MARYANA ISKANDER

Wed, 3/9 2:40PM• 46:15

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

people, governments, organisations, world, problem, harambee, wikimedia, africa, women, inspiring, jobs, youth unemployment, south africa, life, pandemic, countries, work, continent, solution, important

SPEAKERS
Maryana Iskander, Betty Kankam-Boadu

Maryana Iskander 00:00
The starting point is how do you design the systems of the society around the young person? Because if you think about it, the young person has the least amount of information typically, the least amount of power, the least amount of resources. Whereas governments, corporation, corporations, NGOs, development organisations, all of us have resources, power, money in, we have to design ourselves around the young person.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 00:37
Hello, and welcome to Inspiring Open, candid conversations with influential women whose careers and open ethos have pushed the boundaries of what it means to build community and succeed as a collective. I am Betty Kankam-Boadu, a journalist and women's rights advocate. Join me as I explore the fascinating backstories behind Africa's most tenacious female personalities. Inspiring Open is a podcast series from Wiki Loves Women, a project of Wiki in Africa. Be inspired, be challenged, be bold.

Our guest today is Mariana Iskander. After over half a decade of working with Planned Parenthood as their Chief Operating Officer, she fell in love and made the jump from the United States to the southernmost tip of Africa. Even though the love affair didn't last, her love affair with South Africa did, and it ushered her into a career path that saw her working on solving the problems of youth unemployment in Africa to a current position leading the Wikimedia Foundation. Maryana has dedicated her career to breaking down systematic barriers of access to opportunity and education. She has a proven track record for scaling complex organisations through collaborative solution building and community empowerment. Let's welcome Maryana Iskander on inspiring open.

So we will start by going into a bit of your background. You are an Egyptian American. And you moved to America when you were just a toddler with your parents. Can you share with us how growing up was like as an Egyptian family in America?

Maryana Iskander 02:22

Well, I would first say to you that I describe myself as an Egyptian-American South African, because I consider South Africa my home. And that's where I've spent the last decade of my life and intend to continue to live. And so I started on the top end of the African continent and found my way to the bottom end of the African continent and visited a few other continents in between that process. In terms of my growing up in the United States, the first point, I guess, I want to make is that I have reflected on the bravery of immigrants, of people who leave their countries, the familiarity of their homes, they leave their families to go to a new place, and to try to build a new life. I think it's an extremely brave, difficult and courageous thing to do. And I have only recently, as an adult, appreciated my parents for the bravery that it took for them to leave Egypt, leave what they knew and go to this new place, I would say that we were lucky to immigrate to the United States in the early 1970s, which is a time that, I think, America was maybe more friendly and more welcoming of immigrants than maybe what we've seen in the in the recent past. I think that my parents taught me that in America, at that time, education was the key to everything. And if you studied hard and did well in school, opportunities would be available to you. I don't think that that promise is still true today, for most parts of the world. Certainly not for young people in Africa. But I feel very fortunate that at the time I was in the US, you know, making sure that education came first did do that. It opened up opportunities for me that otherwise would have been unimaginable.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 04:20

And when you talk about your parents telling you to study hard, it rings so true, because when I look at your educational background you are just making a mark, everywhere you go, magna cum laude at Rice University, starting Rhodes Association for Women at Oxford, you have just excelled. And it's interesting that your parents instilled that that in you.

Maryana Iskander 04:44

I mean, I think that most people who are lucky and it doesn't have to come from traditional families, right? It can come from communities; it can come from other influences. But the idea that if you work hard, you can get ahead is such an important idea and making that still be true for people in today's world as it was, I think, you know, for me, it was like you work hard, and then opportunities will come to you if you do that. And I think that that's what my parents certainly helped me see. And I mean, I think again, as immigrants in a new country, I had to learn English, I had to figure out all of the kinds of cultures and customs. And they did, you know, as well as adults. I would say my path has been founded on that principle, and we'll get to it later. But I mean, the work that I've done in South Africa has shown me that that promise

isn't always true now for young people. And I think that's one of the things we have to talk about.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 05:44
Yeah. And we can actually move straight into that, if it's fine by you.

Maryana Iskander 05:48
Sure, yeah.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 05:44
This idea of working hard and just excelling in school, and that could translate into a great life or a perfect life, if I could put it that way. There are a lot of young people in Africa who have lived their lives by this principle and I still find it hard in particular, to even find a job to earn even a meagre salary to take care of themselves and their family. So it's interesting, you talk about that.

