



## **Conversation with Sabrina Habib**

**Ashley Hopkinson**

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**Ashley Hopkinson: Sabrina, can you start by introducing yourself and the work you do?**

**Sabrina Habib:** Thank you so much for having me. My name is Sabrina Habib, and I am the co-founder and chief exploration officer at Kidogo. Kidogo exists to ensure that young children are safe, are fed, and stimulated during their early years while their parents go to work. We operate the largest childcare network in Kenya. At this moment, we have nearly 1600 *Mamapreneurs* who run profitable childcare micro-businesses and are providing safe, quality, affordable childcare to nearly 40,000 young children (0-5 years of age) and their families. This ensures that 40,000 moms are able to work with peace of mind.

I'm a first-generation Canadian. My parents, my grandparents, and my great-grandparents are all from East Africa. My great-, great-, great-grandparents are from South Asia. I feel incredibly lucky to have been born in Canada. In some ways, I feel like I won the genetic lottery. I grew up being told that I could be anything that I wanted to be, and I had access to a great public school education and public healthcare system. I often wonder what my life would have been like if my parents hadn't moved to Canada.

I just want to figure out how we can create a world where all children, no matter where they're born, have the opportunity to reach their full potential, where families don't have to migrate all across the world to give a good start to their children.

**Ashley Hopkinson: Is that desire part of the catalyst that brought you to this work, to Kidogo?**

**Sabrina Habib:** Absolutely. It was seeing a grave injustice and imagining a different way of doing it. So the story of Kidogo started quite by accident. I was working for a large nonprofit in Kenya, had gone out to an informal settlement (an urban slum) and saw my first childcare center. It was a 10-foot by 10-foot corrugated metal shack. It was dark, with limited ventilation. When I opened the door into this

darkness, my foot hit something. I looked down, and it was a baby. Realizing that I nearly stepped on a child, I leaned forward, picked her up, and saw babies all around me: 15, 20 maybe, all awake but completely silent. They had learned not to cry anymore because they didn't receive any attention for it — or in some cases, they were actually given alcohol or Piriton, a cough syrup with a sleeping agent, to keep them quiet through the day. They were so severely neglected.

I asked a lot of questions to the woman who was running this childcare center and learned that it was the best childcare option for working moms living in the informal settlements. There's no public childcare system in Kenya like in many other countries around the world and grandmothers often still live in rural areas so if you're a mom who needs to go to work in the informal sector, there's no maternity leave, and you have this difficult choice of whether to put food on the table or to spend time with your child.

In many cases, you need to go out to hustle, to work and you leave your child in whatever circumstance you can afford. Parents were paying up to a dollar per day to have their children in these poor-quality daycares. Again, going back to this idea that I feel like I won the genetic lottery — that my life has taken a very different turn having been born in Canada than if my parents hadn't left East Africa — I felt deeply connected to this issue.

When I dug in further to learn more about early childhood development, I learned that the first five years are when 95% of brain development takes place. So if we want communities that are thriving, and if we want economies and democracies that are working, then we really do need to invest in this youngest generation, these littles that are often completely forgotten. That was my impetus to want to do something.

I ended up calling a friend who was a management consultant in Toronto. He ended up becoming my co-founder and my husband. Like many entrepreneurial endeavors, it started with a single question: How might we provide a higher quality childcare option at roughly the same price point that moms are already paying, about a dollar per day? And that is what started Kidogo.

**Ashley Hopkinson: You mentioned 'mamapreneurs.' Can you define that for me and explain how you came to the conclusion that entrepreneurship is a path toward solving this problem that you were seeing?**

**Sabrina Habib:** The problem that we came across was these hundreds and thousands of individual mom-and-pop type daycares that were run out of somebody's home or a rented space but operating under the shadows. There was no regulation, no support, no training, none of that. And it just seemed

ripe for a market-based solution. You've got parents that are paying and the problem is quality. So, how do you provide better quality at the same price point that moms were paying? A franchise model just seemed perfect for what we were finding. The same way you go into a Starbucks or a McDonald's and you expect a certain standard of quality, that is what we wanted to try and bring to the childcare sector. Why not? Why shouldn't a mom in an informal settlement in Kenya who is struggling with so many different things, have the ability to trust sending her child to a particular daycare and knowing that the child is safe? That should just be the norm.

So it just felt right that rather than trying to create our own centers or a parallel system, why not use the existing infrastructure of these really entrepreneurial, incredibly resilient women who are doing this really tough work? Why not find ways to support them to do the work at an even bigger scale? That's where the word *mamapreneur* eventually came from. We made it up.

