

## Rapid Response Transcript – Tokunbo Koiki Koiki

“Transforming an idea into a movement overnight”

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**TOKUNBO KOIKI:** I was seeing what was being documented by the African and Caribbean students who were trying to flee from Ukraine, and I felt inspired to take action and support them. We have now raised 166,000 pounds on GoFundMe. We've also raised about \$30,000 in cryptocurrency. We are also working to help the 80-plus students who are currently trapped in Kherson. I've basically become a volunteer humanitarian relief coordinator overnight, having the entrepreneurial skillset definitely helped. People in authority, they did not see the humanity of Black people. But yet on the flip side of that, we have had donations from across the globe. And so I feel like this is us seeing the worst of humanity, but also seeing the best of humanity in action.

**BOB SAFIAN:** That's Tokunbo Koiki, co-founder of Black Women For Black Lives, a new organization that sprung up to help African students facing racism and hostility as they were fleeing Ukraine.

Pulled together in just days after Russia's invasion, Black Women For Black Lives has already directly helped more than 1,200 people on the ground.

I'm Bob Safian, former editor of Fast Company, founder of the Flux Group, and host of Masters of Scale: Rapid Response.

I wanted to talk to Tokunbo because, while challenging moments can sometimes bring out the worst in people, they can also bring out the best.

Tokunbo is a social worker and serial entrepreneur who turned her outrage and frustration into positive action, linking up with two other women she'd never met, and using the scrappy tools at her disposal to spark unexpected impact.

She shares with us the real time story of how an idea became an organization and a movement, one that even the US Ambassador to the UN has recognized.

It's a story that continues to evolve, with twists measured in days and hours, in dollars and lives.

It demonstrates how entrepreneurial spirit and community can come together, and provides practical lessons for each of us about what's possible — and an inspiring model for supporting others in need.

**[THEME MUSIC]**

**SAFIAN:** I'm Bob Safian, and I'm here with Tokunbo Koiki, a social worker, a serial entrepreneur, and in just the past few weeks, the co-founder of Black Women For Black Lives. Tokunbo is joining us from her home in London as I ask my questions from my home in Brooklyn. Tokunbo, thanks for joining us.

**KOIKI:** Thank you for having me, Bob.

**SAFIAN:** Many people have been troubled by the news coming out of Ukraine. Some post about it on social media in the hopes that it will spark action and help. You found yourself doing that, and then decided, "Hey, maybe I could be the one directly providing that help." And in just a short time, Black Women For Black Lives was born, and it continues to evolve and grow. We're eager to hear about that journey. To start, can you share how you went from concerned observer to a resource for direct aid? You and your co-founders didn't even know each other before, right? You only connected via social media.

**KOIKI:** Yes, that's exactly right. We were all strangers prior to February 26th. I was watching the news just as concerned as everybody else, mainly on social media, specifically on Twitter, which is where I spend most of my life unfortunately. And through seeing what was being documented by the African and Caribbean students who were trying to flee from Ukraine, I felt inspired to take action and support them. One of the students, who is now a cofounder for Black Women For Black Lives, Korrine Sky, was a second-year medical student who herself was having to flee Ukraine.

And whilst Korrine was fleeing Ukraine herself, she was also signposting and helping other students to understand how to get to the nearest borders, which border made sense for them to travel to, especially when the borders were getting congested. She was also actively paying for students through her own funds to be able to get the taxis, because as we've all seen on the clips, students were being physically pushed out of the trains that were coming to evacuate Ukrainians from major cities in Ukraine.

**SAFIAN:** And so Korrine, you didn't know her. You were just following her on Twitter. And then how did you...

**KOIKI:** I wasn't even following Korrine Sky on Twitter. Korrine Sky's tweets was just another thread of tweets that came across my timeline as well as other tweets that I'd seen from other African students, other concerned people who had loved ones in Ukraine and were tweeting about their frustrations and their anger toward specifically African embassies who were not quick to react. So I actually tweeted at Korrine, so it actually started with a tweet, and I remember saying something along the line of, "Do you have a GoFundMe, or is there another way that we can support what you are trying to do to help you and the other students leave Ukraine?" I also sent her a private message on her Twitter account. So she responded to me and she sent me her bank

account details, because Korrine is also a British Zimbabwean, so she lived here in the UK prior to moving to Ukraine for her education.