Maryana Iskander 06:17
I mean, for me, that's been one of the central tenants that's motivated 10 years of work in South Africa, because we see everywhere in the world that education systems are deteriorating, they're unconnected to the labour market. And so, no matter how hard you study, or how well you do in school, if you don't go to a school that an employer thinks is valuable, or you don't learn the things that an employer thinks is valuable, it doesn't even matter, right. And so, there's a question of the problems of the education system. And those problems on the continent are very different in different parts of the continent. So in South Africa, as an example, we have high access, but low quality. Most people get access to education. The question is, what is the quality of that education, and how does that translate into employment prospects? Whereas in other parts of the continent, there's limited access to education. And so then it's a different set, I think, again, a different set of issues.

Disrupting the education system is a whole topic for another podcast, and we can make time to figure that out. But the bigger problem is, one: how do we help our economies grow so that there's opportunities for young people? Two: how do we think differently about what does experience mean? Because if I can't get a job, to get experience to get a job, I'm trapped in this impossible circle of I don't have enough experience to get a job, but I can't get a job to get the experience to get the job. And I think that there are very real innovations, and how we think about young people showing what they know, showing what they can do that doesn't look like traditional qualifications or traditional experience. And then the third thing is, we have to reimagine what work is. Like what does work even mean? Right and post the pandemic, even a more complicated question. And so how do people do things that can help them earn money, but maybe help their community? So don't look like a normal job in a normal corporation? How

do we value that as work? How do we provide wages for that kind of activity? How do we think very differently about, again, what's the relationship between work as a mechanism for giving me dignity and social cohesion, not work only as a mechanism for earning money that helps me, I think, pay for things? And I think that in many of our African societies, reimagining that conversation about work is going to be so important, because there are not enough jobs for the young people now, and there will never be enough jobs for the young people coming in the next few decades. It's a very hard truth. And I've had to say it to a lot of politicians and ministers and CEOs. And we have to accept the truth that in Africa, the number of jobs is much smaller than the number of people. And we've got to, like use that crisis to imagine something different and something new.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 09:27
Imagining something different and something new will really be key. A bit of an example here. Quite a number of my friends figured out that for the very first time, they could deliver perfectly on their targets at their current jobs without spending eight to 12, sometimes 14 hours, in the office. And this is thanks to the working from home idea that came with the corona virus pandemic. But for most bosses and business owners, they still require people to show up in the office every day, even though their employees are delivering on their targets, they just require them to spend that number of hours in the office. And this is, of course, for certain people in certain kinds of jobs. But there are others I know that they are required to show up that number of hours. So yeah, reimagining what work is, is going to take some time. So Maryana, I imagine that working with the youth at Harambee wasn't such a smooth ride. You mentioned that you made it clear to governments that the jobs in Africa do not match the population of the workforce. For a lot of governments, the youth may seem more of a problem than a solution, mainly because they have not been able to figure out a way to channel their energies and their enthusiasm into good use. Is there hope when some governments see the youth as a problem?

Maryana Iskander 10:59
I'm more hopeful than you would think about this topic maybe because, again, I've dedicated a decade of my life to how do you actually try to answer those very impossible questions that that you've asked. If one doesn't have hope, it's hard to get up and keep going. So maybe I'll try to share some of my optimism of why maybe it's not impossible. I've seen solutions, that I think if they could be scaled or taken to other countries may be could help start rethinking and reimagining how we have the conversation. So even though my prior organisation which was called Harambee Youth Employment Accelerator was based in South Africa, we also did do some work in East Africa, and have engaged with similar organisations and partners in West Africa. I'll try to maybe give context for the different regions and areas of the continent.