We just thought, what would it take for someone to run an awesome childcare center? It seemed like they needed to have two elements. One is to be really loving and nurturing and caring and warm. You'd want to leave your child with somebody like that. But then you need somebody who's also got the grittiness and the problem-solving and the resilience and just that creativity and that innovation and that entrepreneurial spirit to do this work. And that's where the entrepreneur point came in. And so we combined it together and we now have *mamapreneur*.

**Ashley Hopkinson: Can you share a little bit more about how you make that work? What allowed it to go from being this idea that you had into something that is scaling?**

**Sabrina Habib:** I think in terms of the success or the stickiness, one of the core components of a franchising model is this deep belief that you've got a go-getter. You've got somebody who's got this initiative and drive to do something that has some basic know-how in some way, even informally you're just trying to provide the structure and guidance to do it in a way that's consistent and at a standard level of quality— whether it be for hamburgers, coffees, or childcare.

You've got, again, these women who love doing this work, love taking care of children, see it perhaps as a calling, have an inclination and temperament for it, are patient, loving, and kind, and see this as an economic opportunity but don't quite know how to make it work. That's where we came in with a social franchising model that essentially does three things.

The first thing is we go in and identify daycares in informal settlements in Kenya. This is often harder than it looks because these daycares don't want to be found. Again, they're operating in the shadows, often in somebody's home. There's no legal way to register as a daycare in Kenya. So, in many cases,

they think county officials are coming to shut them down. We work very closely with community infrastructures to find these daycares. We tell them about Kidogo and invite them to a workshop to learn more. Step two is we upskill them. Through a three-month quality improvement program that's almost like an accelerator, we provide training and mentorship on both early childhood development and entrepreneurship.

At the end of the three months, those who meet our quality standards move to step three, which is the franchise. They officially become a Kidogo *mamapreneur*, receive a small renovation to their space, and access to our mamapreneur app, which eases the administrative burden of the center. They receive nutritional supplements for the children in their center in the form of fortified porridge, ongoing refresher training, and coaching.

They also join a community of practice where they meet other *mamapreneurs* once a month to share challenges and lessons learned and have a sense of belonging — which I think is the stickiest part of the model. Ultimately, that's what we all need in order to thrive: places where we feel like we belong, where we can be ourselves, be vulnerable, share challenges we're facing and get the social support to get us through those challenges.

**Ashley Hopkinson: Can you share a little bit about the challenges that you face doing this work? How have you worked to adapt to those challenges?**

**Sabrina Habib:** I think one of the biggest ones we've been coming across is just trying to get this work embedded into the government systems. Ultimately, we believe that childcare is a public good. The government may not have the risk appetite, nor would we expect them to come up with new models or think about how to deliver quality, affordable childcare for their constituents in innovative ways. That's where we've used philanthropy to really innovate on the social franchising model. But after 10 years, I think we've reached a little bit of a ceiling. There's only so big we can get using philanthropy.

We are working very closely with our government partners to figure out how we can do this together at an exponential scale such that it just becomes the norm. What is difficult is that governments often work on short-term horizons. Everything is urgent, budgets are stretched thin, and it's difficult to think of this as a priority in and of itself.

I believe that children deserve, as a human right, a childhood where they can grow, develop, be themselves and grow up in a loving environment. Yet children are not voters, so they often don't have the same voice and are not often prioritized until they're a little bit older.

The true impact of the work that we do in early childhood development won't be seen until these kids are future leaders. If we want leaders with critical thinking skills, problem-solving skills, empathy and emotional intelligence, then we do need to invest in these young ones. But it's hard to convince governments to make that investment.

We are starting to think about the economic return that you can get by investing in quality childcare. You're enabling half of your workforce to work with peace of mind. Women are less absent from work, and are more productive at work. Can we create a business case around quality, affordable childcare? That is an ongoing challenge when there are no policies, no regulations, no quality standards. Anyone can open up a daycare without any issue at all. So how do we start? In some ways, it's beautiful to be able to work with a blank slate, but there's a lot of work that has to get done.

In the government, there are ministries that are directly responsible for this, so we're constantly trying to get the ministries that touch upon childcare— the Ministry of Health, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Social Protection, Gender— to all come to the table and take ownership over the childcare agenda. There is that proverb: 'If you want to go fast, go alone; If you want to go far, go together.' And we definitely want to go far with this and ensure that childcare isn't just a one-off thing but really is embedded in the way that societies work.

