

Press Release



Visa Everywhere Pioneer 20 spotlights refugee women entrepreneurs transforming European communities.

The Visa Everywhere Pioneer 20 recognition programme – run by WeAreTheCity, the free hub for women in business, and Visa, a world leader in digital payments – shines a spotlight on the amazing work of 20 trailblazing refugee women entrepreneurs, leading small businesses or social enterprises across Europe.

The final of the programme coincides with World Refugee Day, celebrating the strength and courage of people who have been forced to flee their home country to escape conflict or persecution. According to the UN Refugee Agency, the world is witnessing the highest levels of displacement we have ever seen, with more than 114 million individuals forcibly displaced worldwide as a result of persecution, conflict, violence or human rights violations¹.

This year's finalists bring together 20 incredibly inspirational women building successful businesses while defying stigmas and stereotypes, changing lives, challenging narratives and empowering other refugees through employability and financial empowerment.

- Nitharshini Mathyalagan had to flee war in Sri Lanka twice leaving behind her family and home. Her finance career in ruins, she retrained as a chef in France and now has her own kitchen that has provided catering at over 500 events for 5,000 clients
- Maria Igwebuике created a sustainable lingerie brand using old wedding dresses. She now employs and trains fellow refugees providing economic empowerment and skills for women.

¹ [The UN Refugee Agency 2023](#)

- Last Mafuba set up her business – Inini – which provides integration and mental health support to new refugees. She has also helped shape policy in the UK and has been a key contributor to improved mental health services for refugees in Midlands.
- Nataliia Ilchenko is helping hundreds of Ukrainian students to secure education in other countries through her business – EduSpot. She recognised the unique challenges Ukrainian student face in the aftermath of war and conflict and her business is helping the next generation of Ukrainians to continue their education through scholarships and opportunities to further their education.

These are just four of the 20 incredible awardees of the 2024 [Visa Everywhere Pioneer20 project](#).

WeAreTheCity founder, Vanessa Vallely OBE, said: “WeAreTheCity has been humbled to read the stories of so many incredible businesswomen and leaders 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.”

Mandy Lamb, Managing Director Visa UK & Ireland, said: “It’s a privilege to celebrate the remarkable women featured in this year’s Visa Everywhere Pioneer 20 recognition programme. Each nomination we receive serves as a heartwarming example of how these trailblazers inspire others, break down barriers and create meaningful change. These women not only overcome personal hardships but actively reshape narratives to empower women and girls around the world. I extend my gratitude to WeAreTheCity for partnering on this vital initiative – congratulations to everyone involved.”

To read the full stories of these remarkable women, please visit [here](#)

ENDS....

We would love to put you in touch with any of our winners for interviews or features. There is a full list of all 20 winners 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](#)

Editors’ note:

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

Laila Majeed

Laila is a refugee from Afghanistan who since arriving in the UK has gained a bachelor's degree in computer science and a master's degree in finance. She has since created Gilguzi, an organic and sustainable skin care brand for skin conditions. Through her business Laila has developed several commercial relationships with organic retailer, pharmacies, and clinics. Laila also economically empowers other refugee women by employing them on a flexible basis within her business.

Nitharshini Mathyalagan

Nitha's home in Sri Lanka was destroyed by war, not once but twice. Nitha fled with her family to Malaysia as a political refugee with an eight-month-old baby. With no money she found a job as an accountant, but it was an NGO that offered Nitha the opportunity to learn how to cook and who supported her to achieve her first Pastry qualification. Today, Nitha has multiple qualifications in catering and is a chef who resides in France. She has her own kitchen and has provided catering at over 500 events for 5,000 clients. She has also received several awards from the UNHCR for her effort and talent as a refugee in Malaysia.