South Africa has the highest rate of youth unemployment in the world. And part of that may be because it has more data than other countries. One might argue, actually, the rates of unemployment are much higher in other African countries, but we don't have the data, and we don't know. But it doesn't matter, the point is the rates are high everywhere. I would get sort of agree that that's like the problem. And your comment about young people being the solution and not being the problem, for me is the starting point. The starting point is how do you design the systems of the society around the young person, because if you think about it, the young person has the least amount of information, typically, the least amount of power, the least amount of resources. Whereas governments, corporations, NGOs, development organisations, all of us have resources, power, money and we have to design ourselves around the young person. It's almost like instead of them running around trying to figure out everything, we must run around them and try to figure out how do we organise ourselves in a way that makes it easier for the young person who has limited resources? If I don't have enough air time, I don't have enough money for data, how do I find out what opportunities are available? We created a, you know, a platform that allows young people to find opportunities in one place, so they don't have to apply to 16 different things. They don't have to have data; they don't have to pay for transport costs. And that is about convincing everybody else, right. Convincing government, convincing corporations. Saying to them, why don't we try to coordinate, so that young person goes to one place, instead of goes to 18 different places? We can do that. And so, I think the core principle of designing around the young person makes some of this feel possible. And there's no doubt, even if it's difficult to hear, governments have to help solve this problem. This is not a problem that can be solved without them. Because it's not just the market isn't working, the state also isn't working. And so, if you don't fix the market and the state, there's no way that there's going to actually be sustainable solutions. We've seen, maybe just to give you a little hope on this, we've seen that you can create new jobs for young people in big numbers that are about the future of work, and about the digital economy and about what's possible. I know, I keep saying we I mean, my colleagues at Harambee. I'm in transition, but you know what I mean.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 14:32
Yeah, 10 years of your life. I know what you mean.

Maryana Iskander 14:35
Yeah, no, but I think that there's a lot of... there are a lot of data points that say that economies and if... I mean, the growth in West and East Africa, and the amount of innovation, the role of technology in your societies, has to give us hope that there is a different way of doing this and that again, young people can be seen as the leaders and the solution and the ones to take the society forward.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 15:01

That is so true. Let's just go back a little bit when you worked with Planned Parenthood. You gave 6 years of your time there. And then you had to come to South Africa, to Harambee. How was that transition like? And the work that you did at Harambee, obviously we spoken a bit about that. Tackling youth unemployment, it looks like a huge problem that I bet, when you had to leave Planned Parenthood and come to South Africa, when you've lived most of your life out of Africa, and then take out this huge challenge. How was that feeling like and how did you navigate it?

Maryana Iskander 15:39
Well, the first thing that I want to tell you is that I left Planned Parenthood and came to South Africa because I fell in love with somebody, which was a total accident and not in my life plan and not what was supposed to happen. And that's what brought me to South Africa, and then I found Harambee and decided that was going to be the work that I was going to devote myself to. And I always share that story because no matter how important our work is, and as professional women, we still have personal lives. And they're important to us. And they shape a lot of our direction. And so, love is what brought me to South Africa. I mean, I am now in love with South Africa, and it is my home. But I think that, Harambee was sort of the second part of that. When I came, I asked myself, what are the biggest problems in this country that I'm new to? And this one is overwhelming. This is like the biggest, I think it's like the biggest challenge facing the continent and facing the country. And it can absolutely feel overwhelming.

I think what worked for me is one, as I've tried to do, even now starting at Wikimedia, you start by being quiet and listening, and learning and understanding who's doing what and what's working and what's already there, and who's devoted their time and energy to this very, very big problem. I found incredible partners, I found credible people who if they could be brought together in the right way, could create all kinds of new coalition's for change could do things that nobody thought was possible for them to do alone. Could create trust between government and the private sector, which hadn't been there. And so even though the problem is overwhelming every day, I think the partnerships that I have seen are possible to build around the most intractable issues of a society have given me, again, hope and optimism, that we don't have to just write these things off as like never going to be solvable, it's not going to happen. Some of them may take a generation to solve. Timeframes are important. We're not going to solve these problems in five years, 10 years, maybe not even 20 years. But that doesn't mean we can't have a sense of forward motion and progress and momentum.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 17:56
You just mentioned partnership, how easy was it finding partnerships and finding other organisations, and even governments to collaborate with, in tackling this issue of youth unemployment when you were at Harambee?

Maryana Iskander 18:11

I would say two things, Betty. I think the first is that, you know, partnership is probably one of the most overused words in the world, right? We all say partners, and we like partnerships, what does it really mean and what... I would say that if people don't see the problem in the same way, it's hard for them to do work together. And I think that partnerships built on a shared definition of the problem is very important. And I can remember having meetings with organisations where it was clear to me, they didn't see the problem the way we saw the problem. And it typically had to do with the young person, right? They thought young people are lazy, young people don't want to work. And I was like, we can't partner with you, because we see the problem completely the opposite. Young people are hungry for work, young people are ready to do whatever it takes. The system has failed them. Because all, as I said, the education system's broken, the labour market's broken, the government systems are broken. I think the first question is, do people see the problem in the same way and on that basis, like a good partnership can be formed? The second point, which is true for youth unemployment, but as we start talking about Wikimedia you know, I would say is true of the world of free knowledge as well, is that it's too big of a problem for anybody to solve on their own. And when people know that, it makes it easier to partner, because I know actually, this is too overwhelming, it's too big, and it's not something either have the resources or the capability, or the tools to solve on my own. I think those two aspects helped us build very strong partnerships at Harambee around youth unemployment, and I'm hopeful to see whether that's going to be true in this next phase at Wikimedia as well.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 20:00

