



Diversity **E**quity **I**nclusion

Short-Case Series

Resilience on the Menu: A Migrant Woman's Path to
Inclusive Entrepreneurship

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Case theme: raising awareness on DEI issues in SMEs

Resilience on the Menu: A Migrant Woman's Path to Inclusive Entrepreneurship

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Abstract

This teaching case presents the entrepreneurial journey of Ms Shumaila Arif, a Pakistani mother of three, human resource management professional, and migrant student entrepreneur, who relocated to Lithuania in 2023 to pursue a Master's degree at Vilnius University. While studying and living in Vilnius, Arif identified an unmet need in the local food ecosystem: the absence of an authentic halal dining space that could serve as both a culinary experience and a bridge among diverse communities, including locals, international students, and migrants.

Motivated by this gap, she founded Dhaba & Delights in 2024, a business enterprise that rapidly transformed from a small restaurant into a space for inclusion, dialogue, and social impact. The case illustrates how food has become a symbolic and practical tool for advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), demonstrating how migrant entrepreneurship can foster belonging and cultural understanding in increasingly multicultural European societies.

Unfortunately, this journey was marked by significant adversity. Financial instability, the dissolution of a business partnership during a harsh winter, and personal challenges, such as her child's injury, created emotional and economic strain. Instead of halting her progress, these challenges became catalysts for resilience, innovation, and purpose-driven leadership.

The case invites students to analyse inclusive entrepreneurship within an SME context, with a focus on migrant identity, gender, and inclusive leadership. It demonstrates how food-based businesses can foster social integration and how resilience becomes part of an entrepreneur's strategic practice. The case also links migrant women's entrepreneurship to broader DEI objectives and to the Sustainable Development Goals, which promote reduced inequalities and inclusive economic growth.

Keywords: *diversity, equity, inclusion, migrant entrepreneurship, inclusive entrepreneurship, intersectionality, social integration, resilience, SMEs, halal food sector*

The case relates to the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals: SDG 8 Decent Work and Economic Growth; SDG 10: Reduced Inequalities.



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1. Coming to the right place at the right time in Vilnius

Shumaila remembers that when she first arrived in Vilnius in 2023 to pursue her Master's in Human Resource Management at Vilnius University, opening a restaurant was never part of her plans. She focused on adapting to a new culture, managing her HR studies, and supporting her family in settling into life in Lithuania.

Soon after the studies began, she realised that she was not alone in feeling the absence of familiar food. Many Muslim students expressed frustration that, although numerous international or ethnic restaurants were available in Vilnius, none offered genuine halal options or the ability to adapt spices in ways that respected both cultural authenticity and diverse dietary preferences. The existing South Asian restaurants were either not halal or too spicy for local preferences. For her, it soon became clear that there was an unmet need not only for the Muslim community but also for locals and international students who were curious about global cuisines yet preferred lighter flavours. Her observation reflected a broader shift in Lithuania, where growing numbers of international students, migrant families, and foreign professionals were quietly reshaping the city's cultural landscape, yet the local food ecosystem had not fully adapted to these emerging DEI needs.

That observation became her driving motivation. She decided to establish a small restaurant, not because she had a specific aspiration to own a business, as some of her classmates did. She wanted a place that represented flexibility with halal food and trust, that could bridge cultures, and that served what she likes to call a “flexible spice palette” - authentic enough for those who missed home and balanced sufficient for those trying it for the first time.

With her background in HR, she and two other co-founders established Dhaba & Delights around three principles: fair employment, cultural representation, and community connection. The company was established in September 2024 by three female partners, each contributing an equal share. Owing to her professional background and leadership experience, Shumaila Arif was appointed as the company director. As a newly registered venture in a traditional industry, the business was ineligible for national start-up grants and several early-stage financing instruments. Although formally grounded in eligibility criteria, this institutional arrangement created a structural barrier that intensified early liquidity pressures.