Maria Igwebuike

Maria arrived from Nigeria aged just 11. From a young age she was passionate about fashion which she went on to study at college, thereafter she founded Maria Callisto, a bridal lingerie and loungewear brand that uses reclaimed fabrics and old wedding dresses to create high quality pieces for everyday glamour and special occasions. As part of her company, Maria also created the Trinity Project that supports female refugees and those from disadvantaged background by hiring them and training them in skills such as pattern cutting. The project has also provided sanitary products to remote villages in Lebanon. Maria has created more than a company, she has created a community and support network for many refugee women who not only benefit from employment, but from training, educational opportunities, skills masterclasses, and wellbeing support.

Anna Andrievska

Anna arrived in Scotland with her daughter after fleeing from the war in Ukraine. In 2022 she brought together a group of Ukrainian women in business to meet and support each other, this later became the first Ukrainian Businesswomen in Scotland club. The club now helps women from Ukraine to rebuild their lives and establish businesses in the UK. Under her leadership the club has held over 50 learning and networking events across the UK. Anna also uses her events to create opportunities to showcase small Ukrainian micro businesses to help them generate revenue through her community.

Last Mafuba

Last was an asylum seeking who suffered with her mental health as she sought refuge in the UK. It was trying to navigate support in the UK that led Last to create Inini. Inini is a support network aimed at helping asylum seekers and refugees with the tools, resources, and guidance they need not just to survive in their new countries, but to thrive. Today, Inini offers support groups, workshops, and community outreach, not just through its own resources but through partnerships with local councils and mental health organisations. Last has conducted multiple research papers and is currently concluding a self-funded PHD study as to how the challenges of integration influence decisions for black communities. Last also sits on several council committees and has contributed towards papers submitted to UK government on mental health inequalities.

Majeda Ibrahim Krban

Majeda is a Syrian activist that had to leave her country and her family for her own safety. Majeda moved to the Lebanon where she continued to work across refugee camps and participate in human rights forums. It was an invitation for her to speak in Edinburgh about her work that led her to the UK. In the UK, Majeda needed to generate income, so she started a small enterprise called “Syrian Sunflower”. This catering company allows her to share her culture and story through food. Her organisation aims to break stereotypes about refugees, raise awareness of the humanitarian crisis in Syria, and to help empower Syrian women through employment and independence.

Kateryna Alieksieienko

Kateryna fled Ukraine to Germany at the outbreak of the war with her twin sons. Kateryna was offered assistance by the local job centre, however she chose to try and build her own business. Today Kateryna is the CEO and Founder of StaFFinder, a recruitment organisation which specialises in personnel search for German companies. She has placed over 200 Ukrainians into employment and now has employed 10 members of staff, all of which are women who are providing economical support for their families back in the Ukraine.

Liliia Pochkun

Liliia’s love of food began at a very young age back in her native country of Ukraine. When war broke out, she fled to the UK to rebuild her life. After months of adaptation, she decided to launch a business as a way of employing Ukrainians and to fund the rebuild of her country back home. What started as small cookery classes and a YouTube channel led to the launch of her own co-owned restaurant BorschToGo in 2023. Liliia’s dream is to bring the Ukrainian dish Borscht and many other traditional Ukrainian dishes into the mainstream – her vision is that BorschToGo will become a unicorn brand. Liliia has also led campaigns, fundraisers and used her network to gather supplies to send back home, she has also built a school and a publishing house and is the author of three books. Her latest book which tracks her career growing the

brand of GoBorsch is available on Amazon – with all proceeds donated to the rebuilding of Ukraine.

Nataliia Ilchenko

Nataliia fled Ukraine at the outbreak of war to Poland. Thanks to the Homes for Ukraine scheme, she moved to London to rebuild her life. Nataliia and her passion to help others led her to create her company, EduSpot, a premier destination for exceptional education which helps students find work abroad. Given her own experience in Ukraine, the initial focus of her business was to help Ukrainian students find work after recognising the challenges they face in the aftermath of war and conflict. Today, as CEO and Founder of EduSpot, she helps hundreds of students navigate the complexities of securing work in other countries enabling them to reach their full potential.