And that will bring me to open. When you talk about collaboration, and people realising that, when we have shared knowledge, we could have shared solutions, we could have shared information, and that could really be a game changer. I know that in your work, you definitely adopted some open practices. Talk to us about that. How that came about and how much, again, of a game changer that has been in your work?

Maryana Iskander 20:24

I would say it's been the game changer. I mean, it really makes me think of two things. One is that when we think about open principles as both sharing and learning, right, so sharing with each other and learning from each other, I believe that we can find more things that people have in common, that they have different even if everything about them is different, and their contexts are different, and the countries they live in are different. And the issues. For me the concept of sharing and learning in an open way is what would help us find things that are common as a result of our diversity. I actually believe that diversity is the catalyst for finding things that we may have as shared purpose or have in common. And I was commenting on the diversity of our African societies, if you think about it, language diversity, regional diversity, religious diversity, ethnic diversity, and yet we have to find ways to be in a society together.

And I think that the concept of openness, of sharing, and of learning, and making it a two-way way of being holds promise as the only way to achieve progress.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 21:55
I heard you in one of your interviews, that in order to tackle a problem, or find solutions to a problem, you need to fall more and more in love with the problem, rather than the solutions to the problem. Can you elaborate on that? Because that is such an interesting concept. And I never actually thought about trying to tackle a problem in that manner. Keep falling in love with the problem, and not so much with the solutions.

Maryana Iskander 22:26
So that concept comes from a book called Lean Impact that I recommend to everybody. That's the title of the book is Lean Impact. The author is a woman who I admire greatly named Ann Mei Chang, and she wrote that book based on a Silicon Valley bestseller called The Lean Startup, which is a book many people have heard about, and it talks about how to grow in kind of the Silicon Valley way. She asks the right question, which is how do you use those same principles of innovation and scale in the world of development, in the world of non-profits, in mission driven work? And the premise behind that, which is why I repeat it everywhere, is that if we stay holding on to our solutions, and what we do today, when it's not solving the problem, then we've lost sight of our purpose. And so, when we talk about falling in love with the problem, it's about: is what I'm doing solving the problem? And if it's not, again, I have to be brave enough to let go, I have to have the courage to try something different. I can't hold on. And I think in a lot of the world of development and not-for-profits, and government and other kinds of organisations, we see that people keep doing things that are not working, because they're too, for whatever reason they're scared to change, or the funding doesn't allow them to try to do something... you know, you'll meet organisations where they know what they're doing isn't working, but they can't change it because they get funded to do it the wrong way. And that's just silly. That's just silly. So we have we have to find a better way.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 24:10
Oh, that's an aha moment for me, honestly. Wow. And then thank you, thank you for that. And that will bring me to my next question. I know this may sound a little broad, but it will still be interesting to hear your perspective on it. You've worked on the continent for 10 years tackling one of the biggest issues on the continent. Now, what do you think should be the kind of job opportunity, or job creation, governments should be focused on if they want to tackle this youth unemployment situation? Because now everybody wants a white collar job, unfortunately, I know that a lot of the youth are now starting their own thing and trying to be entrepreneurs. But it's still not on the biggest scale. So in your experience, what kind of employment opportunities, if I should put it that way, should government focus on to be able to absorb the huge number of youth in Africa who are unemployed into the workforce?

Maryana Iskander 25:09

I'll answer that better with just our what I've seen be true. So lived experience, practical examples. You know, the first thing is that there is a big role for governments to play in enabling growth of private sector companies that are building future-oriented jobs. So again, whether it's the digital economy, clean energy, if you think about things where there's a demand and a need, governments have a huge role to play in enabling the growth of industries where there are jobs. And young people, we mustn't ask them to want less. Of course, they want jobs, they want to provide for themselves. They want what everybody wants. And so, the question of how to, one, be realistic that not every job is going to look like an office job. I think the pandemic has been a good, actually a good lesson for all of us, that work is going to look different. And the idea we're going to get up and put on our suits and go to an office and spend the day I mean, that idea is pretty much gone as a result of the pandemic, which I think helps, I think with some of these other conversations.