However, from the beginning, she insisted on fair employment, including transparent contracts, equal treatment, and opportunities for migrant workers who often faced precarious working conditions in small service-sector SMEs.

The restaurant slowly became a dining space that showcased diversity through its menu design, team members, and customers. Every detail mattered. The interiors reflected both Pakistan and Lithuania - local wooden textures paired with warm South Asian colours. A small chalkboard by the door invited international students: **“10% discount for Erasmus students – Everyone welcome.”**

In late 2024, when she opened a restaurant with two other international colleagues, the response was humbling. The restaurant immediately attracted Muslim families seeking

authentic halal food, Lithuanian professionals curious about something new, and international students who found in it a sense of comfort and cultural exchange. Gradually, the restaurant became something more profound: a place where people stayed longer than their meals, shared stories with strangers, and found comfort in the feeling of being seen and accepted.

2. Understanding the Realities of Entrepreneurship Behind the Surface

Every entrepreneurial journey looks inspiring from the outside, but the truth behind it is often full of quiet battles that no one sees. For her, that battle for business survival came during the winter of 2024, just a few months after Dhaba & Delights opened its doors.

At first, things looked promising. Customers were curious, feedback was positive, and the sense of community was growing. But as the weather turned cold, so did the pace of the business. The cold wasn't just in the air; the rhythm of life slowed down. For someone raised in the warmth of Pakistan, winter in this new country felt like stepping into a world where even emotions had to be insulated.

“In Pakistan, winter is when people go outside and enjoy the breeze. Here, winter makes you feel like you're surviving, not living,” she reflected. The restaurant, which had started as a symbol of hope and community, now faced harsh financial reality. Expenses, such as rent, heating costs, supplies - kept rising, while income steadily declined, turning optimism into anxiety. She wasn't only managing a struggling business but also raising three children and attending university full-time. Each day became a test of endurance as she moved between lectures, the kitchen, and home, balancing academic deadlines with financial spreadsheets and family needs. Her days were shaped by the constant negotiation between being a migrant, a mother of three, and a full-time student - these identities that rarely allowed a pause. The winter was not only a season but also a period of pressure that demanded resilience across every aspect of her life.

In addition, her two business partners, who had initially shared a common vision, began to lose faith. The financial pressure and slow months created tension among the shareholders. One gloomy day in November 2024, everything changed. They decided to withdraw, unwilling to bear the losses, leaving Shumaila - already constrained by limited access to external financing - to absorb full responsibility for the venture. They were demanding a return on their investment or suggesting that the business be sold altogether.

For Shumaila, it was a shock - emotionally and financially. She had built Dhaba & Delights on trust and shared purpose, and suddenly, that foundation felt as if it were collapsing. She faced decisions that would determine not just the future of the restaurant but also the dignity of everything she had worked for.

At the same time, life was testing her in another way. Her eldest son suffered a leg fracture, and her family's routine turned upside down. Between hospital visits, financial discussions, and managing staff, she felt as if she were standing in the middle of a storm without an umbrella.

Those days were painful—full of uncertainty, exhaustion, and fear—but they also revealed something powerful. She learned that entrepreneurship is not only about having ideas; it's about the strength to hold your ground when everything seems to be slipping away.

She decided not to close the restaurant nor to sell the business. She took over the full responsibility, restructured finances, and reorganized operations to survive the hardest season. Even during the crisis, she made sure her small team felt safe, valued, and part of the mission —

a leadership style shaped by empathy and lived experience. However, every day became a lesson in persistence, beginning with negotiating with suppliers and reassuring her small team that they would get through this together.

That period also changed the spirit of Dhaba & Delights. The restaurant became not just a dining space, but a small social ecosystem, a symbol of endurance, community, and empathy. Employees and customers began to notice a difference: some clients stayed longer than usual, others offered words of support, and many shared that they admired the calm strength behind the business. It reminded that inclusion is not just about giving space to others, it's also about not excluding yourself when things go wrong.