**Ashley Hopkinson: Something that came up when I was covering early childhood as a journalist was the need to make an economic case for the importance of early childhood. Do you find any challenge with that being a part of it?**

**Sabrina Habib:** Yeah, sometimes I struggle morally with this, and perhaps I was too naive when we started Kidogo 10 years ago. For the first few years, we were really talking about this as if it should be done. It is a right. Access to quality, affordable childcare and early childhood services is the right of every child. What we heard was, "That's wonderful. Great, okay. We'll worry about it later." It's not until we brought in this economic angle to it — that quality, affordable childcare enables women to work, enables businesses to thrive, enables economies to function, and is such a vital building block — that we've actually started to get some traction.

I think that we could stand on this high horse and say, "No, let's talk about the money. This is social justice, and it's a right," but if our end outcome is to get budget allocation towards this and actually move the needle on this, then we have to speak in the language that makes sense.

We've not, by any means, lost touch with the value that quality affordable childcare holds in and of itself, but we do know that if we want to actually make a difference in terms of getting government buy-in, then we need to speak in a language that governments understand.

**Ashley Hopkinson: How do you see Kidogo in the space of systems change? How has collaboration played a part in moving your work forward over the last 10 years?**

**Sabrina Habib:** There's no way you can do this without other people. When we started, we wanted to just put our heads down, do the work, and almost fly under the radar of the government.

We very quickly realized that solutions scale either through the market or through the government, and especially when you're dealing with something like childcare, which again we feel is a public good, there is no way you can do it without the government, especially if you want it to last. So we collaborate with the government at all levels. We work from the executive level all the way to the county level, to the sub-county level and the community level and the chiefs and the parents.

We celebrated the first-ever International Day of Care with the Office of the President last year. Right now, we are working with the Council of Governors to draft quality standards for the sector. I think systems change needs to happen at all levels, top down, bottom up, in order for it to work. It's a key component of how we're scaling right now.

**Ashley Hopkinson: What do you think leaders and decision-makers can do to play an active role in advancing systems change?**

**Sabrina Habib:** The Ministry of Health, for example, is focused on childhood immunizations and growth monitoring and malnourished children. There's an entire layer of government infrastructure to do this work, except when community health promoters go door to door, they don't find any children because all the children are in daycares. That's a wonderful proof point to bring to the government to say, "We can help you. We can help you further your agenda by using childcare as a place-based strategy to get your work done."

We can say, "Ministry of Education, you are struggling so much with learning outcomes, but if we were to just get these children ready to learn in their first few years, it would advance your agenda and make your work a lot easier."

It's about understanding what each ministry's priorities are and what constitutes a win. I think it's about active listening and understanding what the priorities and agendas are for our various

government partners as well as our other partners, and seeing how a collaborative approach would actually help us all get to our objectives in a faster and more effective way.

**Ashley Hopkinson: Have you found that people are more willing to work outside of silos?**

**Sabrina Habib:** I can only speak to what I know in Kenya about childcare and early childhood development. It starts with the recognition that this is important, and then there's the question: who needs to do what about it? Often, things get messier before they get figured out. In some ways we're in the messy middle of figuring out who is taking ownership in what areas.

I think there's a wonderful opportunity there to find places where there are interdependencies, acknowledge them, and figure out how to work through them as opposed to working in a more siloed way. If we can identify our various points of intersection and entry points within the government system, essentially mapping out where each ministry fits on the value chain, it helps us to break out of our own bubbles. Often, we only see our narrow perspectives. Coming together to visualize the bigger picture is a crucial step in preventing silos.

I think that there's progress being made, certainly, and it's exciting to see — it's been 10 years of building a movement towards quality, affordable early childhood care and education. We just always need to be cognizant of the fact that we all rely on each other and have the same end outcome, which is children, families and communities thriving.

**Ashley Hopkinson: Could you share a good insight or takeaway from the work you've done?**

**Sabrina Habib:** One of the biggest things that we've learned in this process is that trust is so very important in everything, especially in childcare. Parents will send their child not necessarily to the best facility or to the closest place, but to the people they trust their child with. It takes trust for the daycare operators, to go from not wanting to be found to actively joining a network. When you think about scaling, you can't just think about this as widgets that get replicated over and over and over again in the factory. We're in a service-delivery industry that is so relationship-oriented and is built on trust. Often, we can only scale as fast as we can build that trust.

You have to ensure that program design, rollout, and all aspects are deeply rooted in building trust within these communities, and that you consistently deliver on your promises.

We wouldn't be able to do any of this work without our *mamapreneurs*. They are the backbone of this. They are the superheroes that are looking after young children for 10 to 12 hours a day, five days a

week. Truly understanding who they are as individuals, their motivations, aspirations, and building a trusting relationship with them is at the heart of what has led to our success.