So she has a UK bank account, and she sent me the details, and I transferred some money to her, but I felt that whilst I was happy to do that, a lot of people would not have the time and patience to wait for somebody to send their bank details and then send the money across. So I offered to set up a GoFundMe for her. The reason I did this was because I have 22 years of fundraising experience. I have been a long-term volunteer with the African Caribbean Leukaemia Trust also last year in 2021, I created a GoFundMe for a woman who I had actually helped to flee from her abusive partner's house.

I remember going there late at night, grabbing her and her son, putting them in my car, and bringing them to my home. We were able to create a GoFundMe and raise the money for her legal fees. So I was able to say to Korrine I knew that I had social capital, that if I tweeted GoFundMe about this issue, people who would come across that would respond positively.

**SAFIAN:** And this is just a day into the invasion, right? This is still early. And you have another cofounder, Patricia Daley, who joined the team. How did that happen? What was her role in this?

**KOIKI:** So Patricia Daley had also separately reached out to Korrine Sky on Twitter. She had also offered to help Korrine with fundraising. Because Patricia, as well as being a barrister, is also an avid activist, and she had fundraised about 75,000 pounds to provide legal support for protestors at a Black Lives protest in 2020 and 2021. So Patricia reached out to me. She sent me a private message on Twitter, and then Korrine created a group on Twitter. And so yes, the first 24, 48 hours, we were mainly communicating on Twitter. We had never seen or spoken to each other outside of Twitter.

**SAFIAN:** Now, your goal was to set up a GoFundMe, but GoFundMe wasn't accepting for this cause at that point, right? So you had to find another workaround.

**KOIKI:** Exactly that. Previously, when I'd used GoFundMe, the appeal was usually allowed instantly, but I remember it flagging up that regarding the issues facing Ukraine, the suggestion was they would rather people make donations to the larger NGOs, like Red Cross. And so GoFundMe said they were going to have to verify the campaign, so I hopped onto PayPal and I created a PayPal Pool. And the initial target was 10,000 pounds, simply because I, at the time, did not realize how big this was going to turn out. And I just thought, "Okay, 10,000 is a comfortable number that people are not going to be like, 'Hey, who's this strange woman who's trying to collect money for my African Caribbean students in Ukraine?'"

We were able to reach our goal of 10,000 pounds within less than 12 hours. I increased the target to 20,000, and we were able to meet that target under 24 hours as well. So we then created a second PayPal Pool, because by Sunday morning, people were still asking to donate. People were still learning about what was happening not just in Ukraine, but specifically the anti-Blackness and the discrimination that Black people in Ukraine were facing. And that was how we were able to raise over 40,000 pounds in just a matter of two days over a weekend.

**SAFIAN:** Now, that money comes into PayPal and then goes to your bank account, right? And then how does then that money get to the folks you're helping in Ukraine and in the refugee area?

**KOIKI:** Bob, it was so astonishing to me, because I remember that Saturday I was at a birthday party for my niece. I was keeping an eye on my Twitter and answering messages to Korrine, and also transferring money from the PayPal as the donations were coming in. So what we were doing initially was I was getting the money paid into my UK bank account. I then transferred that money to Korrine's UK bank account. She would then do an instant, fast payment to her Ukrainian account. From that account, she then was transferring to the other students who were trying to get out of Ukraine. Patricia played a vital role in terms of she was doing the verification. So she created a system where students would have to send her their details, bank account details, their contact number. She was actually contacting students individually to verify that they were students, that they were in Ukraine. And once Patricia had verified the student, she would then tell me, "Hey, Tokunbo, can you transfer 50 pounds to this person for Korrine to make the transfer?" And that was how we were initially doing it.