Then the second point, which is what you said is that entrepreneurship, and the growth of enterprise and particularly, I would say, an African economy has to be such an important part of the solution. And in some ways the role government can play there is just by getting out of, you know, getting out of the way, making sure that there aren't unnecessary regulations or red tape or bureaucracy that keeps individuals and companies from being able to grow. of course, you have to regulate the environment, you have to protect people's, you know, labour conditions, you have to do a lot of those things that are critical, but the question of how do governments also do less, you know, is sort of an equally important question and allowing for some of the entrepreneurship to take off and for small companies to, hopefully over time, become big companies because they've been able to create lots of jobs for people.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 27:12

Before I move on from Harambee, I know you've moved on, but I reckon it will still be a very big part of you, because like I mentioned earlier, you spent 10 years of your life there. It was such a passion project for you. What do you envision for Harambee?

Maryana Iskander 27:33

Well, first, thank you for recognising and acknowledging that I think this is an issue close to my heart. And it is one that no matter what I'm doing, I'm going to stay close to. I think Harambee has done something remarkable in that it's built a model for how to tackle youth unemployment at a national country level that can be taken by other countries, if they're interested in the model. Harambee isn't planning on setting up itself in many countries, because actually, the people in those countries have to be the owners of the solutions. There isn't going to be a Harambee in Ghana run by people living in South Africa, it has to be Ghanaians saying what is going to work for our economy and for our country. But Harambee

can offer a roadmap and it can offer solutions. So how do you grow the formal economy in very specific and concrete ways around, again, future oriented growth sectors? How do you tackle the informal economy in both helping enterprises grow, and helping understand what some of the constraints are that keep people from doing things that are income generating for themselves and their families?

And the things that Harambee has done that I think can be shared with other African countries [inaudible], there's probably places in the Global North if they're interested to learn as well. But how do you design a system built around the young person and make that the key design principle? And get governments to understand that and get companies to understand that we work for the young people in terms of how to make the society give them opportunities, if they're willing to work hard, as I said earlier. And I have, in the 10 years that I spent at Harambee, I have met thousands, maybe tens of thousands, of young people who are so inspiring in their commitment to wanting to work hard like I did, and have better opportunities and believe that if I do what you tell me I'm supposed to do, there is opportunity on the other side of that. I'm optimistic that what Harambee has built as a model for tackling this problem from all different angles, that has been shared. So certainly has done, as I said, work in East Africa and engaged with governments in West Africa as well. And I'm excited to see where the team that is there now is going to take it, the new CEO, the board and the executive team, and I'll be cheering them on from the side lines.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 30:06
Now we can move on to Wikimedia and congratulations again for coming on as the CEO for the Wikimedia Foundation. Like I mentioned early on, it's such a great feat, and I wish you all the best in advance. I know you're going to do great work.

Maryana Iskander 30:24
Thank you.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 30:27
I was looking around and looking at the some of the initial interviews that you did, and when you are appointed, and you mentioned in one of them that your focus will be on diversity when you join the team? Do you mind elaborating on that? Why is diversity such a huge issue to tackle?

Maryana Iskander 30:50
Sure, I mean, the first is that in the recruitment process, I obviously was exposed to the movement strategy, which guides the Wikimedia movement, not just the foundation, but the broader collective of affiliates and volunteers all over the world. And in that process, this concept of knowledge equity, and how do we ensure that when we talk about the sum of all

human knowledge, we're really talking about the sum of all human knowledge in all of its diversity and all of its forms. The principle of knowledge equity, came through for me and that movement strategy, and as a priority, and obviously resonates with my own personal values. It resonates with the way I've thought about my career and about my work. As I have spent the last few months on a listening tour, so really engaging and meeting volunteers and leaders across the world, and you know, many, many countries. I spoke to people from about 55 different countries, I joined events in all regions of the world to try to understand community context. I think that there are three things I would elaborate on. I think the first is that there is enormous diversity already in the Wikimedia movement that we have to lift up and make more visible and celebrate. Whether it's bringing people together, again, pandemic willing, and all of the other realities of our lives. But celebrating and lifting up what's already happening and what's already here, I would say is the first point. And again, having met leaders now, in every shape, and every size, and every form all over the world is kind of the first. The second is that we have to make the spaces in which we engage, safe and welcoming for the diversity that we want to see. And I'm encouraged by the process to develop the universal code of conduct, which has been a process of putting together a statement that has been endorsed around the safety of our communities, and the health and safety of contributors. And so that's an important part of this so that we create welcoming spaces for people to join us. And the third point is how to now invite more people in and how to make sure that more people are part of this movement, and part of the community building that we need to see in every region of the world. And certainly, I would say in many areas of the Global South, where Wikimedia projects have historically, maybe, been less resourced and less represented.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 33:39
And with Wikimedia Foundation now, you will be thrown into the world of open that you know already. And so, on that note, I'll just ask you, what does open mean to you?

