

Sabrina Habib: Affordable and Accessible Childcare

SABRINA HABIB: It's that leap of faith knowing that you're onto something, knowing that the problem needs to be solved, knowing that there's this urgency. There's no time to wait. And the consequences of waiting. I think there's something that builds up inside of you that says you gotta do this and it's trusting that voice that you have within.

RAMA CHAKAKI: This is Sabrina Habib (Ha-beeb) the co-founder and Chief Executive Officer of Kidogo and our guest on today's episode. Kidogo (Ki - do - go) is a nonprofit social enterprise that works to improve access to high quality, affordable childcare in low-income populations.

SABRINA HABIB: We're based in Kenya, we're the largest childcare network in Kenya, and we use a social franchising approach to provide training, mentorship, and support tools to improve the quality of informal childcare centers.

RAMA CHAKAKI: I'm Rama Chakaki, and you're listening to Innovate with Purpose, the official podcast of Expo Live, an innovation programme by Expo 2020 Dubai.

[INTRO STING]

RAMA CHAKAKI: When we sat down with Sabrina, she told us that growing up she had different plans for her future.

SABRINA HABIB: I actually wanted to be a neurosurgeon. I had epilepsy as a child and spent a lot of time in the hospitals and thought that that was my career path. But I quite literally stumbled into entrepreneurship.

RAMA CHAKAKI: In 2011, she was walking around one of the informal settlements in Nairobi when she came across what appeared to be a childcare center.

SABRINA HABIB: It was this 10 foot by 10 foot corrugated metal shack.

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It was dark. It was congested. The smell was awful. There was no sanitation at all. And my foot nearly tripped over a young child. And as I leaned forward to pick her up, I saw 15, 20, maybe more young children, zero to three years of age, all awake, but completely silent.

This was such an eerie feeling.

I think it hit me right away that this was not fair. This was not just.

It spurred up, for me, the idea that this could have been me, you know, my parents, my grandparents, my great-grandparents were all born in east Africa. And the idea that a child's life, their trajectory is dictated for them simply because of the circumstances that they were born in, it's not fair.

RAMA CHAKAKI: That was the moment the idea of Kidogo was born. At the time, Sabrina was working at a large non-profit in Kenya, so she was embedded in the space, but having been born and raised in Canada, she was aware that there was a

lot she still needed to learn. And it wasn't just that. Sabrina and her partner, a friend at the time who would later become her husband, were both young and relatively inexperienced.

SABRINA HABIB: We were very hesitant to jump in because there's so much of this white savior mentality that, you know, people in the West know how to fix problems, that the communities that they don't grow up in. And we didn't want to be that. I think solutions need to come from local communities.

And then I think not knowing anything about childcare, I mean, we were in our mid twenties. I didn't have any children of our own, not able to tell a four year old apart from a two year old. I mean, we had very little knowledge of the sector.

Entrepreneurship starts with curiosity and we just spoke to a whole bunch of these childcare operators to understand what are their pain points? You know, why do they do this work? What's motivating them? What is a day like in their life of, you know, looking after 15, 20 children for 10 to 12 hours of the day, what must that be like? What are the challenges they're facing?

And then speaking to dozens of mothers to understand what are their pain points? What is it like for them to have to go to work and leave their children and being unsure of the state they'll find their child in when they come to pick them up at the end of the day?

RAMA CHAKAKI: And so what were your next steps after that initial survey?

SABRINA HABIB: I think we learned a whole bunch of stuff and we put it down on paper, and we, we did this global benchmarking study as well, because we figured

if this was a challenge in the slums of Kenya, it had to be a challenge in the slums of India or Latin America. And so we came up with a whole bunch of solutions and then we packaged those solutions and gave it to large nonprofits working in Kenya because we figured, again, we were not the right people to do this work.

And after a year, you know, a year and a half went by and nothing was happening. And we knew that every day that was going by these young children were missing the opportunity to reach their full potential. We figured why not? Why not try it ourselves. And we gave ourselves a year to figure it out. And if it wouldn't work in a year, then we would have said, at least we would have tried.

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SABRINA HABIB: We got started with a little bit of cash that we had, my husband left his apartment and cut down on his expenses. And we used his six months of salary and savings to launch our first center and it was that first center that helped us learn and also provided an example to funders of what we wanted to do. It's hard to talk about something and sell it. It's a lot easier to show it.