Mahboobeh Rajabi

Mahboobeh is a refugee from Iran, an artist, creative producer, cultural leader, and creative entrepreneur. She fled Iran after the green revolution and endured a six year wait through the courts as an asylum seeker. It was her volunteering that led her to be invited to speak for the World Health Organisation about her work in the arts and her story. In 2016 she founded her own enterprise, DIPACT which aimed to showcase diverse artists from all over the world who needed both visibility and support. DIPACT also gives a platform to artists to tell their stories and generate income through partnerships and pop ups. Most recently DIPACT has been chosen as one of the global solutions to refugee crisis by the Refugee summit.

Aleksandra Volkova

Aleksandra was a successful business owner in the Ukraine and had previously won several awards, worked with leading brands and led fashion festivals. During the height of her business, she had over 500 clients and managed 300 models. When the war broke out, she found herself in the UK with nothing. Struggling to find work, she created a community to unite Ukrainians where she held over 156 events and became a finalist for The Business Awards in Kensington. After creating her community, she decided to launch her PR and Model business in the UK. Today she is the CEO and Founder, of Volkova PR and Fashion Talent agency who works with leading Ukrainian brands and models helping them to fulfil their ambitions. She has worked with London Fashion week, Ukraine Fashion Week and has since expanded her organisation to showcase the cultural talents of the Ukraine through exhibitions and networking events.

Georgia Alzahr

Georgia is a Syrian refugee who now resides in Switzerland. Georgia had a promising career in finance however this all changed when war broke out in her native country. After securing a job supporting refugee chefs and working her way up, she began participating in SINGA's incubator programme where she won funding to launch her business – Georgia's Bread – which provides

artisan breads that use ingredients from Georgia's homeland in Syria. Georgia's bread has been very successful through partnerships with gyms and other outlets, however since launching her business, Georgia was given her B permit which gives her citizen rights in Switzerland. She is expanding Georgia's bread by opening own restaurant "Bab Simsim" in the summer.

Inna Sopronchuk

Inna is an educator who founded a very successful business called "Speak Ukraine". Despite the war and her displacement, she has managed to scale her business. To date Speak Ukraine has taught language skills to over 1,000 people across 46 countries. Before the war in Ukraine Inna employed five remote workers. She now employs 17 teachers and 13 management staff whilst continuing to scale her offering of 800 online lessons – as well as the introduction of the first ever Ukrainian speaking club. Her charity – Buy a t-shirt, save Ukrainian Life – raised £130,000 in its first month and continues to fund initiatives in her home country. Inna boasts more than 77,000 subscribers on social media and will shortly be travelling to the University of Texas to teach Ukrainian as a second language. She has also provided a Ukrainian language course at St Antony's College in Oxford and is currently writing a book about her personal experiences of war in her country.

Yelyzaveta Tataryna

Yelyzaveta arrived in the UK from the Ukraine aged 23. She had no business knowledge, yet she had a dream to open a pink café right in the heart of London. Despite challenges obtaining funding, Yelyzaveta opened the Dream Cream café in 2023. The café is now a central hub for Ukrainian culture providing vegan, gluten free and sugar free treats and space for Ukrainian artists to exhibit their work. Yelyzaveta is also planning to expand by securing space above the café to provide an environment for training programmes and conferences to further support the Ukrainian community in London.

Kateryna Stetskova

Kateryna is the founder of Scotland's first western style sushi restaurant – Minami – which employs Ukrainian refugees who were unable to secure employment due to language barriers and other challenges. Through her café she is building a legacy of mutual support, solidarity, and female empowerment. Kateryna also provides workshops and training to support an ecosystem where small business owners can thrive. For Kateryna it is not just about the food she serves at Minami, but the community she now fosters, supports, and nurtures. Her ambitions are to expand across Scotland and build a future where her western style sushi becomes a staple in households and restaurants alike.