Maryana Iskander 33:51
Well, as I said earlier, and I'll make it brief is that, for me, open is about shared purpose. Like that's what I'm taking, that's what I take from it is that, in the diversity we can find commonality. And that open allows for that, because we can share and we can learn from each other and from others, in a way that is building and not taking away.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 34:22
Is there one woman, or women, you would say you have been inspired by in the open movement?

Maryana Iskander 34:30
Well, many. I would say one thing on that I've reflected in the last few months as I've talked to volunteers all over the world on the gender diversity of the movement. There are many shades

across that spectrum of gender diversity, and really holding that up and recognising and appreciating that spectrum, whether it's, it's non-binary people or individuals may identify not necessarily as a man or as a woman. But I think that the prospect of specific individuals, too many to name. Some of the executive directors of our affiliates in countries that have focused on gender diversity has absolutely inspired me. Some of the women like Florence, who have been the stalwarts of this movement and have been shaping and building it from day one, have inspired me. And particularly now, trying to meet more young people and young women who again have to also be the future of this movement and have to be lifted up and being grown and developed in taking the open movement and the free knowledge movement forward, is going to be a place I'm going to go looking for them if I can't find them easily.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 35:59
And for women like you who've been very successful in their various career fields, do you think that it is important for them to reach out to inspire the other young women? How important is that? Because some women will tell you everybody will have to find their own paths. I just like to stay away and let people find their own path. But I guess there's also something to be said about inspiring somebody or maybe giving any form of guidance to somebody.

Maryana Iskander 36:24
I would say it's absolutely critical. And if I build on our prior conversation, the one thing I've learned from my 10 years of work in the employment and opportunity space, is that almost everyone gets ahead using their networks, that is the reality of a lot of the world in which we live. And if you don't have a network, and network doesn't have to mean a bad word. It doesn't mean, you know, asking people for favours, network is like, Who do I know? Who do I have common interest with? Who can I learn from? And how do I build that as a group of people that can guide me and can help me? And I think that encouraging women to build their networks is so important, because it's an opportunity to learn from others. And you never know, all of our lives are very zigzaggy, and we're not sure where our careers are gonna take us. And we might fall in love and end up in a totally different continent. And we might, you know, you don't know. And so how do you build it? How do you build a network that you can use? And I think for women to do that, for each other is absolutely essential?

Betty Kankam-Boadu 37:37
Yeah, it really is essential. And let me also ask you, what is that one challenge you faced in your work life? And how did you handle that?

Maryana Iskander 37:50
Well, I would say, for every organisation in the world, change is very hard. And especially if it's like leadership change, or deciding that it's time to do something with people that have run their course, or you have to make a change, it's very hard. It's very hard. But as I was saying

earlier about not holding on to the solution, but making sure that what you're doing is solving the problem, it's sometimes necessary. I would say that the challenges I faced in every single organisation, around leadership and around change, very difficult. Very difficult. And I think that at this point, I now have more experience. I can say that I feel more experienced that how to tackle those kinds of challenges, but I don't think any amount of experience makes it less difficult. And so that would be something that I would identify as kind of a key challenge that I've faced in my work life. And you can draw lessons from your non work life about humans and about, you know, how to be caring, even when you have to be firm, or how to be humane even when you have to do something that's difficult. And I think that those have been lessons I've really tried to learn in all of my career experiences.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 39:13
And what has been your guiding principle in life?