**SAFIAN:** Yeah. You said to me yesterday you're requesting money from strangers to send to strangers. It's a complicated process on the fly.

**KOIKI:** It was a very complicated process. So initially, PayPal was allowing me to transfer like 500 pounds, 2,000 pounds to my account. But once we reached the target of 20,000, it then transferred the full balance, which was about 17,000 pounds, into my account. Bob, I won't lie to you. I was scared. I was like, "This money coming into my account, I am going to have to account for why this money is coming to my account and also how this money's been spent." I literally wrote a very basic accounting of "400 pound was transferred from my account at 4:00, and then I transferred it to Korrine's account at 4:05."

And I was just trying to make sure that people could see that we were using the funds in the way that we stated that we were going to be doing. I posted that on my social media account, and had the thread that I kept embedding with updates. So people could see the transparency, and they could see that we were trying to be accountable because people kept sending us money. On the Monday once we'd reached the target for the PayPal, I hadn't even known that GoFundMe had started allowing donations. Somebody

found the GoFundMe, made a donation, and then messaged me to say, "Oh, by the way, is this your GoFundMe?" And I was like, "Oh, yes. It is. Please, let's now start donating on this GoFundMe instead of the PayPal."

**SAFIAN:** And the GoFundMe, once it opened up, it brought in a whole lot more money.

**KOIKI:** It absolutely did. I really value the different platforms. We've had issues with both of them, PayPal and GoFundMe, but what I really appreciate about GoFundMe was that it allows you to continue to just fundraise, even when you've reached your target. So again, the initial target on GoFundMe was 10,000 pounds. We have now raised 166,000 pounds on GoFundMe that is just over two weeks. We've also raised about \$30,000 in cryptocurrency that was donated to us by the Web3 Africans Collective. So yeah, it's just been an astonishing amount of trust that people have sent to myself, to Patricia, and to Korrine as individuals, but also as an organization.

**SAFIAN:** Yeah. And you got a donation from some celebrities, from Yara Shahidi, the American actress, the star of Black-ish. How did that come about? Or did you just see it on GoFundMe?

**KOIKI:** I have to send voice notes to my business coach and my mentor just so that I can record the things that are happening in real time. So Yara Shahidi, how did she even come across us? I don't know. I honestly don't know. All I know was Yara Shahidi tagged me on Instagram and posted a screenshot of the GoFundMe to her 6.8 million followers. She also sent myself and Korrine Sky individual messages to just thank us, and she donated 5,000 pounds to the GoFundMe. As I mentioned, we'd had issues with GoFundMe initially delaying the campaign, but also delaying the verification process for us to be able to withdraw the money. We were able to get the contact email for the VP of GoFundMe, and we sent him an email.

And he responded within four minutes. So I responded to him, and I was like "We really appreciate the quick response, and we really appreciate that you're trying to fix the issues for us. But how about as an organization, you contribute to this?" And GoFundMe actually donated 3,000 pounds to our campaign as well. So we've had a 2,000 pounds donation from Isha Sesay. This weekend, I had a Zoom FaceTime with Patrick Kluivert, who is a former football soccer player that used to play for the Dutch national team. We had a conversation with Clarence Seedorf, who's the current Dutch football manager, and we are having conversations with people who know Oprah.

I woke up yesterday and I saw a news alert that our names individually and as an organization were mentioned by the American ambassador to the United Nations in the same line as VP Kamala Harris.

And it was just like, "What is going on? My life is a movie right now, literally."

**SAFIAN:** I noticed on your email signature you quote an African proverb, "Until the lion learns to read or write, every story will glorify the hunter." Can you explain what that means to you?

**KOIKI:** Just hearing you say that I just got chills, because I can remember the first time I heard that proverb. It was at a TEDx that was created by a bunch of Africans in the diaspora to tell African stories and African narratives. For the longest time, we've not been in control of our stories. We've not been in control of the narrative. We've heard things like the dark continent, African rising. We go to events where people are experts on Africa that are not Africans themselves. I put that proverb in my signature, because everything I've always wanted to do is to take control of the story that I tell, not only about myself as an individual, but also the stories that I've been told about my community.