Mariia Kushch

Mariia and her family fled Ukraine as the war devastated their streets. With an injured child, they travelled through several neighboring countries, eventually reaching Poland, then France, and

finally the UK. A filmmaker in her homeland, Mariia overcame numerous challenges to find work in the UK's film industry. She discovered a Ukrainian support community called Hilltops, where she heard many stories of resilience and strength among fellow refugees. Mariia established her media company and produced a viral documentary –Voices – which depicted the war through the perspectives of children. This documentary was even shown in the UK Parliament on the war's second anniversary. Now, Mariia is dedicating her efforts to creating a video magazine to create a unified cultural community of Ukrainians in the UK.

Yevgeniya Zhyryakova

Yevgeniya is the head of the Ukrainian Educational Hub in Great Britain, created by the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine, where she coordinates initiatives supporting Ukrainian culture and education. Recently appointed CEO of the London Business Club, Yevgeniya brings extensive experience in business and communications. She founded and managed a business in Kyiv, developed the “Free Financial Education for Youth” course, and led a discount startup in Hong Kong and China. Her journey from Kyiv to London is marked by resilience and dedication. At the onset of the war, she embarked on a seven-day trip to Poland, sheltering a dozen pets. Despite personal loss, including the death of her cousin Volodymyr Mukan, a patriot who gave his life for Ukraine's independence, she remains steadfast in her mission. Passionate about change, charity, and helping abandoned pets, Yevgeniya believes in the power of making the world better through unity and opportunity, embodying inner strength, faith, and hope.

Nazek Ramadan

Nazek and her family fled Lebanon in 1986 during the civil war, and she joined her husband in the UK as a refugee. Facing racial abuse and a challenging adaptation period in London, she drew on her strong sense of community and resilience, inspired by her mother's example of welcoming refugees. Nazek established an Arabic supplementary school and supported homeless families, recognizing the need for migrants to share their own stories. In 2005, she joined the Migrant Resource Centre and later founded Migrant Voice in 2010 to amplify migrant voices in the media. Through campaigns and media training, she has empowered migrants to challenge negative narratives, advocate for their rights, and foster understanding. Nazek's work has been instrumental in changing the discourse around migration, demonstrating her dedication to treating all individuals with respect and dignity.

Helay Rahim

Arriving in France in 2016 with no knowledge of the language, Helay faced significant obstacles in housing, employment, and navigating bureaucracy. Determined to overcome these challenges, she immersed herself in learning French by working as an au pair and tutoring English, which helped her integrate within a year. Witnessing the transformative power of language, she began volunteering to assist Afghan asylum seekers. Pursuing higher education, she earned a degree in International Relations and Oriental languages, then freelanced as an interpreter, ultimately working at the French immigration office. Continuing her studies at

Sciences Po, she co-founded the Hila Initiative, an NGO empowering Afghan women through online English training, addressing educational restrictions imposed by the Taliban. The initiative aims to reconnect these women with the international community, fostering long-term societal change and promoting gender equality.

Liliia Ilkevych

Liliia had a successful career in finance after earning her master's degree from Kyiv National University of Trade and Economics. She worked for 16 years in banking, managing a branch with a staff of 30. Driven by a lifelong dream to start her own business, she began studying the travel industry, assisting a friend's travel agency in Ukraine. However, the outbreak of war on February 24, 2022, forced her to flee to the UK with her two daughters. In the UK, Liliia faced the challenges of learning English and finding employment, eventually participating in the STEP programme to improve her language skills. Despite initial setbacks, she founded Fly & Joy, a travel company catering to Ukrainians in the UK. Overcoming regulatory hurdles and language barriers, Liliia's company joined the Travel Trust Association and was featured in Travel Weekly. Now, Fly & Joy boasts 10,000 social media followers and is developing an agency network and website, aiming to help other Ukrainians find employment and navigate visa issues.