Maryana Iskander 39:17
I haven't had like one guiding principle but there is a poem that I think has given me guidance when I've been looking for a reflection. And it's not so much based in a faith tradition, even though if you look at the Wikipedia page, it gives you the history of it, called the Serenity Prayer. And it talks about knowing when you need the courage to change the things that you can, and the peace to accept the things that you can't change and the wisdom to know the difference. And I think that for me, that that's something I constantly return to, is when to have the courage to change the things that you can. And when to sort of have peace with the things that you can't change, and most importantly, to have the wisdom to know the difference between the things that you can change and the things that you can't change.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 40:20
I mean, this is something maybe I'll also look into more because then it allows you to know when to let go when you have to let go of something.

Maryana Iskander 40:29
Exactly right.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 40:20
Yes. Hold on to it. What do you wish you had known in the beginning of your career that you know now?

Maryana Iskander 40:37
Everything! I mean, I wish I'd known everything that I know now. Wouldn't it have all just been easier? I think I wish I would have just been more relaxed. Honestly, it's all going to be okay. It's just, I think that when you're young, it's just, it feels like everything is not going to be okay. And

then as you get older, you realise it's all going to be okay. So I think that that sense of calm. I wish I had had more of that, I think, earlier in my career, but I'm grateful to have it now. So I'm hanging on to it.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 41:12
That's great. Do hang on to it. And then I also would want to ask you, the three things that you are most passionate about in 2022?

Maryana Iskander 41:23
Well, the first is Wikimedia, because that is for me, my big new adventure in 2022. So I am diving in and excited for what the year is going to bring. The second is that we keep living with a pandemic, because every time we think we've outsmarted the pandemic, it reminds us that it has outsmarted us, and I wish, I wish in 2022, we're focused on how to live through it as opposed to waiting for it to be over. So that how we think about our lives, I think, can continue and can be managed. And I would say that the third thing that I'm passionate about, for 2022. I see that, that that so many of the most difficult issues, whether it's climate, whether it's employment, whether it's the polarisation of societies, at least people are talking about it, at least countries are acknowledging it, and at least people are trying to find a way to come together. So that gives me kind of a reason to have a lot of passion for what what's in the year ahead.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 42:38
What conversation should Africa be having that we're not having?

Maryana Iskander 42:44
I'm not sure that Africa isn't having every conversation it should be having. I guess it's a question of how visible it is. And so, you know, in light of the COP 22 and all of the conversations happening now around climate, I would say that Africa has to play a more visible role, and a bigger leadership role, in how you can talk about climate and economic growth, because that's very difficult. And we have to find a way to ensure that as a continent that has most of the future workforce of the world, what does that look like, in a way that's also going to be environmentally sustainable?

Betty Kankam-Boadu 43:26
, yeah, and sometimes, some way, somehow it doesn't seem to be the ... or one of the top conversations that we're having when it really should be. Okay, cool. Who would you want to listen to on this podcast? Like, do you have anybody in mind that you would want to listen to on this podcast? And do you want to drop some names?

Maryana Iskander 43:48

Well, I was actually, I was thinking less of the individual names, and more... I hope lots of men listen to this podcast. I hope that men who are interested in these issues, who maybe feel that it's unfamiliar, who are interested in how women think about the networks, they create about how they engage and lift up others, that's who I would hope would actually listen to the podcast.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 44:13
Thank you so much for your time. We don't take it for granted at all.

Maryana Iskander 44:16
It's been such a delight talking to you and hearing your perspectives as well. And I feel honoured to be on the podcast and can't wait to see who else you talk to and what they have to say.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 44:27
All the very best in your new adventure Maryana. That was Maryana Iskander, CEO of Wikimedia Foundation. Thank you for listening to Inspiring Open a podcast series from Wiki Loves Women. This first series of Inspiring Open was funded through the International Relief Fund for Organisations in Culture and Education 2021, an initiative of the German Federal Foreign Office, the Goethe Institut and other partners, and an annual grant from the Wikimedia Foundation. If you enjoyed today's show, subscribe on Spotify, Apple Podcast or wherever you listen to your podcasts so you never miss an episode. Feel free to share, rate, and review us. We appreciate the support. You can also tag us in your posts. We are at @WikiLovesWomen on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. I'll leave you with the words of Ntozake Shange. "Sisterhood is important, because we are all we have to stand on. We have to stand near and by each other, pray for one another and share the joys and the difficulties that women face in the world today. If we don't talk about it amongst ourselves, then we are made silenced by the patriarchy. And that serves us no purpose." Until next time, look after yourself and your sisters. And remember, be inspired, be challenged, be bold! I am Betty Kankam-Boadu and you've been listening to Wiki Loves Women, Inspiring Open.