, she's missed out on all of that, which is really sad. I think it's probably more beneficial to the parent and the child.

JoJo (57:59)

Very true.

Amneet (58:01)

So I missed out on all of that. But yeah, it is still that she would have been getting something from it, which is frustrating. But yeah, for my eldest, definitely. She grew up a lot in that time and it's weird now if she was to I've seen her play with other kids now, but it's like they all sort of play in their own space.

JoJo (58:27)

Luna cousin a couple of weeks ago and he's a baby too, and they sort of like ignored each other. She didn't even acknowledge that he was there. It was funny because I was just like, Jaxson's here and she was like. It was like nothing. It was really. I guess it is a lockdown babies, isn't it? I've just got one more question I haven't really asked. Sorry, I haven't told you. I was going to ask you about, you know, your charity. So did anything. Were you running that throughout?

Amneet (59:03)

Can you tell us a little bit about that? We were running since 2019. What we do is we do comfort boxes for people who are pregnant again after loss, but only in Newcastle North and South Tyneside in that area at the moment. We did our trial in the January and then we were ready to launch and then covid happened. Now our whole model, like business model was that people go and collect their boxes from a collection point. It was just like we had to pause the whole project, but it wasn't that bad because we went down the digital route a lot more. And so we started doing some Zoom support groups for people pregnant after loss. We did a lot of research in that time. We launched a new resource for dads and partners as well, which is a whole series on South Asian baby loss. So we were hearing people's stories and we've got all of those stories anonymously on our website. We've got a whole section about South Asian baby loss. So we use that time to do research and do things digitally and support a lot more people. And so we got the go ahead from the charity Commission that anything we do sort of online or digital, we can say is we're a national charity for that, but our sort of physical boxes are still North East based.

Amneet (01:00:31)

But we grew a lot as well because there was obviously a lot of anxiety in pregnancy after loss anyway,

during a pandemic. It's even worse, obviously, as people go into scans on their own. We did a little card thing that people could print off and put in their wallet or in their purse or whatever, like with a mindfulness technique on it and just say we're thinking of you if you're on your own going to this appointment. We gained a lot of followers on social media and things like that. And now we've relaunched our boxes and we're doing them by post now and that's it opened us up to because before we were only doing Newcastle North Side, but now we're open to Gateshead and Northumberland and those areas too.

JoJo (01:01:25)

Such an amazing charity. And I don't just stumbled on it when I just had it look. And then I thought, you know what, I need to ask you about this. It's such a really good idea and something that's really needed and especially all the research throughout South Asian lots as well. I think that's amazing. So I'm going to have a proper look on your website and have a file, but it's brilliant. I mean, did anything come out of that? Was there like a collective stuff that was coming out of that? Because I know that someone disclosed that they had a miscarriage to me during the pandemic and that she had to go to hospital on her own and wasn't with her partner. Was that something that was happening a lot?

Amneet (01:02:14)

Yeah, we had people who were going and finding out really difficult news on their own and then it didn't just end there. It was the choices that you had as well when it came to how you deal with a loss were limited. So you can usually get a few different options and one of them, you can go and have surgery or natural loss or whatever surgery, but was taken away from a few people because obviously the hospital was restrained and services were cut back to Covid and that was really difficult. I remember thinking for me, I was in my first trimester, I was like when I had my loss, I had surgery and part of the reason was because I just wanted sort of closure of it and I would have been too traumatized to go through a natural miscarriage and I was absolutely petrified that if I was to lose this baby that I would have to go through that and I wouldn't have the choice. And so that was really difficult for people hiring in the back of their mind that I think when we went into had this pregnancy as well, I kind of felt like, right I'm mentally in the right place.

Speaker 4 (01:03:31)

I know what I need to do to make myself feel better, but this whole pandemic took everything out of my hands. So, yeah, we had a lot of people like that, which was sad.

Sarah (01:03:51)

Womxn Up? has been funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund. The podcasts are presented by me, Sarah Hughes Produced by Workie Ticket and edited by Studio 26.