

These Refugee Entrepreneurs Are Building Thriving Businesses

Becoming a successful entrepreneur is no easy feat. From securing investments to having access to resources, the path to entrepreneurship is often difficult. For refugees, it is even more challenging, and yet for many, entrepreneurship is an opportunity to better their lives.

In Egypt, Syrian entrepreneurs have created “Little Damascus” in the neighborhoods of 6th of October City, an area now bustling with Syrian restaurants and grocery stores. In Turkey, over 8,300 new Syrian companies were founded in 2017 and in Jordan, over 800 Syrian industrial establishments have reportedly relocated to operate in the country, according to the report *Entrepreneurship in Exile* by Ahmad Sufian Bayram.

For Lara Shahin, a Syrian entrepreneur in Jordan, living in exile has enabled her to empower herself and fellow refugees. Wanting to break free of the cycle of aid, she sought to provide sustainable alternatives to refugee families, particularly women, who make up one of the largest segments of refugees in Jordan.

“At first, I used to volunteer with organizations to support refugee families. But I soon realized that I needed to provide them with something sustainable so they don’t live on handouts,” says Shahin.

Shahin founded Jasmine in 2014, a for-profit initiative by and for Syrian women in Amman, to produce a wide range of handmade products including soaps, embroidery, accessories, candles and food products. Working with more than 35 refugees, she not only provides women with a sustainable income, but with the opportunity to learn new skills.

Following the success of Jasmine in Jordan, Shahin is now looking to expand her business across the Middle East.

Examples of such success come as no surprise to Valentina Primo, founder of Startup without Borders, an organization that supports migrant and refugee entrepreneurs in Egypt and beyond. In her time working with refugees, Primo has noticed that they possess many traits of successful entrepreneurs.

“A migrant or refugee is entrepreneurial by nature,” explains Primo. “Their entire journey, venturing into a new world and creating a new life is highly risky. A person that has had the ingenuity, power and capability to build a new life from zero can surely find a way to build a business.”

For Azhar Al Madani, a Syrian entrepreneur in Erbil, Iraq, starting a new life in a new country only fueled his desire to succeed. Although he worked as a project engineer in his host country, he decided to leave his job and create his own startup. Inspired by his personal struggle of obtaining his daughter’s birth certificate, he co-founded Shiffer in 2018, a peer-to-peer shipping platform.

To date, Shiffer has won first prize of the Startup Roadshow, a competition for Syrian Startups that took place in Amsterdam last year, and was selected during 2019 as a finalist for the MIT Pan Arab Startup in Amman.

Al Madani attributes his success to understanding people's problems. "We understand their pain," he says. But this wasn't enough to guarantee success. Al Madani participated in several training programs and bootcamps to learn to build and launch a successful business.

"It was all the hard work we did and still do that makes our startup successful," says Madani.

But without capital, many refugees struggle to see their ideas and businesses through.

"This is often the biggest barrier for refugees to succeed as traditional VC networks don't often exist in countries where the majority of refugees are displaced," explains Alexandra Clare, co-founder of Re:Coded, an organization training conflict-affected youth in technology.

To overcome this obstacle, many use their own savings to start a business. This was the case for Reem Sabouni, a Syrian entrepreneur in Cairo.

A former educator, Sabouni moved to Cairo with her young son in 2012 before launching her business in 2018. Using her savings, she created Arab Mom's Club, a place for refugee and Egyptian mothers to interact and learn about motherhood through the club's various resources and trainings.

"I invested all I had in this business because I believed in it," says Sabouni. "I had no other alternative of seeing my idea through" says Sabouni. "I know that many entrepreneurs struggle with financing their business, but as entrepreneurs, we must be resilient and create a plan to continue moving our business forward."

Determined to see her business succeed, Sabouni continuously upgrades her course and workshop offerings. She is optimistic about the future and plans to open a new branch of the club in Cairo.

Another common challenge that refugee entrepreneurs face is registering a business. Without it, they are unable to formally establish their enterprise and earn a living.

"Registering a business was the most difficult challenge for me," says Shahin. "I had to partner with a local founder to register Jasmine, but it was a bad experience. I lost everything. I was so depressed, I was ready to give up. But the women working with me encouraged me to rebuild the business. So, I started again in 2015, but I only registered my company two years later when the laws in Jordan became more favorable to refugee entrepreneurs."

Although Shahin still had to partner with a local co-founder, she didn't need to invest large sums of money as she did before. This enabled her to rapidly grow Jasmine and sell Syrian handmade products not only in Jordan, but in neighboring Arab countries.

All that being said, refugees can positively impact a host country's economy. In Egypt, Syrian refugees contributed to \$800 million to the local economy, according to the UNDP report, [*Jobs Make the Difference*](#).

“We want to shift the negative narrative to tell stories of refugees who are a strong economic asset to any country,” says Clare from Re:Coded. “Through the stories we share on our platforms we can provide these entrepreneurs with much needed visibility, which often leads to more opportunities for them, from funding to expert mentorship from someone in our network.”

Despite the hardships they face, many refugees are using their skills and talents to create their own businesses, benefiting themselves and their host countries in the process. Demonstrating incredible strength and resilience, they have been able to achieve their ambition of becoming successful entrepreneurs. As Reem Sabouni says it best, “we have no option but to succeed.”

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