The financial challenges eventually passed, but the lessons they taught remained. As a small business with limited resources, Dhaba & Delights relied heavily on trust, informal support networks, and community engagement - typical realities for migrant-led SMEs in Europe. Shumaila soon realised that she had emerged not just as a business owner, but as a resilient migrant woman who had transformed crisis into clarity and rebuilt her venture with a more profound sense of purpose.

3. The Joy of Concentration: Finding Purpose through Food and Community

Running Dhaba & Delights taught here that business is not just about sales, but it's also about attention and empathy for customers. When people walk into a space, you can feel what they carry: homesickness, pressure, excitement, or loneliness. She learned to see those emotions as invitations to connect. Many of her customers were international students far from home or Lithuanians, curious yet hesitant about the unfamiliar. Rather than conventional marketing, she focused on meaningful engagement. Near our counter stood a small glass bowl filled with handwritten notes - each one carrying a short message of encouragement or gratitude. Guests were invited to take one, read it, and leave another behind.

“Soon it became our restaurant's quiet ritual; it was kind of a version of the 'coin story'. Each note represented a human connection; each exchange reminded people that they were seen, heard, and valued.”- Shumaila smiles.

Through that small act, she discovered that marketing can also be healing. It has the potential to serve as a powerful tool in creating a sense of belonging. People returned not only for the food but for the warmth, the familiarity, and the feeling that someone cared enough to write something just for them.

Then came one of the most significant moments for Dhaba & Delights, as participation in the “Vilnius My City” Festival. It was their first major public event as food sellers, and they didn't know what to expect. The day was long, the crowd enormous, and the air filled with energy and laughter. By 5 p.m., all dishes were sold out.



Picture 1. Dhaba & Delights' visual representation at the Festival (left) and the restaurant (right)

That day, standing in the middle of the crowd, watching people queue for Pakistani biryani and mango lassi, Shumaila felt something beyond pride — she felt connection. The festival became a symbol of how far they had come—from a struggling start-up in winter to a recognised, trusted name in the city's multicultural landscape.

The joy of concentration, she learned, lies not in doing everything perfectly, but in doing every small thing with sincerity. Whether it's writing a kind message, serving a meal, or greeting a stranger — every action counts when it comes from purpose.

Dhaba & Delights has become more than a restaurant; it represents a story of community, belonging, and resilience, built one focused act at a time.

4. Dilemma

Dhaba & Delights had now gained visibility as a symbol of cultural inclusion and resilience. The city council invited Shumaila to partner on an official multicultural initiative that would promote migrant entrepreneurship. This partnership promised funding, recognition, and access to larger networks, but it also came with conditions. She would need to scale her operations, formalise employment structures, and modify the menu to appeal to a broader audience, potentially diluting the cultural authenticity and community-driven spirit that defined her mission.

At the same time, several migrant women approached her seeking jobs and training, not only for income but also for dignity and belonging. They saw Dhaba & Delights not as a restaurant but as a place where their identities were not merely accepted but valued.

Shumaila now faced a challenging dilemma:

Should she scale the business to achieve broader social impact and financial security, even if this risks diluting its authenticity and grassroots identity? Or should she preserve the intimate, values-based model focused on community and cultural preservation, even if it limits growth?

This dilemma raises a fundamental question for educators and future leaders:

In entrepreneurship driven by diversity and inclusion, which matters more—scaling for broader impact or preserving authenticity and purpose? And how should inclusive entrepreneurs navigate the tension between economic growth and cultural integrity?

About Shumaila Arif



Picture 2. Shumaila Arif, the CEO of the company

Shumaila Arif is a Pakistani entrepreneur, mother of three, and a Master's student and scholarship holder at VU in Lithuania, who transformed a simple observation into a socially driven enterprise. Seeing the lack of authentic halal food and inclusive dining spaces in Vilnius, she founded **Dhaba & Delights**, a restaurant that blends culture, community, and entrepreneurship. Her work emphasises resilience, empathy, and inclusion, positioning her as an emerging voice in migrant-led innovation across Europe.