**Ashley Hopkinson: From your perspective, what is missing from the conversations that you're having about care and childcare, whether they're in a boardroom or in the community?**

**Sabrina Habib:** At the treasury and in places where the money actually moves, women's voices are often missing. We don't have enough women, working women, in the room who, perhaps, have seen this and have gone through this. As a result of that, childcare, in particular, and the care economy is really a mother's responsibility. We heard time and time again in the early years of Kidogo—and we still often do—that the responsibility of a young child falls with the mother. We see blank faces when we say, 'But the mother needs to work, where should she send her child?' Because it's like, 'I have no idea. And that's not something we want to get into.'

The more that we can reframe childcare and, more generally, the care economy as not just a women's issue but an everybody issue, the more we will have functional economies and functional societies. It cannot be an afterthought.

I don't think the world was designed for working mothers and I think that if we had more women in power, we would be able to design systems and economies and workplaces differently so that childcare is not seen as an afterthought.

**Ashley Hopkinson: What makes you feel hopeful? What makes you feel like the work you are doing is working?**

**Sabrina Habib:** There are hundreds of stories that we hear every year from parents who talk about their sheer sense of relief having found Kidogo. That they don't need to worry if their child will be fed, or if their diaper will be changed, they'll be cared for by *mamapreneurs* who are able to send their own children to good schools from the income that they receive by doing this work.

But when you were asking the question, the story that actually came to mind was actually during COVID. There was a surge in teenage pregnancies, and the county government in Kisumu approached us saying that they were afraid that young moms will not be able to come back to vocational training school. Some schools had already reopened, and they were beginning to see that they didn't have girls anymore because many of them were now at home with their babies. The Kisumu government asked if we could do something.



We ended up setting up a childcare center in three of these vocational colleges in partnership with the government where they provided the space. We did our normal model: We set up a functioning childcare center, and then after six months, we handed it back to the government. It has been a couple of years, and they continue to run these childcare centers fully funded through their own budget. This is such a win to show that you can design something in partnership with the government.

The early results showed that young moms were able to return to school. They had a place to leave their children. They would go to class. They would breastfeed when they needed to. They were doing well at school because they weren't as distracted. Those who had come to school with their babies could concentrate because they weren't caring for their babies while trying to focus.

The best part is that it actually instigated what is now becoming a county policy around mandating childcare for young moms at vocational colleges — a county policy that will hopefully then become national.

That gives me so much hope, that you can find a problem, work collaboratively with a partner, with a government partner, make something happen, show that it works, and use that to inform policy. And I think that that is a great example of systems change.

**Ashley Hopkinson: What do you do when you're in a room full of people working on different issues, and everything feels urgent? How do you have conversations about the urgency and the need for childcare alongside all these other issues that feel equally urgent?**

**Sabrina Habib:** That's a good question because you're absolutely right. There are so many issues, how do you pick the one? I think this is probably what governments face as well, especially with the climate crisis happening.

What's worked well has been to talk to people in a language that resonates. For example, when we're looking for funding, we've gotten a lot of funding from the early childhood funders and have done quite well there. We've had to now branch out to try and find additional funders who wouldn't normally support the sector.

For those interested in women's economic empowerment, we talk about how childcare is such a cornerstone to allowing women to actually work. For those who are focused on food insecurity and nutrition, childcare is on this basis of nutrition and stimulation. So everything is so complimentary.

I think sometimes, if we're so stuck in our silos of 'this is our issue,' we forget to zoom out and think about the big picture — that these are actually all puzzle pieces that need to work together to create the world that we want to see.

If we can acknowledge these interdependencies and see how they fit together and how it's not one or the other, it's both. There are opportunities, again, to work more collaboratively together to stretch each dollar on multiple different problems while ultimately serving that individual, child, person, whoever it might be.

Before Kidogo, I worked in maternal and child health. It would be so funny because you'd have funding for a maternal and child health project. You'd have a woman who would come in and need a safe delivery, but she also had malaria, or she also had HIV/AIDS, or she also struggled with clean water. And yet we only operated in these silos despite the fact that the goal of health is healthy, functional, thriving people, families, and communities, which need all of these different things.

No one will be able to thrive if they have nowhere to live. No one will be able to thrive if they're constantly dealing with climate insecurity. So I think a lot of it is about parking the ego and thinking about it as this holistic, bigger picture where each one of us fits into this bigger puzzle.

**Ashley Hopkinson: I love that. I'm going to end it there because that was great.**

*Ashley Hopkinson is an award-winning journalist, newsroom entrepreneur and leader dedicated to excellent storytelling and mission-driven media. She currently manages the Solutions Insights Lab, an initiative of the Solutions Journalism Network. She is based in New Orleans, Louisiana.*

*\*Editor's note : This interview includes written material submitted by interviewee as well as audio transcription from a virtual interview on 5.29.2024. This conversation has been edited and condensed.*