When I created the first caption for the GoFundMe, I ended it with, "For us, by us," because I wanted it to be that Black people, people of African descent all over the world, understand that this was a cry for help. This was a rallying cry to say, "We don't have to wait for the establishment. We don't have to wait for our news to be featured on the mainstream media. We can take control of the stories that we're telling. We can change the narrative so that when the world is showing anti-Blackness, we can rise up as a community." And that is exactly what has happened.

**SAFIAN:** Before the break we heard cofounder Tokunbo Koiki talk about the early twists in creating Black Women For Black Lives. Now she shares what she's hearing from those she's helping on the ground in eastern Europe, and how partnerships with Airbnb and others are helping. She also shares the personal toll the initiative is taking on her, and the most important lessons she's taken away as an entrepreneur.

I'm curious what you've been hearing from the people you're helping, from the students. What are their stories like? Are some of them home? Where are they?

**KOIKI:** It's been a mixture. We've had students who have been successful to be able to make it back to their home countries. We have other students who want to stay in different parts of Europe, mainly to continue their education. A lot of the questions we were getting were, "How come there are so many African people in Ukraine?" It seemed like such an unreal thing for people to see tens and tens and thousands of Africans. A lot of these Black people in Ukraine are students. They have left their home countries in various parts of the continent to go to Ukraine to further their education, to get themselves skilled to be able to then compete in the global market.

We have been working with students who are fifth-year medical students, who were three months away from finishing their course. I am currently in talks with a young woman who was about to start a postgraduate in gynecology. We're speaking to STEM students, engineering students, and many of them mature students with families. So they want to be able to continue with their education, whether it's in a new European country

or however it is that we can support them. We've also been working with a young mom, a woman who's currently in Lviv in Ukraine. She's very, very unwell, and she has a four-year-old son who's also autistic. She was evacuated with some other students from Sumy, but the friend that she was staying with actually had to leave her so she has been by herself essentially.

And if not for one of the volunteers who has been speaking with her on a daily basis, giving her hope, I don't know what would've happened to this woman.

**SAFIAN:** You must get all kinds of questions too, about where to go and places to stay, or maybe how to seek asylum. What do you tell them? Who's fielding all these incoming calls for information, for guidance?

**KOIKI:** Initially, the kind of query we were getting from the people we were helping were just to get out of Ukraine. Over the last few days, that has definitely shifted to people wanting to know, "Okay, how can I seek asylum in this country? How can I get a scholarship to go carry on with my education?" Thankfully, Airbnb reached out to us to forge a partnership to be able to provide up to two weeks of free accommodation for students worldwide, and that's just been amazing. Since we launched that campaign on Friday, we've had almost 200 people apply for vouchers. Airbnb has already started processing and issuing people with vouchers. We're also partnering with other organizations to look at how we can provide scholarship to the students in other European countries.

**SAFIAN:** We had a guest on recently who said setting up your own aid network is really hard, and it's better to work through existing ones. But obviously, you didn't feel like you had that option for this group, that there was just no help for them.

**KOIKI:** There wasn't, and we weren't the only people who started helping. There are other volunteer groups as well who have also been doing the work on the ground in Ukraine and other surrounding countries. Every time I think about the message that I got from GoFundMe, if I wasn't a tenacious type of person, I would've given up at that point. I would've been like, "Well, GoFundMe said we should donate to Red Cross, so maybe we should donate to Red Cross." But because I knew that Red Cross were not thinking about people like me, I thought that it was essential for us to find a way to help those people. And I'm so glad that we did, and we took that action.

**SAFIAN:** So how much money have you raised so far? How many people have you interacted with, have you helped?

**KOIKI:** As part of our social media, we try to put out a daily update. And also as a team, we have daily meetings where we go over the numbers. And I believe as of yesterday, the number of people that we had helped was 1,261, and we had sent about 96,000 pounds to those people to be able to get them out of Ukraine. We are also working to try

and help create a situation where the 80-plus students who are currently trapped in Kherson can also be evacuated and returned safely to either their families or allowed to continue with their education, and not be pawns of war.

