

Our focus on refugees

International Women's Day 2021

To mark International Women's Day we hosted a panel discussion featuring some remarkable female refugees who shared their stories and spoke about how they have responded to the challenges they have faced. Read on to learn more.

Raghad Haddad

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I came here in 2016 and when I arrived, I realized the challenge of starting from square one. I wanted to choose to be safe and restart my life in a new home. I claimed asylum and am still fighting - to improve my experiences and language - and to build my career here as a musician.



Raghad was born in a small city in Syria. She studied viola at the Higher Institute of Damascus before becoming a member of the Orchestra of Syrian Musicians, which she combined with teaching at the Institute. When the civil war broke out in Syria in 2011, life for Raghad changed. In 2016 the Orchestra of Syrian Musicians toured Europe. This gave Raghad the opportunity to present herself at border control and request asylum in the UK, which was granted in 2017. She has since been reunited with her family.

Q: Why do you feel that story telling is important? Why do you tell your story?

A: It's very important for someone who has an experience to share their story. Sharing feelings can be a relief and provides other people out there who might be struggling with some reassurance that they're not alone.

Q: Are there any challenges you've faced in particular because of being a woman and a refugee in the UK?

A: A big challenge for me is being a female in a new place, not knowing anyone. I had to start at square one and rebuild. I worked so hard in my country to get a good job and build something for myself and my family, but I had to leave all of that behind.

Razan Alsous

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It's not easy to establish a business, especially in a new country. I spotted the gap in the market and turned my love for cheese into a business to support me and my family

Razan came to the UK with her family in 2012, following the start of the war in Syria. After losing almost everything, she struggled to find a job to support her new life in Yorkshire, despite having a strong background in microbiology. Missing many things about home, including halloumi cheese which wasn't widely available in Yorkshire, she decided to start a business. She obtained a loan from the local enterprise agency and now runs a multi-award-winning cheese and dairy company.



Q: Are there any challenges you've faced in particular because of being a woman and a refugee in the UK context?

A: As a female refugee it's not easy to establish a business. You are not familiar with the culture, so there's a lot of uncertainty when you are first starting out. Upon starting my business, I joined an agricultural society. Its members were very welcoming, supportive and empowering.

Another thing I found challenging was managing looking after my three children whilst working. However, it was easy to stay strong as I knew I wanted to provide a better future for my kids.

I think my positive approach helped me to overcome these challenges and ensured that I stayed focused on my goal of becoming a successful businesswoman.

Q: Can you see a hopeful future in Syria, particularly for women and minority groups?

A: Definitely. No one could have guessed that we would be living through a global pandemic, so that proves that anything is possible. We can achieve a hopeful future by thinking positively, working hard, and showing resilience.

Benoitte P.A. Osango Ntshaykolo

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I consider myself to be a woman that believes in empowering others to realise their true potential. I believe in motivating others to take action. I consider myself a leader who seeks to be an agent of change.



Benoitte is a Congolese refugee. Ever since The Democratic Republic of Congo won its independence in 1960, there has been ongoing fighting and unrest throughout the country causing many people, including Benoitte, to flee their homes. Benoitte is now studying for her bachelor's degree in Law at the University of The Gambia. Having experienced financial struggles, she is being supported in continuing her studies through The UN Refugee Agency's Aiming Higher programme. Although there have been many challenges in her pursuit of an education, Benoitte is on her way to becoming a lawyer, balancing a busy workload of classes whilst also helping to support other young refugees.

Q: In what ways have you been challenged because of your status as a refugee and how have you overcome this?

A: Every refugee faces the challenge of discrimination. People look down upon you because you are a refugee and make you feel like you don't belong. Gaining employment is also difficult and refugees often find that their vulnerabilities are exploited. There is a huge lack of support, which can feel mentally and emotionally traumatising.

Q: What advice would you give on how to maintain resilience and how to keep hopeful during difficult times?

A: My advice is that the sky is the limit. I graduated from senior secondary school in 2012 and only started law school in 2018. With hope and faith, it's possible to get through the tough times. Don't let people suppress you or look down upon you just because you're a woman. You have a voice – let it be heard.