RAMA CHAKAKI: Kidogo's goal was never to come in and replace the existing childcare centers. What they wanted to do is offer the women running those centers the skills and support that would ensure they deliver quality childcare and are able to make profit.

SABRINA HABIB: Our idea was how do we professionalize the sector? We brainstormed that, you know, a franchising model might work really well the same way you go to a Starbucks or to a McDonald's or somewhere, and you get the same standard of services. Why not try that for the childcare sector?

We thought, okay, great let's go to these childcare operators. Let's tell them about us. Let's show them what we can do and then have them join our network. And we did that and they said no.

RAMA CHAKAKI: Why did they say no?

SABRINA HABIB: A couple of reasons, one was, you know, who are you?

The second one was, there is nothing wrong with my center. I grew up in something just like this and I turned out okay.

And it clicked for us that if you don't know what quality looks like, you don't know what to strive towards.

So we actually pivoted early on, and started a "hub and spoke" model. So what that meant was we started our own childcare centers to show a proof point of what quality care can look like.

And when we started our first center in 2014, and then a couple months later, early in 2015, we launched a second center in a different community. We then were able to bring those childcare operators to those centers and say, this is it. This is what we were talking about.

They then came into these spaces and then went back to their centers and tried to replicate it. And that was exactly what we were looking for was, that spark, that inspiration that, yep. There, there is a possibility of doing something even greater.

RAMA CHAKAKI: To date, Kidogo has provided more than 5,000 hours of training and mentorship in more than 30 communities, reaching 400 daycare operators in a network of over 450 childcare centers.

SABRINA HABIB: The work that we do is not normal. You know, the typical childcare or early childhood set up is a small classroom with desks and chairs and three-year-old staring at a chalkboard all day long. And,, just everything is done by rote memorization.

We take a very play-based approach to how we do things. There's no desks and chairs. It's, you know, there's learning corners and activity centers. And. It's been, it was tough initially to get parents onto this new methodology of doing things and showing how play is actually the brain's favorite way to learn.

RAMA CHAKAKI: To gauge how they were doing, Kidogo carried out their own research, and they quickly realized that inside the classroom, Kidogo's kids were more independent than kids who were enrolled in other preschools. Can you tell us about some of the results that came out?

SABRINA HABIB: I remember getting the results of a research study that we had done that compared, Kidogo children to children who had gone to other early childhood centers or not at all.

And these were kids that had gone and graduated to primary school. And the research came back saying that our children are in the top 5% of their class.

They get their work done so quickly. They ask so many questions that the teachers are having trouble because they're so inquisitive. They're so curious. They want to finish their work and go off and do other things.

When my husband and I saw that, we actually high-fived because those are exactly the building blocks of the types of citizens that we want. Right? We want problem solvers. We want creative thinkers. We want, people with curiosity, who aren't afraid to ask questions. And so that was, that was really exciting to me.

RAMA CHAKAKI: The Expo Live grant has played an integral role in Kidogo's journey; not only did it allow the enterprise to grow, it also helped Kidogo cement its role in the community as a trusted learning space.

SABRINA HABIB: So Expo Live came into the Kidogo journey a couple of years ago. We had tested the social franchising model in a couple of communities, and we used the money to scale into new communities and counties as well.

We actually had our biggest success in the communities that Expo Live funded.

We take our mompreneurs through a three-month accelerator program and once they reach our level of quality, they convert into Kidogo franchisees. So they hold Kidogo's brand. It's a signal to the community that this is a center you can trust because they uphold certain quality standards and the communities that Expo Live funded, had our biggest conversion rate, you know, 80% of the centers ended up going on to become Kidogo franchisees. And I think it was a pivotal moment in our scale journey. And so we are so grateful for the funds.

I think there's actually something larger though about being an entrepreneur, being a human being, in a world where every time you turn on the news, you see something bad going on and I think the Expo Live meetups that would happen in Dubai were such a refreshing moment to be able to be amongst other entrepreneurs who are solving other issues, whether it was to do with the environment or climate change or, you know, economic opportunities or, water and sanitation or hygiene, or every issue possible, there was a Expo live innovator addressing it.

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Being amongst a community like that just makes you feel more hopeful about the world that as many problems there are, there are just as many changemakers from around the world that are addressing those problems.

RAMA CHAKAKI: Thank you for sharing your story with us Sabrina.

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