**SAFIAN:** Yeah. All this is going on, and you have your own work in the meantime. It's 9:00 PM at night for you right now while we're having this talk. You mentioned you had to give away a customer for your food business, one of your entrepreneurial ventures. As much of an experience as this is, there's also sacrifice. How do you manage both sides of that? You're a social worker also.

**KOIKI:** Yes. So I am a senior social worker in a local authority here in London. I manage a team of five social workers, as well as managing five hospital trusts across London. The first week, I was very thankful that my workload was not as busy. I think why I've been able to do all of this is because even before this, I am a serial entrepreneur. I do have several businesses that I run concurrently at the same time as having a nine to five very early on in the pandemic, I wasn't a social worker at that time. I was an entrepreneur. I had a full-time catering business, an award-winning kitchen and food business called Tokunbo's Kitchen, and I wasn't thinking about social work. But when the pandemic started, and seeing that I had the skillset to be able to help and support people that I knew were going to be affected by the pandemic, I made a decision to return to social work after a six-year career break. And whilst doing that, I also made a decision to become accredited as a style coach, because this is something I'd always done since I was a teen.

I want to do and be all the things that I can be, because why not? If I don't do this now, then I'm never going to get an opportunity to do this. I have a full-time job as a senior social worker... And there has been sacrifices. The first two weeks, I wasn't seeing my daughter. We usually have quality time in the evening where we make dinner either together or separately, and we come together and we watch Netflix, or we watch Golden Girls. That's our thing, and we weren't able to do that for the first two weeks. But thankfully, my daughter is old enough to understand that mommy is trying to do something for other people at work.

I definitely felt the pressure, especially the last week. I had to adjust my working hours. But I did find myself on Thursday last week having to take a mental health day, because I just couldn't cope anymore. So after about 10, 11 days of nonstop Black Women For Black Lives, Black in Ukraine, I took a mental health day where I didn't think about Black in Ukraine. I had to focus on myself. Spent time with my daughter, took her to dinner, and just really got my energy back. So there's definitely been lots of sacrifices, but honestly, I am so grateful for the opportunities that's arisen from this.

I'm so grateful for the lives that we've been able to impact, the videos that we are getting from the students to tell us, "This is what you taking this action has led to. We're now safe. We're back with our families." Joyce, one of our volunteer liaison officer, she's now

got so many of the students on her WhatsApp. And she's like, "Guess what? They're back in Nigeria, and they're having parties." So there's been incredible lows, but there's been amazing highs from this experience.

**SAFIAN:** When you think about this from your perspective as an entrepreneur, what have you learned or are you learning about how something scales.

**KOIKI:** The main thing that I've learned is having social capital and having a network of people who you can call upon would definitely help. We became Black Women For Black Lives on the first Monday we had a team meeting. I suggested to my co-founders that we needed to give our organization a name and start putting some structures in place. We came up together unanimously with the name Black Women For Black Lives, which we felt represented not only what we were doing now, but what we hoped to do in the future.

I was then able to call in a friend of mine who has a domain company. I'd already put him on standby. And I was like, can you just create the domain for us and help us to create the website?" He was able to do that instantly. We were also able to collaborate with an amazing director from R/GA, Bayyina Black, who created a lot of the assets that we've used for our social media, for the GoFundMe. So we've managed to scale up because we've connected with an amazing network of people who share the same vision, who see the bigger picture, who want to help, whether it's donating their time, whether it's donating their money, or whether it's donating their resources.

What I've realized as an entrepreneur and being able to scale up at this rate is having the right team members. A lot of them I've never met in person. We have come together to achieve something that I did not think was possible. I've basically become a volunteer humanitarian relief coordinator overnight, and having the social work skillset, but also having the entrepreneurial skillset definitely helped. But then also being able to partner with an incredible, amazing barrister like Patricia, that has also been a real factor. Korrine Sky, her personal experience and her personal story. Even when she's been back to the UK, she still wants to help the students. She's still fighting and trying to give voices to those students. So I think all those combinations coming together has just drawn the right connection for us to be able to scale up as quickly as we have.

