



The trailblazing refugee women transforming communities and empowering women and girls.

[EMBARGOED UNTIL WEDNESDAY 6TH SEPTEMBER 12:00HRS]

Taban Shoresh shares her story as a survivor of child genocide. She is also a women's rights activist and leads her own charity, The Lotus Flower that supports displaced women affected by conflict in the Middle East.

Comfort Etim shares her story about her mother selling everything she owned so she could play football professionally abroad. But believes the scout she trusted trafficked Comfort from Nigeria to London.

Comfort eventually sought asylum and now works tirelessly to support other female asylum seekers. She also harnesses football to empower, integrate and boost the health and wellbeing of migrant women.

Sara Shamsavari shares her harrowing story of how she survived kidney cancer and war – all before she was two years old. After fleeing the Iranian Revolution, she settled in the UK, and now explores themes like global identity, inclusion and transformation in her work as a renowned artist and lecturer.

And psychologist Kateryna Shukh has dedicated her career to supporting women survivors of war and violence – first in Mariupol and the Donetsk region (following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2014) and now from Warsaw in Poland.

These are just four of the 20 incredible women highlighted in the inaugural [Visa Everywhere Pioneer20 project](#).

The listing – run by [WeAreTheCity](#), who support women in the workplace, and digital payments leader Visa – shine a spotlight on the amazing work of 20 trailblazing refugee women living in Europe.

These women are facing down stigmas and stereotypes, campaigning, changing lives, challenging narratives and empowering women and girls.

WeAreTheCity founder, Vanessa Vallely OBE, said: “WeAreTheCity has been humbled to read the stories of so many incredible women who were nominated for this year’s Pioneer20. These women have shown such resilience, strength, and tenacity. Despite their own harrowing experiences, they have worked tirelessly to ensure that their fellow refugees and asylum seekers have the support they need to rebuild their lives.

“I am honoured that we have had the opportunity alongside Visa to shine a spotlight on their incredible work. Congratulations – you are an inspiration to us all.”

Katherine Brown, Vice-President, Inclusive Impact & Sustainability at Visa Europe, said: “It is an honour to be able to highlight the journeys of these inspirational women who make up the inaugural Pioneer 20 list. In many different ways, they have all worked incredibly hard to not only rebuild their lives after significant trauma and upheaval, but to support others who are going through similar experiences.”

We would love to put you in touch with any of the women who feature in the list for interviews or features. There is a full list in the editor’s note, with a brief description of their achievements. Please email me (vanessa.vallely@wearethecity.com) with any requests.

For more details – including our panel of esteemed judges – visit our website here: <https://wearethecity.com/pioneer-20/>.

Editors’ note:

The full list and a quick overview of each are as follows:

Rabia Nasimi has dedicated both her professional and personal life to championing inclusion for refugees and acknowledging their valuable contributions to society. In 1999, Rabia and her family relocated to the UK, and shortly thereafter, her father established a charity to aid refugees. Throughout her career, Rabia has actively collaborated with both governmental and third-sector organisations to assist recently arrived communities.

Ghadah Alnasseri fled Iraq and has since become a human rights advocate and policy leader. Her focus is on reforming how migrant women experience the UK's criminal justice and immigration systems.

Tetiana Balanova landed in Edinburgh last year from Ukraine. After her cousin was killed by a Russian anti-tank mine, she committed herself to the war effort including supporting displaced people and championing Ukrainian heritage and culture.

Taban Shores is a survivor of child genocide. She is now a women's rights activist and leads her own charity that supports displaced women affected by conflict in the Middle East.

Education was the key for **Sarah Ahmadi** when she arrived in the UK from Afghanistan. Alongside setting up charities, she now works to help refugees become entrepreneurs and run their own businesses.

Rossana Leal recalls arriving from Chile to Scotland and being welcomed by a local mining group who had kitted out a home for her family. She repays the generosity now, working to build a culture of welcome to refugees in Hastings and East Sussex.

Sara Shamsavari survived kidney cancer and war – all before she was two years old. After fleeing the Iranian Revolution, she settled in the UK, and now explores themes like global identity, inclusion and transformation in her work as a renowned artist and lecturer.

When civil war broke out in Cote D'Ivoire in 2010, as an influential politician **Agnes Amon Tanoh's** life was in danger. She escaped to the UK where she hoped to claim asylum. But she was detained and left destitute. She supports other women and now also uses her skills to raise awareness about detention and inspire other women to find their voice too.

Scotland became **Anna Nevmerzhytska's** second home when she was forced to leave Ukraine. She now does incredible work to help other displaced Ukrainians including English classes, wellness workshops and even trips to the countryside.

Mursal Hedayat MBE is inspired by her mother, who brought her to safety in the UK from Afghanistan when she was just three years old. Mursal founded her own company, an online language learning platform, to train refugees.

Comfort Etim was trafficked from Nigeria to London. She now works tirelessly to support other female asylum seekers. She also harnesses football to empower, integrate and boost the health and wellbeing of migrant women.

A star student, **Loraine Masiya Mponela** came to the UK to study. But she was forced to claim asylum in the UK in 2015 and sent to government accommodation living on just £5 a day. But she organised and now, through various roles, works to help others facing similar challenges.

Souad Nanaa brings her experience of being a Syrian refugee to bear in her work as a social entrepreneur in France. She co-founded a non-profit that leverages the arts and culture sector to promote inclusion and the socio-economic and cultural integration of refugees.

Sheyda O'Rang is a unique leader. She has overcome untold traumas and now combines her creative talents with her lived experience to coach and counsel other refugee women using the arts.

Psychologist **Kateryna Shukh** has dedicated her career to supporting women survivors of war and violence – first in Mariupol and the Donetsk region (following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2014) and now from Warsaw in Poland.

Elmira Abasbekova left Kyrgyzstan and arrived in Poland as a refugee in 2011. As a community leader and activist, no problem is too small for her as she helps other refugees settle in and regain their sense of agency.

Khedi Alieva arrived in Poland from Chechnya in 2012 with her three children. She champions other migrant women and families – combining practical help with challenging the stereotype that refugees are dependent on help. She empowers them to reclaim their dignity and speak for themselves.

Yuliia Pugolovko has helped to resettle thousands of Ukrainian refugees in Poland and across Europe. She has seen how the physical and emotional fatigue of trauma affects people, and recognises the importance of self-care both for survivors and volunteers.

Publisher, journalist, activist and volunteer **Tetiana Vyhovska** is bringing the books of Ukraine to fellow refugees in Poland. Her library has become a refuge for Ukrainians to treasure their home culture, and Poles who are embracing the heritage of refugees.

Teacher **Tetiana Balym** works at a unique school in Warsaw - 100% of its staff and students are Ukrainian refugees. She is a support for children who continue to suffer the horrors of war, putting aside her own pain to create a safe space for her students.