**SAFIAN:** My colleague on the podcast, Reid Hoffman, uses this analogy. He says that the startup is like jumping off a cliff and building the plane on the way down. Did you even realize you were jumping off the cliff when you started?

**KOIKI:** I really didn't. Like I said, Bob, that Saturday, I was at a birthday party. I was literally at my niece's birthday party. I didn't expect that I was jumping off a cliff. I did very, very early on start to understand that this was going to be bigger than me, and it was going to be bigger than what we had started. I remember saying to a friend, "I wonder if knowing what I know now, would I still have made that tweet to Korrine? Would I still have offered to do what I did?"

But I definitely feel that I was called to this. I feel like I've been living and working in my purpose, and all of that has led to this happening, the same way it has led to this happening for Korrine, has led to this happening for Patricia. I also believe that in the face of severe adversity, there's also opportunity for strength. There's also opportunity for compassion. This started because we saw the worst of humanity. We saw Ukrainians and Russians and other Eastern European countries, people in authority, they did not see the humanity of Black people. But yet on the flip side of that, we have had donations from across the globe. We have had volunteers. We have had people respond from all over the world, from New Zealand, from South Africa, from America. And so I feel like this is us seeing the worst of humanity, but also seeing the best of humanity in action.

**SAFIAN:** Are you thinking that this project will be your future, or are you not even making plans that way, just taking what comes?

**KOIKI:** One thing I've learned is you can make all the plans that you want, but life will always come along and just either surprise you or show a new dream. I'm always conscious of nothing is forever. So whilst I'm enjoying being a co-founder of Black Women For Black Lives, there are so many other things that I want to do with my life. And so this would definitely be a major pivot and a major part of my story, but it's just another chapter in my book.

**SAFIAN:** If people want to give to Black Women For Black Lives, what's the best way to do that?

**KOIKI:** You can go on the [blackwomenforblacklives.org](https://blackwomenforblacklives.org), and you will find the link to GoFundMe. You can also Google search Black Women For Black Lives, and we can also be found on our social media. Whilst this has happened, a lot of good has come out of it, but at the same time, there are thousands of Black people, thousands of students who now have a very uncertain future.

If you have resources, if you have contacts, if you have knowledge that can be helpful to the students, please do reach out to us on our social media. You can also email us directly at [info@blackwomenforblacklives.org](mailto:info@blackwomenforblacklives.org).

**SAFIAN:** And so if there's a business here or business person who might have guidance or resources to help you in this scaling journey that you're on, they reach out to that—

**KOIKI:** A new email account specifically for that, so [partnerships@blackwomenforblacklives.org](mailto:partnerships@blackwomenforblacklives.org).

**SAFIAN:** Well, this has been a ride for me just listening to you go through this. So do you think about what the future for Black Women For Black Lives is?

**KOIKI:** Absolutely. Black Women For Black Lives can be an organization that is not just responding to crisis, but enabling Black people globally to come together to achieve. This organization can definitely grow and scale up. I would love to be able to do what Oprah's doing in terms of creating a school in South Africa, being able to partner with someone to develop a scholarship brand of Black Women For Black Lives. Patricia is very, very keen to work in criminal justice and address some of the injustice that Black people face in that field. Korrine decided to be a medical doctor because she cares very deeply about the issues that Black moms face during their pregnancy and at the point of childbirth.

This platform definitely creates a foundation. One thing I've definitely realized, I am a problem-solver. It just comes up in different shapes and forms. So whether I'm catering for a wedding, I'm solving a problem. As a social worker, I'm solving a problem. As the cofounder of Black Women For Black Lives, I'm trying to help solve a problem that came about.

**SAFIAN:** Well, Tokunbo, this has been inspiring, inspiring to listen to you. I marvel at your energy. Thank you again so much for doing this.

**KOIKI:** Thank you so much, Bob.